

Diane Root Interview with Kathryn Hart
for Gallery&Studio Magazine, Spring 2015 Issue

1. Am I correct in believing that Unapologetic Presence was the title of a recent show as well as the catalogue. If so, when and where did it take place? Was it your latest show? If not, please give details of your most recent show if relevant.

Unapologetic Presence is the name of my current series (and thus the name of the catalogue even though the catalogue shows a subset of the entire series). I have shown these pieces in numerous group exhibitions (3-5 pieces in a show), but have yet to have my own solo show of just this series. That would take a very big space because most of the works are quite large (up to 8 feet wide). It's coming ☺

My most recent exhibitions were at New Century Artists (NY, NY) in January 2015. In October 2014, I was quite busy with exhibitions (museum and gallery) in Madrid (Ateneo de Madrid), Paris (Galerie Etienne de Causans) and New York City (New Century Artists). I am most pleased to have been invited to the Ateneo de Madrid (Museo) for the 2nd consecutive year. I was a Featured Artist in October ("Memories") with New Century Artists (Chelsea). The Paris gallery is on the rue de Seine in the prestigious 6th arr., the heart of the gallery section on the Left Bank. All really COOL! My exhibitions are typically in NYC and Europe. I am exhibiting in a 4 artist show for the month of June 2015 at and have been invited to a residency and gallery exhibition in Warsaw in the Fall.

I suspect that the title alludes to something specific. Could you please enlighten me with the background and/or genesis for the name?

Each of my series is relevant and pertinent to my life at the time of creation. My life informs my art, so each piece is a real time reflection of my life, current struggles and emotional states. Series and individual pieces are spawned by events, or a sequence of events and their resulting emotional aftermath...the ripples of the wave. Creating is my way of struggling through psychological issues. I agree with Louise Bourgeois...it's psychotherapy. My difference from her on this issue is that I am dealing with the present, not the past.

Unapologetic Presence is the current life phase I am in. The series presents the search for an unswayable feminine identity amidst the white noise of society, family and personal experience. I am (finally) unapologetic about who I am. My search requires blocking out the external voices in my head to dig into my true identity. When the static is stripped away, what remains at the core? It's basically a, "I am Here, Now" quest.

2. In your bio, you state "As a market researcher for major medical companies, my job was to uncover the unseen need, find the niche not-yet-discovered, and focus on the gap, not what actually existed." Isn't that, in fact, what your art is all about? There seems to be a link here. If so, tell me about it.

Yes, there is a link. The thinking, the search for hidden/subconscious desires, focusing on space not object...that is similar. I conducted new product development research for Johnson and Johnson surgical products. Although it was a corporate environment, this work required much right brain thinking to relate disparate pieces of information and present an analysis with a clear, strong message. In this regard, there is a thread of continuity with my art...the focus on ideas, but the big difference is that my ideas surrounding my art are rooted in an emotional response to the circumstances of my life.

3. Otherwise said, did the requirements of your market researcher job for medical companies eventually translate into another language, namely your art? Did the thinking involved in your "medical" life morph into the thought behind the artistic life? If so, how?

I wouldn't say that the "medical life" morphed into the artistic life. Perhaps the market research role helped inform my art, but I had the type of brain that focused on ideas and creative concepts (rather than practicalities, like an engineer) from early on. What does carry over into the art life is being a communicator of abstract ideas/emotions.

I was an artsy kid, but given that my entire family was in the medical field in some way or another, going to art school was not an option. I had to be prepared for a REAL job. I am intrigued by other cultures, so I obtained a BA in International Relations from Boston University (studied in London and interned on Capitol Hill) and took as many art classes as I could cram into 4 years. Then, after a few years of dead end work, I went to graduate school

for an MBA and used that in get into the business side of the medical field. In a way, I fell back on what was familiar...medicine. I am fascinated by medicine and its endless possibilities. It is a vast arena to explore. But it was not enough. It never would be. I had to create because the need sprung from an internal well. And I could say so much more in a piece of artwork than on a piece of paper. I wanted to present a reality that was experienced all at one. Visual art is like that...it hits you all at once. No one tells you where to start looking and which path to follow and where the finish line is. A great piece of art captures the viewer and does not let go. Words are linear. Even spelling is linear. We read one letter after another, one sentence after another, one page after another. It requires logic and understanding. I think art is an experience. It is not necessary to understand it.

4. Some of the titles of your work are often very interesting, but hardly obvious--poetic, literary, sometimes humorous, or often opaque. Talk to me about how and why you name your work the way you do.

Titles are important and an integral part of each piece. Each title relates directly and is a summation of the emotional narrative of the piece. Sometimes, the piece begins with the title or a literary phrase. Titles keep me on track with the feeling tone of the piece. Other times, I know the emotional complexities I want to express and the title comes to me during the creation process. Titles are part of a piece's personality. They do not change; it would be like altering your child's name.

I have done some creative writing and at one time, thought I was going to be a writer, but I found that I could communicate so much more with visual images (see answer to #3). But I still like to play with words to find that succinct phrase that is poetic, that captures the essence of the piece and is ripe with many meanings.

5. Who/what are your main sources of influence and inspiration?

I've probably answered this in #1, but my art is autobiographical. Fortunately, or unfortunately, there have been many issues to work through. I say, no one ever goes to therapy because they are too happy or too much in

love. I work out my current life by creating. The focus on primal emotions makes my work universal...accessible to everyone because its genesis is an emotional response. I am inspired by real life and challenged to present an unvarnished truth (also see #10).

The beginning of this type of raw, direct work began with my mother's Alzheimer's and subsequent death. It was so painful to witness this brilliant microbiologist's brain and personality fade away. The only way I could deal with it was to work out my emotions in the creation process. I discovered what it was to work in real time from current emotions...completely pulling the creation from depths of my gut. Many of them ripped my heart out. It was the most honest work I had done up to that point. And now that I knew what that was, to work from a place of raw, unvarnished honesty, not giving a darn what anyone else thought, I have never worked from any other place again. BTW: I want to be clear, the work is not about my mother.

6. If you could be another artist(s), who would you be?

This work has come from who I am and not wishing I was someone else. Perhaps I'd choose a younger version of me who knew what I know now but was coming out of a great MFA program.

7. What and/or who provide(s) you with the impetus that makes you pick up your brushes or whatever else, and pushes you to create?

I need to create like I need to breathe. It is my dominant voice for expression and revealing who I am to the world, and to myself. So creating is intertwined with self-discovery and self-expression. I am most definitely pushed from within. I get crabby if I am away from the studio for a couple of days. I heard a quote that I completely agree with: "Art is a jealous lover." So, so true.

Also, I am self-motivated and self-directed. I jog 5 miles every morning. Being creative day to day requires more work than most people realize, self-motivation and lots of patience to handle the failures when I've gone too far out on a limb. Creativity (a noun) comes in the process of creating (a verb).

8. If you had to describe a “context” for yourself, what would that be?

If I have to choose a context for my work, a previous article from Gallery&Studio stated I was like “a more abstract Frances Bacon.” I’ve had other people say something similar. I’d agree based upon the unsettling emotional outpouring of his work. Louise Bourgeois – unfailingly honest in her work; she always did what she wanted and didn’t care what anyone thought. This tiny little French lady created powerful works about her life. She laid it open for all to see.

I resonate with artists whose work has physicality, power and poetry.

9. Do you feel that you have a special affiliation with a specific “school” of art? If so, which one?

No, I don’t feel affiliated with any school of art even though I admire many artists. My work is not really like anyone else’s.

10. How would you describe your own work?

I create physical embodiments of complexities of emotions. Each piece is a gestalt of emotional input which becomes a living, breathing entity. This is why my work has such a strong sculptural/3D component. I cannot create physical beings with the illusion of depth; it must be literal depth and volume.

I reveal the underbelly of life, the aspects of ourselves we want hidden, even if we do admit to them privately. My work provides a glimpse into my psychic underwear drawer...the secrets I won’t tell, the thoughts and emotions I won’t say out loud. And the inevitability of rising from the ashes of our own internal conflicts. My father was a plastic surgeon, one whose focus was solely on external beauty. I show the strength in revealing our human fragility, not veiling it.

These humanoid-like beings are sutured and stitched, sometimes suspended in their own amniotic fluid of sewn threads and wires. The knots in these spider webs are actual suture knots. When assisting my father in his surgical suite, I

learned how to tie suture knots that would heal and that would hide. Some slip; some stay put.

I use rough, raw, earthy materials because it suits what I am searching for in the series...an unadulterated and unvarnished truth about myself. Form follows content. Burlap is hardy and withstands twisting, pulling, tearing apart. I can form beings, breathing entities that are solid, yet full of air or that look airy, but are rock hard. There is a tension created from this dichotomy of airy and rough, light and durable, the commonplace becoming unique.

Also, I love the smell of them. They smell of the earth.

The found materials I use – old barbed wire/wire, rusted hinges and other hardware, bones – are glorified in their original meaning. I do not give these materials a rebirth but I honor and respect their initial intention.

My work is aggressive and unexpectedly quirky, yet “oddly elegant” (to quote Ed McCormack in a previous article). Pregnant, empty space--ripe with expectations, hope and longing--often plays a key role. These open frames (as in *Empty Fable*, *Veiled Attempt*, *Dialogue with a MadWoman*, and others) allude to the emotions around leaving (or being left) and staying. Exits and entrances. Emotions are different depending upon which side of the open door you are.

My work is informed by my gender, but not constrained by it. Many initially think my work is created by a man. Stereotypes still exist which purport that women don't create this sort of raw and powerful work. I feel my work is feminine for those very reasons. Women are tenacious, powerful, strong, determined and sensitive. These traits are not confined to either gender.

11. How would you describe yourself (besides being unapologetic)?

Uhh...focused, intense, inner-directed, tenacious, authentic, sensitive, kind, (AND unapologetic).

12. When did you chuck your job and strike out as an artist? I have the impression that the year (give me a date) you took that first drawing class,

you did an immediate U-turn and never looked back. Am I right? That takes considerable courage. Tell me about it. How old were you then?

Ha! You're asking me to age myself. OK, I'll do that ;) I quit my corporate job of a decade because climbing one more zombie ladder seemed shallow and pointless. Everyone thought I was crazy. I moved to Colorado and started my own business, consulting with organ and tissue transplant organizations. And I was drowning in work. Not a bad thing, right? What every new business owner wants. Except that I was working my ass off, miserable, and chained to my desk and my computer. I had traded the corporate boss for the client boss. AND...I was not satisfied. I had gotten what I wanted...I thought. In attempts to clear my head for 1 night a week, I took a drawing class the summer of 2001; I had just turned 40 (a seminal year). I struggled, but it was like a drop of water on parched lips. And I craved for more. I knew at once that inside me was a visual artist. I just didn't know what form it would take. I didn't immediately quit my day job; still had bills to pay while I was at the brand-new-beginner stage 😊 But I knew where I was headed and it was in 5th gear.

13. With whom did you study once you embarked on your "art education" and where did you study?

I am mostly self-taught. I went to every Life Drawing class I could find. I had a leg up already due to my knowledge of anatomy but I needed practice in making my hand do what my brain was telling it to. Through the process of learning to paint, first in transparent watercolor, then in oil and acrylic, I taught myself about colors and their various properties. I took some workshops here and there. The artist who challenged me start making MY art, was Skip Lawrence. I began studying with him around 2006. He challenged me to find myself in my work and to work from feeling, not perceiving. Katherine Chang Liu has also been an influential mentor.

14. From the artwork I saw, many of which are monochromatic, your palette is basically composed of three colors: ebony, ivory and blood red. Why is that? Do those colors have significant meaning for you? If so, what is it?

Life happens in the grays. They offer depth, mystery, poetry. Black comes from life...crushed soot, charcoal, burned bone. Black is sexy and

feminine (think black lacey lingerie). And you are correct, the color I use is blood red, not “red.” Blood...the source of and necessity for life. So many meanings, physical and emotional. It is the source of pain and pleasure (a bleeding heart, an engorged vagina, bleeding out and the bloody birth of a child). Red is just as powerful as black and white/ivory. I modulate the white to varying degrees...so it is bone colored instead of virginal white.

More color would be a distraction, a decoration, and would manipulate the viewer by the emotional baggage associated with different colors. It does not suit my intent of raw honesty. Also, color would trump the texture and flatten the sculptural aspects of a piece.

15. Is there an underlying message in your paintings? If so, what is it?

See below...it is the same answer.

16. What would you want to have your viewers come away with after seeing your work? What would you have them *see/feel*?

I'd like the viewer to have an emotional experience of any kind. The work is created for me, but when it is shared with others, I am letting them into the depths of my being. I don't try to make the viewer see or feel anything. I just put the work out there so it is experienced. At best, I'd like for viewers to walk away with an intimate glimpse into themselves.

17. You use really “raw” materials to build the haut relief in many of your paintings: jute, burlap and hemp. This apparently harks back to an equestrian childhood. However, as an artist, it might be more than that. Talk to me about your choice of those materials and why.

Answered in # 8...see paragraphs 4 &5.

18. The late George Canatta, an abstract expressionist, a teacher at the Art Students League in NYC, and a friend of mine once told me, 'In an artist's hands, childhood is never very far away.' Your thoughts?

Hmmm...In the context that an artist can tap into the imaginative freedom of a child, I agree with that. While all of my work is inevitably influenced by my childhood and every year after that, my work is not about my childhood. This statement resonates, but not in an obvious way. I'm still considering this one. Perhaps I should put on a Freudian lens 😊

BTW, I looked up his work and think it's great!

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Favorite writers, artists, composers, musicians, sculptors

Bernini, Brancusi, Giacometti, Calder, Naguchi, duChamp, Bourgeois, Miro, Joan Mitchell, W. deKooning, Bontecou, Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Louise Nevelson, Rothko

I'm a huge Robert Plant fan (from Led Zeppelin to his solo career up to current day), Pink Floyd, Janis Joplin, Etta James, Don Henley, Edith Piaf, Beethoven.

Steinbeck (Grapes of Wrath is the most haunting book I've ever read), Follett (his historical fiction), Pat Conroy for his beautiful use of language and his intimate portrayal of the dysfunctional persona and family. I laughed and cried at the same time; Emily Dickinson