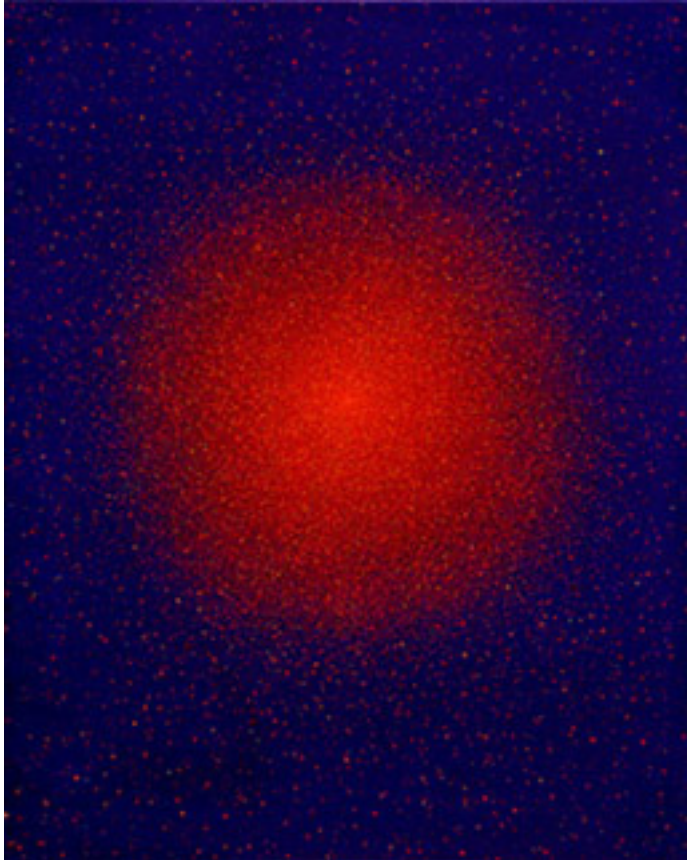


Interview with Karen Arm, Assistant Curator, ARAS New York

by Allison Langerak, Collection Editor of ARAS Online



Untitled (planetary body #1) 2005
by Karen Arm

The ARAS archive in New York is an active place. It has to be in order to make our ambitious and important projects happen. One of the people who has been instrumental in these projects is the Assistant Curator, Karen Arm. Not only has she contributed her curatorial and computer skills to ARAS but she is also a talented and accomplished artist. This side of her career gives her a unique perspective in her work with ARAS images. I sat down with her to find out more about how these two sides of her life mesh.

Allison: Karen, how long have you worked at ARAS?

Karen: I started working in 1989; just one day a week. I was still finishing graduate school at Columbia University. So, it's been 19 years.

Allison: What was it like when you first started?

Karen: It was just Ami Ronnberg, the curator and myself and we were finishing up Volume 1 of the Encyclopedia of Archetypal Symbolism and my first job was to track down permissions for some of the images in this book. That was before the Internet so it was more about calling up places like the Indian Embassy and lots of other unusual places trying to find these images. It was very different in those days. You really had to use the library a lot. I got really into doing the detective work to try and track these images down. I learned about all aspects of the archive and helped users when they came in. A few years later we began work on Volume 2 of the Encyclopedia which we worked on with George Elder, the writer. Ami, George and myself worked on this book together for several years and this is one of my most treasured experiences at ARAS. We had such a great time together.

Allison: Can you give us an update on your career as an artist?

Karen: One of the things that is so great about working at ARAS is that everyone has been so supportive of my art career, especially Ami who has been amazing over the years. When I first started working at ARAS, it was early on in my art career. I was working four days a week and at that time, and I had another job on Fridays doing framing. And then over time as I started to have some success with my art work, ARAS allowed me to drop some days, which was a big deal at the time. It was a big change for me and for them, too. Now I have a successful art career and am working half time, and I am very grateful to have this schedule. I just had a show in February this year which went really well.

Allison: Has being an artist helped you in your work at ARAS?

Karen: Yes, they totally go hand in hand. I always think that this is such a perfect job for me because I have a very strong art history background and am very interested in details. Also I had always been interested in Jung's ideas having been exposed to his ideas very young, around 16. One of the other jobs that I did when I first worked here was checking all the art-historical information on new records that would come in. I always had a good knowledge of art history which helped me to get hired as the Assistant Curator of ARAS. The fact that I had a graduate degree, even though it was in fine arts, gave me a lot of art history background and I think they were really happy about that when I was hired.

The other thing about my work at ARAS is that when I started working here I hadn't realized that I had an affinity for computers and it was such a great, nurturing environment for me to learn. In those days we had a first generation IBM and then we had this very difficult database system - the Star System by Quadra - that we had to have outside people come in to help us with. Over the years I learned a lot about that system before we finally switched over to a PC-based database. This was before off the shelf database software was available. I found that I was really quite good with the computer and this skill has really blossomed into one of the biggest parts of my job here - managing our system, helping the staff with computer issues, and setting up databases for the book we're working on as well as previous books.

Allison: Are you inspired by ARAS images?

Karen: Absolutely. Working at ARAS was part of my growing up as an artist, or growing into

an artist. When I was first working at ARAS I had just gotten out of graduate school and the work I was doing then was very different from what I'm doing now. Really I was still just trying to figure out what kind of paintings I wanted to make. So, when I was first working here I was very influenced in that - I was doing more figurative work then - I was surrounded by all these amazing images and books. As a young artist I was very immersed in contemporary art so it was very grounding somehow to be surrounded at work by all of these very ancient and sacred images. It was kind of a process that evolved over the years. Certainly my way of thinking is kind of intuitive and my work is abstract now. It's hard to even express the influence that ARAS has had because it's so intertwined with my life experience. So, I would say it's integral because it's been an integral part of my life for the last 20 years. I don't know if I'd be where I am if I didn't work at ARAS. It's hard enough to try and be successful as an artist without a supportive job. I should also say that one of my first paintings I sold was to the president of ARAS at that time. Charles Taylor bought a painting and a drawing from me and I have to say it made me feel really supported.

Allison: Does your current work have any symbolic imagery?

Karen: I would say absolutely. My paintings are abstract but based on nature. They are paintings that are kind of on the cusp between abstraction and figuration. For instance, these star paintings that I'm making now - I intentionally leave the interpretation somewhat open. They are symbolic in a more open way. The viewer can come up with their own conclusion about what the symbolism might be. But, it's certainly part of the way I think about my work.

More and more I see that I'm so lucky to work at such a special a place that uses my skills almost perfectly and that's really rare and I appreciate that. I love to investigate things. When we're trying to get the facts about a particular art work, I love tracking down this information, and ARAS has such a great library of books to search through. And, all of the editing that I'm doing now for the bibliographies for the entries in our present book project is intertwined with the new computer technologies that we have created for keeping track of things. I like that what I do here is so different from painting. It uses a different part of my psyche so I can still be fresh to do my work when I'm not at ARAS.

Please visit [Karen's gallery website](#)