

Through A Mended Portal
by Rachel Jones

One of the lesser-discussed elements of grief is the way that it can crystallize and heighten experiences of the world around you. A version of this phenomena might be the vaguely articulated “appreciation of every moment,” but in its immediate form the feeling(s) can be visceral, intense, approaching the psychedelic. Blink, blink. The world is seen – and felt – anew, a baptism by loss.

For Lydia Kern, the ruptures of loss become the coordinates of a constellation, a guide to and through another mode of being. Churches and cathedrals have long dazzled with art, architecture, and appeals to the five basic senses, offering an embodied experience to inspire reverence and devotion for things unseen. These languages and experiences are not restricted to the narrowly religious though, and with *Passages* Kern welcomes us into her radically expansive space of process-ing life and death.

What is it like, such intensity of pain? asks Rilke in his poem “Let This Darkness Be A Bell Tower.” In the wake of a traumatic passing, Kern’s own passage intensified, a disentangling from rigid definitions and binaries in favor of a new, if messy, spaciousness – “I couldn’t build the new structures fast enough for when I needed them,” she remembers. New structures take time, and with time, practice, and process, Kern has developed a potent material vocabulary for renegotiating the funerary and ritualistic, the personal and communal, the natural and synthetic, the historic as well as the open-ended, the metaphorical and the literal.

In place of words, bones, roses, mirrors, water, light (and shadow), electric shocks of pink and more delicate sunset hues get stitched together into Kern’s architectural poems. To stitch – and its medical sibling, to suture – is the verb. The humility, and humanness, of visible mending imbues her work with a populist warmth; some of the stitches here were made by other hands, friends who came together to help sew the communal “quilt.” Like so-called “Crazy Quilts,” pieced together from disparate, salvaged elements, Kern works to transform loaded fragments into cohesive meditations on embodiment and awe.

Each of these meditations – living reliquaries – might be seen as a collaboration and a study in interconnectedness. In the obvious sense, certainly, Kern has called upon her extended community to work with her: to construct and sometimes singe her wooden frames, to dig and rinse the bones of a cow named Cherry, to make video documents, to help process “the hide of a deer that the artist witnessed run into a garden fence and die.”

But then Kern’s mode of collaboration is more metaphysical, too – Cherry is present in *Alive absence, flowing* (2022), and so too is the deer present in the work, and the flowers and their dust, and so too the artist’s sister. Pulsating throughout *Passages* is the conviction that, one way or another, all acts – and absences – are collaborative and no one is ever alone.

This ethos of interconnectedness is maybe most readily seen in *Tear Torn and Oneing* (2022), in which dual passageways are united by an umbilical cord of gauze, sutures, and bells. In *Revelations of Divine Love*¹, mystic and anchorite² Julian of Norwich used the word “Oneing” to describe her concept of divine

¹ The first book in English confirmed to be written by a woman

² A person who self-isolates for devotional purposes

unity. With *Tear Torn*, Kern materially and psychically spans the distance between the deer hide she tanned to a “soft stained glass” panel of roses, a butterfly, locks of her own hair curling like horns, and a mirrored green imprint of the deer’s hide – the reflection of a body whose context has changed. In the ultimate poetic gesture, Kern has installed *Tear Torn* beside the church bell – ring that bell and so too other bells will chime. *Let this darkness be a belltower.*

Through its healing, Kern tells us, the wound can be a passage to wholeness – not as a singular achievement, but as a prismatic, porous way of moving through the world with care. A spiraling, fractal logic reverberates throughout these constructions, built from the artist’s whole-hearted, wide-eyed movement through the unknown. Blink, blink. Hand extended and soul bared, Kern invites us to cross our thresholds with rawness and a fierce, fierce love.



(Left to Right)

Tear Torn and Oneing, 2022

roses, locks of artist’s hair, butterfly, amaranth, sutures, bells, hide from a deer that the artist witnessed run into a garden fence and die in Brattleboro VT, egg wash, smoke, water, gauze, wood, mirror, vinyl fabric

Clanging Symbols (eight bells all is well), 2022

cymbals, dried kombucha mother, hazelnuts, altar candles, amaranth (also known as love-lies-bleeding), rope, sutures, bells, torched wood, fire retardant string