

ART

Kate Kretz: Freudian Slips

This artist wears her psyche on her sleeve — and her coat, her purse, her dresses ...

BY JANICE T. PAINE
Ambience contributor

Most women think they speak the language of clothing fluently, but visual artist Kate Kretz takes it to a whole new level. She has created a body of work that she calls "psychological clothing" — wearable art that communicates near-universal emotions and psychological states.

"It's like wearing psychoanalysis," Kretz, 41, said of her artfully embellished clothing, which usually starts with a thrift-store find that she decides to transform. Her *piece de resistance* in this regard is the "Defense Mechanism Coat," a behemoth of a garment, made from 150 pounds of roofing nails pushed through a woolen coat from the inside. It took Kretz and a hired assistant three months to insert the nails by hand, one at a time.

You could imagine a beefy contractor showing up for a meeting with irate clients in this piece of body armor. Or a woman shouldering the bristling pelt for a night on the town in singles bars. Neurotic and funny at the same time, the coat might also be just right for a quick trip to the shrink.

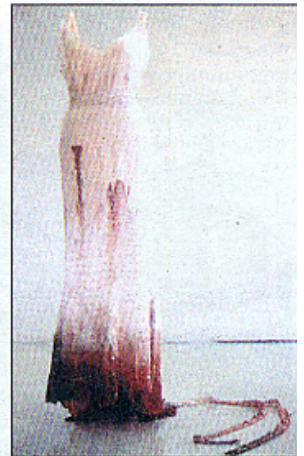
Kretz, of Hollywood, confided that she's never actually donned the thing, mostly because of its sheer heft. On occasion, though, she'll slip into one of her dresses for an exhibition opening or some other art event.

But, she said, as she conceived the idea for the coat, "I was thinking, how would you portray a defense mechanism? And I wanted to make the inside look so tender that it could bleed."

So she hand-embroidered the lining, made of flesh-colored velvet, with a tracery of veins and arteries. The pattern accurately reproduces



"Defense Mechanism Coat" bears 150 pounds of roofing nails pushed through a woolen coat from the inside, which is lined with soft velvet with the impressions of human veins and arteries.



Kretz's "Individuation Dress" is covered with embroidery declaring independence, but its sash of "Love" and "Guilt" say that the emancipation isn't really complete.



Kate Kretz wears one of her creations, this one called "Fertilization Dress," easily understood by anyone who has taken high school biology. *Courtesy of the artist (3)*

Kretz

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the major blood vessels in the human body, an oddly clinical touch. Still, this soft, vulnerable interior makes a striking contrast with the coat's fortified exterior.

An associate professor of art at Florida International University in Miami, Kretz came to the Sunshine State in 1995, not long after she completed a master's degree in fine arts at the University of Georgia. At the time, she primarily thought of herself as a painter, and she still paints and draws constantly, when she's not obsessively stitching away on a garment.

Her early canvases were nocturnal landscapes. Gradually, she turned to figurative scenes, often of women seen at night, dreaming, hiding, or somehow turned in upon themselves, wrapped in slumber or reverie. Others provide glimpses of women and men caught in the midst of lurid emotional crises, presented like scenes from a movie in progress. (Kretz dubs herself a "Technicolor Romantic.")

A selection of the artist's work in various media will be featured this summer at Florida International's Frost Museum of Art. Called "Grace and Shame," the

show will include paintings, psychological garments and other three-dimensional objects, such as hand-embroidered pillowcases. Working with single strands of her own hair, Kretz has fashioned tiny, dreamlike images on these once-utilitarian bed linens.

Increasingly, however, Kretz has found herself drawn to clothing and its accouterments as carriers of meaning. It all started about five years ago, when she purchased a home in Hollywood, a slowly gentrifying seaside enclave north of Miami.

As Kretz made pillows, recovered vintage furniture and generally fluffed up her new nest, she realized that she was attracted to the soft drape and sensuous feel of fabric. She began to teach herself to sew and embroider from how-to manuals, and scoured second-hand stores for dresses that she might transform into storytelling devices.

"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 that 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 is usually used for covering

If you go...

'Grace and Shame'

When: June 3 to July 31

Where: The Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum (PC 110) Florida International University, University Park Campus, 11200 S.W. 8th St., Miami

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, with hours until 9 p.m. on Thursdays; noon-4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

Admission: No charge

Phone: (305) 348-2890

Driving directions: Take the Florida Turnpike south to the Tamiami Trail exit (S.W. 8th Street). Take the S.W. 8th Street east exit; follow S.W. 8th Street, FIU will appear on the right before S.W. 107th Street. Park in Blue Parking Garage and walk to museum.

'Skin Tight: The Sensibility of the Flesh'

When: April 17 to July 31

Where: Naples Museum of Art, 5833 Pelican Bay Blvd.

Hours: through May 1 — 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays; May 2 - July 31—10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays; noon-4 p.m. Sundays

Admission: \$8, \$4 for students

Phone: 597-1111

things up – and use it to reveal psychological states rather than camouflaging them."

Since that time, the dresses have poured out of her imagination's closet. Kretz has created a lovely, lyrical "Summer Night Sky Dress," a blue velvet sheath beaded with faux-pearl constellations of stars. Its companion, the "Summer Night Breeze Dress," is

practically transparent. Light and leafy, it conveys the whisper of evening wind through the trees.

Heavier issues also emerged, some raw and urgent. Kretz's "Fertilization Dress" expresses the all-too-common anxiety over a ticking biological clock by showing embroidered sperm with fake pearl heads heading for the wearer's womb – and on up to her heart, which is appliquéd on the bodice of the dress.

The artist's "Physical Memory/Last Goodbye Dress" carries the impress of a man's body, seemingly seared onto its eggplant-colored silk. It memorializes a parting that actually occurred, when Kretz embraced a former lover and realized that it was probably the last time she would hold him.

Perhaps most poignantly, Kretz's dresses treat topics pulled straight from the analyst's couch, like family enmeshment and conflicted relationships. Her "Individuation Dress" is a long, cream-colored formal dress that looks as if it has seen better days. The artist covered it with strips of machine embroidery that say, over and over, "I am not them." Once in a while, the lines also insist, "I am not him."

Even the sash carries a rueful refrain, alternating the words "Love" and

"Guilt." At the hem, the garment is stained with a tea-colored dye to show, as Kretz explained, that no matter how hard a person tries to separate from his or her family of origin, "you still get tainted."

The blurred boundaries between art and fashion that Kate Kretz's work embodies are also explored in an exhibition coming later this month to the Naples Museum of Art. Called "Skin Tight: The Sensibility of the Flesh," this show displays garments, photographs, videos and installations created by 10 cutting-edge, internationally known clothing designers.

Opening on April 17, the exhibit is sure to be an eye-opener. Viewers will gasp at the audacious clothing concepts presented in some cases, and in others perhaps mutter that fashion designers have grown a wee bit self-indulgent.

Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, "Skin Tight" charts the radical deconstruction of fashion by figures such as Martin Margiela, known for clothing that exposes its own "bones," and its reconstruction in ways that express social tensions rather than conventional notions of beauty.

It's a context in which Kate Kretz would feel right at home.