

Art in America

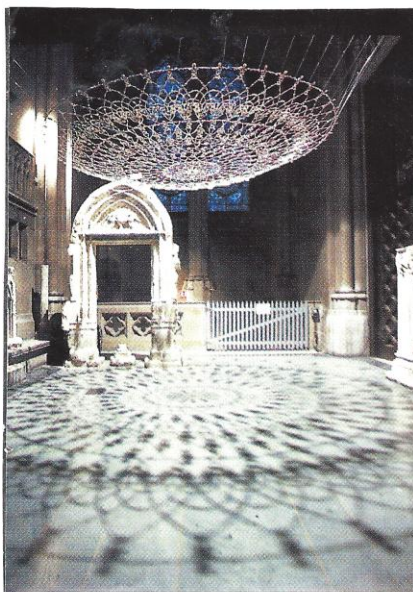
March 2000

Karen Giusti at Nikolai and St. John the Divine

On Oct. 4, 1992, David Blakeslee took his life at artist Karen Giusti's home, leaving behind a note that reads, "Sweetee, My apologies. Create a piece for me. Love, Your Sweetee." "Safety Net," a collection of drawings, sculptures, photograms and installation works, recently on view at Nikolai Fine Art and the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, is Giusti's memorial.

In most of the dozen works shown at Nikolai and in the cathedral installation, the human skeletal form is deployed in repeating geometric patterns of engrossing complexity that recall in both appearance and spiritual resonance the Celtic decorative tradition, mandalas and stained-glass windows. Many of the pieces feature dozens of small skeletons (bronze, paper cutout or drawn), and the human anatomy proves a surprisingly versatile unit within these decorative systems. In the smaller bronze wall sculptures, Giusti allows herself the liberty of elongated femurs and fingers or a trio of truncated skeletal forms to enhance the decorative effect. The sculptural works range widely in their surface qualities and patinas, from a dull steel black to an exquisite opalescent bronze.

Giusti's most evocative statements are the large-scale works in which dozens of bronzed skeletons (at Nikolai) or hundreds of various-sized paper cutouts (at Saint John) were



Karin F. Giusti: January, 2000 Installation
Safety Net, view of 300 paper skeletons
suspended with lighting in the Cathedral
of Saint John the Divine, New York City

woven into circular nets, suspended horizontally and lit from above. Giusti describes her labor with the skeletons as "weaving," referring to the web-like form of her creations and to one of mythology's original artists, the weaver Arachne, who was Minerva's competitor in an ill-fated contest.

Here the contest is between the morbid but commonplace subject matter and Giusti's artistry, and the latter wins the day. The desire to render death in the image of Beauty reveals a romantic sensibility that is fueled by faith in the transcendent possibility of artistic creation to bring order to chaos and healing to loss. Particularly in the chapel setting at Saint John the Divine, where Giusti's 10-foot net cast its fuzzy shadow on soul-searchers below, the meditative (if obsessive) work offered a sense of reassurance. In this piece and the smaller bronze net installed in Nikolai's courtyard, scores of skeletons were arranged in a centripetal pattern in which the regularity of the design affirmed a cosmic order. Individuality, however, was implied by such varied details as the clinging fingers and toes with which adjacent skeletons hold each other, and—most poignantly—generalization was countered by particularity with the suspension of the original suicide note in the Saint John installation.

With the refined filigree of "Safety Net," an affecting memorial that has clearly been cathartic, Giusti makes a rich and original contribution to the distinguished tradition of dance-of-death imagery.

—Joe Hill