

## Obituaries

# Karen Aqua, 57, film animation artist, teacher from Cambridge

By Bryan Marquard  
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Well into her studies at Rhode Island School of Design, where she was majoring in illustration, Karen Aqua saw a collection by the renowned animator Frank Mouris and experienced the kind of moment that defines an artist's journey.

"It was a eureka experience," she told the Globe in 1981. "It got me so excited that I decided to do a film as my senior thesis."

In film after film over the past 35 years, her award-winning animation was measured by viewers in the few short minutes each production took to watch. For Ms. Aqua, however, time and work divided into tiny fragments: 24 drawings for each second on the screen. Her 1982 animated short "Vis-a-Vis," which runs 12 minutes, might require in excess of 15,000 drawings, enough to fill a museum. The effort was worth it, though.

"Once I saw my drawings move, it was a big magical connection," she told the Globe in 1994. "It is a really addicting experience, to see the things moving. For all the things we come to hate about it, like the process being so tedious and how long it takes to do it and how hard it is to get your stuff shown, it seems impossible to do anything else."

Ms. Aqua, whose work was shown in festivals and museums worldwide in places as distant as Hawaii and Iran and who created 22 animated sequences for the popular children's television show "Sesame Street," died Monday in Brigham and Women's

Hospital, about a decade after being diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

She was 57 and lived in Cambridge.

"Karen did animation for a reason," said her husband, the musician Ken Field. "She really had a very clear vision of what she wanted her art to look like, and animation is an art where you can have pretty much total control of what gets created, within your own technical limitations."

The creative process, though arduous, "suited my personality," Ms. Aqua told the Globe in 1994. "I could lock myself in a room and have complete control over my work, and not have to depend on anyone else."

She even came to like the different phases of creativity, some of which were controlled by those who might never set foot in her studio.

"You go through changes, just like the film," she told the Globe in 1981. "There's the verbal stage when you're applying for a grant. Then you make a storyboard, and your idea changes. Single drawings are next, and then you film. The finished film is a very different animal. I like that feeling of change."

Viewers liked what emerged from her hands.

In 1982, Globe film critic Michael Blown called Ms. Aqua "clearly one of the finest animation artists in the country" in a review of "Vis-à-Vis," a film in which she mused visually about her own creative process.

"She struggled with the solitary nature of her work and the

intensity of the time required to do animation, which she did for almost her entire career by hand on paper, not using computers," said her husband, who com-



KAREN AQUA

posed soundtracks for many of her works. "She struggled with the balance of staying in her studio, working hour after hour for days and months on a single film, with the need that an artist, and in particular Karen, had to see the world and have things come into her life, which would then come out again in art."

The second of four children, Ms. Aqua was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., and grew up across the Susquehanna River in the small Pennsylvania town of Forty Fort.

A daughter of a dentist, she graduated in 1972 from Wyoming Valley West Senior High School in Plymouth, Pa., and headed to Providence, where she graduated in 1976

with a bachelor of fine arts degree from Rhode Island School of Design.

While there she met Field, who was attending Brown University, and the two shared a car ride to the Western states during a summer near the end of their time in college.

"When she got out of the car, I left a little note in her crayon box," he said. "At the end of that summer, we both went back to Providence and became a couple."

They married in 1984 and, save for the occasional waitressing job, Ms. Aqua always made her living as an artist.

"She lived on air and water when she graduated," Field said. "She never owned a car. She lived in cheap, cheap apartments, and just made it so she could live her life as an artist. People marveled at her ability to sustain herself and live on next to nothing and do her work without compromising."

To mitigate the solitary studio hours, Ms. Aqua taught in workshops at Emerson College and Boston College. Fellowships and artist residences took her from Maine to New Mexico, and from Florida to Colorado. Ms. Aqua received grants and commissions from numerous organizations, ranging from the American Film Institute in 1979 to being notified a few days before she died of her last one from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

She reveled in the stark beauty of New Mexico and delighted in marching and dancing and playing with her husband's band in Mardi Gras parades in New

Orleans, once wearing a dress festooned with purple and silver sequins.

"I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven, because it was my idea of all the things I love, with performances and shiny costumes," she told the Globe in 2006, recalling her first of many visits to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. "It was like a sensory picnic for me."

In addition to her husband, Ms. Aqua leaves her mother, Ruth (Bhaerman) of Edwardsville, Pa.; a brother, Hal of Denver; and two sister, Marlene of Northfield, N.J., and Ellen Hart of Stamford, Conn.

A gathering to celebrate Ms. Aqua's life and work will be held at 2 p.m. July 10 in the Center for the Arts at the Armory in Somerville.

"I would characterize Karen, and I think many people would, as animated, and to animate something means to bring it to life," her husband said.

Ms. Aqua did that by turning her drawings into living entities that moved and breathed and flowed on the screen, erasing boundaries between plants and objects, people and animals.

"All over the world, everywhere she went, people fell in love with her," her friend Joanna Priestly, who also creates animated films, wrote on her website, [www.primopix.com](http://www.primopix.com). "That's the kind of person she was. Everyone loved her. The world has lost a great human being and an amazingly talented artist. I will miss her with all my heart."

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