

# KAREN WELLS     *SHADYSPACE*

---

## ESSAY BY ALEX WALKER

Karen Wells views her paintings as shadows, shadows of the unconscious, imagination, of perceived existence. A flicker of a moment or experience, presented within two and often three dimensions. Due to the very nature of a shadow, it cannot exist without light. The negative/positive dichotomy exists in nearly every aspect of life on earth. It is the intersection of these two states which Wells highlights and portrays within her colourful abstract paintings. Bold warm colours are placed against cool, dark, non-representational forms. When these two juxtaposing forces are placed together side by side, something truly fascinating perceptually happens. Memories are triggered, colour association begins to activate as our minds search the subconscious to bring meaning to the work.

Following in the footsteps of Andy Warhol's 'Shadow' works, Wells also focuses on "the shadow to devise light - that is to say, sparks of colour - returning to the quintessential problem of art: perception." This problem of perception, the ability to insinuate some form of affect within an audience using the medium of choice is present in nearly every artist's practice. How to convert a thought, an experience or a feeling through art? Often the answer lies in the shadowy part of the mind, the subconscious, an aspect of the mind which is hidden even to ourselves, guided and informed by our own perception.

This concept of the shadow in conjunction with perception was physically called into question in 2012 when Wells began to lose her capacity to see, an integral part of her artistic process. Without lens surgery her perception would have perpetually become a shadow. A shadow of her present vision certainly but also her experience of the world was becoming a shadow in the most literal sense - lacking light, darkness, an echo of another existence. Before this time she focused heavily on darkness in her work, a product of immense loss and emotional trauma. Despite this, art has helped Karen through the hardest of times and will continue to do so for the rest of her life. Now her focus is directed towards the positive, renewal and regeneration. Exploring what grabs and holds attention, engaging the viewer with allure and intrigue, these are the things that sustain her. The newfound positivity is materialised in her bold colour palette, carefully assembled forms and highly considered presentation of artworks in comparison to previous pieces created by wrecking and burning paintings which were much darker in tone and conception.

The shadow aesthetically, psychologically and philosophically is a loaded concept throughout history. Seen as a representation of the unconscious, a deeper 'truer' self where the basis of creativity lies, this self could often be malevolent or even 'evil.' Therefore, there is commonly a relatively negative connotation which I would like to challenge in this essay. I believe this negative association with the shadow is born from the concept of Enlightenment and the immensely positive, pure, beautiful, truthful (I could go on) attributions connected to light as a symbol. Due to our predominantly binary way of categorising surroundings it is natural that when placed against such a 'good' allegory as light, darkness literally took on a 'darker' affiliation. Yet one cannot exist without the other. They are not nearly as powerful without their individual counterparts. Wells uses this juxtaposition of states to explore a deeper aspect of consciousness, where intimacy, memory, experience and imagination lies. We as humans are a curious bunch and it is this factor of the unknown which draws us in and leaves so much more substance for contemplation. Wells echoes this stating her work "thrives on the uncertainty and incomprehensible darkness of shadows."

The ability of architecture to mirror this, to veil and unveil, to house and to alter our way of seeing and interpreting art is paramount to this essay - for example, traditionally speaking if art is presented within a white cube it is seen through a common formal/institutional manner of viewing work versus how it is perceived in a corridor or outside an institutional space. Architecture can be an integral framework for perception; the nature of a space can imbue a physical and/or psychological response, just as a large cavernous space can make us feel small and uneasy, even overwhelmed. It is this "sensory experience of space" that drove Wells' work into three dimensions. The work is presented between the two larger galleries at Seventh. A fabric work creates a shadowy form within the space. Fields of colour intercept and interweave with the space and the works. Corners travel from one side of the room to the other without consideration for conventions such as physics. The gallery extends and compresses simultaneously as your eye attempts to adjust to this new way of perceiving space. The juxtaposition of light and dark triggers subconscious memories almost accessible to the conscious mind, a joyous phenomenon when viewing abstract works.

In *Shadyspace*, Wells has created a truly psychological and visceral experience of art. Combining two dimensional paintings which challenge our perception and experience of the world, and three dimensional interventions in the form of draping fabric to create shadows. Calling upon our own mentality and awareness in relation to surroundings, colour and what is left unseen, Wells' exhibition opens our eyes to the 'Shadyspaces' that are present all around us.