

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

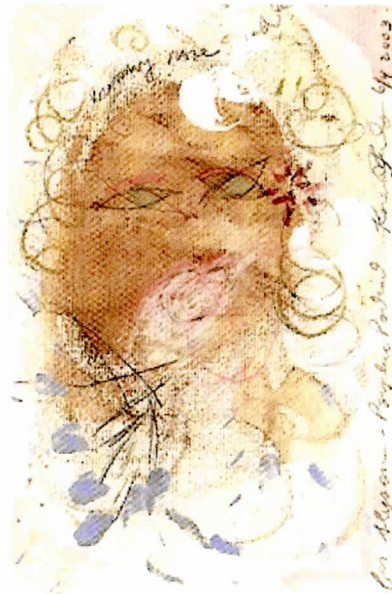
NEW YORK

Karen Finley at the Kitchen

The Kitchen's gallery was moody with votive candles. In the oracle's back room, a long table was covered with butcher paper, on which pastels and watercolors were set out. I was there to have my aura channeled into a long *Psychic Portrait* by Karen Finley (30 minutes, \$100/gouache, \$150/iridescent).

"I get a feeling of sadness," she said. Madame Karen's sharp, off-kilter face was familiar to me not only from the press, but from seeing one of those chocolate-smear-naked-body 1980s performances that almost brought down the N.E.A. Actually, I wasn't particularly sad. I seemed to have thrown the artist into psychic's block. "I don't get an image. The first time that's happened," she said with what might have been glee or desperation.

Drawing from Karen Finley's "Psychic Portraits" show, 2003; at the Kitchen.



Revealing up front that I'm a reviewer was perhaps a mistake. So I leaned to the side to seem non-threatening. She relaxed. "I get a no-makeup, early-morning feeling," she purred, scribbling on the page's edge. "Critical. Mass. Does that mean anything? A coldness. You want to make art, but can't." (Hmm. Was I a Rorschach test for her image of critics?) "You wanted to pursue medicine? Analyze? You're in a relationship of cruelty with somebody." (With her, right then?)

Finley's eyes, strangely, are the same tawny hue as her long hair. Her pupils became pinpoint small as she suddenly attacked the page, painting an aquamarine rectangle. (Progress! I like blue!) My aura turned out to be a window framing a leafless tree behind a table set for one. Then I was filled with a feeling of sadness! In an adjoining gallery I had seen others' aura-paintings—gouaches sparkling with feminine faces, mascara-lashed eyes, cats, the gushing artlessness of teen girls' notebooks. And I got a leafless tree? I tried to reveal my fuzzy, warm self to her, and some kind of friendly exchange did result as we chatted. She drew a dash of scarlet under my solitary blue window to make me feel better.

But then, maybe her ESP was telling her the truth: that I've always seen the whiny stream-of-consciousness rants for which she is known as, well, intellectually lazy. And yet, to be fair, I thought to myself: isn't she operating in the Artaudian tradition of the artist as medium, breaking through to society's dark, nonlogical heart?

As we got up from the table, I gave her a critic's gift, saying that her *Psychic Reading* is a metaphor, up close and personal, for all art: creator and viewer in communication via an object, whether the result is a reading or misreading. The oracle seemed to like that. And the medium, after all, is the message.

—Carey Lovelace