Inside out

Kathleen Ann Pheney

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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INSIDE OUT

A Thesis
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Louisiana State University and
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Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
In
The School of Art

by
Kathleen Ann Pheney
B.A., Saint Mary’s College, 1991
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I dedicate this work to my husband Joey and my son Max who love me for who I am. They are more precious to me than words can describe.
Acknowledgements

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Abstract

Because I process my external world internally, I often think of my mind as a vessel-housing my internal reality: fears, demons, curiosities, joys, sorrows, etc. My body of work is comprised of paintings and drawings that present surreal interpretations of these occupants as depicted through line, color, gesture and form and, as such, are true self-portraits in that they bring the “inside out.”
Chapter 1

The Point of View

Because I process my external world internally, I often think of my mind as a vessel—housing my internal reality: fears, demons, curiosities, joys, sorrows, etc. The paintings and drawings in my show are surreal interpretations of these occupants as depicted through line, color, gesture and form and, as such, are true self-portraits in that they bring the “inside out.”

In my life and in my work, I start with the precept: there is no such thing as a “shared experience.” I believe only I feel the things I feel in the way that I feel them and possess a singular experience of the true, absolute reality of those feelings. In short, my world is the only one I can genuinely know. Those around me exist as inhabitants of my world just as I exist as an inhabitant of theirs. For me, there is no one, shared world; rather, a single world exists for each person defining their reality--what only they can know with absolute certainty. This belief leads me to feel as if I am a solitary creature in my world as all are alone in theirs. Other people are physically in my world; but, they are defined by my perception of them, which can never be complete as I am not and cannot be that person. I can only understand, experience and truly know one existence: my own. People closest to me share information—giving me the tools to develop a more acute perception of their entirety, their reality. The more I know about them, from them and through them, the closer I can perceive who they really are, but I will never know them completely.

My truest world exists within my internal self. I filter everything internally and my internal voice guides me through daily external situations. Everything I experience (directly or indirectly) is separate and distinct, knowable only to me. In the most literal sense, I share nothing with anyone. As the sole arbiter of my existence, everything I have ever experienced informs and
determines how I feel and respond to events as they occur. For example, if I am standing next to someone on a rainy day and a car drives through a puddle and “splashes” us, we will both get “wet.” However, based on previous, individual experiences that day (or our experiences with water or our fear of being humiliated or the infinite variables that separate us); even the sensation of water exists separately in our two worlds based on what that event represents in the present. In other words, we are unable to share this experience—making life, for me, feel lonely and frightening a good deal of the time. I honestly do not know what water feels like to someone else; only what it feels like to me.

I never feel more alone than when I am surrounded by crowds of strangers. In this situation, I feel a heightened sense of disconnection from them because, ultimately, I observe them as “extras” merely roaming around in my world; I have no information with which to develop an accurate perception of their reality. I have no actual connection to their reality and am only aware of a connection based on common, ideological concepts of the human condition; in other words, we share ideas not experiences of them.

Due to this emotional and psychological divide, I believe language (verbal and visual) exists as a common denominator for relating to, and sharing in, the human condition. A general accepted definition of the word pain is physical or emotional distress or discomfort. I can never know what the sensation of pain means to another person. I can only relate it to my concept of pain. Language is what binds people together. We cannot actually share experiences, but we can agree on ideas of things, how we collectively define a thing. The human condition is an umbrella concept bound together by a collection of ideas. As human beings, we are capable of experiencing pain, joy, love, disappointment, humiliation and so on. I may be alone in my experience of an emotion, but I can at least know someone else has felt similarly. This general
understanding of what pain is allows me to empathize with those who are in pain. I know the reality of my pain and the degrees of my experiences with it. Based on these degrees of experience, I can gauge what others are going through. Based on what they tell me, what I see in their face, what the facts are, I can compare it to something I have experienced and gauge whether it is close to or beyond that which I have myself experienced. And while I remain “alone” in my world, empathy allows me a bridge of understanding for how life might feel to others.
Chapter 2

The Work

I am inherently intimidated by a blank canvas. Therefore, my initial approach involves rapidly placing as many lines and shapes onto the canvas as possible. I start with graphite or charcoal strokes, making random, unchecked stream-of-conscious marks and, using an eraser and paper towel, instinctively remove certain areas and lines. Once the surface is covered, I step back and wait for specific images to emerge; often turning the canvas around as an aid to discover elements I recognize or which contain a fragment of familiarity. They are not images I am consciously aware of having seen before; rather, they are the visual manifestation of my thoughts, fears and ongoing sense of isolation accompanied by random feelings of joy, calmness and freedom. Simply put, the images represent my interior reality.

I explore abstract shapes and lines that seem to make sense, appear familiar, and feel almost reassuring while at the same time are often jarring. My works present a tension between cotton candy colors that draw the viewer into what at first appear to be child-like images, but at closer view bear a darker edge. There is a rhythmic balance to the relationship between the images that softens the slightly disturbing element to the works as a whole. I use bright color in my work to represent an acceptance of and affection for the imagery that evolves. This body of work is greatly influenced by my five year old son. He has reminded me how to play, and how to rekindle the child remaining in me. The bold and bright colors and whimsical imagery in the paintings and drawings offer a way to present my darker themes in a slightly playful manner. I find comfort in the “disturbed,” the “off kilter,” “awkward” and “dark”. I relate to and identify most with those states. I am drawn to artists like Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti, Salvador Dali, Giorgio De Chirico and Max Ernst because of the grotesque and fascinatingly beautiful
distortion of their imagery (our common connective ideology). I relate to these artists because their work is unnerving, as is my own reality.

I apply multiple layers of glazes (especially in my paintings), allowing for a transparent memory of past glazes to be seen. The layers of glazes allow for slow, quiet moments and imagery not immediately obvious to emerge and unravel the longer the work is viewed. I play with space and depth and attempt to create a visually abstracted space, with hints of interiors that open up to distant landscapes, literally representing the theme of inside out. I sometimes allow elements from the immediate interior to travel through a window to a receding landscape or hover at the opening, representing the bridge between internal reality and the shared external ideological world.

The finished composition contains bold color and many layers or “hints” of an environment shifting from one to another, images on top of, or overlapping each other. This is representative of my constant internal processing of feelings, decisions and interactions with others. My body houses an internal reality at the mercy of experiencing multiple emotions at once. Experiences lead to mixed emotions and, because they are left to my interpretation, processed simultaneously creating an ordered chaos. Each work is a snapshot of a piece of this “chaos.” When depicted, the landscape is always presented in a traditional form. This is done intentionally to provide a resting place for the viewers in the midst of what may visually seem claustrophobic for them. Furthermore, it offers an escape, a familiar place of retreat from a world they do not normally inhabit or experience. In this context, the landscape represents the physical, external reality of our shared ideology (or definition) of things…i.e. grass, a lake, a hill, and so on.

The process of painting is one of complete discovery for me. Extrapolating images from
seemingly random marks coupled with the process of shaping them through color, space and line is a subtle dance between intuition and objective decision making. I know a piece is finished when I hear a distinct “click” in my mind—as if the final piece of a puzzle has just popped into place. I do not dissect the imagery into individual decisions: why this color needs to be here or a line has to be there. For the viewer, this information is not important. I do not consciously know what the blue figure with the three sets of eyes represents, I just know he is familiar and needs to be given a presence in the portrait. This, too, is not important for the viewer to know. So I ask myself, “What is in it for the viewer?”
Chapter 3

The Viewer

As an artist, I feel a sense of responsibility to provide an inclusive experience for the viewers and want my work to engage them as much as possible. The work depicts my fears, my demons, my laughter, my singular internal reality. However, I believe the ideological link between individual perceptions of what a thing is creates a link to visual perception as well. It is both logical and natural to seek meaning from something in response to viewing it. And in doing so, I believe the viewers cull from a vast reservoir of memories and experiences that comprise their visual associations with the images. In that way, the imagery may also strike a profound chord with each viewer. Everyone's demons are unique to them, but there is a familiarity we all share with the dark, the disturbing and the uncomfortable. Everyone experiences the duality of light and dark, good and evil, life and death both externally and internally. But it is my hope the viewers can relate to each piece through their own experience of them. Ultimately, my art provides imagery I cannot explicitly define or explain, but I believe the images are universal to the viewers who, in some way, can recognize their own reality and bring personal context to the work and their experience of it. Ideally, the viewers create their own narrative and the moment they engage with the piece, it becomes theirs --- a part of their distinct reality and only a perception of mine.
Images of the Work

Inside Out #1
charcoal on paper
24” x 32”
Inside Out #2
oil on canvas
24” x 30”
Inside Out #3
mixed media on paper
24” x 32”
Inside Out #4
charcoal on paper
24” x 32
Inside Out #5
charcoal on paper
24” x 32”
Inside Out #6
oil on canvas
36” x 48”
Inside Out #7
oil on canvas
32” x 20”
Inside Out #8
mixed media on paper
24” x 32”
Inside Out #9
oil on canvas
30” x 40”
Inside Out #10
charcoal on paper
24” x 32”
Inside Out #11
Charcoal on paper
24” x 32”
Inside Out #12
charcoal on paper
24” x 32”
Inside Out #13
mixed media on paper
24” x 32”
Inside Out #14
mixed media on paper
24” x 32”
Inside Out #15
Oil on canvas
36” x 36”
Inside Out #16
oil on canvas
24” x 30”
Inside Out #17
Oil on canvas
24” x 30”
Inside Out #18
mixed media on paper
24” x 32”
Inside Out #19
oil on canvas
12” x 12”
Inside Out #20
mixed media on paper
24” x 32”
Kathleen Pheney was born in 1969 in Livonia, Michigan. The middle child of five siblings, she grew up in a home where creativity and imagination were cherished and encouraged. She attended schools in which art and music classes were a regular part of the curriculum and at an early age recognized that art would always play a vital role in her life. Pheney earned her bachelor of Arts degree at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, with a double degree in fine arts and English literature. After graduating in 1991, she moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, for three years making art and working in commercial galleries. In 1994 she moved to Baton Rouge and for eight years served as the Executive Director of Baton Rouge Gallery. At the end of 2002, Pheney accepted a position with the State of Louisiana as the director for the Percent for Art Program, Louisiana's first state public art program. During her career with the State, she also served as the Director of State and Local Partnerships, working with 10 Regional Arts Agencies throughout the State. She has served as an arts administrator in Louisiana for 17 years, and has worked with many local, national and international artists and arts organizations. She will earn the degree of Master of Fine Arts in August of 2011.