

**Kathy Grayson: So tell me, how did this collaboration come about? E.V., you went to Giverny first. Was there something about the gardens that made you think of Kembra?**

E.V. Day: Yes, I was at the Claude Monet Foundation as the artist-in-residence that summer. The first day I went to the water lily pond, standing on that bridge looking out at the landscape with the pond—it looked like a Monet painting, of course, but like it was missing something, a set waiting for action.

I imagined Kembra there walking on water...bright pink body-paint matching the water lilies and her black patent leather stiletto boots shiny and wet looking like the black water...I never realized before that the pond was so black.

I remember calling Kembra that day so excited, it just made perfect sense for her to be photographed here. She said she had friends in Paris so maybe this could really happen. I didn't know if it would happen, but I wanted it.

**KG: And Kembra, when she first invited you to come, what were your first thoughts about that?**

Kembra Pfahler: Well, coming from Los Angeles, I don't have much knowledge of European History. So I started to learn about Impressionism and it made me investigate Claude Monet. Impressionism to me is a word that signifies making an imprint or an indentation. In southern California surf culture, an indentation is also called a 'ding' in a surfboard. I sort of felt, with my Karen Black costume and visage, I was making an indentation or an impression in the garden. I was making my own little imprint by invitation.

ED: Your presence sure made an impression! You activated it and made it contemporary, or at least transport it to another time. It was really very surreal.

KP: It felt like I was magically able to alight myself and make a little surfboard ding in the garden. I made an impression. One of Monet's first paintings was called 'The Impression' and it was because he painted lilies very sloppily and with a lot of smudges. So they started teasing him in Parisian art circles saying, "There's that Impression painter of that smudgy lily painting."

ED: History says he embraced the term, reversing the slight from his critics into a compliment: "Yes. We are the Impressionists." He was a maverick.

KP: My philosophy of art is Availabism. Making the best use of what's available. And to visit this historical garden was made available to me, it was really a dream come true. As an anti-naturalist, my whole history is very urban. It's all mall culture in southern California. So I felt like I was making a sort of reverse

visitation, like how Oscar Wilde lived in Paris and then traveled across the world to visit the Wild West to see what that culture was about, but I was doing it in reverse. I came from the Wild Wild West, and I had the chance to investigate European culture. It was as shocking to me to visit this traditional European landscape. The only other places I had seen like it were Disneyland or in the movie Shrek.

**KG: Did the space feel like it was natural or contrived? What does it feel like when you visit it in person?**

KP: I was so overcome by the beauty of the garden that it just made me cry. It was so overwhelming.

ED: To quote Stevie Nicks, “hauntingly familiar.” Ha! It’s so recognizable it can be visually suffocating which is why I had the desire to alter it somehow: to make it active, alive, now, give it some octane, edge, something mischievous. When Kembra’s character The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black came into it, it was a relief for me.

**KG: Does it feel uncanny?**

ED: Yes, definitely, in every direction you look, it feels familiar. It made me dizzy at first, then like a chronic déjà-vu. Also, thinking about how this living environment is almost exactly how it looked to him in August a hundred years ago. Like time travel or stasis?

**KG: It must feel like you are standing in a gigantic still-life.**

ED: Exactly, he created a still life for his painting but it wasn’t sitting on a table. He arranged the nature; the pond, trees and plants for the composition of his paintings, like furniture in a house. It’s a phenomenal scale for just making paintings. Can you think of another artist who cultivated a landscape for their painting? It’s like creating a Storm King to then make a sculpture of it!

KP: The entire time I was there, E.V. was filling me in on all this incredible history about Monet having such a singular vision, and he spent almost his entire history in what would be comparable to us as upstate New York. It was kind of a nowhere town and he spent his time researching these flowers and building and building this world that he was able to later share with us. To me that is what I would love to achieve in my art-lifetime: to create something that I could leave behind and share with someone. You sense that generosity, that’s why it’s so overwhelming. It’s the nicest thing you could do.

ED: It is interesting to learn his life in Giverny was not by choice—like a second

home in the country—but was all he could afford at the time with eight children, some adopted from his second wife. He definitely made the most of it while his peers were up and down the Seine and in Paris.

**KG: Didn't he bring artists there to hang out with him?**

ED: Yes, eventually. It took him many years until he owned the whole farmhouse and four acres of garden. He entertained visitors for lunch, and they would come by train so he knew exactly when they would arrive and leave. He was so disciplined about his working time with the sun that he installed exit doors in every room downstairs so he could get back to his painting if guests lingered.

**KG: I like the similarity how Kembra is like an interior designer also, like a world-builder. Her house is completely painted red, down to the computer and bathtub...**

KP: Well that comes from extreme decoration, and doing the Karen Black costume itself is a complete transformation. There's not one part of my body that's not attended to. Each detail from the wigs to the boots and glitter: it's something that's very meticulously assembled.

**KG: What about the idea that Impressionism was a movement that addressed light and a specific place and time and natural elements? Like in your work E.V., it's very scientific and can be kind of manipulated and controlled as opposed to the impulse of Impressionism, which is maybe about responding to light and place. How did you reconcile that sort of Impressionist urge with your own style?**

ED: At first I was a bit terrified; what is going to happen to me here, will I be inspired, will this be the blankest three months of my life, will I make anything? I gave myself the limitation of producing two-dimensional work only, and brought a camera, scanner/printer and a flower press. Also I'm fearful working with colors, I was frightened it would overpower me. I started working by pressing flowers discarded by the gardeners as they pruned, figuring at least I'll have a good souvenir for my grandmother, and getting some control, one by one. I ended up with around 500. The pressing activity was an opportunity to get into the color and learn about the flowers and not worry about the outcome so much. It's like dipping your toe in the water until you can finally go under.

By the time I came back to Brooklyn I was like, "Where is my garden? Where's the color? Nothing here is colorful!" Kembra made it real to me and made me feel comfortable and calm in a way, not stuck in the past. I have a new image of Monet and it's not the Thank You note stationery.

KP: Then there's that idea of that when something performative-ish happens within a space like that it transforms and activates the whole environment.

**KG: Can you tell me what shooting was like and what were the challenges shooting in the garden?**

ED: We had to shoot either before the garden opened or when the garden was closed after 5pm, and it got dark at 9pm, so we had a really short window of time. I had ideas of where I wanted Kembra to be; walking on water, on the bridge, and Kembra had hers, so it was stressful trying to fit it all in.

KP: It was unusual for me, too, to have those time constraints, doing something when the garden was closed to the public. I had to set the clock for 3 am so that I would be ready to shoot by 5am and then prepare for a second shoot in the evening.

**KG: Were there any mishaps?**

ED: No one fell in the water, which is pretty amazing. And I was really panicky I would get in trouble for all the stray glitter in the garden.

KP: Yes because glitter is the herpes of crafts...When I am in my Karen Black costume I feel so super-human in a way. And I feel like E.V. and I spent so much time discussing our motives that no harm came our way. Our intentions were clear and our desire was to make the same beautiful picture. One day I didn't have the right tone of pink, so I found it in this Joan of Arc department store down the street in the children's painting department. This paint was so painful it felt like burning acid on my skin. I had to remain in the paint for a long time and it took hours to remove off, pulling on every nerve in my body and my face.

ED: I took a photo of Kembra in the bathtub with pink everywhere.

KP: That was unusual that I experimented with this French children's paint. I felt so safe in the garden. I'm not a naturist. I don't really go on picnics, I don't camp, I don't really spend time in these types of situations. I felt like a visitor from another planet. Like visiting from Los Angeles, another planet.

Also what was interesting to me was how E.V. examined the flowers. She really investigated the architecture of the plants, which brought it to an alien place for me. The flowers that you were dealing with really became E.V. Day artworks. It was like Georgia O'Keefe on acid.

ED: All those flowers I pressed turned into another photo project called *SEDUCERS*, made of super high-res scans of the center of the pressed flowers,

enlarged so it's like you are looking through a magnifying glass: really alien and beautiful and strange.

And suddenly you see there are millions of these flowers and it's just a big orgy. It's all a big club and they are all trying to procreate. And then Kembra's just like the water lily in the middle. It's so sexual it kinda makes you crazy, you can't get away. Flowers everywhere.

**KG: Tell me about that sexual element because part of it was that you guys had to be fast and furious or renegade with your nudity. How important was bringing a sexual vibe to the artworks?**

ED: I didn't really think of the project as sexual, but sexy? Yes! When we proposed our idea to Beth De Woody, there was a discussion of no nudity in the garden and so forth, and I thought "no problem" because I didn't think of Kembra's character as being "naked." Kembra was very concerned as she has been censored before, but I think of her as the "never nude," completely covered in paint. The sexy thing for me was how she appeared to possess the garden, like, "This is my garden, baby, and it's just you and me." Like *she* owns it. She owns the most iconic garden in history!

In French, the word for "water lily" is "Nymphéas" and she definitely became a rock and roll nymph.

KP: There's also that cliché in decoration, where you walk into a room and you have this overwhelming feeling of gorgeousness, where you say, "Oh, this is fabulous. It has a real *feminine touch*." And I thought: "We're really adding this *feminine touch* to the garden. It has a real feminine touch now." In the decorative sense. Just to have an appreciation for the creatures and things born out of mother earth, that's really sexy to me in a really PG-13 type of way. And I don't think I was bringing any adult sexuality into the garden, but I found there was a very kind of nice, indigenous sense of sexuality.

**KG: Wholesome?**

KP: I don't know about wholesome, but just present and undeniable. There's vaginas everywhere and trees look like vaginas. There that book by Huysmans called *Là-Bas*: it was a surrealist piece. There was that one part where he is walking through the woods or something looking at this extreme nature, seeing sex in everything.

**KG: Like an orgy of spring?**

KP: Yeah it's really poetic. I guess it was kind of wholesome, it didn't bring out

the horn-doggityness in me—I didn't go on a date or anything after the garden! It just really inspired a deep appreciation of the true nature. Flowers, seeds blooming, blossoming, willow trees erupting and spooling everywhere.

We were invited to participate in this piece and we didn't barge in or vandalize or sneak in. We had the key, we were allowed. So with my nudity, being perceived as scandalous, I wanted to remain a well-mannered feminist lady and be respectful of that space because it was a big honor to shoot there.

**KG: When you came back and were developing final artworks, were there things that came out that you were surprised by? After the experience of shooting, did seeing the final artworks bring up things or present juxtapositions?**

ED: Yes! I was surprised how successful the pictures turned out! I'm not a professional photographer and was using a Canon G12 point-and-shoot. For me they transcend the campiness and blend the awkward beauty of Karen Black in the way she matches the garden.

Her vertical reflection in the pond was so strong that it led me to digitally mirror her left and right as well, so you get four reflections, to bring the already surreal imagery into a sci-fi realm.

The funny thing is that in some of the pictures, it looks like I Photoshopped her in there, but I have my witnesses—she was really there!

KP: I was surprised by how the Rorschach images came out. I felt like I was getting into E.V. Day sculpture territory. The composition felt like that to me. It was interesting to see this sci-fi side emerge, and the reflections, too, how they hadn't been manipulated.

ED: When you think of water lilies and you think of Monet you don't think of black, so now I always see the black mirror and acid pink and green and not the Monet pastel.

**KG: Were there any other surprising revelations?**

ED: One of the most important things of my experience at the garden was really having time to think about the fact that all these plants were all trying to do the same thing. Why did nature keep making so many varieties of things? Humans are all variations. Why is nature so much more intelligent than it seems like it needs to be? The way that it is designed and these complex lures—it really keeps everything so exciting for these insects.

**KG: Sexual one-upmanship privileges innovation and both bees and plants become more specified. To put it heterosexually: for every type of woman there's a type of guy that is attracted to her. There's such a diversity of female sexuality and there are people for every type.**

ED: Hopefully! And Kembra is just another sexual variation. It's funny: we survived an encounter with the very stern head gardener. He's very intimidating and I was worried he would feel we were defacing his garden somehow. Of course we ran into him and he wanted his picture taken with Kembra—he wasn't freaked out at all. It made me so happy