

A Hard Place: A Visit the Studio of Kara Stein

By Ernesto Renda

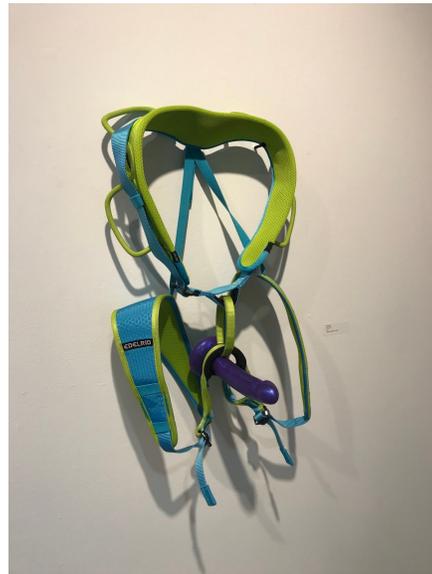
I have had the privilege of studying with Kara Stein in the past, and it was nice to catch up. We sat down at her RISD studio to talk about her recent experiences coming-to-terms with substance addiction, the challenges of sobriety, and specifically, the way that process is felt in and through her artistic practice.

Kara's work has led her to a variety of material approaches to personal subject matter, from traditional oil painting to extremely precarious found-object installations that I would be more inclined to call "situations." Though formally diverse, Kara's work evokes a focused search for ways to speak about her addictive personality and her love for rock-climbing. She states adamantly that throughout her using and sober life, climbing always held a "sacred" place as a sober activity. "I can't drink in safety, can't smoke in safety, but that's where the 'safety' gear comes in," she says. Climbing, for her, operates as a useful metaphor in her art but also a very real self-care practice during this transition into sobriety.



A large representational work on the studio wall shows a close-up of climbing equipment while her assemblage, *Harness* employs the same equipment with an added dildo to form a critique of male-dominated climbing culture. *one year*, a shrine-like monument to her young yet confident sobriety, also uses climbing robes and camalots that string up a golden folding-chair (a reference to the chairs at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.) The pebble-filled handle of Tito's vodka placed in the center contributes to the affective condition of being weighed down, which her epoxied status-bottles of expensive liquor also evoke. These bottles are Kara's attempt to

“move beyond the ready-made” and gain control over the bottles. She explains, “I wanted to put in all the hours of labor that these bottles stole from me.”



Each of us finds a different way of dealing with the weight of our actions, with confronting guilt and shame. The bottle of Tito's has a longer story. A few months ago I saw Kara with it, then full of vodka, and she said she was doing a ritual with it. I assumed it was a personal ritual and was surprised when it re-appeared in her work. When I asked Kara whether her studio is a place to practice self-care, I was surprised to hear that, for her, it is actually quite triggering, a space where she must punish herself and push through the regret. “I've done drugs all over this studio,” she points out. The studio is a “battleground” for Kara, as she confronts the harsh reality that a lot of her development as a young adult and artist at RISD has been shaped by the tight-rope performance of substance abuse and dependency, attention-deficit disorder, and relationship issues.

We might like to think that an artist's studio is a sanctuary where they are cut off from the world and thus able to do very personal work. This ends up being more of a fantasy for many of us. Kara speaks about a realization that is common for people recovering from a substance addiction, that there were problems with Kara way before using and holes in her from which she was simply trying to distract herself. As an artist making personal work, the space of her studio is a reflective and revelatory one, but it is far from comfortable or safe.