

Fashion. A recognition that nature has endowed us with one skin too few, and that a fully sentient being should wear its nervous system externally. J. G. Ballard*

Body Language

KATE KRETZ's

Psychological Clothing

Speaks Volumes

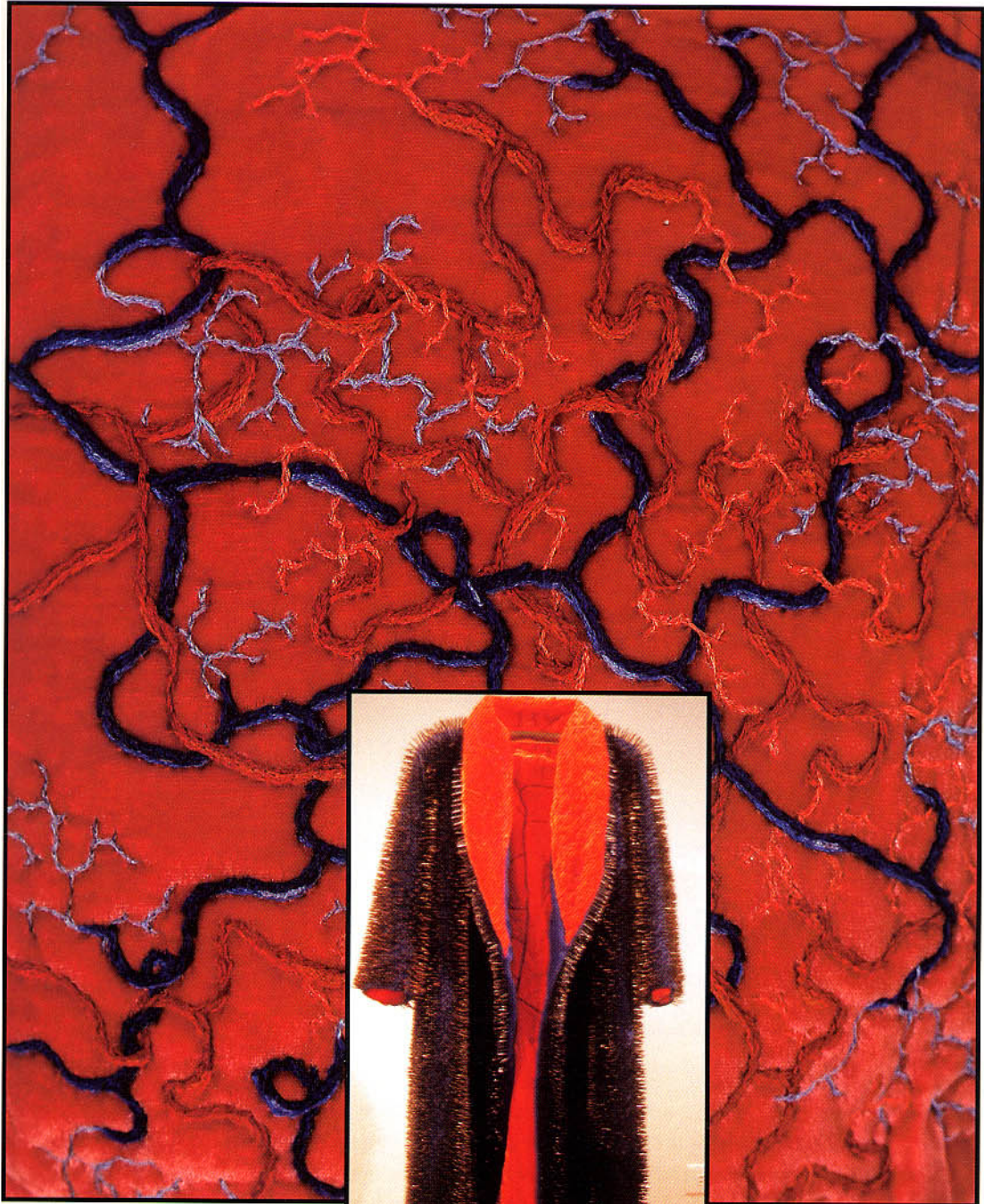
by Janice T. Paine

Bristling with 150 pounds of roofing nails, Kate Kretz's *Defense Mechanism Coat* is a garment that practically speaks for itself. "Don't touch me," the spiky metal pelt all but insists. Painstakingly inserted by the artist and an assistant into a found woolen coat over the course of three months, the nails protect a soft, vulnerable interior that tells a very different story. Made of flesh-colored velvet, the lining is covered with a hand-embroidered tracery of veins and arteries reflecting the major blood vessels of the human body. The lining invites the viewer inside, with whispered promises of warmth and comfort.

"It was early in the game," observed Kretz, an associate professor of art at Florida International University in Miami since 1995, about making the coat. "I was thinking, how would you portray a defense mechanism? And I wanted to make the inside look so tender it could bleed." Although she occasionally wears items of her "psychological clothing" to art events, Kretz noted that neither she nor anyone else has actually donned the *Defense Mechanism Coat*. Fittingly enough, it is just too heavy.

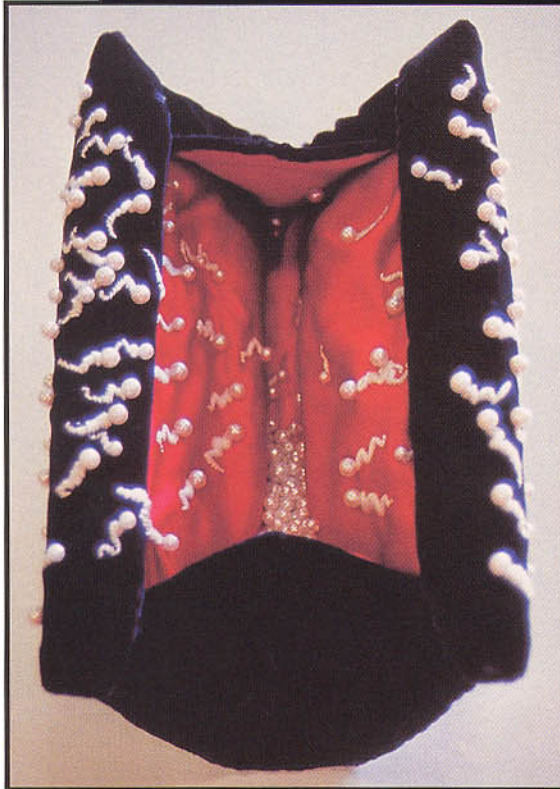
Trained as a painter, Kretz began to realize about five years ago that her two-dimensional work wasn't communicating everything she had to say. She'd purchased a home in Hollywood, Florida, an aging seaside enclave north of Miami, and found herself attracted to fabrics as she made pillows and recovered vintage furniture in her bungalow. "The first time I put a piece of white cloth in red dye, I got chills," she said.

"At a certain point, the two-dimensional image became inadequate for what I was trying to do," the artist recalled. "I wanted to go deeper. I wanted to get inside the experience I was portraying. I had very little sewing experience, but I realized I had to make clothing. I wanted to use the language of fashion—to borrow a language that that is usually used for covering things up—and use it to reveal psychological states rather than camouflaging them." She scoured thrift shops, looking for old dresses to transform, and taught herself to sew and embroider from manuals. For one garment she had in mind, the *Fertilization Dress*, she sought a two-layered dress. A simple polyester sheath that fit the bill finally turned up.



KATE KRETZ *Defense Mechanism Coat* Velvet,
nails, embroidery, 46" x 6" x 12", 2001.
TOP: Detail. Photo: George Valcarce.

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INSET: KATE KRETZ Fertilization Purse Velvet, satin, pearls, thread, 9" x 5" x 5", 2001"
KATE KRETZ Unidentified Detail. Photo: George Valcarce.

Kretz embroidered the dress with a swarm of spermatozoa, some on the under layer, made with fake pearls for their heads. She worked at the rate of "three sperm per hour," she wryly noted. They mostly congregate in a biologically appropriate spot, but Kretz also placed one headed for the heart that she quilted and applied on the bodice. Not a cutesy, Valentine's heart, this is a human organ covered with blood vessels and shaped like the real thing.

Breathtakingly literal in its conception, the *Fertilization Dress* is both rhetoric and reality. Kretz was indeed grappling with the desire to have a child, but at the same time, she crafted her statement about this bodily process to have maximum dramatic impact. Like the costumes worn by film divas in the Technicolor movies that Kretz loved as a child, her garments are imbued with

glamour and sensuality, even when they are also fraught with anxiety.

Smaller accessories, such as her *Vagina Dentata Purse*, extend the metaphors of psychological clothing even further. Alluring and comically transgressive, the handbag is coffin-shaped, lined with red velvet. Equipped with a set of shell teeth that snap closed, it is ready for action. A pair of mangled elbow-length leather gloves, called *Bleed*, has a more visceral effect. Twisted and stained with red dye, the gloves evoke images of pain and bloody struggle.

Kretz's wardrobe of ideas also yielded some gentler themes. One particularly beautiful garment, the *Summer Night Sky Dress*, reaches back to a peaceful childhood memory. As a girl of twelve or thirteen, Kretz used to sleep on the porch of her parents' home in Binghamton, N.Y., on warm summer nights, listening to the leaves rustle and catching glimpses of bright stars overhead. She translated this experience into a sleeveless sheath made of silk velvet dyed an inky blue, beaded with faux pearls. These "stars" follow the pattern of constellations visible in the Northern Hemisphere on summer evenings, taken from sky maps. Lovely and lyrical, the dress is bordered with a hand-painted hem depicting a grayish green tree line that "grounds" the wearer.

"I really love Art Nouveau," Kretz mused, "and I realized that in some Art Nouveau paintings, night is embodied as a woman, or as a woman wearing a cloak of stars."

While in graduate school at the University of Georgia in Athens during the first half of the 1990s, Kretz felt at home in the night herself, frequently painting nocturnal scenes. Influenced by representational painters as diverse as Eric Fischl, Al Leslie, and Ivan Albright, she sought to portray people and places in moments of extreme emotion, especially after dark, when social disguises are dropped and "authentic" selves unveiled.



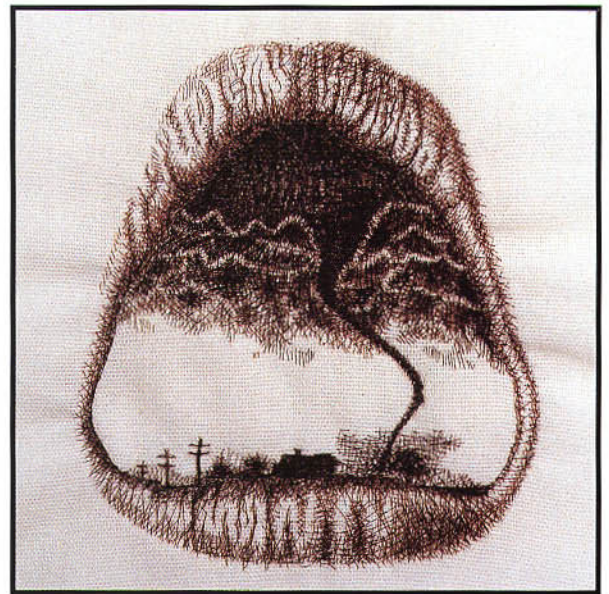
KATE KRETZ *Summer Night Sky Dress* Hand-dyed velvet, fake pearls in patterns of summer constellations, size 6, 2002.

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During this same period, the art world at large was like a creature rediscovering its own physicality. Awakening and stretching its limbs, peering at its navel and occasionally scratching its private parts, this being seemed to come to the collective realization that after all the heady, theory-driven art of the 1980s, intimate bodily experiences needed to be explored and rendered as a corrective. "The body" became the mantra of the '90s and beyond. Artists such as Kiki Smith, Janine Antoni, Ann Hamilton, Tracy Emin, Damien Hirst and Andres Serrano captured the zeitgeist, variously expressing the fact that as much as we may be spiritual and intellectual beings, people are human animals with physical needs and messy habits.

We shed, for instance. The all-too-familiar experience of finding hair on one's pillow in the morning is brought to mind by Kretz's pillow cases. They are embroidered with strands of human hair, generally her own, a time-consuming process that she refers to as "the most insane thing I've ever done." These curious domestic objects speak of mortality and maintenance simultaneously, referring to the rituals of grooming associated with hair and also its use in fashioning memorials to dead loved ones, such as Victorian hair jewelry. However, unlike Anne Wilson's "subversive mendings," which also use hair to embellish domestic linens and create a sense of intimacy, Kretz's pillow coverings are pictorial in nature. They depict open mouths with small images stuffed inside—a tornado, a fetus—that spring from the artist's preoccupations. These portents imply a dialogue between the sleeper and his or her subconscious, dreaming mind, or between lovers sharing a pillow.

As Kretz's psychological clothing has developed over the past few years, interactions between herself and others have increasingly come to the surface. Her *Physical Memory/Last Goodbye Dress* grew out of the artist's awareness, as she embraced someone for the last time, that she was consciously forming a tactile memory of the feeling of his body on and around hers, trying to remember the specifics of each point of contact. To translate this encounter into an art object, Kretz enlisted two friends, a married couple, to reenact the embrace while he wore body paint and the woman was encased in a simple cotton dress designed to act as a recording device. Their touch was recorded as a monoprint on both sides of the dress, forming a pattern that Kretz transferred to the final garment, using discharge and dye.



KATE KRETZ *Threat of Heavy Weather* Human hair, pillowcase, 20" x 30" x 10", 2003. Detail. Photo: George Valcarce.

Other dresses wield words to convey psychological dramas. At a distance, Kretz's *Individuation Dress* looks like a tattered formal garment, perhaps a party dress that has seen hard times. Up close, however, the dress is incantatory, almost an exorcism in cloth. It seeks to express the anguish of trying to establish boundaries between oneself and others, especially family members or a romantic partner. Machine embroidered on the found garment, over and over, is the phrase "I am not them." Less often, the words also say, "I am not him." The lace sash carries a refrain of love and guilt. At the bottom, the dress is stained with a reddish brown dye to show, as Kretz explained, that no matter how hard a person tries to differentiate from others, "you still get tainted."

"It's like wearing psychoanalysis," Kretz said of her clothing in general, and certainly her *Individuation Dress* comes awfully close to embodying a therapeutic experience. Seen as a whole, however, her garments eloquently speak the languages of fashion, art, and psychology to communicate a range of emotions and psychic states with great clarity and directness. Clothing comes out of the closet as a very malleable and articulate form of expression in this artist's hands.

*J. G. Ballard, "Project for a Glossary of the Twentieth Century," in Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (eds.), *Incorporations* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 275. Cited in *Skin Tight: The Sensibility of the Flesh* (exhibition catalogue), published by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2004.

A selection of Kate Kretz's paintings, clothing and objects will be featured this summer in an exhibition called Grace and Shame at the Frost Art Museum, Florida International University, June 3-July 31, 2005.

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KATE KRETZ *Physical Memory/Last Goodbye Dress* Found silk dress, discharged and overdyed, size 10, 2002.

KATE KRETZ *Physical Memory/Last Goodbye Dress* Back.