

# KATIE PELL

*TINY ACTS OF IMMEASURABLE BENEFIT*



## WOMEN & THEIR WORK

AUGUST 7 - SEPTEMBER 13, 2008

AUSTIN, TEXAS

KATIE PELL

*The Big Bad Realism of Katie Pell*

The art of Katie Pell is big in presence – in its physical and intellectual provocation. It is bad in the sense memorialized by Michael Jackson in 1987 with his pop-rock tune “Bad.” To be “bad,” the way Jackson once was, is to be a wise though wily trend maker and shifter. Pell is just that: an artist who participates in collective cultural trends while being critically conscious of them, that is, while poking fun at them. Just as Jackson once sang “Because I’m bad, I’m bad, come on, really, really bad” to our collective delight, Pell’s work resounds with the naughtiness and play of a woman at work, individuating and ever evolving into the new millennium, challenging us all. The charms and charm bracelet in Pell’s *Charm and Weight* are a gargantuan homage to their original version: a charm bracelet from Pell’s father with tiny charms that he had collected on business trips to cities around the world. Its charms, like the stupa of *Spinning Stupa for America and People Who Love America*, carry a badass statement on the trends of capitalism, yesterday’s empire and today’s globalization.

In countenancing the realism of Pell’s work, we enter the more complex space of artistic influence and inheritance. Realism in the arts is without a doubt a many-splendored thing. To experience Pell’s greater body of work – the works in *Tiny Acts of Immeasurable Benefit*, the *Bitchen* project, her figural drawings and paintings, and highly plastic sculpture – is to forge a connection to a panoply of realisms past and present. Though incisive like the savagely realistic bodies of Lucien Freud and Jenny Saville, the figures in her cartoonish drawings and perceptive paintings are often closer in appearance and tenor to Wayne Thiebaud’s cute and colorful pop iconography of cupcakes and ice cream cones. Her sculpture bears a strain of magical realism found also in work by certain contemporary German painters, such as Andrea

Lehmann and Neo Rauch. Then there’s the Super-Realism of famed and canonical figures such as George Segal and Duane Hanson. Pell takes the life-like wax-figure realism of Segal and Hanson and channels it through a lens of tough femininity. Her objects offer a force of the Super-Real recontextualized according to 21<sup>st</sup> century circumstances.

Though these realisms bear an important if not palpable effect on Pell’s work, there is yet one other realism, the one perhaps most catalytic of them all, 19th-century realism in painting, that reverberates through her work. In this instance, the groundswell of influence is felt not so much in literal representation, say in the way Pell’s work might *look*, but in the way that her work functions like a painting by Millet, Courbet, or Meissonier. As that work did in revolutionary fashion some 150 years ago, Pell’s work lives up vibrantly to its contemporaneity. Pell’s work is of its time – it critically reflects the mores of our moment. The art historian Linda Nochlin wrote brilliantly of 19th century realism in 1971, explaining its central cause – *Il faut être de son temps*, or

“One must be of one’s times” – according to three precepts. First, to be of one’s time as the realists of the 19th century were, one may simply “express the ideals, achievements, and aspirations of one’s own times.”<sup>71</sup> Second, and in more political and critical-minded fashion, one might confront a “serious and unidealized embodiment of the concrete experiences, events, customs and appearances characteristic of one’s own epoch.”<sup>72</sup> Third, being of one’s own time implies equally being in advance of it. It means to be avant-garde. Pell is a realist. She makes work of her time in all senses of the word and phrase.

Pell negotiates the realism in her work with both honesty and irony. She owns up to her own participation within and perpetuation of certain marketplace and cultural trends while upending them in revealing their faults. In *Charm and Weight*, twenty giant links cascade from floor to ceiling. An array of objects – the Hindu elephant-god Ganesha, a sailboat, a bare foot, a swallow, a breast milagro, and a hand of Fatima – all dangle from the chain. In her own words, Pell described this disparate array of objects as her “version of international cultural assemblage.”<sup>74</sup> Pell confronts the act of “cultural appropriation” in these charms, framing it as a means of international tourism and authentic curiosity. At the same time, she folds the literalism of these objects back into themselves, doubling their meaning. They are at once a confession of her own life practices – reminiscences of her year backpacking, ear piercings, foreign silver jewelry, and new age belief structures – and emblems of her inheritance of capitalist imperialism, as the charms are a throw back to the charm bracelet her father gave her when she was young. As such, the charm bracelet is equally a recognition of Pell’s “father’s economic imperialism (his own father ran a copper mine in Rhodesia in the ‘30’s).”<sup>75</sup>

In *Spinning Stupa for America and People Who Love America*, a work Pell also jokingly



Installation view, *Tiny Acts of Immeasurable Benefit with Spinning Stupa for America and People Who Love America*. Photograph by Shaune Kolber.



*Beautiful Butterfly, Meant to be Adored*, 2008. Fabric, paint, wood, you or me, 10' x 8'.

refers to as the “patriotic stupa,” Pell has brought together opposites: Zen Buddhism and American jingoism. Round with a square base, a stupa is a Zen Buddhist reliquary. The stupa evolved from its original material of clay during the time of the Buddha (3rd century BCE) into a variety of materials, from elaborately carved stone to carefully filigreed stucco. In the Far East the Buddhist stupa became the pagoda. All forms of the stupa share the same function: they are sacred spaces paying homage to the Buddha, or a Buddhist saint, through the representation of earth, water, fire, air and space. In painting the stupa red, white and blue, Pell reduces the original representation from five to three elements while also shooting the elements through the bombast of American patriotism. Like a roulette wheel, Pell’s stupa spins around, as the flag on top clack-clacks with the fervor of a Fox News reporter. A scroll with the American Pledge of Allegiance is hidden inside. Pell says that she “gently chides a smug spiritualism and tourist worldview that claims sophistication while merely dabbling,” and that, perhaps more forthrightly, “the patriotic stupa gives us a way to integrate the convenience of certain Tibetan and Nepalese Buddhist practices with our own brand of on-the-go

American pride.”<sup>6</sup> This explanation is indeed to the point; however, at the same time, because of its powerful iconography (East collides with West, Zen Buddhism meets American jingoism), the “Stupa” opens itself up to an array of signification. The stupa represents an impossible form of Zen Buddhism, namely fast-food Zen Buddhism. Viewers might be compelled to ask a series of questions that shoot beyond Pell’s intentions. How can urban Americans ever reach a state of Zen enlightenment when they work two or more jobs and have the lowest number of vacation days of all industrialized nations? How can a country at war ever be truly Zenful? How can jingoism, and the McCarthy-era zeal with which Americans have recently been wielding it, be remotely related to the practices of Zen Buddhism? These are profound questions. They are also the weighty stakes of Pell’s big bad realism.

Pell’s version of realism has taken different forms. In an earlier project titled *Bitchen*, Pell wrote and illustrated a narrative of the ironies of DIY culture – examining the quasi-individualism of custom-building a cabinet and employment at All Mart, Pell’s only slightly veiled version of Wal-Mart. Pell included souped-up appliances, stoves

that popped, exhaled and walked, vacuum cleaners painted in fantastic colors, and pimped-out toasters, in an exhibition recounting women at work within the deep space of big-box retail capitalism.

Though Pell makes uneasy reality’s simple boundaries – the delimitation of the true from the false and where real becomes unreal – it is clear that Pell has an acute sense of reality in all of its minutiae, and the effects it has on our life, no matter how manmade that reality might be.

Charissa N. Terranova, P.H.D.

<sup>1</sup> Nochlin, Linda, *Realism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971) 105.

<sup>2</sup> Nochlin, 105.

<sup>3</sup> Nochlin, 106.

<sup>4</sup> Discussion with Pell, August 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Pell, Katie, *Artist’s Statement*, July 2008, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Pell, p.2.



## KATIE PELL

Born in Rhode Island. Lives and works in San Antonio, TX.

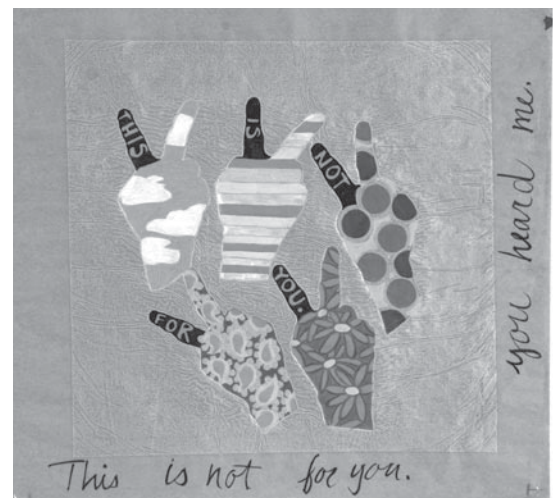
### EDUCATION

- 1987 BFA, Painting, Rhode Island School of Design  
1990 Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA  
Studied with James Watkins  
1998 Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, CO  
Studied Painting with Ed Paschke

### EXPERIENCE

- 2008 Adjunct Faculty, University of Texas, San Antonio, 3D Design  
Visiting Artist, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas for  
*Feminist Art History*, Professor Kate Green  
Painting *All the Birds Will Come to You* acquired by the  
San Antonio Museum of Art  
Created Texas Public Radio Annual Artwork  
Speaker, *Artists on Art* Guest Artist Series, McNay Art Museum,  
San Antonio, TX
- 2007 Visiting Artist and Lecturer, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX  
Art teacher, Circle School, San Antonio, TX  
Workshop Instructor, *The Innovative Pastel* and *Drawing Intensive for  
Non Drawers*, Southwest School of Art and Craft, San Antonio, TX  
Created Ceramic Murals for Public Benches with artist James Hendricks,  
San Antonio, TX
- 2006 Artpace Resident, 06.03 in San Antonio, curated by Tom Eccles of The  
Public Art Fund of New York  
Performer *American Schlock*, NADA Art Fair, Altoids, Miami, FL  
Writer for Fluent Collaborative, based in Austin, TX  
Art Instructor, Circle School, San Antonio, TX
- 1999-2006 Designed and implemented a ceramic line which was created in artist's  
studio in San Antonio, ceramic line shown at national wholesale shows,  
craft fairs and galleries throughout the United States. Highlights: articles  
in several newspapers, radio and television appearances, festival awards,  
and inclusion in the Craft Texas Show at Houston Craft Center.
- 2005 Workshop Instructor, *Experimental Pastel*, Southwest School of Art  
and Craft, San Antonio, TX,
- 2004 Featured on HGTV's Crafters Coast to Coast
- 2003 Workshop Instructor at Southwestern University in Georgetown, TX  
American Craft Council Show in Baltimore, MD
- 2002 Presenter at Texas Teachers Association Conference, San Antonio, TX  
Presenter at CODA (Craft Organization Director's Association),  
San Antonio, TX  
Organized the First Annual Automatic Downtown Studio Tour, a  
self-guided city-wide artist tour held in conjunction with Contemporary  
Art Month (the fifth tour took place July 8, 2006)  
Created two adult comic books, *Mick*, and *Mom*, currently in the  
process of self-publication.  
Taught Experimental Drawing at the Southwest School of Art and Craft  
Became Regional Director of the Texas Clay Arts Association  
Curated *San Antonio Furniture* at the Market Square Art Space,  
San Antonio, TX
- 2000 Member of the Southtown Urban Mainstreet Alliance Board of Directors,  
San Antonio, TX  
Member and Juror of the King William Fair Committee, San Antonio, TX
- 1998 Received Pamela Joseph Scholarship to study painting with Ed Paschke at  
the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, CO

- 1998-9 Art Instructor, Carver Cultural Center, San Antonio, TX  
Art Instructor, *ArtsTeach* Department of Art and Cultural Affairs,  
City of San Antonio  
Educational Guide, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX  
Received teaching grant from San Antonio Junior League to teach at Bexar  
County Juvenile Detention, San Antonio, TX
- 1997 Ceramic Workshop Instructor, Center College, Danville, KY  
Art Instructor, Southwest Craft Center, San Antonio, TX  
Art Instructor, Carver Cultural Center, San Antonio, TX  
Art Instructor, Department of Arts and Cultural Affairs, San Antonio, TX  
Art Instructor, San Antonio Academy Summer Program, San Antonio, TX
- 1995-6 Art Instructor, Carver Cultural Center, San Antonio, TX  
Scenic Painter, Bradley and Bradley, San Antonio, TX  
Art Workshop Instructor, Bexar County Juvenile Detention, San Antonio, TX  
Received SpArts Grant for Victoria Courts Youth Art Project,  
San Antonio, TX
- 1995 Awarded Red Brick Schoolhouse Studio by the Aspen Council of the Arts,  
Aspen, CO
- 1994 Drawing Workshop Instructor, Aspen Institute International Design  
Conference, Aspen, CO  
Private Lessons in Drawing and Portraiture, Snowmass Village, CO  
Roaring Fork School District Art Outreach Program, CO
- 1993-4 Artist in Residence Anderson Ranch Art Center, Snowmass Village, CO  
Art Handler, Habatat Galleries, Aspen, CO  
Hot Glass Casting Assist, Maroon Creek Glass, Aspen, CO  
Illustrator, *Aspen Magazine* and *The Travellers' Guide*, Aspen, CO
- 1992-3 Artist in Residence, Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA  
Fabricator for Liz Marx and Therman Statom, Los Angeles, CA  
Art Handler, William Traver Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 1990-3 Artist Assistant and Fabricator, Ginny Ruffner, Seattle, WA
- 1991 Nominated for the Corning Award, Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA  
Received Merit Scholarship to study glass fusing with James Watkins,  
Pilchuck, WA



*This is not for you*, 2008. Serigraph, reclaimed  
paper, pencil, ink, collage. 25" x 25".  
Photograph by Shaune Kolber.



Above: *Charm and Weight*, 2008. Various woods and paint, 19' x 33'.  
Cover Panel: Installation view, *Tiny Acts of Immeasurable Benefit*, 2008.  
Both photographs by Shaune Kolber.



Installation View, *Wall of Prints Made with You in Mind*, 2008. Serigraph, reclaimed paper, pencil, ink, collage. 25" x 25" each.  
 Photograph by Shaune Kolber.

## Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 30th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,798 artists in 254 visual art exhibitions, 109 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 20 literary readings, and 366 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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