

## **BROOKLYN RAIL**

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### **Elisabeth Kley: A Seat in the Boat of the Sun**

Elisabeth Kley revels in the kitsch, the eccentric, and the natural rhythm of patterns. Her drawings and ceramics span time and cultures with intelligence, charm, and humor, as well as allusions to nature and the way we play in it. Her current show, *A Seat in the Boat of the Sun*, features six black-and-white sculptures placed on the floor, surrounded by graphic wall paintings that create an architectural effect and open up a gently surreal excursion through design tropes, ranging from ancient pre-Columbian sculpture to Egyptian and Chinese-inspired configurations, Mexican art and architecture, Persian and Far Eastern motifs, Wiener Werkstätte craft, and the elegance of Art Deco and Art Nouveau. A distinctive geometry that is Kley's own energize these referential elements, as they take the shape of interrupted patterns that lead us to pause in our thinking.

In Canada Gallery's large main space, we are immediately engulfed in a trompe-l'oeil spectacle. Huge black-and-white drawings on unstretched fabric are affixed in such a way as to resemble ceramic walls surrounding the earthenware objects set across the floor. The pottery designs seem to spill over into the built world of the huge canvases, creating an effect that crosses between the geometric clarity of Art Deco and the soft, choreographic twists of Art Nouveau.

Kley welcomes us into a grand night garden created by vertical painted black lines and gestures on white ground painted directly onto the gallery walls, generating a variety of perspectives. The illusion of steps rising up the walls to a band of black across the top frames the scene, holding it in place and evoking the night sky, or the threat of an abyss. As we ponder our own orientation in the setting, we can succumb to reverie and see ourselves positioned in a number of times and places throughout history—and in our imaginations where myth, magic, and illusion converge to yield architectural delights. Here we are given a space in which to ponder Kley's graphic puzzles and even the salubrious effects of decoration.



Elisabeth Kley, *Flowers and Arches on Two Legs*, 2022. Glazed earthenware, 42 × 28 × 11 inches. Courtesy the artist and Canada Gallery.

Music, seductive motion, and the strange affect in Kley's painted curves and curlicues cause her forms to dance gracefully, but then twist and pause. Inspired by the great Russian theater designer Léon Bakst, whose erudite costumes for Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes traversed history in their references even as they reveled in its exoticism, Kley similarly mixes the visual and performing arts in this night garden, recalling that splendid period of time in early twentieth-century European history when imaginations ran free. What Bakst did with fabric, Kley renders solid in clay. You see this in her appropriately unfussy, glazed-earthenware construction *Flowers and Arches on Two Legs* (2022), a multipart, built ceramic structure that invites engagement. Kley's own repetitions abound, evoking medieval church designs, Islamic mosques, art, and action, showing how there are not unpleasant dissonances in sudden internal shifts in pattern.

That Kley's work remains distinctive is remarkable, given her many sources. There's her *Chacmool with Ladders* (2022), a witty, stylized abstraction of a reclining, Mesoamerican sculptural figure with a bowl-shaped belly presumably intended to hold sacrificial offerings to the gods. There's the allusion to water and boats in her imagery and to related machinery as evinced by her ceramic *Vessel with Curved Sides and Round Shapes* (2023) all of which makes one think of the tubular Cubism of Fernand Léger. In Kley's work, the Wiener Werkstätte notion of the total work of art shines through. She celebrates the handmade in both her painted gestures and also within her built world of craft and architecture. Her ink-and-graphite works are, at once, like preparatory drawings for works and installations, as in her splendid stage-like design, *Installation with Black Triangles* (2022) and then in her huge (81 1/2 by 106 1/2 inches) geometric trellis, titled simply *Overlapping Discs* (2023). Here, the carefully painted two-dimensional wall drawings are as convincing in their solid effect as architectural constructions. Added to the mix are Kley's drawings of astrological signs and activity. We can't escape the feeling of sitting in a Roman courtyard, letting our minds wander to the warmth of Matisse-like dances and the strains of Erik Satie.