

Kate Kretz

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Dressed in lustrous red, a young woman dozes curled up in the front seat of a car traveling beneath a blue night sky. Her figure is illuminated by the lights of oncoming traffic as she, dreaming, is transported across the dark countryside. *Taking Me Away From All This* is one of seven narrative night scenes in this intriguing exhibit.

Kretz describes the essence of loneliness in vivid visual memories using oil and acrylic on canvas, linen, paper and masonite. The artist has a viewpoint that is at the same time familiar and detached—intimate because of the open expression of vulnerability in the women, distanced because of the artist's photorealistic treatment of every compositional element. Each eyebrow, every tendril of hair is carefully sculpted; the light is bright, the fabrics patterned and opulent.

These painted female figures appear as objects in a series of still lifes, ironic counterpoints to the narrative titles of the work. Kretz has chosen words charged with *double entendres*—saying so much that goes unsaid in relationships, in love, in sexual encounters. Almost life-size, the women share very personal recent experiences. There is a strong sense of immediate past tense in each scene. The viewer connects words with visual contexts to reconstruct these narratives.

While motionless, the women's bodies make distinctly gestural marks. Allusions to social conditioning, the figures are lying on their sides, stretched out, curled up or on their backs; not one takes a defensive or assertive stance. While there is no sense of victimization, there is also no feeling of hope. Instead, these women are viewed in stages of awakening to a bittersweet reality. From sleeping oblivion to open-eyed consciousness, they are forced to embrace their seclusion.

Ten Ways to Win Him Without Losing Yourself, p. 93 could be an illustrated page from a primer on love. With her rolled-up denim jacket as a pillow, a young girl sleeps on an empty seat in a car lit by the orange aura of a street light. Kretz captured her slim figure unaware. The girl's story reads as one of naiveté and potential compromise.

3:15 is equally poignant. Here the reclining figure faces the viewer. Lying naked and alone in the darkness beneath white bedclothes, she fixes her brown-eyed gaze on a memory. The illuminated digital clock reads 3:25. In contrast to the younger dreamer in *Ten Ways*, this woman has a fuller body, stronger arms and shoulders.

Seeming hardened, she confronts the emptiness of her bed. Her reflective mood is mirrored in the regard of a woman whose

story is told in *Arranging Her Feet That Way, No One Could See the Hole in Her Shoe*. Confined in a ragged room on a bed with surprisingly silken sheets, our heroine lies fully dressed on her back in the glow of a deep orange sweater. She resists reality, contemplating the ceiling without heed to the roach creeping across her flowing skirt.

In a car stopped next to a gas pump, another young girl sleeps pillowed by a rolled up jean jacket, knees drawn tightly to her chest, on a burnt orange seat. The work is untitled in this exhibit—the artist's words are suppressed because of their direct sexual reference. Censoring a pivotal element in the composition has its own symbolic impact, further emphasizing the alienation and pessimism described by the painter.

Many of the emotions represented within these paintings are associative. We experience the subject through objects that surround her as they are transformed metaphorically. Solitary women are pictured in cars or in small rooms that offer limited, impersonal space; the scenes are claustrophobic. The cars' interiors are molded smooth and cool. In *3:15* darkness presses physically against the reclining figure, while the shabby room in *Arranging* offers its own oppression. What softens the images of these women is the fabric that surrounds them. Folded, draped, stretched, ripped and wrinkled fabrics in rich colors and textures depict both the mutability and resilience of the female spirit. No matter how it is manipulated or distressed, fabric by its nature provides shelter, comfort, support, and protection.

In almost painful detail Kretz recounts the confessionals of these postmodern women. Unspeaking, they acknowledge their longing and disappointment. Unmoving, they express an infinite ache for a presence which is clearly absent. The artist tells us that the contemporary female must accept her aloneness and meet instead the absolute necessity of self-reliance.

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