Welcome to Episode 99: Kathryn Hart:

I am just thrilled to celebrate the contemporary artist Kathryn Hart. In this episode you will experience her works, sculptures, room sized installations and photography. And you will experience her works in a very collaborative manner. Meaning you, the viewer or spectator, view the works from multiple angles, you have to walk around them to see all the sides and layers that allows a space for you to insert your own experiences; a very interactive looking experience that expands beyond the work's physicality, it is possible in part because Hart uses "shadow, reflection, light, dimension, gesture, line and space," in response to the unique architecture of her spatial installation environments. The boundaries of her constructions or sculptures, Hart believes, are like membranes, permeable by light, air, space and emotion. You, my friends, will become truly immersed. Through my personal exploration of Hart, the collaborative visual experience in my engagement with her works, I found my curiosity heightened to learn about its maker, the woman behind the work. This meaningful access to her is possible because engulfed in her process, in the tangibility of her works Hart speaks to universal, human themes. She says, "All my work is about life, death and hope."

Hart articulates on a very deep level the autobiographical roots embedded in her works, the internal primal emotions that propel her. Hart says, "What drives my work are internal primal emotions and my hope is that by exploring universal emotions everyone feels, my works become very accessible to the viewer because everyone deals with tragedy, love, loneliness, joy, despair; we all heal with those emotions." The works are also laden with feminist voices, women writers and thinkers from the Middle Ages that inspire her, poetic voices she looks to for her work, they echo through her hands, as Hart forms a pathway for those voices to amplify. Her installations, both large and intimate, as writer Kristine Schomaker eloquently describes, are "physically palpable."

Let's look at a one of my favorite sculptures/installation "Ariosta;" Ariosto is the surname of the 16th century Italian poet (thank you Kathryn for emailing me this wonderful description. "He created the magical being "hippogriff" which is a cross between a predator and prey; a horse (hyppo) and a griffin (the predator). It represented impossible or improbable love. "Ariosta" (I changed it to a female ending because the creature is female) explores this tension between the simultaneous experience of love and vulnerability, in the face of inevitable loss. This struck a tone with me regarding my husband, his cancer, the treatments and our relationship. Love requires a giving of the entire self in vulnerability"

In the multi-media large scale work created onsite in Hart's studio during the pandemic; she employs found wire, barbed wire, pheasant wings, glass ampoules, alpac fur, monofilament and other mixed media, like horse hair. Her approach to assembling and constructing the diverse mixed media is in part intuitive. Hart notes that she feels when the "work becomes an entity. I can tell when it starts to breathe on its own; it's not just a set of objects. I am interacting with it and that's when I feel like it's got life."

 From my looking perspective through photographs from multiple views, what I notice first are the long strands of silvery, silky white horse hair, it glean in the light. The horse hairs appear to be tied or fastened in a loop--the loop extends or braced by an articulated mass of twisting wires. Hart notes that the space, the ambient air makes the horse hair move and the shadows the hair casts is also part of the work.

Hart brings her personal notions of barns that are rooted from her upbringing on a Texas farm. Found objects like horse hair reference an aspect of her youth. She says, "Horse hair reminds me of the barn to which I would escape during childhood weekends to avoid household dynamics. It was my refuge from my sanitized upbringing in the suburbs, to be surrounded by these beings that require honesty." She describes the horse hair as "tactilely seductive, a veil, a symbol of strength. Horse hair is comforting, musical, is used in string instrument bows, but also flight of freedom. Hair survives long after flesh." Hair also reveals a truth about Hart's chronic autoimmune disease that caused the artist to lose her own hair. I want to take a moment here to share in more detail of Hart's physical challenges that will offer you a deeper insight into her artistic practice. My source is from Hart's own writings.

When she was 27, "a strange insidious illness invaded my body. It took several years to diagnose the rare autoimmune disease that taken hold. My body was eating itself from the inside out. There was little treatment and no cure and I wasn't supposed to live for more than a few years." Her hair fell out, her muscles atrophied, joints swelled, skin eroded and thankfully she is still here with us, making art, a "unicorn who is the subject of white papers in medical journals." She also experienced dreadful violence, in her 20s, by a "stalker who successfully broke into my home. I was held hostage, tortured, raped, and left for dead." These struggles, horrific and undeserved, "brought a focus to my mortality. I realized deep feelings and emotions are the crux of living, at the core is "hope," a constant and necessary friend, credits Hart. As a woman, I understood how my agency changed when my attractiveness waned with the disease and when my sense of self was shattered by the assault. Disillusionment and resentment have led to an ingrained feminism and reliance on my own power and self-determination."

Taking that narrative Hart courageously and openly shares into the piece, we can see associations behind the elements. In the installation "Ariosta " the barbed wire, is described by Hart as " multivalent, but this aggressive, frontier found barbed wire reminds me of my scars on my body, railroad tracks from prior surgeries belying events and a past." Glass ampoules once encased medicine for my husband who has cancer. It speaks to the improbable compatibility of the body and the toxic medicine intended to kill cancer..**hope** served up in vials.

 Found objects like the horse hair are not simply repurposed. She honors the objects she incorporates in her sculptures; she honors the past that they had. There is a palpable reverence woven into her works that for me creates a sense of awe. Yet I would not describe "Ariosta" as beautiful in that standard way most think of beauty. Hart declares, "The power of voice and truth overrides prettiness. I reveal the underbelly, not veil it." What we see in this non-representational work are layers and surfaces rich with archeology that reflect as they do in all her works the complexities of human existence. I think that is where the beauty resides, where it pools together. Hart says, "In essence all of my work is about life, death and hope and the hope needed to get from point A to point B through life. So there is not a narrative of what physically may have happened or any reference to any physical object." And this makes our engagement with works like "Ariosta " so personal and accessible to the depth of emotions we each hold.

Hart has a deep awareness of the viewer's perspective, especially the ways they connect with her non-representational works. Hart says "A viewer is going to react to an emotion, but first you have to be drawn in and be willing to be with the piece long enough to see how it makes you feel." Looking at her large, intricate works is kind of, and I am using Hart's words "this Gestalt of looking at the piece all at one time which is what I would like because that is how we process things; we're not linear in our emotions. We could feel a 1,000 different emotions at once but because the work is also intricate and detailed it invites more microscopic dissection of it which to me is a lot of how we look at life and how we live is that we have just these competing emotions and situations that come at us and we have to deal with them all at the same time, all at once."

The act of making or Hart's practice, for me is fascinating because it imbues multiple aspects of her personal history including her identity as a "plastic surgeon's daughter. "My scientific family and career in organ transplantation and wound care research," says Hart, "fostered a fascination with the unseen intricacies underneath the skin. Suturing and slicing come naturally after frequently observing surgeries. I like digging into things--lots of webbing, surgical knots." Surgical knots as synapses within chaotic webs of connection." Her exposure to her father's surgical hand directly influenced the materials she chooses--they are very "tactile." "Lots of wires and webbing are in my work and it is not webbing like a spider; they are surgical knots, the physical line work is my handwriting; those are my gestures and their connections from one thing to another or connections through time and space; there is an intricacy to it. It is almost like making lace and that you can't see the whole until it is done."

In my preparation for this episode, I describe my time as a sojourn into the visual and the cerebral. I think is very true as we explore her work "New Dawn," another site-specific installation at the 2019 Venice Biennale. In the solo exhibition of sculpture and photography, Hart contemplates the organic processes of generation, regeneration, degradation and finally documentation." Using wire and fiberglass, Hart's sculptures incorporate the tension between becoming and eroding, renewal and entropy, growth and decay." The non-representational pieces reflect Hart's methods of using found materials. In the installation the three-dimensional pieces, are beautifully described by the writer Emma Stolarski, " an embryonic presence." There is a figurative aspect.

Let's walk through the space of the third floor of the 16th century Palazzo Mora in Venice. On the walls are photographs, deer remains, their bones, another materials Hart likes to use and dig into, indicate "structure of life--it is the only thing about animals and humans that survive." Bones are a reference back to life and the deer bones found near her home reveal transformation after long term exposure to the natural elements. They become translucent to light and full of graceful energy. "The images document and ultimately replace the bones, originally the last phase of an animal's existence, with a black and white image that records this loss. Their temporary display during the Venice exhibition suggests the "hopeful possibility of rebirth in a new, unanticipated form."

Like "Ariosta ," I viewed this work through photographs; what is striking for me is the source of light, she includes in the work; the play of light and shadows they cast on the photographs, the images of those worn bones and the interplay of light and shadow on the sculpture, one specifically is placed on a kind of pedestal painted white; its materials, wire and fiberglass are twisted and stretched. The bright light source forms striking shadows on the white walls; the cast shadows of line and shape appear to creep along the sculpture's curved surfaces. The lines of wires and shadows both enhance and contrast the arcs of the Palazzo's walls and ceilings. Each sculpture "sways towards either becoming or eroding." The sculptures "are figurative turned inside-out; the external body is eliminated; instead the focus is in the interior; As Hart describes, "sculptures simultaneously become and erode. There is the glistening of newness and the molt of decay. Membranes are dense and fragile, permeable to light, air, space, energy." "New Dawn" is a voyeuristic glimpse into the interior." Symbols of decay alter into pictures of rebirth. Hart records the natural cycle and unique moments in time that takes us way beyond the aesthetic gaze.

Working with universal themes, Hart "allows all people in." Because she is a female, the works are from a female point of view. Though she does not consider her art "Feminist art." Hart explains, "My feminism has been influenced by my Dallas roots, my plastic surgeon father, my illness, my assault, my husband’s cancer, and my advocacy for others and awareness of those whose voices are not sufficiently loud enough to be heard. I repel the arbitrary constraints placed upon my opportunities because I am female." As a woman Hart "pushes against boundaries yet manages to operate within them to fulfill her dreams, her desires." We own our own voices."

So so powerful--Did you notice how often I quoted Hart? She is so articulate and her words are so vivid and deliciously fall from my tongue. And the power behind her words--her work "strives towards truth."

And now my conversation with Kathryn Hart.

Thank you for listening; Resources for this episode include Kathryn Hart website, her evocative essay, "Psychic Heritage of Powerful Women," writers Emily Stolarski, Kristine Shomaker, and Art Daily magazine I encourage you to go to Kathryn's website and explore her work. To virtually walk around in and out of the spaces of her installations. As you enter into the space of her sculptures, what surfaces within you? Thank you!

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