

IMPULSE

Face to Face: January 2026 | Karla Diaz
By Jesse Firestone | January 31, 2026



Dreaming, as we generally understand it, happens at night—despite the drool of daydreams peppering our waking hours, turning days into daze. In recent years, researchers have come to a growing consensus: dreaming during sleep, particularly during the REM cycle, is critical to the brain's ability to cleanse and recalibrate itself. Dreaming functions like a carwash, flushing neurochemical waste while sorting emotions and memories, resetting neural circuits for the work of the following day. So what happens to someone like artist Karla Diaz, who, for more than a decade after a stroke, lives with intense insomnia and may no longer dream or sleep the way she once did?

Of course, she runs—upwards of two hours a day for heart health. But for the deeper recesses of the brain, Diaz has found another form of exercise, or excision, to clear not only neural pathways, but something closer to the soul.

Diaz's deeply intuitive, generative, and psycho-emotional drawing practice began in the wee hours of the night, when sleep refused to come. Faced with the vastness of time, she turned to pen and paper, but found the blank page too daunting. Instead, she flooded it with watercolor: splotches of pigment blooming and bleeding into one another, reminiscent of 1960s liquid light shows and acid-trip luminosity. From within this abstract terrain, forms began to emerge with images surfacing the way dreams bubble up from the unconscious. Diaz now refers to this process as a kind of psychic excavation—a practice of “rendering at night.”

What appears in her mind's eye and then the page is expansive and unruly. Childhood visions. Family scenes. Memories inherited through the ancestral grapevine. Stories of love, death, political provocation, and historical and ongoing abuses. Fears and hopes alike channel themselves into paper. Over time, as Diaz became more adept at handling these images, a shift has occurred and the work includes scenes beyond personal memory into something collective, tapping a deeper well of shared consciousness. Serial-killer luchadoras, urban myths, personal loss, community violence, and invented worlds collide and co-mingle.

Recently, Diaz began a new project born from interruption and missed connections. After receiving countless phone calls meant for someone else, she started painting the people who left her voicemails. Their stories, confessions, and fragments of lives misdirected into her inbox, now given form on paper. On the other end of the line, Diaz becomes a kind of priestess, a reluctant holder of confession and in a psychic-like fugue state. She imagines what these unseen callers might look like, giving form to the disembodied ghosts traveling through digital ether from their mouths to her ears.

This flow state is deeply fragile. Conjuring images takes a toll on both body and mind. It is a form of conscious free association—an improvised therapy that navigates the inner monologue of a restless, loving spirit. Yet it is profoundly cathartic: a way of responding to emotion, to states of being, to the need for safety and self-determination. “I own this. I need this,” Diaz asserts, claiming space for healing, for storytelling, for repair.

Where does healing happen for the self, for the individual, and for the collective? In her own words, Diaz offers a quiet but radical proposition: “a community that is healed is the most powerful form of protest.”