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— arts & leisure —

Images of The Socialized Female at the 621

Sun, Mar. 5

With the skill of a Caravaggio and the mindset of a Gloria Steinem, Kate Kretz paints disturbing images of the emotional life of women in an exhibit on view at the 621 Gallery.

Review by Verna Safran

This show displays work from two of her series: The "Beauty Wrest" series depicts women sleeping in cars; the "Vigil" series, which usually contains the image of a candle, is about loss on many levels, inspired by her loss of religious faith and of the ideals she formed as a fanatic moviegoer; also the death of her mentor, Charles Eldred.

Bordering on the surreal, many of the paintings are done against the backdrop of night, and have a dreamlike quality. She prefers to consider her work part of the "magic realism" genre.

Light plays an important part in her work, since vivid contrasts in light and dark attract our attention and also represent insight and revelation.

She sketches from live models, trying to get models with pre-Raphaelite features, since that's a school of painting she admires. "The art establishment thinks my paintings are bad," she says, "because of my obsessive realism and attention to detail." But she says that what she is trying to do is seduce the viewer with a lush, psychoerotic image. "People stand in front of a picture and say 'Oh, how pretty,' and then the longer they remain with it, the more they get a sense that something strange is going on, until they begin to feel slightly ill at ease."

Her paintings are literally on two levels: She underpaints with acrylic, then paints over that with oils and glaze. And underneath the beautiful women in dreamland, she says "I strive to paint the unresolved tension between tacit self-delusion and the anxiety which festers beneath the surface."

We asked her what the automobile metaphor means to her. "It's about the power relationship between men and women," she answered. "A car takes us to newer, more exciting places. There's a sense of freedom about it. On the other hand, it's also claustrophobic, and the seat belts are a form of bondage." She has seen many a woman who is

perfectly capable of driving hand the keys over to a man when they are together and become the passive passenger. Sleep, to her, represents consciousness, or lack of it.

She likes to quote the critic David Hickey, who said, "Beauty can be a weapon; you jsut have to know how to aim it."

Originally from upstate New York, Kate spent a year at the Sorbonne in Paris and also studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. She currently she teaches at FIU in Miami.

Her most recent painting is called *Burrows*. It shows a woman forcing her own mouth open. Inside is a landscape. She tells me that the landscape is down the street from where she lived as a child., and the piece is about "the resistance we have to giving up the past, which is literally stuck inside of us."

Another recent work is the "Book of Disillusionment," a book made of painted paper and acetate, which contains text and also replicas of flies. She says it's about living in Miami, and the disregard people have for each other.

Also part of this feminist-oriented show are sculptures/installations by Cariana Rambuski, who is working on her MFA at UNC in Chapel Hill. She is working with images of incest and of "the socialization of women," using mixed media with found objects. I personally feel that too much explication is necessary to enjoy her work and that it fails to stand enough on its own. But if you immediately associate armchairs, hope chests, sewing machines, glass vases and wineglasses and plots of earth with women's plight, then you may get a great deal out of her sculptural replications.

The show runs through March 26, 2000 at the 621 in Railroad Square. Gallery hours are Wednesday through Friday 11-2; Saturday & Sunday, noon-4. Closed Monday & Tuesday. In conjunction with the exhibit, Refuge House has informational materials on display, since the images in the show might provoke memories of abuse, and both artists and the gallery want you to know where to go -- be you man, woman or child -- to get your life back on track if abuse happens.

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