

## Some thoughts on Karin's current exhibition in Céret.

*by Dr. James Pimm*

There's a piece of art in Karin Jolly's exhibition at Sant Roch in Céret currently; the title is "It took her in eight weeks". Someone had left the tiny work "in" out of the title, and it was pencilled in. I thought it was interesting, and intriguing – surely Karin meant that it took her (Karin) 8 weeks to make the sculpture. ("It took her 8 weeks" would refer to the process of making the sculpture) Then I asked Karin if she would mind talking about some of her pieces, and as she had been downstairs talking, I waited for Karin to come up. Now this exhibition holds together a coherent body of work incredibly well. For a start, with an exhibition of paintings, one usually has more than one medium, say oil paints and charcoal studies, and a fixed palette of restricted colours can be unusual. Here Karin has taken the safety pin, surely emblematic of safety, and a common household object, and then allowed a period of contemplation and meditation on some quite profound subjects such as life and death, family, chaos, suffering, joy – you can see I could go on. What is remarkable is that she has looked at how safety can both provide a sense of structure and function, and this can be used for good or ill. The safety can work, or it can hasten the damage.

To come back now, to the art installation called “It took her in 8 weeks”, with a little nudging, I discovered this was a meditation on the death of a close friend who had tried to seek medical help during the pandemic when “for the safety of others” doctors saw very few patients face to face, to reduce the risk of covid-19 spreading within the surgeries in the pandemic. Karin’s close friend therefore did not get her terminal diagnosis of stage 4 cancer with her spine affected until far too late to provide her with any intervention. The cancer deposits riddled her spine, and it was cancer that took her to her death in 8 weeks. The 5 red arrow shaped feathers which pierce the sculpture and appear with something like drops of blood spraying away from the “spine” represent the five weeks that Karin knew she was dying with a terminal prognosis. Perhaps the five feathers shaped as arrows were Karin’s long conversations of support which go through the cancer in intermittent steps but make little difference to her close  
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friend’s condition. There is something desperately deliberate in the way the arrows point upwards, perhaps hopefully conveying some sense of holding on, of fighting towards something successful, and yet otherwise not altering the web of metal woven organically. The organic form of the safety clip sculpture here does indeed give a sense of the vertebral column, although not exactly, but

the domestic mirror allows for a comparison with one's own frame. It certainly lines up at about the correct level, but one is distracted by one's own image. Does this distraction add to the art? Possibly, probably. One needs to know first of all what the back story is – and then of course healthy people with healthy spines who don't have cancer would have been vying for attention to Karin's friend's GP, and ultimately getting in the way, being a distraction. The sculpture is not inherently emotional and doesn't jolt within us a reaction immediately. But it is pensive, a meditation on the safety-net which is no longer safe, no longer a net designed to catch you or rescue you. The sculpture is so much more profound than I expected. These five red feathers have only one direct echo elsewhere, in a crucifixion scene, (Liberty crucified) which does invite a shocked reaction, perhaps the only piece which produces shock in most people. Is this tiny piece a comment on Christian religion as a safety net? Most of the pins are not safely closed but rather open and used to pin the body-like feather to its backing, which mirrors the nails used in the real Roman crucifixion. Here the safety pins lack any kind of net-like togetherness, and obviously pierce both the crucified and the background. Is a religious safety net something that many others have found gave only hurt or worse?

I was sent to a catholic boarding school at the age of

eight, one of the most traumatic events of my life, exposing me to bullying from larger boys (I was a full one year too young for my class owing to knowing too much at the age of five), sadistic beatings from Jesuit staff, minor sexual abuse, humiliation, and isolation.

Therefore, as an institution, the Catholic church and its boarding schools, its maternity units, its places of refuge for pregnant unmarried mothers in Ireland, is sometimes repugnant, and perhaps for some, the very nonsense of a place of safety. The catholic church is, in some eyes, historically responsible for untold harm to young boys at or before puberty, and untold harm in stealing the babies of unmarried mothers and selling them to Americans. I agree

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the pins on “Liberty crucified” need to be all open, all sharp, all dangerous. I wonder if the small piece with the central figure apparently dripping blood is shocking enough. But France is a very catholic country, so this is just a tiny piece of offense, and quite subtle. Well done Karin, on reigning it in and not over-playing it.

Karin’s central large piece is called “150,000 acts of safety”. It consists of hoops all covered in closed safety pins, and the lighting in the room casts an orange-red glow. The hoops hang from the ceiling, and make a long cavernous structure that appears to invite you to dive in. It looks safe, it looks inviting, and somewhat vaginal – it

looks like an orifice with something at the end – from the viewing end it isn't clear – what is it?

This large piece must have taken some time and a huge community act of help to get it done. Every last safety pin had to be opened and closed around the many bands of wire, so Karin elected to make this art in the company of others. The process allowed an interesting observation; mostly women taking time to physically help to do the work, while men mostly watched and passed comment. If it was a test of the local community to see how safe the community is, I likely failed this, since I did not help, I just watched. This casts me as an observer, perhaps unwilling to get involved, perhaps daunted by the sheer scale of work involved. Perhaps as a reflection on community, on society, and on the safety in numbers, this shows us that women perform most of the acts of safety and provide the secure foundation of a society. They certainly bring forth the next generation, usually from the vagina. And the single object at the end is just a single safety pin, perhaps signifying the smallness and vulnerability of the foetus, and perhaps it is now just women who protect the unborn. From my perspective this means the whole safety structure is just for the purpose of bringing a single new baby into the world to become part of society. The men sit around and talk about it, perhaps judging it. The supreme court in the USA recently debated women's rights to a

safe abortion by reversing Roe vs Wade. The ultimate feminist decision currently is to take a stand against a group of mainly privileged older white men sitting in judgement. Reina del Cid sings it most profoundly “My country ‘tis of thee, land of inequity, of thee I sing. Land where my mothers cried, fought, bled, and sacrificed, for rights which we are now denied, let freedom ring”

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The women do the work of knitting together the fabric of society, the social connections, doing the practical things together and helping each other. Men mostly get in the way. Miriam Morgolyes in promoting “This much is true” says that men are here to support women, not the other way around, as they like to believe. As a grand central piece for the exhibition 150,000 acts of safety is definitively hollow, and void like, so in my mind this is a feminine or feminist piece, and Karin says it was overwhelming made by women, with almost no men doing anything practical. And it was a public process, being made in the cafés and public spaces of Céret, overwhelmingly by women together. If society is safe it is because of women largely. Men make wars and make laws, but where women have led the way, history has really noticed. You can’t just ignore Joan of Arc or the central figure in Delacroix’s Liberty Leading the People. Perhaps it is significant that Delacroix’s famous work, and

Karin Jolly's central piece are similar in size and scale.

Liberty exposes the breast, Jolly shows the vagina. Well it is hollow, and there is a tiny baby safety pin at the top end, not so?

I was left with the distinct impression that this whole show is a very strong feminist view, shaped by personal experience, personal tragedies, and with a very restricted palette – safety pins, some feathers, and a tiny amount of red paint or red dye or red light. A lot of interesting shadows, and sculptures that appear to be delicate, but are actually very strong. They move if pushed, they don't resist against the touch, they are strong, but still convey a certain fragility and elegance. Each piece says something, everything is worth paying attention to.

This is Karin Jolly's finest work – not just worth seeing, but hopefully other curators and galleries will hear of this work, and it's take on feminism, safety, family, and all the rest.

I would hope to see this exhibition go on tour so that many others get the same chance, to see it and experience it.

Curators please take note.

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