

Artist's Statement

Kristen Palana

Our desire as humans to try and influence our lives and bring about a sense of control and good fortune by evoking “magical imagery” goes all the way back to ancient times. Like our ancestors who painted animals on the walls of caves to inspire a successful hunt, we too as their descendants have attached significance, faith, and hope to a variety of symbols and objects.

Many of the beliefs surrounding these icons have cultural, religious, and historic roots. However, as the world becomes more globalized, these symbols are becoming more universal as they increasingly start to transcend culture, geography, and time.

I create images that can be used as wishes or creative visualizations for positive things like good health, love, protection, abundance, connection, success, etc.

I believe that strategically placed colors and patterns can conjure up positive energy, be perceived to be healing or therapeutic, and serve as vehicles for spiritual connection and growth. Symbols and characters acting out narratives can educate, tell stories, and inspire personal reflection and even positive social change.

Having lived and worked in Asia and Africa since 2016, I'm especially drawn to the patterns and colors found in traditional clothing, baskets, ceramics, and local handicrafts made from raw and natural materials.

In my current series of drawings and paintings, I'm paying homage to my host country of Malawi and its emerging (and often underrated) community of artists and artisans, many of them women. I do this knowingly as a foreigner and obvious outsider seeking ways to transcend my “otherness,” build bridges, and find common ground.

I aim to use colors that evoke strong emotions and to utilize symbols and patterns that have cross-cultural significance. Western influences from my American/Portuguese upbringing in a small Massachusetts town include stained-glass windows as well as the bold dark outlines found in cartoons and comic books.

Since 2000, I worked almost exclusively using computers to make animation, digital art, and multimedia projects independently, for clients, and as a full-time Associate Professor of Digital Media in universities on four continents. After being forced by the recent pandemic to work from home, isolate, and sit behind a screen eight hours a day, I finally reached a breaking point and happily rediscovered the art-making materials of my offline childhood.

I find that simply working with traditional materials grounds me, reawakens my love for drawing, and connects me with artists now and in the past who express themselves without any need for electricity, digital tools, or software.

My aim is to explore links between new and traditional art forms, modern and ancient human desires, and the universal impulse to try and create better outcomes for our lives through magic-charged imagery.