The New York Times

A Longtime Artist Reimagines City Landmarks

Cynthia Karalla almost fell into the Central Park Lake and was pierced by brambles to create works for a luxury condominium building — the biggest payday she has ever seen.

Give this article

Cynthia Karalla with one of the photographs she shot for a new condominium called 1289 Lexington, being built by Zeckendorf Development. James Estrin/The New York Times

By Helene Stapinski

Nov. 18, 2022

6 MIN READ

Cynthia Karalla has never been represented by a New York City gallery but has managed to survive as an artist here for four decades, scraping by on individual sales. So when a high-end Manhattan developer inquired about buying a large number of her pieces this summer, she was both shocked and thrilled.

“At first, I thought, ‘Is this for real?’” Ms. Karalla said. “I have no dealer, no inside connection.” She had never met a real estate developer and had never even heard of the Zeckendorfs, who were putting the finishing touches on a new luxury condominium project on the Upper East Side.

“So I did my homework,” said Ms. Karalla. She researched Zeckendorf Development online and started asking around, then found a friend who knew the Zeckendorf family who assured her they had a solid reputation in the New York real estate world.

A true Bohemian, Ms. Karalla buys her clothes at thrift stores, furnishes her apartment with found objects and spends most of her time making art. Her eclectic repertoire ranges from playfully political pieces like giant flowers made from copies of the Mueller report, to bleached black and white landscapes, to hyper close-ups of brightly colored poppies shot in southern Italy. Her work costs anywhere from $450 for a small piece to $8,500 for a matted, framed print of those poppies. (Full disclosure, this writer owns a poppy print as well as several other Karalla pieces and has known her for 12 years).

Two summers ago, Jeff Stockwell, a real estate agent, first glimpsed Ms. Karalla's poppies on a friend's wall in the Hamptons. The following autumn, he visited Ms. Karalla's studio in Newburgh and bought a print of the poppies. (Each year Newburgh and other artist communities open their studios to the public for a weekend meet-and-greet and an opportunity to buy art.) "I thought Cynthia's work was phenomenal," he said.

Seven months later, when Mr. Stockwell started working as the sales director for the new condominium project, he and the developer, Artie Zeckendorf, discussed buying art for the building, which is called 1289 Lexington. Mr. Stockwell immediately thought of those poppies.

Did you know you can share 10 gift articles a month, even with nonsubscribers?
Share this article.

Ms. Karalla, who is in her 60s, splits her time between Newburgh, where she develops and prints photos, and Manhattan, where she has rented the same two-bedroom rent-stabilized apartment in a tenement building for 34 years. The apartment is about 11 blocks away from the 86th Street building — a short walk but a whole orbit away.

Ms. Karalla sent over dozens of her poppy images. Mr. Zeckendorf loved them, but some of his development partners weren't comfortable with the drug connotation of poppies.

“I had never even made that connection,” said Ms. Karalla, laughing.

Excited about working with a local artist, Mr. Zeckendorf and Mr. Stockwell went back to Ms. Karalla and asked if she was interested in shooting a series of new photos specifically for the 20-story building — 17 shots that would be hung on each wall you see as you exit the elevator on 17 different floors. The building had been designed with large spaces for art in mind.

Real estate titans for four generations, the Zeckendorfs are among the most successful developers in the city, known for high-end buildings like 15 Central Park West and 520 Park Avenue, which attract billionaire and celebrity buyers. (Mr. Zeckendorf’s great-grandfather, William, was the man who put together the land deal for the property that would later become the United Nations. Another great-grandfather, Trygve Lie, was the first secretary general of the United Nations.)

The Zeckendorfs are also art collectors and often buy pieces to feature in their buildings. “But we had never commissioned new art directly from an artist,” said Mr. Zeckendorf.

Artie Zeckendorf, left, the developer of 1289 Lexington, and Jeff Stockwell, the sales director, on the building's rooftop space. James Estrin/The New York Times

Ms. Karalla had never created art for anyone but herself and was a bit nervous her ideas might not jibe with the developer's. "But Artie made it clear I was not just a hired hand," Ms. Karalla said. "He has a great eye. He's grown up with beautiful art on his walls. And he was totally open to my ideas. It was great to have someone believe in the unknown instead of the known."

When she asked Mr. Zeckendorf what her deadline was, he answered, "Yesterday." Ms. Karalla had never produced art on deadline before. "But I'm always up for a challenge," she said.

Inspired by the painting that hangs in the Lexington Avenue lobby of the new building, by David Korty, featuring a hansom cab in muted colors, Ms. Karalla immediately started shooting scenes in nearby Central Park. "The idea was that the carriage is taking you through the park," she said. "And each image would be like a window you were stepping through, your mind and eye traveling."

Using a D850 camera and 135 mm Zeiss lens, Ms. Karalla shot around 8,000 images. Though she usually shoots in film, often distressing the negatives, Ms. Karalla worked this time in digital. She shot in color, then transferred the images to black and white, adding blasts of purple, pink and orange to trees and flowers using Photoshop software. Some took a few hours to produce, others two weeks.

In her Newburgh studio, she made 40 by 60 inch test prints of her favorite images on her 44-inch printer and taped them to her wall, standing back seven feet to mimic the effect of stepping off the elevator. There were shots of the reservoir, gardens, the Loeb Boathouse, Belvedere Castle, and the Metropolitan Museum.

"We didn't want clichéd images," Mr. Stockwell said. "The Dakota, the Guggenheim. They're beautiful but everyone's seen them a million times. We wanted something different." Ms. Karalla does not work in clichés. For this series, she took recognizable sights and landmarks and turned them into impressionistic landscapes and geometric abstracts using an otherworldly palette.

She also kept constantly texting and calling her clients as she was shooting. “Saturday mornings, Sunday nights,” laughed Mr. Zeckendorf. Mr. Stockwell said she worked harder than any other person on the condo project. “Cynthia is in a league of her own,” he said.

For her boathouse shot, Ms. Karalla balanced on a rock over the water and nearly fell in. For a picture of the Guggenheim, she climbed into the bushes across the street and was pierced by brambles. “I bled for that one,” she said, smiling. “My DNA is in those shots.” Ms. Karalla made the Guggenheim look like an alien spacecraft, with the offending plant life framing her shot. “It’s as if nature is taking over,” she said.

But then Ms. Karalla suffered a setback. On July 4, she came down with a high fever, chills and a throat so sore she could barely swallow. She had Covid-19. After six days in quarantine, she got back to work, and shot what became Mr. Stockwell’s favorite image — a large field of daisies, which she colored fluorescent magenta in postproduction. For a shot of the Bethesda fountain, Mr. Zeckendorf asked her to remove several people from the scene, including a man in a loud Hawaiian shirt. Ms. Karalla obliged.

“It took me a whole week to pull that image together,” she said. But Ms. Karalla, a perfectionist, shot much more than she needed — or than Zeckendorf expected. “I would push it and do something else,” she said. “I drove them a little crazy. But the result was so much better.”

Mr. Stockwell said Ms. Karalla had a true vision. “It’s not like she was just doing what we asked,” he said. “She pushes back when she thinks it’s artistically wrong.”

“It’s not about the money for me,” said Ms. Karalla. “Art lasts longer than money. I didn’t want to ruin my name. So I kept going and the project kept evolving. I was lucky that they patiently waited for the art to come."

Mr. Zeckendorf was so happy with the images that he asked for five more for the building's lounge, roof and gym, pushing the project into the $150,000 range. He is considering buying a shot of the sailboat pond to hang in his son's room. Mr. Stockwell bought two prints for his mother, including those daisies.

Even with two thirds going to production costs — printing, mounting and hanging the photos — the job is the biggest payday Ms. Karalla has ever seen. Laumont Photographics, a fine art print studio in Long Island City, Queens, printed each photo on matte paper and glued them to TruLife Acrylic.

Mr. Stockwell started selling the 60 apartments four months ago, ranging in price from $2.49 million to $16 million, and the first owners have just moved in. At the end of September, Laumont started hanging Ms. Karalla's photographs. That same week, Ms. Karalla got some bad real estate news.

Her Newburgh studio building was being sold and may soon be cut up into WeWork-like spaces. (She's paying $1,200 for a 2,400 square foot space.)

With help from the income from the Zeckendorf project, Ms. Karalla is now shopping for her own building in Newburgh. For the first time in her life she hopes to put a down payment on a piece of real estate, thanks to the Central Park shoot — and to Mr. Zeckendorf's continuing support.

To showcase Ms. Karalla's work and help her sell more of it, Mr. Zeckendorf is hosting a photo exhibit in an unoccupied, $11.5 million terraced apartment in the Lexington Avenue building. "I really want other people to see her work," he said. The show opens on Nov. 28 in the 3,600- square-foot, 17th floor apartment with killer views of the city. Each of the condo's seven white rooms will feature a different project from Ms. Karalla's long career.

One room, of course, will feature the poppies.