

HESSE FLATOW

Kinsella, Eileen. "Artist Tara Geer Goes through Hundreds of Pencils a Day Creating Charcoal Drawings in Her Harlem Studio, Dog by Her Side." *Artnet News*. Online. July 18, 2023.

artnet news

Studio Visit

Artist Tara Geer Goes Through Hundreds of Pencils a Day Creating Charcoal Drawings in Her Harlem Studio, Dog by Her Side

The artist will open a show of large-scale new works in Long Island on July 22.

Eileen Kinsella, July 18, 2023



Tara Geer. Photo by Fredrika Stjärne

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Artist Tara Geer, known for her raw, almost sculptural charcoal drawings, has been on a roll this year. Her large-scale works were the focus of a compelling Guild Gallery show in downtown New York this past spring, titled "Unstill World" (April 20–May 27), juxtaposed with sculptural designs by four Japanese fiber artists placed strategically throughout the gallery.

On July 22, the Arts Center at Duck Creek—a 19th-century barn in East Hampton—will open "Tara Geer: Sown in the Half Light," an exhibition of large drawings (through August 20) that features a mix of unusual bulbs, stems and wildly scribbled panels. It marks the first public, large-scale installation of her work.

Geer counts a wide range of styles as influences, ranging from traditional Chinese landscape painting and early Japanese calligraphy to Mexican "retablos," small, colorful paintings typically executed on tin. She has been a teacher in the art and art education program at Columbia University's Teachers College for the past three decades, all while continuing to sketch her charcoals.

Geer's works are held in several museum and public collections, including the Morgan Library & Museum, the Parrish Museum, and the William Louis Dreyfus Foundation, among others. Her work with the six-woman activist collective Victory Garden is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the New York Historical Society, the Beinecke Library at Yale University, and the Canadian Museum. After a recent walkthrough of the Guild Gallery show with the artist, we caught up with her for a virtual visit to her West Harlem studio on the eve of the new show.



Artist Tara Geer at work. Photo: Fredrika Stjärne.

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Tell us about your studio. Where is it, how did you find it, what kind of space is it?

After I graduated from the Columbia University's School of the Arts in the late 1990s, me and some adjunct faculty signed a lease for the third floor of a rundown building in West Harlem a block from the Hudson River. It was next to the highway, in the shadow of the massive, metal undercarriage of the elevated part of Riverside Drive, an area with no visible nature except the flat, gray running of the river. The previous tenant was a prop company. We kept a three-foot saw blade on which someone had painted "chickens for sale" and subdivided the floor into eight studios. At that time the building was surrounded by slaughterhouses, storage, abandoned buildings and a Cleantex dry cleaner. I've been on the same floor for almost 25 years, walking up the same three flights of uneven stairs, and listening to the sounds of the city change. I still feel the sweep of happiness start at the first staircase. Now, two very popular clubs below me blast music on weekends, bouncers eye my clothes and look away. I have 15-foot ceilings, a skylight, two large windows facing south over a city bus lot, a huge space over the parked buses, and sky over the buildings. When I close the door of my studio behind me, stillness and quiet pool around me. I love my studio.



Photo by Fredrika Stjärne

Do you have studio assistants or other team members working with you? What do they do?

The first 10 years I had a studio I let almost no one in, ever. I wanted to be alone, to feel alone, to hear my own voice, to not try to make anything for anyone beside myself, be able to make ridiculous things, or wild mistakes and not judge them, to know what I thought about it.

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The closing of a door on a space in which you do not have to be anyone, or anything, or please anyone, or clean, or do assigned work, or be nice, or smile and wonder if you are doing the right thing, is profound and powerful. We become artists, in some cases like mine, because we cannot stop. And no one can tell you how to do that but you.



Photo by Fredrika Stjärne

The studio is where I learn how to be an artist—not how it's supposed to look on the outside with cool outfits and hair at an opening, but what it really is. When I felt I'd taught myself how to draw, after a decade, I started letting in people whom I admired, maybe one or two each year. The skills in being an artist in the outward facing sense have been harder for me to learn than the work of making art, by myself in my studio. I have had to learn how to open the door to the outside world. Last year, I sort of had a studio assistant, for a few half days, for a few months, and then I worked with an archivist. Mostly I do the work myself. I love working alone.

How many hours do you typically spend in the studio, what time of day do you feel most productive, and what activities fill the majority of that time?

Before I had kids, when I didn't have to be at a job, I'd work in the studio through the night. After my first child was born, I didn't have that kind of time anymore. I decided I had to cut out all the looking and considering. Any idea that popped in my head, I did. If I thought, maybe rip the middle out, I'd immediately rip out the middle. I didn't spend any time weighing if it was a good or bad idea. I have more time again now, with kids in school, but I still try to barrel out of the gate. It's more fun. I'm in the studio three to four days, and two to three nights weekly

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Photo by Fredrika Stjärne

What is the first thing you do when you walk into your studio (after turning on the lights)?

When I'm in the middle of something, I change into my studio clothes, turn on the tea kettle, and am absorbed into drawing by the time the kettle starts to whistle, and don't bother to make the tea. The rest of the world drops away. That part is hard to describe. Joy maybe. I sit at a big, ugly water-swollen desk and feel the partial drawings, or empty walls, breathing at my back. I thought that with experience I'd learn to make work easily, evenly, regularly. It turns out, instead, that it is a part of this life, to walk in and out of the garden plot of my own work. And even at the studio, with time in front of me, I can stand outside the gate, and wonder how to get back in.

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Image courtesy Tara Geer

What tool or art supply do you enjoy working with the most, and why? Please send us a snap of it.

I love my electric pencil sharpener. I flatten to the nub hundreds of pencils a day, bowls of them. The sharpener saves me the time that I would have to spend scraping them into points with a blade knife. This Aformat makes a nice, long point. Also, if I remove the top and use pliers, I can sharpen my stubs much further. One might consider the risk of some electrocution, or one might not.

What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Is there anything you like to listen to/watch/read/look at etc. while in the studio for inspiration or as ambient culture?

Sometimes, I believe that listening to repetitive music without words—or in languages I do not know—is useful. Then I get tired, and I put on anything that makes me want to dance and thrash about. When I am inside a drawing, I don't hear the music.

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Image courtesy Tara Geer.

When you feel stuck while preparing for a show, what do you do to get unstuck?

I have been trying to standardize this re-entry. The past few years, when I feel stuck, or even stuck-ish, I make circles. I close my eyes and, as slowly as I can, I brush uneven ink circles, in a probably un-kosher, jerry-rigged version of the Zen Buddhist monk practice called Enso. I make the circles, over and over, until I am not looking at the drawing—even in my mind. I am feeling out into the world. Then I leave notes below the ink circles about what worked for the next time I get stuck. Sometimes, I say, just get your hands dirty for the length of one good song. Or, feel as much of the world as fits in one bathtub, and then walk away.

Where do you get your food from, or what do you eat when you get hungry in the studio?

I have an electric tea kettle, and turn it on to make tea and then forget about it repeatedly. The nearest bodega is a 15 min walk away, so I never go. I usually try to keep a box of cereal or something I cannot eat with my hands as they are blackened with charcoal and probably lead dust.

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Photo by Fredrika Stjärne

Is there anything in your studio that a visitor might find surprising?

It's dirty. In the film version of an artist's studio you have an affair on the couch. My couch is barely visible under ripped out parts of charcoal drawings, piles of inked circles on crumpled rice paper, paint stains and dog hair. My dog recently has been objecting to it. Around the edges of the floor are mounds of eraser shavings and charcoal dust and shreds of paper, plastic takeout containers of hardened glue, and mugs of cracked ink. It is a gift to have a space that cannot be messed up.

What is the fanciest item in your studio? The most humble?

My partner put wheels on my worktable, so I can move it around easily—that feels fancy. The rest of the furniture was abandoned when I dragged it in.

Describe the space in three adjectives.

Still, dirty, beautiful.

What's the last thing you do before you leave the studio at the end of the day (besides turning off the lights)?

Wash the charcoal off my face and neck and arms.

What do you like to do right after that?

Go home.