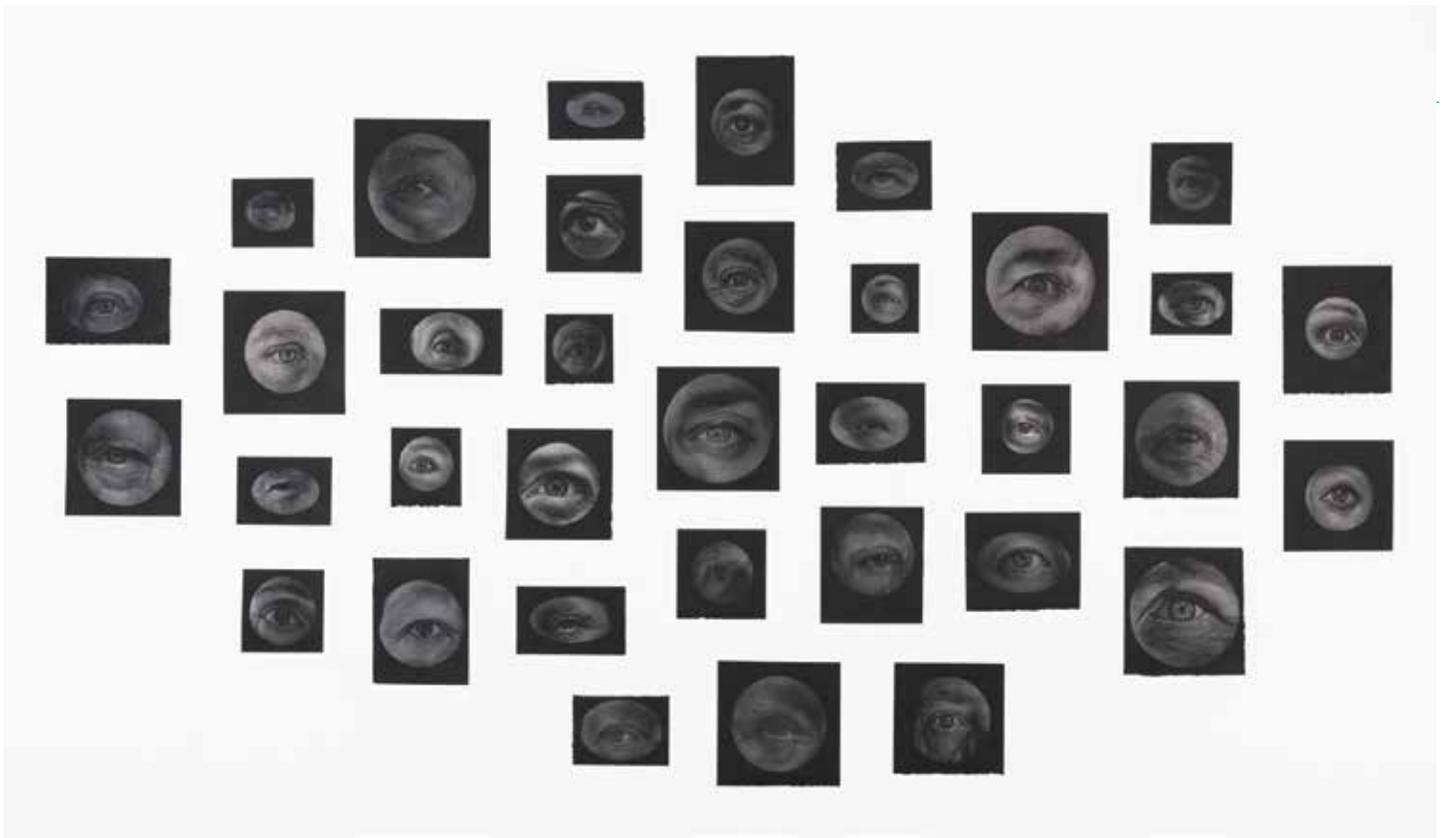




Larassa Kabel  
**SOJOURN**





Larassa Kabel, 42, 2021, Graphite on black paper

You're right to believe that you will die. It sustains you. If you didn't believe it, could you bear the life you have?

– Jacques Lacan

Stability is serenity. Predictable experiences and forecast outcomes are balms that provide a sense of safety, clarity, and perspective to mitigate the unpredictability and fluctuations of life. Our homes, which combine to create larger communities, are the physical structures that create a sense of familial and cultural belonging that endure for generations. It is easy to see why stability can make it hard to make substantive changes to our everyday lives, much less pay attention to the miniscule alterations happening to us each day; these alterations happen at the macro level, including global climate and political changes. And they occur imperceptibly at the micro level when the cells in our bodies slowly die. We may not be watching closely but time, whether we like it or not, is always passing us by.

*Sojourn* is an exhibition of Larassa Kabel's most recent drawings, prints, and sculptures that, amongst other important creative functions, scrutinize our relationship to change, as well as the internal and external factors that structure our

lives as we age and eventually die. Larassa is interested in topics that are often difficult for people to talk about but she gets our attention in a few ways. One of them is her use of *memento mori* (Latin for 'remember that you must die'), creative devices that have been used by artists for centuries that serve as reminders of human mortality. Memento mori encourage people to live a virtuous life but Larassa embraces the importance of reflecting on death and the passing of time in her work. Her innovative contribution to the artform is how she makes it a collective rather than individual experience.

Larassa's drawing practice is time-consuming. The compositions and details are staggering. Not only does her work invite long-term engagement, it carefully scrutinizes the sometimes slow but inevitable process of transformation. Once she begins drawing lines on the blank paper for the horses in *Fly Boy*, *Requiem* and *Waters of March*, the colored pencil is indelibly absorbed. Since she can't go back and erase a mistake. She draws with a confidence and direction that is different from sketching. Sketching, I have always thought, is a way of looking. Instead of looking with their eyes, an artist may use a pencil, as an extension of the hand, to look for and find the shape and contour of what they are drawing. This means



Larassa Kabel, *Fly Boy*, 2014, Colored pencil on paper

that the form can be considered provisional or almost finished. Larassa's continuous line drawings are not sketches in this sense but there is still an openness in the rhetorical structure of her work; it is not closed off or completely resolved. She wants you to know that it takes time to find the precise form in each piece while it goes through changes of its own. It's a difficult thing she has accomplished with this work. Each figure is carefully positioned on the paper but she also uses the invisible force of gravity to create a sense of movement.

The topics that Larassa wants to talk about are not easy ones. Death, especially, is so often compartmentalized that it is difficult for people to connect around the issue and not feel lonely. She knows that depictions of people going through life's difficult changes risks pushing people away. Animals, like those in this exhibition, are potent containers for ideas

and storytelling but they're also creative tools for helping think through and unpack the conversations she wants to have about death and loss. During our conversations we talked about our affinities with, rather than differences from, our animal relatives. We all know we're not outside of nature. Nevertheless there is a societal scale that creates a hierarchy of value that sets humans and animals apart. By setting up this equivalency between people with animals, the natural world becomes both more familiar and more complex than we know.

42 is a drawing installation of 41 eyes that Larassa drew from selfies taken by people as they were thinking of her. Each eye is expressive in its own way and it's easy to see the range of motion expressed by each sitter. For her, it was a powerful moment of making and seeing the final work, "The emotion reflected in their expression says so much about what that



Larassa Kabel, Maquette for *The Black Crown of Recurring Loss*, 2020, Bronze with wood base

relationship is or was, and how I judge myself by it. The best and the worst are all on view for me, and the judgment I feel is what this piece is all about.”

The number 42 has an important association in ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* mythology, specifically the forty two Assessors of Maat who were charged with judging the soul of a person on their journey to the afterlife. If the deceased’s heart weighed equal to or less than a feather, they passed on peacefully. If it weighed more, the soul was devoured by the goddess Ammut. This process of weighing a person’s soul, called psychostasia, was also practiced by ancient Greeks and Christians.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, long-distance and clandestine lovers would often trade images of each other’s eyes as a symbol of their devotion, especially when they could not be together or wanted to hide their identity. These mementos, called *lover’s eye*, were small pieces of jewelry with drawings of a disembodied eye that would serve to connect people who were apart. On the one hand it’s a fraction of a portrait but it’s also a gift of a part of oneself to another person. It can also be seen as a way to keep an eye on someone, watching and monitoring from afar. It was the act of looking and connected gazes that were being

shared, not the person’s full likeness, The reward for looking at the drawings in 42 this closely is that you can scrutinize each eye, imagining how each person chose to think of Larassa and the significance that person holds in her life.

*Tomb* comes out of Larassa’s gleaning process, that is, how she finds and collects pieces of natural specimens. If it feels like there is a lot packed into each of her works, that’s not an accident. Larassa is a deep thinker but she’s also very deliberate and does a lot of work outside of her studio. Like 42, Larassa has used the salon-style arrangement for the paintings you see here. It’s a taxonomy of sorts and she thought carefully about the best way to celebrate the perfection of each stick’s form and personality. Each of them is painted in silhouette, which mimics how she sees them during her early morning walks as the sun is rising. And like 42 it is inspired by the *Book of the Dead*. The congregation of paintings mimics a form of pictographic communication, similar to how hieroglyphs are a writing system that mimics the physical world.

*Spirit House* is another monumental piece. Not necessarily monumental in scale but in Larassa’s intricate labor and the work’s extremely delicate details, especially her ongoing

collaborations with nature. The installation includes five magnolia branches from a tree near her home that no longer exists. The core of the piece is a replica of her home she created with wasp papers. It took her 5 years to collect enough paper for the final piece. It's hard to imagine the patience and care that goes into a piece such as this but it falls in line with my earlier comments about stability. By carefully collecting and preserving the embodied labor and materials of the wasps, Larassa reminds us of the importance and fragility of home, shelter, and community.

With generous support from the Iowa Arts Council, *Sojourn* has been an opportunity for Larassa to open up her practice, seeking out new creative challenges, and work with new collaborators. Over the summer she completed *Tributaries*, a community sourced drawing project in which audiences drew images of loved ones they have lost. She also traveled to Minneapolis to work at Tandem Studios with artist Drew Peterson on a new and complex series of screenprints. *Between There and Here* is the 5-panel series she made during that collaboration. Not only is it the newest work in the show, it is the most personal work as well. The title comes from for an e.e. cummings' poem "Autumn is:that between there and

here." Larassa frequently uses literary inspiration in her work but this poem hews closely to her interests in seasonal change and personal transformation.

The white-tailed deer has an important place in the American imagination, especially as a symbol in storytelling. And to some, the deer is a connection to bygone eras of American history, a bellwether for overdevelopment, and an amazing example of adaptability. Disney's animated film *Bambi* is the most popular example of how deer have been anthropomorphized in order to allegorize human family structures. Similarly, Larassa uses deer images as stand-ins for important people in her life. The fawn in *Between There and Here* represents her husband, children and even young relatives. The continuous line drawing of a buck taxidermy form, rendered as a ghost image, and the deer skull represent Larassa's father-in-law Paul who recently passed away. The green and yellow maple leaves map the beautiful decay of seasonal change. The weed on the left side of the composition is Queen Anne's lace, which is a natural abortifacient. While she was working on this piece, Larassa told me, "There is a rhythm to the way the elements enter and exit the space that echoes the way people come and go from our lives."



Larassa Kabel, *Spirit House*, 2021, Paper, wasp paper, found wood, branches, paint, and monofilament  
Figge Art Museum, Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, 2022.18



Larassa Kabel, *The Weight of Grace*, 2021, Gouache and 24 karat gold on paper

*The Black Crown of Recurring Loss* is a smaller version of a large public sculpture that is installed in Des Moines, Iowa. The smaller scale of this piece, and seeing it in a gallery context, are important. It was inspired by a Persian Ice Age artwork of two conjoined deer. Larassa's piece presents to us, in another beautifully conjoined pair, the dualities of life that so many of us must deal with. On one side, a living fallow deer raises up its head as if waking up and getting out of its bed. The other deer is dead, signaled by its downturned ears. Their beautiful antlers show how extreme binaries are always entangled, impossible to separate from each other. Her sculpture looks like a mythical creature but it speaks directly to very real concerns, such as

how love is shadowed with loss. Larassa's describes it this way, "When you have a profound love it is always shadowed and paired with the absolute terror of losing that love. Everything goes away."

Even though death is a current that runs through all of Larassa's work, she wants people who see her work to come away with an appreciation for death as a transformative process that we must all reckon with, in one way or another. And it's this collective experience, rather than the morbidity, of death that Larassa finds so generative. She wants us to think about and embrace it together.

cover image: Larassa Kabel and her dogs Hugo and Inu in her studio