



Art with shadows: Larry Kagan at MAM



Impossible Shadows: The Art of Larry Kagan
Through Jan. 5, 2020
First solo exhibition in New Jersey
Montclair Art Museum, 3 South Mountain Ave.
Montclairartmuseum.org, 973-746-5555

By GWEN OREL

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Shadows are funny things: they seem to be both present, and not present. They change their shape: think of the Robert Louis Stevenson poem “My Shadow.”

Not having one could mean you are dead. Or Peter Pan.

Shadow art usually means silhouettes, or puppets.

Right now at Montclair Art Museum, it means shadows of steel, and work by Larry Kagan.

That work includes steel sculpture hung on the wall: and precise shadows that form pictures of a Keith Haring pop art image, President Obama, a man’s dress shoe.

The show, Kagan’s first solo show in New Jersey, includes 21 of his pieces. It runs through Jan. 5.

“Impossible Shadows” is playful and somber at the same time — as a show that deals with light and dark should be.

Kagan, born in 1946 in a refugee camp in Germany, has connected his art to the loss of his Jewish family in Belarus.

“I’m the child of Holocaust survivors,” Kagan said from his home in California. “There was a whole set of relatives that were not there when I was growing up. Other people had aunts, uncles, cousins... but when your whole family gets wiped out... making these images, to me, they were appropriate. They were shadows. They existed, but they didn’t really. As soon as the light goes off, there’s nothing there.”

Before he began working with steel and its shadows, he thought he would work with found, old steel. “I started welding large steel drawings. I found that as soon as you put something against the wall and light it you get these shadows.

“I became concerned with what shadows are doing, and I started exploring shadows.”



All sculptors work with shadows to some extent, he said, but he hadn't seen anything sculpturally where shadow became the medium.

Then he noticed that people were ignoring the shadows, when connected to his sculptures. So he decided to change the balance and put the image information into the shadow instead of into the steel.

"People's attention immediately shifted," he said.

He's been working with shadows now for about 25 years. It's a very time-consuming process to turn an image into a piece of shadow art. He has to split an image up into small pieces and reassemble them. It can take months.

And the pieces only exist if they are lighted precisely, with the light in the exact right spot in respect to the wall. "I've had to fabricate all the light fixtures," Kagan said. "Every place we show has different height ceilings, and requires different lighting solutions."

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Gail Stavitsky, who curated the show, with curatorial assistant Alison Van Denend, said the work is kind of magical.

"Nobody can figure out how he does what he does. And I still can't, after watching him install the show."

The sculptures look like abstract tangles of steel. The shadows are representational, recognizable images.

Kagan does have a background in engineering and architecture, having studied at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (though he graduated with an English degree).

A sculpture that casts a shadow of an open box is in MAM's permanent collection, and hangs on the stairway.

"Box II" is one of the most popular pieces in the show, which is how Stavitsky got the idea for the show, she said.

He helped write all of the labels that are in the exhibition, explaining what inspired him. Kagan, Stavitsky said, sees himself in the Pop Art tradition. Some of the sculptures depict artists; Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp (in

drag). One of the most popular sculptures is one of an Oxford shoe, based on an advertisement in The New York Times.

“Part of what’s really interesting is that the work that I do appeals to people who don’t necessarily like art. It’s such an interesting phenomenon, looking at objects that are casting shadows,” Kagan said. Working with the steel has been a learning experience: it’s immediate, and satisfying. “I’m developing a language. As I keep working with this, more and more about shadows keeps revealing itself. The relationship between shadows and the objects casting them is pretty spectacular. Nobody pays attention to them. They go about their daily routine.”



At one point he used to start an object with the found pieces of steel, but now he starts with an image that he wants. When he began with the steel, he said, "I kept creating images from another world."

Recently, Kagan said, a rabbi wrote about a show he had in Albany that his work represented a world view where life is not understandable unless you look at it from above, the way light reveals information hidden in steel.

Kagan likes that notion: when he decides to create a work, there must be something in an image that bothers him, something with mysterious information inside it.

Working this way is a "totally stupid way of dealing with imagery," he said with a laugh. "It takes two seconds to draw something, and weeks and weeks to build something. It's really about drawing a contrast between the image and the object causing it. There's a tension in there. That's the magic, and that's what's fascinating to me.

"I like to play with it. It's great fun. I don't fall in love with images. I get rid of them."