

# Woman uninterrupted

Kate Kretz has rid her life of distraction to focus on her cynical paintings of women in distress.

by Candice Russell

Her television set is covered with beads. A stool in the kitchen is decouped with Wonder Woman stickers. Everywhere you look in Kate Kretz's lovely Hollywood home is something she has made, from lacy wire baskets to a chest of drawers painted with a nude couple. This desire to imprint the space as truly her own goes far beyond the painting that has made her a South Florida luminary.

There's brash humor in "Some Penises I Have Known," a wood sculpture she made of different-sized male members. Ingenuity radiates from the stained-glass lamp she crafted from blue bottles. Kretz adorned a large terra-cotta pot on her front porch with 1,800 cats'-eye marbles, put angel wings on her stereo speakers and sewed tiny pearls on a dark-blue velvet pillow to resemble a starry night sky.

"I always feel I can do anything," she says. "When I moved to Miami, I had two candlesticks. Slowly, I've been making



ideals wove a seemingly impenetrable fabric of faith in magic, romance, justice and universal goodness."

Kretz, an intellectual and feminist who teaches art at Florida International University, sees the lie in what she once believed, though the roots of these beliefs remain with her. Her cynicism is summed up in a poem she calls "Text for *The Book of Disillusionment*." It's about the sins of people, from the greedy and selfish to the vain and lazy.

The funny thing is, Kretz herself doesn't come across as bitter. Her paintings of women cast adrift into a psychic isolation seem to imply a strong dislike of men. The titles underscore this impression: "How to Act, Not React, When He Makes You Crazy," "I Let Him but I Didn't Really Like It" and "Ten Ways to Win Him Without Losing Yourself."

"I definitely don't hate men," Kretz says with a smile.

Women, however, are another story. Kretz is disappointed with her female friends from college: "All the women said they would be totally dedicated to their art. Then, one by one, they got pregnant before graduation. Others would say, 'I'm going where Daryl gets a job.' There's a vast discrepancy between what they said they wanted and what they carried out."

Interpretation is something Kretz leaves to the viewer, but she's hoping to evoke an emotional response. "I create a painting that is seductive, presenting a woman in a very stereotypical way, trying to get people to feel comfortable then slightly uneasy."

"To me, paintings are more like real life," she continues. "A pose or a setting can begin to show power relationships in a

glance. A painting competes with TV and movies and all these crazy moving things. Yet what it might show is the complexity of women."

The painting "Kim" has been seen as a statement about domestic violence, though Kretz had other ideas. "Originally, it was about finding a space where you can have some quiet, a place for conversation," she says.

Often, her work is set during the night, a partial outgrowth of Kretz's lifelong insomnia. "No one in the family slept much," she says. "I was always afraid I'd miss something. My theory is that night is the time when people are most real. A lot of late-night conversations are much more revealing than over coffee at 10 a.m."

"The lack of light becomes an integral part of the content," she explains. "There's almost a kind of toxic-green light outside the cars. And inside the cars with women as passengers, there's a warm light, a certain security."

This soft-spoken, long-haired brunette

has the kind of innocent look associated with the heroines of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals *Carousel* and *Oklahoma*. Though hardly on the verge of ecstatically breaking into song, Kretz projects an inner confidence. She is content alone in her home creating myriad things, writing, assembling art quotes like Gauguin's "I shut my eyes in order to see," reading, painting and communing with her two cats, Gem and Scout (characters from a movie she loves, *To Kill a Mockingbird*). For fun outside the front door, Kretz plays pool at a neighborhood bar and is learning to fly an airplane.

To learn about the values that shaped her, look no further than the painting "Fate of a Technicolor Romantic." It pictures a blue-curtained living room littered with books, toys, games and videos. The TV is on in the empty room, as if someone left to go to the bathroom or get a snack.

A labor of love, the painting has occupied Kretz for nearly a year. It was the only thing she worked on last summer at an

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objects. It's important for me to create a magical environment."

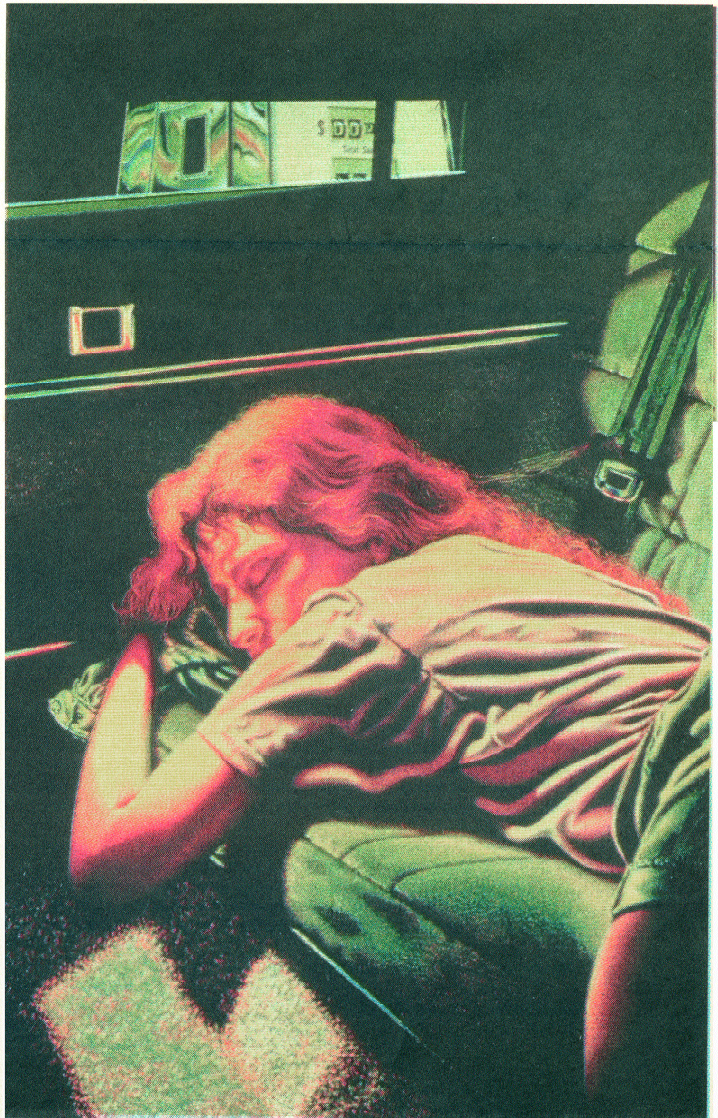
Superior talent landed Kretz a coveted \$15,000 individual artist's grant last year from the South Florida Cultural Consortium. Her unusual and disturbing portraits of women alone in bed or cuddled up in cars suggest their emotional and physical disconnection from the world around them. These paintings, which use light in a remarkable way, speak of anxiety, loneliness and yearning.

To get a picture of the artist, visit Kretz's studio next to her kitchen. On the wall is a 6-foot-high by 8-foot-wide self-portrait called "Fate of a Technicolor Romantic," though the artist isn't visible in it. This is also the title of Kretz's solo exhibition opening Thursday at the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood, where it will continue through June 25. At 7 p.m. Friday, Kretz will lead a walk-through of the exhibition, which features 30 works.

The Pennsylvania-born artist, 37, spent her childhood in upstate New York and was educated at the Sorbonne in Paris, Binghamton University in New York and the University of Georgia. Her father is a French and Latin teacher. "I was raised on a regimen of Catholicism and Technicolor movies," Kretz writes in her artist's statement. "As their common lurid and resplendent light was impressed upon my visual memory, the internal



**Nocturnal transmissions:** Kate Kretz's work is often set at night, when, she says, "people are most real." (right) "Extinguish," oil on canvas, 38" x 32"; (far right) "How Not to Be a Victim of Your Own Expectations," oil on canvas, 73" x 56".



artists' colony in upstate New York. "It began with the idea of things that formed values in my life that were made fun of," Kretz says, "movies, even some of the books, like Richard Bach's *The Bridge Across Forever*. There's a portrait of my grandfather I did in high school over the TV set. All these things are of great value in a chaotic environment. And they will get more chaotic still when I add water stains to the ceiling.

"It's a painting about shame and disillusionment," Kretz continues. "But the TV is on, showing the gazebo scene from *The Sound of Music*. It's really about the war of light with a dim 40-watt light bulb. There are lots of video covers. The angle is tilted — some people get seasick looking at it."

There's also a portrait of Jesus on the wall. "I'm no longer a practicing Catholic, but I hold on to the form and see things as sacred," Kretz confirms. "I always introduce myself as a recovering Catholic so religious objects can't be pure kitsch for me. When I go to shops on Calle Ocho, I see 3-D religious holograms and I'm attracted to their more formal qualities, like their use of light and rich color. They helped to form my visual vocabulary."

She sees the large painting as a sort of turning point in her art. "This is a strong transitional painting for me and the only one I ever kept," says Kretz, mindful that she can't escape the past. "Now, I read *The New York Times* and the right magazines. I've talked to other female professionals about this. No matter how far you go, your origins are always with you."

For the past four years, Kretz has taught drawing, painting, color theory and visual thinking at FIU. "I think teaching helps me in the studio," she says. "I really connect with the students."

"Picasso Didn't Do Dishes: Prioritizing Art in Your Life" is a seminar Kretz conceived to get down to the basics. It concerns making space and creating time for what's important. "For me, it was invaluable [as a student] to go to professors' houses to see how they live," she says. "It's also important to feed yourself through films, reading and talking about art. The times that are most difficult for me are when I'm involved in something other than painting. If I lose touch with being in the studio for a week or two ... " Her voice trails off. "I think things go by the wayside. A concentrated effort is needed. I haven't watched TV in eight or nine years, but I watch movies all the time."

The thought that Kretz puts into each painting is considerable. "They take a really long time," she says. "I use many layers of 20 different transparent glazes. Smaller paintings take two months and longer ones up to nine months."

An artist in the most self-sufficient sense, Kretz revels in the unplanned part of the artistic process. "I'm a great believer in following up on the serendipitous things that have happened to me. I did two separate drawings of birds after my cats brought me a bird as a gift. Another time, I found four photographs at an estate sale and incorporated them in my painting. I find what I need and things come to me."

How does she keep the channels of creativity open? Partly, it's a matter of avoiding certain things, like shopping malls. "I'm very active in my sketchbook and journal," Kretz says. "When I have a dream, I write it down. I really think. I listen to music all the time, like Tori



(clockwise from top) "How to Act, Not React, When He Makes You Crazy," oil, 36" x 62"; "Miami Landscape ... Conscience," acrylic and oil, 52" x 40"; and "Jesus Nightlight," oil, 60" x 38".

Amos, Kate Bush and Ani DiFranco. If you surround yourself with enough noise and activity, you don't see where you are."

Finishing "Fate of a Technicolor Romantic" is a major accomplishment for Kretz, who's excited about the unknown direction in which she's heading. "I think something really different will happen after this," she says. "I always have so many ideas. I want to do a self-portrait with glowing ovaries and a subversive children's book."

Fate of a Technicolor Romantic opens Thursday at the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood, 1650 Harrison St. Call 954/921-3274.