



**Cause & Effect**

Mental Contagion

Art • Environment • Interview

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## Kim Abeles Los Angeles, CA

Interviewed by Dean Pajevic | [Upcoming Shows](#)

**Kim Abeles** is an artist who crosses disciplines and media to explore and map the urban environment and chronicle broad social issues. *The Smog Collector* series brought her work to national and international attention in the art world, and mainstream sources such as *Newsweek* and Dan Rather.

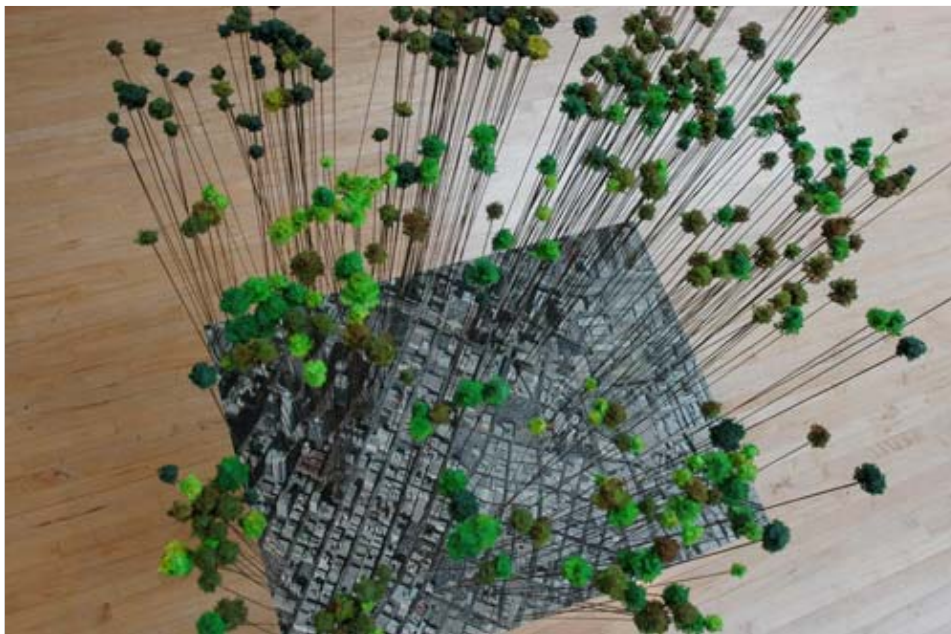
Abeles' mid-career survey, *Encyclopedia Persona A-Z*, toured the United States and South America, and was awarded the Best Regional Museum Show category for 1993-94 by the International Association of Art Critics.

She represented the U.S. in both the Fotografie Biennale Rotterdam and the Cultural Centre of Berchem in Antwerp. Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art, the United States Information Agency, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and is archived in the library collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Cooper-Hewitt Publication Design Collection of the Smithsonian.

Abeles was awarded grants from the Andy Warhol Foundation and Peter Norton Foundation and fellowships from J. Paul Getty Trust Fund for the Visual Arts, Pollack-Krasner Foundation, and the California Arts Council.

**DP:** Maps and aerial views are tools that are often turned to new ends in your work as in the piece "Looking for Paradise (Downtown Los Angeles)". What fascinates you about the intersection of abstract mapping and the actual reality on the street, the dirt and trees?

**KA:** The mappings involve the eye in a scale-shift that is at once playful or aesthetic. It makes the mapping a milagro, a miracle, for the earth. Materializing my ideas has the same appeal as the origins of map making. Imagine taking something that takes weeks to walk on foot and turning it into something the hand can hold. I did a piece once that was a pocket-size sky, and the mapping pieces remind me of that idea; both require a belief or faith in the imagination.



[Looking For Paradise](#)

**DP:** Your work exposes not only the physical clash of the natural and human made worlds, but often

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explicitly the underlying political/social tensions. What drives your explorations? Justice? Truth? The Muse?

**KA:** Art requires the participation of the Muse, even if one is good intentioned to make work about the physical clash between these worlds. The political and social tensions are in the very air these days, yet work still comes forth from the personal. It is as simple as the English teacher encouraging the student to "write about what you know". There is something magical and deep about the creative process that might start with research or a personal interaction, yet ultimately comes through the Muse or not at all. I would like to be driven by Justice and Truth, for the world needs both. But I often feel like I am given my calling. To do my work.

**DP:** How do you balance the physical creation of your sculptures and the mental work of data gathering and idea cultivation? What's the fun part, what's the drudgery?

**KA:** The pieces are highly rigorous in their procedures. The physicality of the resulting artwork is underscored by my immediate involvement with its fabrication. I often learn a technique or skill in order to accomplish a piece. The work combines both high- and low-tech processes, and the metaphor of each material is given the highest reverence.

My work is all drudgery or all fun! I look most to the magical moments, times when coincidence occurs, and places in the processes when it is crystal clear that this is exactly what I should be doing with this idea. These are the signs of something that only becomes visible to the senses through the actual work.



Dolphin Suitcase

**DP:** You state that you "... create sculptural contraptions to collect visual or auditory data over an extended period of time ... [T]he collected "facts" become elements from which I create artworks, and the process itself is materialized."

Can you speak more about the "materializing"? Do you see it in a legal sense of evidence; or maybe more like a birth, the gathering echoes of a larger conversation? Something else?

**KA:** There are some things that are more humorous or profound when they are made visual. I have a primitive response to jokes or situations among people. It makes me laugh. Sometimes I meet people who express themselves a lot in anecdotes, or sayings, or cultural expressions. There are visuals (like a shorthand, a gesture) that are given to ideas, too. This is the art. Without them, communication is only a didactic or an advertisement or a law.

**DP:** There's a biting wit, maybe even a gallows humor to your work. As an artist and human being do you sometimes feel we are just shuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic? Or is there reason for hope? Does it matter?

KA: Hope is a personal idea. I say this only because we live in a time where we are beyond post-modern cynicism. We swim amid more lying and greed than contained in all the novels written, violence is a daily occurrence, while the facts about our polluted environment are understood, yet often denied. Hope, existential humor, and activism allow for more life rafts on the Titanic. My credo is to try each day to educate myself and others more about our world and life; and to keep ready for the Muse to bring me a cornucopia.



The Importance of Objects

DP: With major scientists around the world confirming global warming as fact, and Hurricane Katrina being a tragic example, how do you see artists responding? How should we respond?

KA: People can do practical things in all situations: donate art for fundraisers, give physical time, open ones home, and use these situations to begin dialog with strangers. In these times I often think about someone like Jimmy Carter. Now there's a great role model for people.

The philosophers often write about the problem of taking on one crisis and overlooking the bigger picture. For example, it's the situation of making myself feel better about a specific problem by donating a piece of art for an auction; then I move on to my own stuff. **The challenge is to realize the larger picture so that immediate activities become a continuum in a greater effort toward the positive.**

DP: After all that deep stuff, what makes you laugh?

KA: My cats, my daughter and my husband, and I laugh too much at my own jokes. See? It's the personal thing. It always resonates like the single handprint on the Lascaux caves.

## Upcoming Shows

January 28 - March 26, 2006  
**Presidential Commemorative Smog Plates**  
 In the exhibition, *Extreme Materials*  
 Memorial Art Gallery  
 University of Rochester, New York

January 27 - March 26, 2006  
**Witness Protection Program:**  
*Kim Abeles, Ellen Brooks, and Eileen Cowin*  
 Robert V. Fullerton Museum  
 California State University San Bernardino  
 Catalog for the exhibition with an Introduction  
 By Tom McGovern and an essay by Mark Alice Durant

April 28 - June 11, 2006

**COLA's 10th Anniversary Exhibition**  
Recipients of the City of Los Angeles Awards,  
Department of Cultural Affairs  
Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery

Summer 2006

**DownUp The Golden Mile**

A project by Kim Abeles

Organized and funded by The Public

West Bromich, West Midlands, United Kingdom

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