

# Time Out

## New York

### Fortune painter

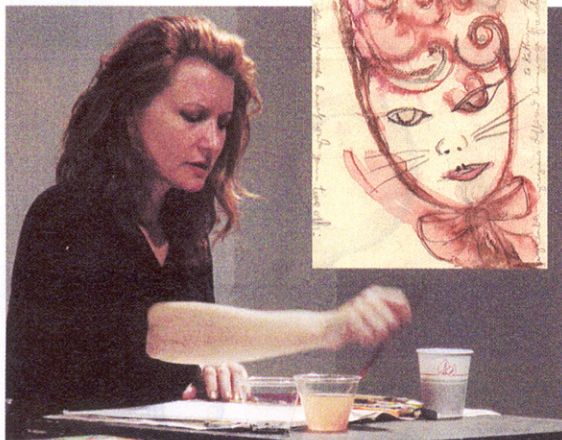
Forget the crystal ball—clairvoyant Karen Finley channels her ESP into art at the Kitchen **By Laura Barcella**

**K**aren Finley is staring at me. We're sitting at a table in a small, windowless storage room at the back of the Kitchen, in Chelsea. A sign on the door reads PLEASE KNOCK, MME. KAREN IS IN. She's studying me because, any minute now, she's going to paint my portrait—my "psychic portrait." Supposedly, the artist will render not my physical likeness, but my inner essence as well. We'll see.

Finley is offering one-on-one sittings every half hour, by appointment, Wednesday through Saturday from noon to 7pm; the results will be displayed in an exhibition titled "Psychic Portraits,"

Senate and Supreme Court debates on artistic-decency standards. Finley has commented that journalists are often afraid to interview her. But right now, while I space out at a little table, I don't feel scared. As Finley draws me, she intermittently eyes her subject and emits a slight groan. I wonder if her psychic talents match her artistic gifts—or if this is just one more *outré* performance to add to her arsenal.

Finley has legitimate roots in the paranormal. She worked as a psychic before pursuing art, and she



**STROKE OF INTUITION** Not unlike Santa Claus, artist Karen Finley knows who's been naughty and who's been nice when she renders psychic portraits at the Kitchen.

on view at the Kitchen Friday 31 through November 15.

A New Yorker by way of Chicago, the 47-year-old Finley is, of course, most famous for her controversial performance-art pieces, in which she has smeared her naked body with chocolate, channeled an abusive man interested in "sticking yams up [his] granny's butt," and ended shows by reading aloud her father's suicide note. In 1990, she was one of four artists whose NEA grant applications were vetoed because of perceivably inappropriate content in their work, sparking

claims both parents came from clairvoyant families. Her "American Indian [ancestry] and Hungarian Gypsy divination background," she claims, have left her able, since childhood, to sense what most of us cannot see. "I was raised to read cards and interpret dreams and to look at omens, herbs and energies the way that some women were taught to sew," she says. "It was as common as making chicken soup."

In "Psychic Portraits," Finley is trying to fuse her extrasensory and creative skills, something she already does to a degree in other pro-

jects. "My early performances were about taking on other energies, another voice. [In "Psychic Portraits,"] what I do is interpret a voice by image," she says. A whisper of the supernatural has always informed her work. Finley claims to leave her body and enter a "finely concentrated" trance state during each one of her stage performances. "I actually need to leave myself. It's a defense mechanism," she says.

So what happens in a portrait reading? She describes that experience, too, as a trance. But while doing a portrait, Finley actually exits her body and, in a manner of speaking, takes a trip through the sitter's. The intrinsic bond created by this kind of work—essentially glimpsing at a person's heart and soul—has a huge emotional impact on Finley. "The trust involved makes me cry," she says, "that the person allows me to go there, to look, to feel that mystery."

Finley hopes each person who sits for a portrait walks away feeling "seen on the inside" rather than "looked at." She also wants patrons to leave with a personalized, original piece of art that's modestly priced, too (it costs \$100 for a gouache, and \$150 for an iridescent work). Palpably disturbed by the art world's exorbitant fees, she proclaims, "Sure, art is everywhere. But it has become so, so, so expensive. Art should become more available."

As for me, I feel almost overly "available"—Finley regards me with a probing eye, painting bright pink and purple stripes across the page. The loud-colored pattern represents the disguise I wear for the world, she later tells me. She's onto something—fuchsia is my favorite color, and I own at least ten striped shirts. She begins to write in a messy scrawl across the paper's border: "Marvelous Marzipan" and "Catwoman." The candy portrays my "dessertlike" quality, she says, and looking down at the feline ears she's added to an abstract rendering of my face, she concludes that cats are my "totem animal."

As I leave Finley, I feel not only understood from the inside out, but I'm also in love with my portrait. At the risk of sounding like a crazy cat lady, I offer a full disclosure: I live with three cats. And though I have no personal affection for marzipan, who knows what she's instigated? Call me a believer.

**To make an appointment for a psychic portrait, call 212-255-5793, ext 25. For more information, see listings ("Psychic Portraits," Fri 31.)**

AROUND TOWN

The obsessive guide to impulsive entertainment  
October 30 - November 6, 2003 Issue No. 422 \$2.99