

LARASSA KABEL ART, WORK, LIFE, DEATH

Once upon a time, a girl named Larassa Kabel (pronounced Laressa Cable) decided to take her impractical art skills and become a very practical biomedical illustrator. Her pursuit of that goal lasted until she ran up against Iowa State University's biochemistry requirement, and even her mother's bribes couldn't get her to go back into that field. Instead, Kabel, whose family had moved to Martensdale, Iowa, from Michigan, dove back into art, this time in an honors program in fibers. She graduated from ISU in 1992 with a finely attuned creative sensibility and absolutely no job prospects.

For some artists, the fairy tale would end there, for art is an improbable way to pay the rent. But no matter what life had in store for her—moves, marriage, a child, a graphic design career—Kabel, now

40, always felt the inexorable pull of art, and it has paid off. She's in the enviable position of working full time in her own studio, where she hones her highly distinctive style of photorealism.

To say that her works, most of them large scale, are just about copying a photograph would be an oversimplification. Kabel dissects and distorts, abstracts and studies, casting about for subjects that explore the often-uncomfortable subjects of death and sex. Ask her why and she shrugs noncommittally; it may be because there's an inherent discomfort in Middle America with both topics.

Take, for example, one of her signature works: a painting of a boy lying face down on the grass in his swim trunks. On the surface, he appears to be, well, just a boy. But a closer look reveals an awkward pose, an unfamiliar adolescent stillness, and there's a dawning awareness: The boy is dead, and Kabel has made us confront his lifelessness.

Because her works are often so big, they're also impossible to escape, however they make the viewer feel. Her current undertaking, 8-foot-tall pencil drawings of horses, is a good example. The horses are upside down, tossed about, falling, their deaths all but certain. The images are equal parts dream and reality, and Kabel plans to complete six of them to hang together. "Horses are this beautiful, emblematic animal that shouldn't be broken, and I want people to walk into this space and be surrounded by falling horses," she says.

The years between graduating from college and moving into her studio at the Fitch Building downtown

in 2004 were full for Kabel: marriage to Chris Snethen, a move to Madison, Wis., a job as a graphic designer and a return to Iowa in 1995. Kabel took a break from work when her son was born in 1999, but she never stopped making art, eventually realizing that art was what she wanted to do full time. Her work steadily gained notice, and in 2009 she was invited to participate in the Iowa Artists show at the Des Moines Art Center. She's now represented by Moberg Gallery.

Kabel's job is very much that: She shows up to work at the same time every day, puts in her hours, goes home to her family, and does it all again the next day. "People think that artists work from the gut, that it's this glorious emoting of the inner soul," Kabel says. "What it really is, is that you may have this insightful leap of what you want to do, and after that, it's 90 percent plodding through and getting the work done."

"It's a risky move, to decide to be a working artist, and it takes a ton of dedication," says Laura Burkhalter, associate curator at the Des Moines Art Center. "You see that in Larassa's work."

After the horse series is complete, Kabel will probably swing back to works focused on sex. She's also intent on finding galleries outside Des Moines to represent her work, but mostly she's focused on working, her job one of her own creation, a happy ending to her fairy tale.

"Art really grabbed hold of me, and I don't get frustrated by my shortcomings—I just keep pushing it," she says.

WRITTEN BY KELLY ROBERSON
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On the Web:
View some of Larassa Kabel's works.
dsmMagazine.com

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