

Catalog Essay by Carol Todaro

“Insides Out” exhibition, January-March 2003 at MIA Gallery in Miami, FL

Like any good artist, Kretz wants to change the way we see things – alter us, disrupt us in some way. Her work makes us uncomfortable, it makes us aware of our bodies – the insides of our bodies – and, not just our own. The work makes us laugh, perhaps out of relief or recognition. I think there might even be a little shame involved, as when you unexpectedly become aware of something. Kate wants us to face “all the stuff that is inside” (see Carol Todaro’s essay), the “stuff” we haven’t clearly labeled, whether she is depicting it or not. We *look* because she lures us with her amazing technical skill, the beauty and sensuality of her materials and the sheer amount of labor involved. The work contains an element of subversiveness; she plays with us, teases us. Like life itself, it is serious, but not all meant to be taken so seriously.

*Introduction by Yolanda Sanchez, Ph.D.
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Kate Kretz and I first talked about her drawing, *Promise.*, on December 9, 1998. I know this because Kate made an entry in her sketchbook, and she allowed me to go over her private notes in preparation for this essay – a remarkable gesture, and very telling with regard to her accessibility. She made this entry regarding my comments of that day: “—said *Promise.* was sexual (mouth).”

Looking at *Promise.* now, despair and hope overwhelm the picture but the mouth still commands my attention. (The title, like others in the show, is an imperative, hence the unconventional punctuation) It is essentially a black and white self-portrait, with color applied to the features of the face that swell when crying – the lids, nose and mouth are tinged with red, the lips are parted, the eyes half-closed but clear, with a direct gaze. Spent from crying, the woman in the drawing has an open posture, is unprotected, and to show this once more in a new and metaphorical way, a small square window opens over her clavicle. Inside we see a burning candle: a hope kept alive despite betrayal, a vigil. I am looking at the record of a true event, not a performance, but like a skilled and honest actor, Kate brings real emotions to the surface through her work so that we can feel them, too.

Insides Out, the new body of work by Kate Kretz, begins with the mouth in *Promise.* The parted lips and body-window in *Promise.* conflate and become the wide open mouths in *Burrow.*, *Through.*, and *Hermaphroditic Romanticism*. These self-portraits contain images that are mysterious and contradictory, and we sense their meanings before we apply reason. In *Hermaphroditic Romanticism*, a graphite drawing with Medusa-like hair spread around the page, the open mouth reveals a lovely landscape with a single tree growing from the back of the tongue. This tiny interior space has a strange, misty quality that makes it read like both a barrier and an open sky- is the landscape inviting us in, or is it on its way out? A heart-shaped charm, stitched to the surface of the drawing with a strand of hair, reads “Ever After”, suggesting an edgy fairy tale. In *Burrow.*, the landscape recedes to the back of the throat as the subject scrabbles to open the mouth wider; in *Through.*, the mouth is again pried open by hands as spiny thistles thrust out, uncontrolled. A vintage picture collaged at the bottom of the field shows a little boy standing behind a little girl, reaching around to cover her eyes with his hands. These

are complicated pictures in that they are painful but not humorless, and speak about human frailties and longing in an elliptical way. Kate's careful rendering and obsessive attention to detail tell us that the artist has an insistent need to show us everything. Her style demands that we pay attention.

I keep thinking of the phrase "her heart in her mouth" but it doesn't fit.

These images are too brave.

In my sculpture, it's not an image I'm seeking, it's not an idea. My goal is to relive a past emotion. My art is an exorcism, and beauty is something I never talk about. – Louise Bourgeois

If the mouth stands for the vocabulary of eating, as Kate points out in her statement, then the mouth might also express sexual or familial affection. The mouth is the place where language becomes audible. The mouth is one of the images from Kate's paintings and drawings that leads her (and us) to the images and symbols that obsess her in three dimensions: hearts, embryos, spermatozoa, tears, words and thoughts, the stuff we humans carry inside.

Kate's newest works are garments and other objects that are every bit as pictorial and metaphorical as her paintings. In *Dream.*, the now established symbol of the mouth is disembodied and set free from the page. Exquisitely embroidered with the artist's hair on a linen pillowcase, the open mouth floats at approximately the location that a flesh-and-blood mouth would meet the pillow. Inside, we find another floating form, an embryo. The mouth becomes a uterus; it is a portal to the deepest desires of the self; it is a wet and warm yet ominous place for such a fragile being to exist. *Vagina Dentate Purse* depicts a different kind of gaping mouth, this one outrageously menacing and funny, with its knobby clitoris and shell teeth shaped into points. Swimming sperm, embroidered with pearls on deep blue grounds, animate *Fertilization Purse* and *Fertilization Dress*. The heart appliquéd on the bodice of *Fertilization Dress* is about to be penetrated.

The visual vocabulary in Kate's large body of two-dimensional works attests to her abiding attraction to fibers. The paintings often include lush renderings of fabric in heightened, symbolic colors; hair, shaggy carpets and grass painted with extreme detail give her worlds a textural presence that is like the palpable textures in her newest work. A desire for touch, a need to physically construct something that had an "inside" to bring "outside," ultimately led Kate to the pictorial garments in this show.

Things that Cannot be Compared

Summer and winter. Night and day. Rain and sunshine. Youth and age. A person's laughter and his anger. Black and white. Love and hatred. The little indigo plant and the great philodendron. Rain and mist. – The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon

Defense Mechanism Coat and *Dress of Tears* are ambitious, heart-stopping works. Both are seductive and dangerous exemplars of Kate's intention to create an emotionally expressive language to wear (or imagine wearing) outside of the body. Part of their visual power comes from the contrast of chosen materials, with radically different weights and textures combined in a single piece. *Dress of Tears* is made of fragile silk that's been shaped into an elegant gown, and then cut with the "tracks" or teardrops. Glass tears run down the dress and gather on the floor in a heavy puddle of sparkling light. *Defense Mechanism Coat* bristles with 150 pounds of iron nails pushed through the surface of the fabric

to turn an ordinary woolen coat into armor. Lined in flesh-colored silk velvet, then quilted and embroidered with the major veins and arteries of the body, the inside of the coat looks unbearably tender, as if it would bleed when touched. The nails form a sharp pelt that protects the interior against that touch. The lining invites us in, the nails push us back; the difference dares the viewer to get close and look hard.

Summer afternoon-summer afternoon: to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language. – Henry James

Add to Kate's themes and obsessions certain intense moments of reverie. As a girl of twelve she spent warm nights sleeping on the front porch of her upstate New York home, watching maple leaves pulse with light from the street lamps. Star gazing, naming constellations, thinking about someone else sleeping under the same soft sky – these nostalgic aspects of memory and desire are evoked by two subtle and poetic works in the show. *Summer Night Breeze Dress* is made of hand-dyed and painted silk organza leaves that move on air currents with weightless grace. In *Summer Night Sky Dress*, a line of trees dyed at the hem gives way to a dominant ink-dark sky, where pearls trace an accurate map of summer constellations in the *Northern Hemisphere*. The idea of wrapping oneself in a summer night sky is lovely, and yes, it must feel like dark velvet. Stepping into *Summer Night Breeze Dress* would be like wearing wind.

Carol Todaro, an artist and writer, lives in Miami, Florida.