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# JUXTAPOZ

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REFLECTING ON POP ART FOREFATHER JASPER JOHNS

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# MARGARET KEANE

## AUTEUR OF THE BIG EYES

TEXT AND PORTRAIT BY **ROBERT L. BROWN**

"THE GIRL WITH MANY EYES"  
BY TIM BURTON

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ONE DAY IN THE PARK  
I HAD QUITE A SURPRISE.  
I MET A GIRL  
WHO HAD MANY EYES.

SHE WAS REALLY QUITE PRETTY  
(AND ALSO QUITE SHOCKING!)  
AND I NOTICED SHE HAS A MOUTH,  
SO WE ENDED UP TALKING.

WE TALKED ABOUT FLOWERS,  
AND HER POETRY CLASSES,  
AND THE PROBLEMS SHE'D HAVE  
IF SHE EVER WORE GLASSES.

IT'S GREAT TO KNOW A GIRL  
WHO HAS SO MANY EYES,  
BUT YOU REALLY GET WET  
WHEN SHE BREAKS DOWN AND CRIES.

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IF YOU CONCEDE THAT THE EYES ARE WINDOWS TO THE SOUL, THAT EVERY PICTURE tells a story, or even that art imitates life, then you might consider revisiting the career of Margaret Keane. This fall, Tim Burton will release the major motion picture *Big Eyes*, documenting the life and controversies surrounding Margaret and her former husband, Walter. The production of that film practically obliges the necessity to contextualize the influence of Margaret's aesthetic and style on countless artists in the pages of *Juxtapoz* and beyond for nearly half a century.

Most importantly, it's time to once again shed light on the eerily stunning paintings for a new generation of readers who were never introduced to Margaret Keane. Robert Brown, Executive Director of the Keane Eyes Gallery, writing about his friend and colleague, makes the case, and he's a star witness.

"Big Eyes," prior to becoming the title of Burton's film, was a term commonly given to a style of painting from the early 1960s, lampooned by the critics, but embraced by the public. For over a decade, it was assumed the painter of those kids with hypnotic round eyes was Walter Keane, and that his wife Margaret, painted the older women, characterized by willowy forms and dark almond eyes haunting their oval faces. That's how the world knew the Keanes; the married darlings who employed two distinct styles on canvas. A painting attributed to Walter would be boldly signed "KEANE" in capital letters, while the elongated subjects were usually signed in the script, "MDH Keane," with each usually stating the year of creation.

Today, it's widely known that the painter of both styles is the wife, Margaret, and the definitive word "is" asserts that the creator and signer of each approach still actively paints to this day. Even in her late 80s, she is capable and inspired to turn out the evocative mood that was so popular in the '60s. I laughingly assure people amazed by her story and huge body of work that, fortunately, her eyes and hands are busy as ever. How amazing that she is still here to paint and tell her story.

Margaret Keane: *As a child, I remember I was always drawing. In the first grade, a teacher told my mother that she should encourage me, and at age 10, I started drawing lessons at the Watkins Institute in Nashville. I was the youngest and could not do the finished work like drawing from casts of heads and hands. It was a challenge, but gradually I improved. Around this time, I painted in poster colors on a piece of smooth wood, two versions of one little girl. In the background, the child was crying, but the one in the foreground had a big smile. I gave it to my grandmother as a present; maybe that was prophetic of my paintings and life—sad and happy. I sold my first drawing when I was about 12 years old for one dollar to my uncle's friend. During high school, I sold drawings of pin-up girls and movie stars to my classmates, and later in New York, though I thought I wanted to be a fashion illustrator,*

*I ended up liking the life drawing classes better.*

Speaking directly of her youthful motivation, Margaret says, "'Big-Eyed' paintings were the result of my desperate need to express my deepest emotions, which led to pouring out my intense feelings into an imaginary child's eyes, and this is what I put onto canvas. The child represented me, although I didn't know it at the time. And viewers often recognized their own inner child in my paintings." By chance, in San Francisco, she met Walter Keane, who noted the overwhelming response to her paintings and how people found themselves captivated by the way she captured the innocence of youth. She honed "Big Eyes" to perfection, making it her own.

*Before Walter, when my daughter from my first marriage was born, I began to draw her. Soon, all my neighbors wanted me to sketch their children. The local picture framer told them he wanted to meet me, and when I went to visit, he told me that I could become a portrait painter. He was impressed with how I "captured" children, so I began doing them in oil and had several shows of portraits of children. I did lots of portrait sketches of children at art fairs, and this was good training, but I later wanted to paint imaginary children in different settings. These children all had enlarged eyes, and I didn't know why, except that eyes have always interested me as the most expressive part of the face. My school books from grammar school onward all had drawings of eyes in the margins. I couldn't sit still without doodling—still can't.*

When the frenzy really hit, exerting undue duress, Walter convinced Margaret that, among other things, a woman during that time could never be taken seriously as an artist. The pressure blindsided Margaret, when approached one evening by a woman who had purchased a "Big Eyes" from Walter and casually queried, "Do you also paint?" This unleashed an outrage of emotions from Margaret, but Walter responded with more of his indoctrination, and in the end, succeeded with his personal propaganda.

*One of my favorite paintings is The Black Dress (1963). I like the mystery it poses. She was to have had on a black dress, but the background was black, so where does this leave the girl? Is she part of infinity? Is she nowhere or everywhere? I like the expression in her eyes that stare right at you. I think it captured some of the questioning in the eyes of those earlier*

*Complicated Lady*  
Oil on canvas  
24" x 36"  
©1976



*"Big-Eyed" children that Walter claimed as his, but doing so in an older "MDH Keane" style. I also like Escape from this same year. I wanted to escape from the impossible position I was in, and the lies.*

Who can judge her? I have personally come to notice that women of her age who visit the gallery, women who would have been at the same professional and marital status at that stage, would similarly be unable to speak up. While disappointed in her own personal resolve, Margaret went along with the lie, that Walter was the painter of the kids with the big, round eyes.

Surrendering ownership of those "Big Eyes" to Walter, she felt and knew she needed something of her own while she continued painting, and so developed a new focus and interpretation. Out of this evolved a style similar to Modigliani, and if ever there were a case for painting for two, this was it. Throughout all those many years the world acknowledged them as a successful, painting couple. The wife had her style, the husband had his, each signed differently, with Margaret being the one doing both, using two different signature styles. The world didn't know about this, and all the while, there was no turning a corner without seeing a Keane painting. The success became mind-blowing. Every dime store, department store, frame shop, gift and design shop sold or employed a Keane image, and Walter was prolific as a promoter, bringing the art and himself to Hollywood and national TV.

*When I began to try and develop another style, I decided to use an older girl instead of a child. I loved Modigliani's elongated, delicate women. I was greatly influenced by his work, and also Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci and the Flemish portraits. I tried to make the eyes smaller and more oval but they often turned out larger than I had intended.*

This lifestyle of lies couldn't last. For Margaret, ten years was finally enough time to summon the courage to pack her suitcases and fly to Hawaii. Grabbing her daughter, Jane, Margaret sought a new life, and why not paradise? She had never stopped painting, and her artistic abilities seemed to improve. The warm tropical environment impacted the compositions, which became more colorful, populated with children who were often smiling and appeared happier. She still paints tearful young faces, but assuredly, they are drops of joy. New love and marriage entered her life, fulfillment at last. She was enjoying life, and yet, there was the gnawing question about a real purpose in life, the why and where, and is this it? For someone whose first artistic inclination was impelled by emotion, a spiritual quest evolved, and Methodist, Catholic, Mormon, Seventh Day Adventist and Hindu religions were explored, with none answering her questions. In time, she found found her answers in the Bible and Jehovah's Witnesses. Skeptical at first, she became convinced she was learning the truth she was seeking, and was baptized in 1972. And after living in Hawaii for 27 years, Margaret was drawn back to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she continues to paint, preach, and enjoy life.



As we often see throughout pop-culture and popular opinion, once a lie is out in public discourse, it's almost impossible to pull it back. In spite of all the media attention given to the court trial between Walter and Margaret, which Margaret rightfully won, you can still encounter visitors to Margaret Keane Gallery in San Francisco asking if Walter is alive and painting. The fact that he never painted the "Big Eyes" amuses at first, until they consider the abuse. The conversation always tends to sway toward why Margaret withstood the fiction, finally applauding her decision to emerge and turn out more beautiful and powerful work while in her 80s.

One of the developments that came about while Margaret lived in Hawaii is her generous portrayal of animals in her paintings. In the '60s, there may have been one cat or one dog, but now some are only of animals, or some with a single human. Naturally, she still works in the classic Keane style we recall.

*I doodle while talking on the phone or listening to something. Some of my best doodles have become paintings. They seem to express things from my subconscious. Most of the time, I will work on four or five paintings in various stages. I will stop on one, go to another, and get a fresh view. If I look at one canvas too long, it gets distorted and I can't see it objectively.*

Another aspect of her recent work has been a series of socially conscious paintings created for the Kinship Care

above right  
*The Stray*  
Oil on canvas  
12" x 24"  
©1962

above left  
*No Dogs Allowed*  
Oil on canvas  
12" x 24"  
©1962

right  
*Taking A Walk*  
Oil on canvas  
18" x 24"  
©1960





Network at San Francisco's Edgewood Center for Children. The center assists in finding a bridge for children at risk, in this case, those whose parents are jailed, mentally ill, suffering from AIDS or deceased.

*Each painting is a challenge as I attempt to juggle colors, composition, lines and planes to achieve a finished whole. I start off with an idea, but it will often change and evolve differently as I paint. I just start and look at what begins to unfold, and then may develop it by putting my feelings into it. I know a lot comes through my subconscious, although I consciously try to portray something from my current life.*

Without a mental block throughout these past years, Margaret finds the paint just flowing onto the canvas. She has the unique ability to say "done" and move on to the next creation, which is partially why she has such a large body of work. While she may characterize herself as disorganized in other aspects of her life, it does not apply to paint on canvas where she is consistent, methodical and clear-headed. It's like moving from one room to the next, knowing clearly how to get there, and we enter the same room by enjoying her work.

*Depictions of time and space have always interested me. As a result, they have been in the background in many of my older girls. Lately, I've been experimenting with the perspective*

*lines in the background or borders, and overlapping planes, as well as distorting the faces to draw out emotion.*

I've always felt there was a dynamic narrative to be told about the Keanes. Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, the writers of *Big Eyes*, along with director Tim Burton and actors Amy Adams and Christoph Waltz, created a film that is a collective celebration of Margaret's art and vindication. Filmgoers will even get a chance to see the film end in a dramatic courtroom "paint-off" scene. At a wrap party for the film that was held at the Margaret Keane Gallery, a beaming Margaret walked into the gallery with about 50 folks present, fueled with excitement surrounding the movie and a new lease on life. The film presents a new door for her to enter, and we benefit from her creative mind, hands and eyes.

**JUX**

*Robert L. Brown is the Director of the Keane Eyes Gallery in San Francisco California*

*Tim Burton's Big Eyes, which documents the life of Margaret Keane, will open in theaters December 25, 2014*

*For more information about Keane Eyes Gallery, visit [keane-eyes.com](http://keane-eyes.com)*

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