

KATE KRETZ

In one of her artist's essays for a recent exhibition, Kate Kretz makes two comments that shed light on her working processes. She writes, "I am interested in the notion of creating clothes that reveal psychological states rather than camouflaging them"; and "Believing the truth is often revealed in an intuitive, sentient way, I seek to evoke an emotional, rather than intellectual, response to my work." Kretz is not afraid of feeling: she uses the pieces as containers of emotional and spiritual meaning, in a broad, often blunt fashion. The strong-handed approach of Kretz results in a particularly interesting reading of her art, in which the feelings associated with her *Vagina Dentate Purse* (2002), for example, or with her painting *Sacred Ovaries* (2001), compel the viewer toward a spiritual recognition of the artist's complex, often moving energies - even when the subject matter is provocative. The emotional forthrightness of Kretz's esthetic - one of her more risqué statements is a group of phalluses entitled *(Some) Penises I Have Known* (2000) - enables the artist to move beyond feeling for its own sake, providing the viewer with a wickedly funny reading of gender conditions. Kretz is an artist, then, who moves easily past the notion of kitsch in work that prepares the viewer for a thoughtful presentation of the spiritual life of a female sensibility - we are confronted with metaphors that highlight the particularities of being female, however complicated they may be in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

So Kretz paints a psychological reality intended to strip bare the reality of the female condition. This is done in work that sits on the border between the assertive and the aggressive. A good example is the *Vagina Dentate Purse*, which consists of two rows of teeth lining the red velvet of the open purse's form. Key to Kretz's art is a sense of humor, which is evident in the purse's red fabric and rows of sharp teeth. Another bold statement of femininity is found in the acrylic/oil on canvas *Sacred Ovaries*, a large painting of a shrouded woman with her uterus and ovaries painted a glowing red. One of the interesting aspects of this work and others is its conscious relation to kitsch, which spoofs the female aptitude for household skills and domestic culture even as it emphasizes its seeming femininity. For Kretz, the examples of the feminine and the feminist coexist on the same plane - hence the raw quality of much of her art, which presents the audience with a language and a pose whose intense emotionalism investigates the more basic aspects of the female condition. There is a strong flair for the spiritual, indeed the devotional, in the *Sacred Ovaries* image, which attempts a supernatural reading of the most feminine aspect of the female body. Clothed in a blue-green dress that echoes the blue-green of the room that she is in, the woman with the sacred ovaries becomes an archetype - something that Kretz reaches for on a regular basis.

Kretz's *Individuation Dress* (2002) bears the enigmatic message "I am not them" which covers the entire surface of the dress, and the dichotomy "LOVE•GUILT" on lace, which repeatedly wraps around the bodice. Made of cotton voile, the dress expresses the ambiguity of being female in the midst of the complicated conditions facing us today: to individuate means to form into an individual or distinct identity, and so here, the artist is using an article of clothing to assist in a metaphorical task, namely to change and become the person she believes that she is. Clearly, the domestic skills that go into the making of this symbolic attire are linked, historically speaking, with the condition of being female; Kretz's achievement is to make the clothing so interesting and vibrant that it easily takes on

a metaphysical meaning, its content a real measure of its usefulness as well. There are, indeed, articles of clothing that Kretz has made that engage the viewer with a disturbing power- witness all the nails in her *Defense Mechanism Coat* (2001), which creates a literal statement from a posture of defensive power. This literalism is part of a larger phenomenon in contemporary art today, in which the figurative meaning of language or ideas is embodied in the forms themselves. The shapes embody their function as clothing, but at the same time they use that literalism to make a political point, something this writer believes is often a submerged theme or issue in Kretz's aesthetic.

But we cannot say that Kretz is more a literal than metaphorical artist; she is at her best when she confronts the emotional reality we all face, with objects whose energies are primarily intuitive in their meaning. In *Crying Man I* (2004), we see a close-up of man with a stubby beard wearing a blue shirt, with tears running down both cheeks. The painting is not unusual in its formalism - it is straightforwardly figurative- but it does grab the viewer with its immediacy of feeling. Why, after all, should the emotions belong to the woman alone? Why can't a man manifest feeling as part of the richness of his life? Kretz appears to be reversing stereotypes in this affecting painting, and at the same time, she holds true to her aesthetic. The notion of a man weeping is, in its particularity, another example in Kretz's grand scheme of an art that does not hold anything back from its audience. So the piece is moving not only in the immediacy of its being, but also as a conceptual work that confronts our expectations of the way things are supposed to conform to gender issues. In one of her most powerful recent images, *Sanctum*, Kretz has painted a tornado threatening a small house; the scene is offered from inside the mouth of someone. It is a scary image that asks us questions: What kind of violence do we contain within ourselves? What is the relevance of nature and culture to the human condition? Its meaning is transcendental, metaphorically inventive. But it offers no answers. Like many good artists, Kretz is constantly asking questions, hoping to transform them into open-ended answers of hope.

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