

STUDIO SESSION

# BEACHY KEEN

IN HER PLAYFUL PAINTINGS, KATHERINE CORDEN RENDERS DELIGHTFULLY QUOTIDIAN MOMENTS IN THE SOFT, SUN-SOAKED HUES OF SUMMER.

**K**atherine Corden grew up with an art teacher mother who encouraged her creative dreams. But pursuing art as a career while a recession loomed? Too risky, Corden concluded, prudently becoming a physical therapist instead. Yet she couldn't shake the urge to capture light, color, people, and places on canvas. She built a successful side hustle for six years before committing to painting full time. Working out of her sunny studio in Traverse City, Michigan, Corden channels local vibes in her laid-back beach scenes, which she sells as fine-art paintings, prints, greeting cards, and calendars. Interview by Kelsey Schagemann.

**MWL** You are known for your beach paintings, which beautifully evoke the simple pleasures of a sand-in-the-toes day—shaking out towels, applying sunscreen. What draws you to that subject?

**KC** In the summer, we're outside most of the time. The beach is just down the street, which is one of the reasons we love living here. I'm fascinated by how light and shadows interact on the water, on faces, on buildings. And then the sand is like this blank canvas, and the people on it are the objects in a still life.

**MWL** Do you set up your paints right there on the beach?

**KC** I like to sketch when I'm there, but I work from photographs when I'm painting. I'll piece together a composition from many different pictures I've taken. My family and friends generously serve as my muses.



*vacation mode*  
Corden grew up in the Detroit suburbs but spent summers visiting her grandparents in Frankfort, Michigan, about an hour southwest of her current home. She sells her work at [katherinecorden.com](http://katherinecorden.com).

**MWL** That's interesting because your style isn't photorealistic by any means. You don't paint facial features, for example.

**KC** Yes, that's right. My style is definitely whimsical and nostalgic, and I emphasize color blocking. But the colors aren't exactly what I'm seeing in real life. They're richer, more simplified, and unexpected. I love earth tones. I might go in with an idea of the color palette, and then it evolves as I paint.

**MWL** I think that's partly why your work feels so approachable, even when the subject is walking or sitting with their back to the viewer.

**KC** No matter what I do, I always seem to come back to painting the figure. It fascinates me. As a physical therapist, I was trained to analyze human movement, to watch how somebody walks, and to understand bone structure.

Every body is different and every pose is so different, and it never gets easier to paint. For whatever reason, my personality is drawn to that challenge.

**MWL** Speaking of challenges, you're a working artist with three young children. How has motherhood impacted your art?

**KC** Kids force you to slow down and be more present, really notice the little things. We'll go on a walk and stop to look at a flower or a rock. Or my daughter will begin an art project, and there's no plan, but she's beaming and there's a purity to the process. I'm trying to channel my inner child more. Becoming a mom has also helped to distill and clarify exactly what my priorities are, especially on the business side.

**MWL** Your business encompasses more than your art. You offer consultations for fellow creatives and publish a Substack, *The Art Table with Katherine Corden*. What was the impetus for your newsletter?

**KC** Do you know Enneagram, that personality test? I'm a 7: The Enthusiast. That's the type of person who is excited by a million

different things. I love painting. But I also love design, fashion, music, magazines! Substack seemed like such a cool way I could fuse those interests together and share them with anyone who's interested. I'm always looking for ways to extend my practice beyond my studio. I consider myself to be an extroverted artist.

**MWL** So that's not an oxymoron?

**KC** Not for me! Of course I like my solo time, but I think it's much more fun to include people in what I'm doing. For instance, I won a commission to paint a mural in Traverse City, and it was completely inspired by our local community. I even asked people to gather at the beach so I could photograph them for the project.

**MWL** Are more beach paintings in your future?

**KC** Definitely. There's a special vibe on the beach. Everyone is more open, more relaxed. The rest of the world disappears. I think we all need that escape.

*This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

"WHEN I WAS LITTLE, I WOULD HAVE LOVED TO GO TO A REAL ARTIST'S STUDIO—JUST TO KNOW THAT THIS CAREER WAS POSSIBLE."

KATHERINE CORDEN

PHOTOGRAPH: (PORTRAIT) COURTESY OF KATHERINE CORDEN