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Inside the Artist Studio: Kathryn Cornelius

May 14, 2010 by [Svetlana](#)

all photos: Shauna Alexander

Intrigued by the way artists make do in a city notorious for its lack of building stock that is both suitable and affordable, we've decided to go on a mission to investigate and document the work spaces of the city's creative class.



Kathryn Cornelius has been handling trash and having herself dunked into buckets of milk for ten years now, all around DC. While the show [she opens tonight \(!\) at the Curator's office](#) ("The feeling of what happens") focuses on her video work, she initially cut her teeth in performance art and is known around town as a fantastically articulate, thoughtful young artist. When we stopped by her studio (in the basement of her house in Columbia heights, which is spacious if not very tall) we wanted to know how it all began.

Fact: Kathryn Cornelius never even took art classes in high school.

Coming to art was a round about process for Kathryn. She grew up with an art teacher Mother in upstate New York and due to the disagreements between her parent and her intended art school teacher in high school, she never ended up even taking a single art class while there. Which was ok by her because, she notes, the way art is taught in the early stages in one's life tends to be very programmatic and stifling ("You have to draw everything PERFECTLY!"). Things need to be a certain way or they are not accepted, and this is not something she was ever interested in.

Fact: Discovering performance art and theory changed everything.

While Kathryn was at Ithaca College working towards her degree in English and minoring in Biology, she went on a semester abroad to London and took this amazing art class where the artists came, spoke to them and then the whole class would retreat downstairs to drink wine and just talk about what they just saw/experienced. Obviously, to a 19 year old American girl, this was a fantastic time and it inspired Kathryn to get an Art History minor “as soon as she could”. Jelena Stojanovic, one of her Art History teachers encouraged them to apply theory to actual art practice and pretty soon Kathryn was participating in class projects that had them creating manuals for the ways visitors could experience art in the gallery and she felt “VERY ENERGIZED by it, because this was NOT my Mother’s art”



Fact: You never know what will happen next.

Kathryn arrived to the District on an internship and in hopes of getting her Master’s degree in English and becoming a Victorian scholar but ended up dabbling in technology (she still keeps a day job in it) and ended up doing her MA in Communication, Culture & Technology at Georgetown which allowed her to further explore how she can apply her love of art theory through different mediums and make a practice of it. Seeing Marina Abramovic’s performances in early 2000s made her realize just how much of an impact one can have on people, plus she felt performance art as a field was so open at the time because no one knew quite how to define it and you were allowed to be a little more experimental and.... “here I am now” (she laughs).

Fact: People do stay in DC for 10 years without wanting to run away.

“Being here for a decade makes you start feeling a little bit as a grandmother”-she smiles-“Because the city is so transient, you sort of cycle out of people (who leave or go on to do different things) and places. A couple of years ago that first core group of young artists I initially was friends with and went everywhere went away and new people came to “replace” them. You miss certain things and places, Signal 66, G Fine Art being right next to Curator’s Office so those 1515 14th street art openings being so much more of a bigger art event than they are now, but there is a lot of really great new spaces to see art at in DC now, I really love the Fridge and the energy they have and the variety of things they’re willing to do in that space, you feel anything is possible, Hamiltonian seems to be doing a really interesting job with their programs, Kathryn has been doing great things with Flashpoint....the city feels good and vibrant, I guess I just don’t go out as much anymore.

Fact: Performance artists have representation too.

Exploring the relationship between the artist and the gallery and how they find each other has been an important aspect of all of our “Year in Art” pieces and for not necessarily sellable art, we think it is even more interesting to know what happens.

It turns out that if you put yourself into a bikini and dare people to dunk you into a pool of milk you will attract some attention. In early 2000s, Kathryn was just writing proposals for every art program/exhibit/show she thought she could get herself in (“Because that is what you do, you just apply to everything”) and ended up being accepted into Artscape which Andrea Pollan was independently curating at the time. This involved Kathryn sitting in a bikini above a pool of milk and daring people to dunk her, playing up both the exploitation aspect of a wet female body in a swim suit as well as the fact that the milk started turning progressively more and more rank due to heat of the day, resulting in something both appealing and repulsive.

Then Andrea opened her own Gallery (Curator’s Office) and invited Kathryn to be one of the artists and they’ve been together through performance pieces and videos (something Kathryn is focusing on more now) ever since.



Fact: Sometimes it is hard to explain EXACTLY what it is you do

A lot of Kathryn's initial work was very site specific and did involve audience engagement and she NEVER did a performance piece inside a traditional gallery space. Video may seem like a natural way to express certain ideas in a smaller, confined space but Kathryn does not feel that she turned to it as a result of now "being with a gallery". It is just another way of making people react to something, and anything you're working on can go through different stages of expression: "Sometimes people say "I don't even know what you're doing" but it does take, maybe, to start working out an idea in, say, sculpture form, before you can take it to video or to the street, it just allows you to look at something from different angles"



So, what is this new show about?

"The Feeling of What Happens" is actually 3 different video series, all of which find Kathryn looking to connect with the audience and elicit reactions from them through both narrative strategies, performance interpretation and technical methods (editing as choreography, different soundtrack use...). Each series is intended to be interactive in its own way. In "How we learn to love" volume 1 and 2, she attempts to walk the thin line between the two extremes of human emotion: love and hate. Second series "Or, Death Speaks to Us" finds her looking at what she thinks may happen to certain people she personally knows right before they die. This series, while also really personal ("Just putting yourself in a position to consider this about people you know, what they would be experiencing before their death feels really invasive"), is an exploration in screenwriting, with the images being presented to the user with a series of tools to create a story within it (Kathryn uses traditional screenwriting Courier font and all the narratives are to be created before your very eyes, at typewriting speed making you truly process letter by letter, image by image, what is going on in front of you) and hopefully, everyone has a different experience through it. The third series "Home Again, Home Again" explores the thin line between comedy and tragedy in movie trailer, starring her actual family and with the dialog consisting entirely of popular movie quotes. Kathryn wanted to present

people with a known format and movie quotes people already use in every day life, creating a shared recognition, and still hopefully elicit genuine emotional responses from the readers.



We turn around and see stacks of books, maps, props from different performance pieces ("This is where I keep all my crap" she laughs) and talk a little bit about how it is impossible to describe a typical day at the studio, because one just works all the time. You never know where the next idea is coming from and when you will HAVE TO work on it. Thankfully, with her work space being right below her living space, Kathryn Cornelius can work on anything always ("I know I should be finishing up some of the stuff for the show now"-she says (we met her last weekend, 5 days before the opening)-"But I am so excited about some of my new projects that I cannot stop thinking about them too"

Well, we, for one, certainly look forward to see what happens next, whether it is more performance art or a longer movie ("Although my sister, who actually trained as an actress will tell you that I am very bad at directing other people, I am curious to see what could be done") or something completely different, we are sure it will be worth our collective time.





Learn about Kathryn Cornelius [here](#) and make sure to check out “The feeling of what happens” which opens [tonight @ Curator's Office](#)