



Portfolio: Kat O'Neill's Exploration of Life & Death Through Mixed Media Photography

July 15, 2017

by Pat Rogers

Kat O'Neill is equal parts artist, photographer and writer. Throw in an advertising background and a strong penchant for storytelling and then get ready to view her work. Keep an open mind as the images are not easy to anticipate; especially if expecting photography with [graffiti as subject](#), the art she is most known for. O'Neill's new work are a colorful coupling of near abstraction with realism along with a strong dose of implied narration. In her new work, collaged elements of photographed color, text and extracted imagery combine to nearly cloak the underlying photograph of a tombstone, hand-selected for the spark that ignited imaginative wonderings of life, death and the things that happen along the way.

The series reflects the labor-intensiveness of [Kat O'Neill's](#) process. She is continually on the visual hunt and makes photographs for both active series and to capture images for later use as collaged elements in her layered, and sometimes mixed media works. At the White Room Gallery in Bridgehampton, where O'Neill is a new co-director and partner, her latest series is unveiled and reveals a mature integration of technique and artistic vision.

In her "Tombstone" series, O'Neill uses the final marker of a person's life as a springboard for imaginative exploration of life through color, texture and implied narration. Moving stronger into abstraction, the series adopts a bit of the sculptural. The art has a three-dimensional quality coaxed through the layering of metal onto her printed photography and through an installation that creates edges and a physicality springing the work beyond a flat presentation.

The current series is an evolution, of sorts, from her ["Rock Portraits"](#) series where the images accentuate imaginary figures appearing naturally in the rock's formation, said O'Neill in a recent phone interview. A selection of these works are also on view at the White Room Gallery. The new tombstone series also integrates the strong narrative lines found in her layered photography and a series that features [vintage album covers](#) as muse, she said.

Pat Rogers of Hamptons Art Hub caught up with Kat O'Neill via email to discuss her new work, on the eve of the series being exhibited at The White Room Gallery as part of the group show "Out of Bounds." The exhibition is on view from July 15 to 31, 2017.

Pat Rogers: What is your inspiration for your art?

Kat O'Neill: In a word joy. The joy of discovery. It never fails to satisfy. I started photographing

images over twenty years ago. Writing was my first passion and the influence on my photography is evident as I am always in search of the history, meaning or journey of a subject. If I can't find the story, I create it.

PR: How did this series begin?

KO: As a writer I am fascinated with the juxtaposition of life and death. I am drawn to cemeteries and have often pulled off on the side of a highway when I noticed a makeshift memorial to those who were sadly struck down. I would take a picture so they would not be forgotten.

Years ago I came across a dilapidated cemetery in New Mexico. It appeared to be abandoned. There were no fresh flowers or notes but there was evidence of love. One small hand-made white cross had only the name "Felipe" scratched into it. Someone took the time to let all know that Felipe had been here. It did not matter when he died. Just that he had lived.

I stayed there for hours capturing the imagery and shadows that the different crosses and decaying iron monuments cast but I never produced those photographs. Years passed and I explored varied themes. This past winter, I was driving around looking for things to shoot, as I often do, and I came upon a cemetery. There was a tall monument that caught my eye from the road.

But what I discovered upon entering was how moss and decay had, in my eyes, turned several of the tombstones into art. Wanting to respect those who had gone before I decided that I would layer images to hide a name or an age. The layering, combined with the information I let show on the stone, is what evolved into the narrative.



Photograph by Kat O'Neill. Courtesy of the artist.

PR: How do these works differ from the mixed media photographer you're known for?

KO: I am known for industrial, graphic and graffiti/street images even though I have taken endless shots of the natural beauty of the East End. I wouldn't say this series is abstract because the pieces are more figurative. But, the abstract quality is in the re-interpretation.



Photograph by Kat O'Neill. Courtesy of the artist.

PR: Can you say something about your process?

KO: Once I have the photographs, I go through anywhere between 500 and 1,000 to make my final selections. I then print them out, put them on a wall and ruminate for days, waiting for them to speak to me. Once they do, I start looking for the layers to tell the story. Then I make sketches to see which will work. Once I have the final sketches, I take measurements to make sure that only what I want covered is covered [in the images] and then I pull the trigger in hopes that it will all align.

The best and scariest moment is when the crate arrives. Did all [the art] survive the journey? Do they look as I hoped they would? Does it work? Layered Photography is a term I coined because no sculptural quality existed in photography. Adhering the layered pieces was a real challenge.

I went down many dead ends because I wanted to make sure the piece could live outside as well as inside. I finally found the answer. And that answer will remain with me long after someone is, hopefully, photographing my tombstone.



Photograph by Kat O'Neill. Courtesy of the artist.

PR: How does this body of work impact you as an artist?

KO: It is a whole new direction for me. Art that makes you feel alive in the face of death is, to me, a reminder of the ephemeral essence of life.

Since coming upon that first cemetery I have explored around forty more all over the South and North Forks. Sometimes there is only one stone worth shooting or none at all but it is always a moving experience. I read each marker and often I am brought to tears.

Coming upon [Spalding Gray's](#) grave took me by surprise. Living on the east end I know the names of families that have been out here for hundreds of years but with [Spalding](#) it was different. We never met but I felt as if we had as I loved his work so much and had seen him in live performances in the city and, of course, knew of his tragic ending. Being raised Catholic I was taught that suicide was a sin, that if you committed such an act you were left in purgatory, never to even glimpse at the gates of heaven. But, even as a little girl, I thought that was bullshit. If physical pain has become that unbearable how and why should life be bearable?

After looking down at Spalding's rock and the words that were written there, and yes it was just that, a large and lovely rock, I looked up and said, "I hope you got a chance to meet my Mom. She was an artist, too."



Photograph by Kat O'Neill. Courtesy of the artist.

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PR: Do you have a favorite piece?

KO: This series really works as a collective in dimension and theme but, if pressed, I would have to say that *KING* reigns supreme for two reasons. One – the KING at the top of the stone that led me to the concept of Elvis, which I had shot from a vintage album cover. And Two – finding a 200 year-old graphic on a stone that looked like it could actually have been one of his signature belts.

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Photograph by Kat O'Neill. Courtesy of the artist.

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BASIC FACTS: Kat O'Neill is based in The Hamptons. More of her work can be viewed at www.katoneillgallery.com.

The "Tombstone" Series is on view as part of the group show "Out of Bounds" at The White Room Gallery in Bridgehampton from July 15 to 31, 2017. An Opening Reception takes place on Saturday, July 15, 2017 from 6 to 8 p.m. The White Room Gallery is located at 2415 Main Street, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. www.thewhiteroom.gallery.

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