

Cosmo Color

By Michael Mills

The eerie glow that emanates from so many of the canvases in "Kate Kretz: Fate of a Technicolor Romantic" is the result, according to an artist's statement, of being raised "on a regimen of Catholicism and Technicolor movies." It's an odd but apt convergence of influences, with the conflicting impulses of the Vatican and Hollywood coming together to create the emotional turbulence and instability that always seem to lurk just below the deceptively calm surfaces of Kretz's images.

There are just over two dozen pieces in this show, which takes up most of the first floor of the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood. The museum's large main gallery is devoted to thirteen paintings, along with two mixed-media items, and the lurid colors in the big canvases jump out at you, as if the pieces are illuminated from behind. The paintings have the garish sheen of old pulp-fiction magazines, and Kretz often lifts the titles for them from the covers of women's magazines: *How to Tell If He Is Lying to You*, p. 47 and *How to Act, Not React, When He Makes You Crazy*, p. 52 are typical examples.

For eight of the paintings in the main gallery, drawn from her "Beauty Wrest" series, Kretz turns to a favorite subject: a reclining young woman. Sometimes the woman appears to be asleep, while other times she seems to linger in a sort of dreamy limbo.

In *How Not to Be a Victim of Your Own Expectations*, p. 73 (1996), a large oil on canvas, the woman lounges on the front passenger seat of a car. A gas pump is partially visible through the car's window, suggesting that the driver is perhaps just out of sight, filling the tank with fuel. *How to Tell If He Is Lying to You*, p. 47 (1996), painted in acrylic and oil on masonite, gives us another woman stretched across a car's passenger seat, this time outside a convenience store.

For the smaller acrylic and oil *Ten Ways to Win Him Without Losing Yourself*, p. 93 (1996), Kretz closes in on a woman sleeping in a car, so that we can't situate the car in any specific location. *Taking Me Away From All This* (1994), also in acrylic and oil, takes the opposite approach, pulling back to show us a sleeping woman in a car that, to judge from the glare of light reflected in the rear-view mirror, is moving. Again, the driver is not visible.

Innocuous-enough images, right? Don't be so sure. Some disturbing undercurrents emerge, especially in the telling little details Kretz has chosen to provide, which, taken with the paintings' melodramatic titles and the Technicolor lighting, evoke domestic disharmony. I don't think it's mere coincidence — or simple realistic detail, for that matter — that Kretz has given two of these women seat belts. Nor do I think it irrelevant that two of the women rest their heads on rumpled denim jackets that imply the men we don't actually see.

If there's any doubt that these women are anything but serene, consider the woman in *How to Act, Not React, When He Makes You Crazy*, p. 52 (1996-97). Her eyes are bloodshot, and she sprawls forlornly on a bed, thrown into harsh relief by an unidentified source of light, probably a television set to which she has turned for solace. Even her cat has turned its back on her and sits staring out the bedroom window. *Arranging Her Feet Exactly That Way, No One Could See the Hole in Her Shoe* (1993) strengthens the case by having

the lounging woman oblivious to a large roach crawling up her skirt.

While Kretz usually alludes to men only indirectly, she gives us a flesh and blood specimen for one of the most powerful pieces in this show. *Choose* (1997) is a three-foot-by-four-foot oil on canvas that zooms in on the small of a man's back, where his two large hands rest, clenched into fists, just above his blue jeans. On its most basic level, the painting can be seen as depicting the common "game" in which a small object is concealed in one person's hand and a second person is asked to guess which hand holds it.

But look closely at the hands again. They're so tightly clenched that it's hard not to read anger into the image, and the taut tendons of the right arm reinforce the idea of extreme tension. And in the context of this exhibition's passive, unhappy women, it's not too difficult to imagine these fists erupting in violence. The title takes on a nasty edge, as if an overpowering man is sarcastically offering his victim a choice.

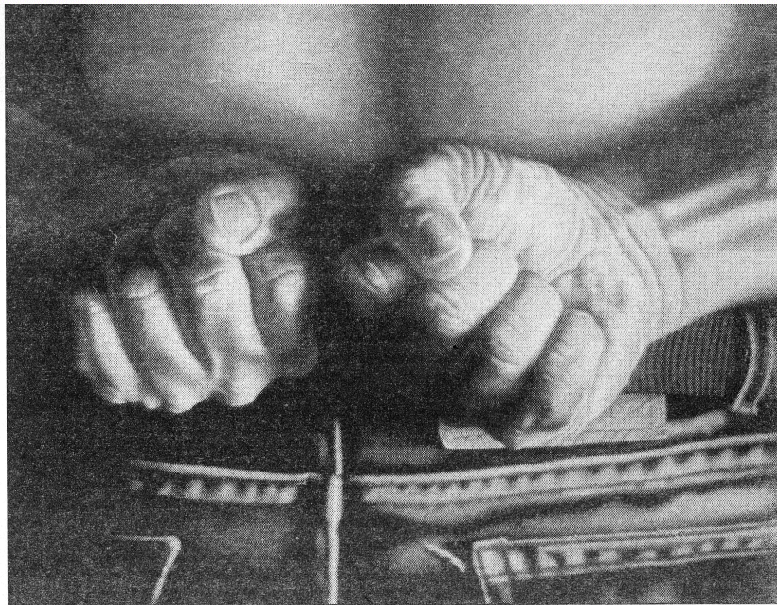
Almost as unsettling is Kretz's *3:15* (1994), a large piece painted on linen with acrylic and oil. At first glance the sleepless figure appears to be yet another of the artist's reclining women, wrapped in a white sheet and lying on her side in bed. But again a closer inspection destabilizes the image and raises a question: Is this a woman or a man? The long, curly blond hair certainly suggests femininity, but the hands and arms are large and muscular. The face, too, straddles the genders. I have no idea what Kretz is up to here, but the painting packs an unexpected punch.

Two smaller adjacent galleries feature additional pieces by Kretz, although there's nothing that quite matches the intensity of those women in the

**Her eyes are bloodshot,
and she sprawls forlornly on
a bed, thrown into harsh relief by
an unidentified source of light.**

big main room. Two drawings, *The Exorcism of Faith* (1999) and *A Conscious Decision Regarding the Possibility of the Existence of Magic* (1998), clobber us with dead birds, while the mixed-media piece *Promise* (1997) forgoes the subtlety of the oil paintings and portrays a woman's misery more directly (and less effectively).

But Kretz regains her mastery of ambiguity in what could be considered the exhibition's closing piece, one of three that are grouped in the museum's smallest gallery. It's called *Close* (1998-2000), and it consists of four tiny oil canvases mounted side by side. In the first, which is maybe four inches by three inches, we see an extreme closeup of a man's hand cupped over his ear. Next comes an even smaller, as in one inch by two inches, closeup of a



man's lips surrounded by light stubble. Then there's a four-inch square of a clenched fist, followed by a roughly two-inch-by-six-inch closeup of a man's eyes, not just closed but scrunched up in an expression of intense pain or pleasure.

Once again Kretz has hopelessly muddied the waters. Is this a man who's close to breaking into a fit of rage or a man who's on the verge of an orgasm? There's no way to answer the question definitively, and the lack of resolution is not only just what the artist seems to be after, it's also what she does best.

The remaining downstairs gallery features "The Theater Photographs of Max Waldman," an exhibition of a dozen black-and-white pictures. Waldman, who was born in Brooklyn in 1919 to Romanian parents, was a commercial photographer in the '40s and '50s who switched to shooting theatrical subject matter in the '60s, and his work here is drawn from that series.

The exhibition includes photos from productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *War and Peace*, and *The Constant Prince*, although the most striking by far feature performers from the 1966 Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. One photograph is an especially powerful shot that echoes *The Death of Marat*, Jacques Louis David's justly famous 1793 painting of the slain Marat in his bathtub.

Upstairs the museum offers a third show, "Recent Drawings by Shirley Katz." It's a series of 20 undated pastel portraits by the French-Canadian artist, who worked from live models for these mostly somber pieces. "The body has many stories to tell and the skin acts as a voice," Katz says in her artist's statement, and she's clearly fascinated with the tones and textures of human skin.

Katz typically exaggerates the long noses, sunken cheeks, and angular features of her subjects, and she doesn't glamorize them — the breasts and bellies sag with unflinching realism. And while the pale, sometimes sickly skin tones with which she works are a far cry from the fleshy glow of Kate Kretz's women and men, there's a melancholy moodiness at the heart of both artists' work that makes these two shows oddly complementary. **W**

**▲ Kate Kretz's
Choose (1997)
may be an offer
we can't refuse**

"Kate Kretz: Fate of a Technicolor Romantic," "The Theater Photographs of Max Waldman," and "Recent Drawings by Shirley Katz" are on display through June 25 at the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood, 1650 Harrison St., Hollywood, 954-921-3274.