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KATHLEEN WHITE

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Kathleen White moved to Boston in 1979 to begin training at the Massachusetts College of Art, where she met fellow students Jack Pierson and Stephen Tashjian. Towards the end of her studies she began to work as a supervisor at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, where she came into contact with Nan Goldin and Shellburne Thurber. From that moment on and throughout the eighties she would be a constant presence in their photographic works.

White produced her first artistic projects in her family milieu, for her father was an environmental sculptor and Land Art practitioner, but her interest in painting stemmed from the rigorous and formalist programme at the school, and would soon become the key feature of her subsequent work. While her early pieces arose out of the materials available in her father's studio, when she moved to New York in the late eighties pigments, canvases and other such necessities were no longer on hand and she began to experiment in new fields.

Her own hair would be one of the new materials she turned to at this time, producing a number of characteristic works. Friends of hers who were performers and drag queens supplied further material of the sort—their old wigs, the worse for wear after years of use in their performances. In this way, the artificial hair worn by New York's transvestite community progressively ended up in her studio. The wigs are a metonymic reference to the importance of a given life option in which decoration of the body becomes a utopian possibility of manipulation over and above biological determinism. Together with nails, hair is what remains incorrupt in a dead body: in these works, metaphorically speaking, it is a representational substance, a residue that captures the semantics of a specific community in the grip of the AIDS epidemic. In fact, these pieces are simultaneously the artist's own memory, at a time when she was devoted to helping those affected by the disease, both financially and personally.

She made her first installations with wigs in her Chelsea studio, followed by two solo exhibitions in New York and San Francisco. These sculptural works, full of small knots, joints and openings, belong to an unconventional form of portraiture dedicated to tracing the ties in a community rapidly disappearing on account of the devastation caused by the infection. The suitcase, which contains the materials that once spread out in space compose the final installation, hints at the possibilities open in the work, proving the possibility of creating an emotional bond that remains as a memory and that, in turn, contains the potential of its revival. Later on, Kathleen White would continue to produce paintings and sculptures.

Recently, together with her partner Rafael Sánchez (who was a friend of Mark Morrisroe's in the latter's later years), she has been working on projects of public art such as *Somewhat Portable Dolmen* and *Table Project*, dialogical pieces which reflect on the possibilities of citizen involvement and the circulation of constructed knowledge as shared resources.

Manuel Segade
curator,

Familiar Feelings, On The Boston Group

Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain

24 Sept. - 13 Dec., 2009



Kathleen White, *Spirits of Manhattan*, Apex Art, NYC. 1996



Kathleen White, *Wig Suitcase*, CGAC, Santiago, Spain 2009

Spirit Drawings

Throughout the 1990's Kathleen created ephemeral sculptures utilizing human hair and wigs. The exact beginning of these pieces is difficult to pinpoint, however their overall import came from her close connection to the downtown Manhattan performance world of the late 1980's and early 1990's.

She titled this activity *Spirits of Manhattan*, in which the hair forms were delicately suspended in space in installations throughout the 1990's (New York, Boston, San Francisco). Friends from the drag and performance scene contributed their hair and wigs to the seemingly ongoing project.

The activity represented a double bind: at once a symbiotic affirmation performance of life and creative celebration while death consumed that very community as it was being decimated by AIDS.

Kathleen cared for sick and dying friends, as many in the community did at the time. Still her studio practice continued in full bloom producing a cross-pollination of mediums. Intimate drawings evolved combining pencil, pigment, burns, watercolor and hair on phone book pages with moody self portraits, portraits of friends (hair ancestors) and strangers, eyes and other mysterious beings.

She referred to the drawings as "spirits."

Rafael Sánchez, NYC, April. 2016
The Estate of Kathleen White



Kathleen with spirit drawing of Jojo America
(1990's, exact date unknown)
photo R. Sánchez, 2006

Kathleen White



Hair Ancestors, watercolor and pencil on paper
(1990's exact date unknown)



Nan Goldin, *Kathleen at Her Studio*, c. 1996



Kathleen White
3 Spirit Drawings, 1990's
hair, watercolor, pencil on Manhattan phonebook pages

(with works by Jennie Jieun Lee)

Martos Gallery
540 West 29th St,
through June 30,

