

Precarious Magic: Everyday Miracles and Disasters in the Work of Keith Kaziak

Jen Delos Reyes, March 2022

A perfect slice of Wonder bread walks on water. A cast iron pan serves as an emergency floatation device for a silver dollar pancake stranded in a five-gallon utility bucket full of water. A hose is frozen into a lively and almost threatening 30 ft long snake. These are just a handful of the artistic actions of Keith Kaziak that have the magical ability to transform not only the materials that give these objects life, but to shift a viewer's inattention into a state of contemplation. Kaziak's curiosity radiates from the work. In an age where many studies have shown that a museum visitor can spend as little as two seconds with a work of art¹, to be able to capture the imagination and time of an audience member is as impressive as making the Statue of Liberty disappear. How Kaziak is capturing his audience is not with the flashy glitz of a David Copperfield illusion, but with the much more modest, and impressive to master, materials of everyday life, the mundane objects that many don't ever give thought to become mesmerizing vehicles. It is ultimately these commonplace items that allow us to see the world anew. Kaziak is giving these objects a chance to be the unlikely heroes that might help build empathy in the viewer towards the material world around us, which while living through a climate crisis of our own making, very much driven by our over consumption, the ability to rethink our relationship to things in this moment is critical. The pieces in *Rule No. 8: Don't Look Down!* are magic tricks, warning calls, pranksters, and familiar friends. They work together to call our attention to the everyday disasters that surround us, as well as the possibility of miracles.

In Kaziak's lexicon Wile E. Coyote "typifies the human condition— His self-defeating chase in the *roadrunner-rat-race* and pursuit of *hare-brained* mechanisms only as a means become his catastrophes." Wile E. Coyote was of course one of the first things that came to mind as I stared up at *Zenith (becoming)*, the mirror ball anvil hanging in his studio. While the images of a cartoon coyote zipped across my mind, a darker more ominous tone set in when I imagined *Zenith* in its true home, on the dance floor. Dance floors have historically been a sight of resistance, and joy, but also a dangerously charged place. The roots of disco were in New York's gay underground scene. Post-Stonewall New York's gay community was experiencing a new-found freedom and openness. For the first time two men could freely dance with one another in public. This sense of freedom and love permeated the music that helped build their scene. In the words of Mel Cheren, a well-known disco record producer of the time and a regular at the dance club Paradise Garage, "It may seem odd to describe disco in these terms, but we were a tribe, and we were doing what tribes have been doing for thousands of years. We were building a community through communal dance and celebration." The backdrop of the Paradise Garage disco scene was the burgeoning AIDS epidemic, and a "Disco Sucks" campaign rooted in racism and homophobia that would soon all but clear the dance floors. Throughout the ongoing pandemic² a refrain I heard often was how of all the things people were missing in their

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-long-does-it-take-to-_b_779946#:~:text=There%20have%20been%20a%20number,the%20text%2C%20and%20moves%20on.

² His other work that calls in the one moment of panic of the pandemic is *Morass*, 2021 in which he creates a single roll of white quilted toilet paper that floats serenely through our chaotic world on the peaceful surface of the water contained in a commonplace galvanized steel pail.

lives, it was the communal dancing they did not realize how much they took for granted until it was no longer a possibility. The idea of hot breathing bodies joyously close on the dance floor all of a sudden held an unimaginable danger, yet the desire for communities of urgency persisted. As part of this exhibition, as the mask mandates continue to be lifted across the country the mirror ball anvil will for the first time be danced under by gallery goers in celebration of the closing of the exhibition, as all spin to the music of the DJ Tricky³.

Aldo Leopold can perhaps posthumously add comedian to his list of descriptors thanks to the work of Keith Kaziak. Considered by many to be the father of wildlife ecology and the United States' wilderness system, Aldo Leopold was a conservationist, forester, philosopher, educator, writer, and outdoor enthusiast.⁴ Leopold graduated from the Yale Forest School in 1909 and went straight into working for the newly established U.S. Forest Service in Arizona and New Mexico. In just five years' time he was already the supervisor for Carson National Forest. A few years later he was credited with creating the country's first official wilderness area in 1924. That same year Leopold accepted a transfer to Wisconsin where he would continue his important ecological work both personally and professionally. He worked with his family on a land restoration project on a farm along the Wisconsin River.

It was in Wisconsin where he would write the very first text book on wildlife management, and eventually take up a position at the University of Wisconsin, where over 90 years later Keith Kaziak would be a graduate student who would in a roundabout way reference Leopold's legacy in his own work as a sculptor. Of this long list of accomplishments and contributions to how we are able to experience nature and wildlife preservation, what Kaziak was most focused on was a now ubiquitous bench design credited to Leopold. Whether you know it or not, you have likely sat on a bench that was designed by the father of wildlife ecology. It is a design elegant in its simplicity. It has an economy of labor in construction. The bench is almost a magic trick in itself, transforming six pieces of board into a sturdy bench on which one can sit and be in nature. The design highlights the beauty of nature by taking up the least space possible. And while these benches have proliferated across the country, they are especially prominent in Wisconsin due to Leopold's connection to the state.

Kaziak has recreated this ever-present bench in an unlikely material, common rigid sheet foam, which he had wrapped in contact paper with a finish to imitate wood grain. While the faux surface still makes space to reveal the true synthetic material of the bench, when placed out in the landscape amongst its peers it is accepted as one of the flock, instead of as a piece of elevated public art. And here is where the comedy comes in. Through the insertion of these artful replicas the unobservant become the unwitting participants in a slapstick physical comedy routine who while supposed to be in a state of awareness immersed in nature is not present enough to take in all that surrounds them, and in turn sit on a bench that snaps and collapses beneath them. Kaziak is an advocate of replicas and imposters, "Props and decoys are not the objects they mimic, rather the 'things' they have become, as their function has been seized by the precarity of their materials." As an artist who revealed to me that he is

³ Moniker of Faisal Abdu'Allah, Professor of Printmaking; Chazen Family Distinguished Chair in Art

⁴ <https://www.aldoleopold.org/about/aldo-leopold/>

an artist who is dismayed by how unaware and unobservant people have become of the world around them, I can't help but imagine this was always an intended part of the gag.

How do we continue to believe in miracles in the face of everyday disasters, global crises, and warfare? As I write this essay we are on the brink of World War 3, two years into a global pandemic, and inflation impacting people's mobility and ability to put food on their tables and feed their family. I have a deep respect and love of comedians because through their work they have the ability to use humor to help us process and move through some of the most challenging aspects of what it means to be humans living together in this messed up world. The work Kaziak makes is equal parts magic, comedy, and tragedy. Unlike a true magician, Kaziak is not unwilling to share the secrets behind his own brand of mundane magic, and that is part of the beauty of it. Encountering the work of Keith Kaziak made me realize I also have an appreciation for magicians, the people who can instill a sense of wonder, create a suspended moment of disbelief maybe in the moment we need it most. Kaziak's work is that of the skillful magician, with comedic timing, showing us that in this painful moment in world history that everyday miracles can still happen, and we can laugh about it too.

Jen Delos Reyes is the strong eldest daughter of an immigrant single mother. Through her upbringing on Canada's prairies she learned about resourcefulness, community building, and how to prioritize joy, fashion, and aesthetics from her Filipina mother. She is the first homeowner and degree holder in her immediate family. She centers her practice around education, ecologies, and the transformative possibilities of sharing domestic space as a community resource.

Jen identifies with Wendell Berry's description as a 'farmer of sorts and an artist of sorts,' an educator, writer, and radical community arts organizer. She is defiantly optimistic, a friend to all birds, and proponent that our institutions can become tender and vulnerable. She divides her time between Chicago, IL where she runs Garbage Hill Farm, and Ithaca, NY where she is faculty in the Department of Art at Cornell University.