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KARI CHOLNOKY: *True Level*

By [Chris Kaspar](#)



Kari Cholnoky, *Floaters/Flashes*, 2018. Faux fur, acrylic, collage, epoxy putty, plexiglass, urethane, 41 x 74 x 6 inches. Courtesy Safe Gallery.

Anyone who has been unnerved and delighted by the effects of a face swap app will recognize the energies of dismemberment and reconfiguration in Kari Cholnoky's new work. The seven paintings, two sculptures, and video that Cholnoky exhibited at Safe Gallery reveal her fascination with the recombination of disparate parts, particularly of body parts. Painters have copied, cut, and pasted body fragments into new composites for centuries. When an artist smooths over the seams or stitching, the composite is returned to coherence and unity, but when lines and cracks are left in plain sight, fragmentation and

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imperfection are emphasized. Cholnoky's work clearly belongs to the second of these two tendencies. Her paintings and sculptures are amalgamations of parts that cannot cohere. She makes no attempt to deliver the small satisfactions of easy unitary solutions but looks instead with wide-eyed wonder at the unruliness of the world.

Her four-minute video, *Shake/Weight* (2018), was projected onto a wall near the entrance to the gallery. It depicted the work of a pair hands as they shook a polyurethane sex toy back and forth. Contact mics had been affixed to the toy and its every movement produced a hard, percussive thud. As the hands jiggled the toy more and more vigorously, the gallery filled with the crash of increasingly louder and faster beats. Presented as a continuous loop, the video seemed at first like a dimensionless and obnoxious ploy. But after spending time with other artworks in the gallery the video's purpose became clearer. Cholnoky fastened sex toys to surfaces of all the paintings and sculptures in the show and she freely sampled from online imagery of sexbots and avatars. A theme of web-facilitated desire soon emerged and consequently the video looked stranger than it had before. The toy had the mouth, cheeks, and chin of an adult man but that's about it. The toy was self-contained and severely amputated at the same time. Close-up shots made the mouth larger and larger while the hands pried the mouth open to reveal the throat. Cholnoky's unflinching investigation of the material object revealed its silliness and absurdity, and left the object's uncanniness intact.

In many ways Cholnoky makes this uneasy terrain absolutely unlovable. The colors she uses evoke both poisonous toxicity and drabness of institutional greys and greens. Many pieces are upholstered in artificial fur that has been slathered with thick paint. Tufts of hair jut out here and there. It seems as if some care had gone toward repelling the public. And yet it was impossible to ignore the

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fluctuations between delicate and exuberant humor in Cholnoky's use of her materials. The neon colored surface of *Floaters/Flashes* (2018) was dotted with a pattern of little tan tufts of fur that would have charmed Bonnard and Vuillard. *Smile* (2018) was painted in a high key canary yellow but instead of applying daubs of color Cholnoky simply cut the yellow encrusted bristles off

of her old paint brushes and glued them onto the painting. Her handling of materials is smart, inventive, and unusual. But her use of provocative content is less developed. Cholnoky printed out excerpts of customer reviews from the sex toys' Amazon product pages and pasted them onto the surfaces of the works. All the photographically reproduced imagery on the artworks had been printed on fleece blankets that the artist custom ordered from Walmart. She then cut the images from the blankets and glued them onto the paintings and sculptures. The elements of an argument or insight into web-facilitated and digitally produced desire were in place but there was no elaboration of any particular point. Underdeveloped provocations like these fell flat. Perhaps, for Cholnoky, wonderment at the variety of desire itself is sufficient.



Kari Cholnoky, *Jaundice*, 2013-2018. Faux fur, acrylic, collage, plexiglass, urethane, 50 x 50 x 12 inches. Courtesy Safe Gallery.

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STUDIO VISIT KARI CHOLNOKY

FEBRUARY 16, 2018 BY INERTIA STUDIO VISITS



Where did you grow up?

I grew up in CT. I was born in Stamford, and then I went to college in NH and got a Liberal Arts degree where I only took two Art History courses, and then I entered the world sort of as an outsider—I had no real understanding of what was happening. I got a really good education, but I didn't have anyone in my life involved in art. My art education was in the woods of NH, and so coming to New York and going to galleries and things like that—the first time I ever did that was after I graduated college. I went to Cranbrook a couple years after I graduated college, and visiting New York with my Cranbrook class was the first time I was ever in a real artist's studio in my life. So when I got to grad school, I felt like I was playing catch-up. I definitely had the educational basis for feeling like I could relate, compete, or understand, but people were actually talking in a language I wasn't fluent in. I had a great mentor in grad school named Beverly Fishman, who runs the painting dept., and she basically told me to go to the library and read Art History between 1500 and now,

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and then come back and we'd do this conversation over again. I sort of knew that was headed my way; catching up. So then I graduated in 2014.

What lead you to New York, and how long have you been in your current studio?

I was here before grad school, then moved back in 2014. I've been in this studio since November 1st. Hopefully I'll be here for a while. My apartment lease is up this Spring, so there's a chance I could be anywhere.

What is the driving force behind your work?

I feel like the driving force behind all our work is that we are either fortunately or unfortunately addicted to making the work. We can't not make it, or else we would have better healthcare and more stable jobs. Most people wouldn't choose to be in this situation, so the driving force is having this out of control addiction to making something you think you can make. I think we're all addicted to the idea of that feeling in the studio when you get something unexpectedly or you surprise yourself—you think if you make another thing you'll figure something out or make something better. For me, that's the real driving force—whether I'm fully in control of making or thinking (that is more elusive to me), but I've never had trouble with making because of this driving force.

[The issue of space] was the impasse that, after working in my apartment for four years, I knew that six months later I would have to make a solo show. I had just made a sculpture and a few big paintings for this show with Regina Rex, and after I made that there wasn't enough space in my studio in my apartment to move around—it was just a fire trap joke. I had some money in savings, and I knew I would have some money coming in the Spring from a teaching job, so I had the opportunity to have a significant amount of space and to really flex and show people what you can do if you can give yourself some space. So I decided I needed to rent a studio for a few months. I'd always prided myself on being someone who could make work no matter what, but no matter what situation you're in in New York, you feel the constraints of the walls around you—literally and physically limiting [what you are capable of]. There are all these other things that limit what is possible where you live, your technical ability, your finances for buying materials that you always dreamed about having. If you could ever in your life give yourself a bit of an edge or a release, I always feel like that's when people's work just explodes, and so I thought if I bring all my stuff into a bigger room—what would happen? It also showed me my work was getting tighter and tighter, more compact and dense in my studio in my house. It really showed me that the natural, feel-good point for my work is body scale. It's not these little, tiny practical paintings. And that's my burden because nobody wants to buy obnoxious looking things that are this big. They're a pain to move around and store, but it's what I need to make, so I just put one foot in front of the other. Looking back on the last things I was making in my apartment, it was just suffocated—[the work] suffocated itself.

Your use of materials is really interesting. Can you talk a little bit about your current process and how you source and experiment with new materials? Do you create the imagery that is on the fabric and then have it printed?

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Yes, some of it is. This lady [on the fabric]—this is Harmony, the RealDoll. This is from a BBC article—so some of it is straight, unaltered pulled from an image collection I have. And then the blankets are digital collages I make, and they are an amalgamation of images from Amazon, news articles, and images of control panels and modular synths. I make the digital collages in Photoshop, and then get them printed on Walmart blankets.

This whole thing started a couple years ago when I sold a painting, and I wanted to spend the income on printing some high quality, archival images. I had been printing my own collages in grad school without those kinds of facilities, and in New York I hadn't really been using collage at all. I missed the directness of using an image, so I was thinking of going to go to Duggal to nicely print images, and then I realized I would blow my entire cut of the painting on one blanket this size. So, I just reverted to the deepest, darkest alternate end of the spectrum and wondered how cheap and shitty could I get this printed. You can spend a ton of money and do something that the art world tells you is really important, or you can give yourself a fucking inch and get as much of it printed as you can for cheap, and give yourself the flexibility of messing up a few times.

The other thing that was so surprising to me was that the color quality of the Walmart prints was unbelievable—incredible. The color as translated from the digital material, but also sometimes there were weird accidents with their color that were even better than I could have hoped for. It's almost like found color, because there's a certain amount of translation that happens between the digital images I see on my laptop, and what ends up being printed—so that stuff is just like Christmas. Unwrapping those is a gift, so those blankets have been really fun. I'm still working out what it means to be using an image, but for me, most of the reason why I use it is because it allows me to work as fast as I want to work. It allows me to repeat a found image that is interesting or compelling to me. It allows me to obtain an aspect of explicitness just because of resolution or clarity, and then I don't have to render.

How do you know when/if your approaches or your processes or the things you're doing are becoming too systematic, or too formulaic?

I feel like I'm so conscious of my work becoming gimmicky that I'm almost overly-cynical of my own process. I'll make a painting with a certain kind of thing in that painting, and if I show it in a group show in some obscure artist space once, I feel like I have to move on. Everybody knows that I've done this and I can't do it again. My partner and friends will remind me that, especially for this show, that it is my first solo show in Brooklyn. In a group context, it's really hard sensing development of an artist if you're only seeing a painting one at a time every nine months or something. A solo show is a real opportunity to say, here's a really deep sense of what I've been dealing with and grappling with. For me, it was a tough situation of showing people a really confident, thorough investigation into something—or feeling like I'd already shown my work in the past that people had really internalized, and pushing it. For me, it was something I really grappled with—making work that wasn't so far past the last time I'd shown that they'd think, how did we get here? I say to friends that I feel like I'm reinventing the wheel every single time I make a painting. I should be doing things like keeping color studies, especially with the material I use, knowing exactly how to

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measure it and get the certain kind of effects—I don't do any of that. I honestly think part of it is because I work for a living, and I don't have the time to spend four days in the studio doing color studies.

I don't know that I don't want to [do it] because I've never had the opportunity to do it. I would imagine part of me would find it helpful, especially because some of the material is expensive and it's just a big waste of money. Some people know exactly how two colors [are going to work together,] and here I am buying a jar of paint, paint an entire painting one color and I'll look at it and think that wasn't what I thought it was going to look like. It's a balance—I think a lot of the invention in my studio is dependent upon accidents, but I also don't have time for that, so it's frustrating because development only takes that much longer because you're constantly beating your head against a wall for unnecessary purposes.



What's your biggest struggle in your studio practice and in your work, and how do you overcome it?

My biggest struggle is not quite restraint, but more like keeping myself from touching the paintings to death. My happy place is working on the paintings, and sometimes I can work on a painting whether I know exactly where I'm going or not just because it feels good.

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There are times when I photograph a painting every day that I work on it, and I'll go forty photos back and think, that was the money. And that's sort of the gift and the curse of an iPhone—is really being aware of where you came from if you are following your own progress.

Part of that conceptually I really love—do you force yourself to deal with your own problems? And because I don't work reductively at all; adding more and more on top of the thing, to me gives the thing more of an aura or energy. That's how I rationalize it, at least. But sure, there are plenty of times where I just smother the thing and suffocate it. And sometimes I can pull it out of itself and bring it home, but one painting, for instance, has been done four times since 2013. Today it's done, but part of my own worst enemy thing is that if stuff is around long enough it will be cannibalized, so I don't have much work at all that's old which is kind of disappointing for me. Coming from Chris's (Martin) studio where he's constantly surrounded by work from the past 35 years—but because I've become so used to being irreverent about my own stuff I destroy it too fast. I think artists could really benefit from revisiting old stuff and looking at it, and not killing it. So that's something I wish I did more.

Do you have any hobbies or interests outside of your art practice that helps keep you sane?

My family lives in Montana now, and I've always been an outdoorsy person. I grew up in a family that was into hunting, fishing, skiing, shooting like a bunch of wild people, so I love being outside in environments that make you think they could kill you. I love catching fish and skiing too fast, and that kind of stuff is definitely hitting the reset button on my brain. I'm sure that like anyone who lives in a city knows, you can become too cerebral. So checking back in with my body in a way that doesn't just involve being catcalled at 10AM when you're on your way to work...just feeling my body in a different way from that is important to me. But in terms of NYC hobbies, I don't really have any besides work and this. This is a blast—having a studio like this. I have two fantastic bosses who let me buzz off when I need to, and if I get a residency I say, see you in a month and they say, have a great time. That's really rare, so I'm lucky to have their support. I'm broke, but I have a really good thing going on and I actually feel really lucky.



Install shot of the group show *Mallrats* curated by 100% Gallery and held at Et al etc., San Francisco, CA.

Interview with Kari Cholnoky

By Emily Burns

Hi Kari! Can you tell us about your process, and elaborate on working on canvas vs. with mixed media?

Right from the beginning I've just had no real interest in rendering an image on canvas. I've got no skin in that game. I've just always been drawn to material and to working it with my hands. I have always wanted to make an object, not a picture of something.

Where do you source your materials?

Most of the material I use today comes from the internet—the faux fur, synthetic hair, plastics and foams, epoxy putties, masturbators, etc. I get my paint locally for the most part.

How do you store, organize, and navigate through saved materials? Do you ever have to let go of items you have collected but haven't found a use for?

Ugh it's a battle against space, constantly. My studio usually goes through cycles of chaos where I will gradually pull everything out with no real sense of order until every surface is covered with material and parts of potential paintings. My partner Dante has referred to my studio in these situations as "a trap" because there is literally almost nowhere to step without crushing

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something breakable or injuring yourself by stepping on something hazardous or sharp. At the breaking point I do frantic cleaning phases where I put everything away. The cycle repeats. If I had more space I would love to just have stuff permanently stay out. I let go of stuff every once in a while if I've had it for a year or longer without really using it, but I usually not only use everything in the studio, but I also tend to cannibalize finished work if I have to look at it for too long...

As a maximalist painter, do you feel that you identify as a maximalist in other areas of your life as well?

I think the work is pulling from minimalism just as much as a maximalism—that interview where I talked about maximalism is more in reference to my studio process as being anti reductionist and against the idea that the work becomes more succinct or streamlined as time goes on. I don't think I identify with maximalism in my life in general—maybe just when faced with ice cream 😊

What is your process like? Are you working primarily directly on the work itself, or do you sketch or plan compositions beforehand?

If I do a drawing before a painting, which is super rare, it's a very basic geometric layout of a substructure of the painting. Otherwise my practice involves making many paintings at a time of various sizes. As I make paintings, ideas for more paintings come and I try to start them immediately. If I don't have enough paintings to work on at any given time I will touch one or two of them to death—smother it. So by giving myself a lot of problems I always have something to channel my energy into. I work about half on the floor, half on the wall. Sometimes the paintings are done in a few months and sometimes they are done four times over the course of three years. I destroy most of it, in the end. If I had more space I might save more. The paintings are taking longer and longer to make, it drives me crazy.

When seeing installation photos of your work, it's remarkable how large some of the paintings are, which seems unimaginable when seeing a cropped photo of one work in isolation. Can you tell us a bit about some of the exciting aspects as well as the challenges of working at this scale?

Yeah it's funny it seems like my work in JPEG form just seems much smaller than in actually is. I don't know what about the work lends itself to this kind of scale bending. I love working at the size of my wingspan, that's my favorite scale. I feel an ease when working with something about the size of my trunk or my body. I can have a really direct relationship in making when I'm at that scale. For obvious reasons, it's a challenge with a small studio. When I visit friends studios and see three sets of shelves holding a hundred paintings stretched on canvas I'm jealous for sure.

In addition, your most recent work seems to share a common color theme, with red and yellow being the primary hues. Can you tell us a bit more about the color choices here?

Yeah the color has been hot for the most part. I just feel like blue is the most disgusting color—I don't know what to do with it. Or maybe it's that it's too conventionally pretty and I just don't want anything to do with it. I like painting lights over darks—I use a lot of yellow over black, like night light. I also tend to bring in either pastel pink or purple, and make them cold and

chalky. When I think about these colors I'm thinking about heat-sourced imaging, poisonous natural material, camouflage, defense mechanisms, fear, and My Little Pony.



Kari Cholnoky, *Case Study*, 2017, Faux fur, acrylic, collage, cardboard, 15" x 23" x 4"

Can you elaborate on the presence of sex toys in your work? Has this been a theme in your work for a while or is a new direction?

They've always been interesting to me—I can't tell you exactly when I became aware of them and started looking at images of them. Maybe around 2007 or so? I never actually bought one and held it in my hand until 2013. One of those situations where the thing is so bizarre and alien that you forget that for \$8.99 it can be yours, in discrete packaging and everything. Anyway, when I did actually buy one and hold it I was blown away because there's so much information you don't get from the image. For example, they're usually covered in powdery shit that leaves nasty residue on your hands forever and they stink like a mixture of perfume and cancer and that smell sits on your hands all day too. They're also ridiculously gloopy and that immediately makes them comical because their movement is so clumsy and uncontrollable. They're interesting to me for all of these physical reasons, and also because, to me, they are one of the most direct manifestations of the abstracted body that exist today. I like imagining a group of people in a room with a block of Play-doh asking themselves "what have we not had sex with yet", and coming up with things that will go on to be called "The Sexflesh Trifecta", or "Tracy's

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Dog Male Masturbator Pocket Pussy Realistic". It's easy to see how, at some point, these just become sculpture....

My interest in the masturbators is sort of a metaphor for my interests in general—they perfectly encapsulate an object that gives some people real, meaningful, romantic satisfaction (where they may not be able to accomplish the same thing with actual human beings) while at the same time absurdly mangles the human form into something almost teratoma-like. They are potentially helpful and harmful simultaneously. And even further, they are fetish objects made of toxic material by people fetishized for living in historically "exotic" places where the effects of globalization and capitalism have resulted in hazardous work environments devoted to making abstracted human form with which people pleasure themselves. It's an insane loop.

What is a typical day like for you?

I'm a studio assistant, so an average day for me is going to work, coming home, eating a bowl of Cocoa Krispies standing up and working in my studio. Pretty straightforward.

Who are some of the artists that you look at the most often or most recently?

Most recently I've been looking at Lygia Clark's early work. I don't look at anyone particularly "most often" but the people who really challenge me in the studio are Lee Lozano and Lee Bontecou.

What are a few of the stimuli or experiences that get you really excited to get back into the studio, particularly if you have been experiencing a spell of tepid inspiration?

Because I work five days a week, being in the studio is what gets me really excited to be in the studio hahaha. Anyone who spends most of their time doing something that isn't their work knows that there is just no replacing consecutive days in the studio. Your mindset and focus on the third day is incomparable to the first day. It's tough knowing that, most of the time, you don't get that level of depth and invention because you can't focus that much consecutive time on just thinking about the problems the painting presents. When I can get those stretches, I'm always looking for that moment that I surprise even myself with something. Those moments of wonder and the feeling of possibility are why we keep doing this shit when it probably isn't rationally such a good idea.

Who are three emerging artists making some really exciting work right now?

I am always really eager to see the work of Amy Brener, Andrew Ross, and the Bobo NYC crew.

If epiphanies occur for you, where and how do they usually happen? Can you conjure them by planning for this catalyst?

Epiphany is a strong word :) Images of unborn paintings float in and out randomly. I try to see paintings when I'm falling asleep at night and I'm in a kind of semi lucid state. I never make drawings at night or write ideas down—maybe some day when my life is a little quieter and I have the peace of mind I will.

Is there anything that significantly supports or destroys your groove or energy in the studio?

Yeah, I can't really listen to music in the studio—it's incredibly distracting for me. If it's upbeat,

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I'm upbeat—If it's depressing I get depressed and the paintings are affected as a by-product. So annoying. I exclusively listen to podcasts, which allow me to fully focus on the story being told and stop over analyzing what I'm doing to the painting. I put myself in a kind of cruise control, it feels really good.

Has there ever been a book/essay/poem/film/etc that totally changed or influenced you?

What are you reading right now?

Not I by Beckett—still, every time I watch a video of the performance of that piece it fucking terrifies me. It reminds me of a recurring night terror I had when I was a kid. I can't really remember what was in the dream, just how it started, but the feeling of it was similar. I'm reading Paul Virillio right now. His writing on speed, politics, technology and war seems highly relevant to the concerns of my work.

Any advice from your past that has stuck with you or helped you?

A lot of "Bev-isms" from my mentor in grad school, Beverly Fishman... that success should be defined within the studio first and foremost. And if I ever get down I just remind myself that a very sophisticated man from Denmark once told me that my work should stop "shoving it down his throat" in my studio and that lifts me right up.

What has been one of the most challenging aspects of your career as an artist so far?

Having a studio big enough to make and store work. It's hard not to feel like my work is becoming physically constrained as I continue to make it in my apartment, and stunted in its development as it's hard to feel like anything is possible in a space packed full of old paintings. I've always felt like I'm the kind of person who can make it work no matter what, so I guess I'm putting that theory to the test.

How do you navigate distraction in the studio and in life?

I'm honestly so eager to get out of work and into the studio that I don't really have problems with distractions. If anything, I have a hard time choosing to be social instead of being in the studio.

Do you have any other news, shows, residencies or projects coming up?

I'll be in a group show at Regina Rex opening September 14, and I'll have a solo show at Safe Gallery in spring 2018.



Habitat: Kari Cholnoky

BY KATHERINE MCMAHON | February 12, 2016

This week's studio: Kari Cholnoky; East Williamsburg, Brooklyn. **Kari Cholnoky** is not a minimalist. “Conceptually, I believe that more is more,” she told me. With her colorful, boisterous paintings, Cholnoky aims to examine our relationship to objects by using a wide variety of materials, like fur, polyurethane, wigs, and sex toys.

Cholnoky, 27, has been working in her Brooklyn home and studio for a year. Before moving to New York, she got her M.F.A. in painting from Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. “I really needed grad school,” she told me. “It was like a two-year monastery where I read a ton of books, made a ton of work, and asked myself a ton of questions. There’s no way I could have done it in New York City—you’re not able to take risks like you can when nobody’s paying attention.” She currently supplements her income as an artist by working as a studio assistant for painters Joe Bradley and Chris Martin.

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At any given time, Chohnoky said, she is working on 10 to 15 paintings. “I’m hyperconscious when I work,” she said. “For me, painting is almost like achieving a meditative state. Yoga doesn’t work for me, but working myself to death does.” In her current body of work, she is restraining her color palette in order to experiment in other ways, like incorporating new materials and trying out unusual compositions. “When a new material comes into my practice,” she said, “I’m so enamored by it that I think its perfect just the way it is, and then after a certain amount of time, I become discontented by the rawness of the thing. It’s been three years that I’ve been using fur at this point and now the fur is basically obliterated. There used to be a softness, but that’s over.”

Chohnoky’s work is currently featured in a solo exhibition at David Klein Gallery in Detroit and will be appearing in a group exhibition curated by Melissa Brown at Safe Gallery in Brooklyn on February 19. Below, a look around Chohnoky’s workspace.

