

# Kristan Kennedy: A Corporeal Presence

by Meagan Atiyeh



*Figure 1. Kristan Kennedy, untitled arrangement for “Tomorrow Tomorrow,” curated by Stephanie Snyder and Wallace Whitney at CANADA, New York, June 15 to July 21, 2017. Courtesy Reed College Art Collection, purchased with the assistance of The Ford Family Foundation through a special grant program managed by the Oregon Arts Commission.*

Kristan Kennedy’s color-field paintings are worked and washed in a repetitive process. A small number of marks, additive or reductive in ink, bleach, or other mediums, often graphically punctuate their foregrounds. Her formats vary from discrete paintings, stretched and framed, to installations in which the raw painted, stained, and dyed canvases fill large walls (fig. 1) and drape over substructures. These are not two distinct bodies of work so much as two poles, serving, as in a magnet, to frustrate and energize each other. At one pole, Kennedy emphasizes composition, soliciting from the viewer the conventional act of looking at an art-historical object—the painting itself. At the other, she uses her canvas to infer a bodily form, marking its faint edges and rendering it evocative through obscurity and innuendo.

Her exhibitions betray a desire to animate the material. At times, Kennedy’s hangings edge between architectural axes, such as a turn from wall to floor, within a doorway, or at the bend of a stair, where a work in two dimensions might borrow a third. An example was her 2012 placement at a Tokyo gallery of *R.B.E.S.*, a small, darkly stained piece of linen with two horizontal slits resembling a niqāb or face veil of the hijab (fig. 2). “It is a little scrap of a thing,” the artist later explained, and “when . . . the curator of that show asked me where I would like it, I could not stop thinking of it sliding down one of their concrete stairs. And that is where it lived, or where it came alive.”<sup>1</sup> Draped as it was here, in the middle of the stairs, the piece could be seen from the front, providing viewers a direct confrontation with its eyelike



slits.  
Yet  
from

Left: Figure 2. Kristan Kennedy, *R.B.E.S.*, 2012, gesso, sumi and acrylic ink on linen, 16 x 12 inches, installed at Misako & Rosen, Tokyo, December 12, 2012 - January 20, 2013. Courtesy Misako & Rosen. (Photo: Kei Okano) Right: Figure 3. Kristan Kennedy, installation for NADA Hudson 2012, Hudson, N.Y. (Photo: Elk Studios)

above, with this side no longer visible, *R.B.E.S.* slid back into its materiality, a limp linen nearly indistinguishable from the gray concrete. For NADA Hudson 2012 in upstate New York, Kennedy was given a small corner of a raw nineteenth-century factory and labored to find the right installation. In her home studio, works in progress had recently draped over chairs to dry, becoming fortlike, and Kennedy knew she wanted to pursue that effect. The final presentation included two unmatched, draped armchairs (fig. 3), situated next to one another and angled just slightly inward into conversation. Each linen covering, stained and heavily washed in peach, violets, and grays, was punctuated by circular shapes made with stain, gesso, and linen additions. As Kennedy remembers, “The chairs were the most curious as they instantly became bodies, a couple, and gendered. ... The slump suggested something more than the paintings themselves. A sort of king and queen.”<sup>2</sup>

When hung in groupings on a wall, Kennedy’s fabric panels regularly take on such familiarity. They are joined in places with knots and pull apart in others, with gestures that just hint at hand-holding, coupling, and other choreography (fig. 1). Arrangements feel spontaneous but are always considered and precise. While draping these works, the artist uses her body, as a tailor or fabric-seller might judge a yard by an arm’s length, in a movement at once mindful and automatic. Informing every work is a preoccupation with corporeal presence: Kennedy notes her enthrallment with Greek and Roman sculpture, “the undulating cloth, the body stopped at the arm that is no longer there,” and in her art makes the classical draped figure modern—even autobiographical. Two wall-hung works from 2017 evoke the strong attitude of an American teen of the 1980s, her tied up T-shirt, the cocky tilt of her flared hip (figs. 4 and 5). *P.T.R.N.L.S.P.T.N.* is a bright, rust-colored square of linen marked with a few spare lines and puddles of bleach and fashionably knotted on one side. *T.A.S.O.J.J.J.* is a taller form, a girlish-pink stretch of canvas that hints at bodily proportions, with a knot at an imagined waist and



Top: Figure 4. Kristan Kennedy, *P.T.R.N.L.S.P.T.N.*, 2017, ink, dye, bleach on linen, 57 x 52 inches. Courtesy the artist and Fourteen30 Contemporary. Bottom: Figure 5. Kristan Kennedy, *T.A.S.O.J.J.J.*, 2017, bleach and dye on linen, 85 1/2 x 41 inches, Miller Meigs Collection.

thin, torn, self-fabric strips dangling on each side like an untied belt. Liquid bleach creates a Pollock-like pattern of scribbled lines and splashes across the “garment’s” bodice.

A text announcing the 2014 exhibition “Kristan Kennedy meets a clock” at Soloway Gallery in Brooklyn is a kind of poetic keystone to the artist’s entire practice, a free-associative web of similes and cultural allusions both historical and contemporary:

All of the paintings have been made, even the embarrassing ones. Exhibiting soft time. “How soon will you forget it?” Finding the figures in O’Hara’s poem, “Vincent,” written for his lover, and also for Nakian and his *Rape of Lucrece*. Steel sheets, real sheets and ghostly hair. A ghost with his sheet on, a ghost with a sheet off. A dual purpose, a double portrait, two coasts ticking, a doubling back. A muse with a muse with a muse. An evisceration with black steel rods. A foot poking from behind Peale’s napkin. A napkin over Nakian. A napkin over all of the paintings that have ever been made. “It’s just a fricking Band-Aid. I tell you what, I’ll just take it off.” Venus rising from the sea or a bath. A towel or a deception. The Shroud of Turin, a medieval masquerade or magic or both? Yes, both. In the nature of things, “on this strange warm morning,” Kristan Kennedy meets a clock. That crook!<sup>3</sup>

As an artist, curator, and teacher, Kennedy grounds her thinking in art history; “a muse with a muse with a muse” is a metaphor for the many referential layers it gives us. She cites poet and curator Frank O’Hara’s odes to his lover Vincent Warren and also his essay on sculptor Reuben Nakian whose 1966 retrospective O’Hara organized at the Museum of Modern Art. In this show was Nakian’s *Rape of Lucrece*, made of steel sheets and rods, itself a work inspired by Shakespeare’s narrative poem. “No longer merely armature,” O’Hara wrote of Nakian’s welded construction, “these rods are as intrinsic to *The Rape of Lucrece* as are



Figure 6. Raphaelle Peale, *Venus Rising from the Sea—a Deception*, ca. 1822, oil on canvas, 29 x 24 inches, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, William Rockhill Nelson Trust purchase, 34-147. (Photo: Jamison Miller)

the chamber, the bedposts, and the drapes in Shakespeare’s poem.”<sup>4</sup> O’Hara’s interplay between the sheets of the sculpture and the sheets shared with a lover parallels Kennedy’s particular interest in the canvas and the cloaked figure. A ghost’s sheet, a napkin, a Band-Aid, a towel, the Shroud of Turin... Kennedy includes here a montage of bodily coverings. The objects enjoy “inside” meanings shared by the artist with her friends. The “napkin,” for instance, is that trompe l’oeil curtain Raphaelle Peale painted in 1822 before a female nude in his *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception* (fig. 6), masking from the viewer and making modest the naked subject he lifted from James Barry’s *Birth of Venus* (1771). Peale’s painting was later, with age and conservation technology, suspected to have been painted on top of a copy of yet another work, a portrait of Peale by his artist father.<sup>5</sup> Of course, a stated deception on top of a primary deception, in which the objects obscured are the body and then the self, would resonate with Kennedy’s penchant for obfuscation, for teetering on the edges of corporeal animation.

Ultimately, and maybe unavoidably, her urge might be to bring the idealized and romanticized classical figure into a postmodern discourse. The Band-Aid reference serves this goal, pointing to a curious and unexplained act of protest by the singer Nelly who, according to



Figure 7. Kristan Kennedy, Portland, Ore., 2017. Courtesy the artist. (Photo: Ryan Noon)

an online post, “used to wear a plaster on his cheek.”<sup>6</sup> The Band-Aid or “plaster” in this pop-culture mystery was initially worn by the rapper to attend to a sports injury, then continued as a sign of solidarity to a wrongfully incarcerated friend. In this way, Kennedy’s bundle of associations mash academic arcana and pop-culture gossip with Nabokovian zeal. She employs the same alchemy in titling her works with unmemorable, unknowable, and unpronounceable titles, strings of letters seemingly built on a phrase yet so near to phonetically speakable words that it is tempting to voice them. The strategy coaxes the viewer into adding another layer of approximated meaning by trying to name, for example, “the pink one.” Kennedy does this herself; when describing a particular painting to me she confessed, “I can’t remember the name, another thing I’ve come to rely on not remembering.”

A candid snapshot from 2017 documents Kennedy, in a Portland parking lot, preparing artworks for an exhibition co-curated by Stephanie Snyder and Wallace Whitney for the latter’s New York gallery that summer. In the photo (fig. 7), the artist stoops over stained linen panels splayed on the pavement. The image conjures well known visions of Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, and Lynda Benglis, each of whose bodily exchange with their work has persistently identified this crouch—for *Life* and *Artforum* readers alike—as the posture of an iconoclast. These are charged and viable influences for Kennedy, the physicality with which she approaches her fabric, the broad gestures and color fields she employs. So too, and perhaps more so, Sam Gilliam, who in the mid 1960s would introduce unstretched and draped paintings to the world, often on a monumental scale—his *Baroque Cascade*, shown at the Venice Biennial in 1972, spanned seventy-five feet. But Kennedy is hesitant to speak at length of direct influences. She is at work with tactics and movements informed by others but uses these to explore content related to specific characters and things. Untangling a personal knot in the chain of creative practice, she remains steadfastly a painter, despite the challenge Gilliam himself articulated: “Now that artists are multimedia and art is so simultaneous,” he acknowledged in 1973, “it’s hard to stay on a problem.”<sup>7</sup> His solution, like Kennedy’s own: “to form one’s own problem and have tenacity.”

---

1. Kristan Kennedy, quoted in Julie Dickover, “Breaking the System: An Interview with Kristan Kennedy,” *At Length*, 2016, <http://atlengthmag.com/art/breaking-the-system-kristan-kennedy/>.

2. Kristan Kennedy, personal email communication with the author, January 24, 2019. Future quotes and references are drawn from this same source.

3. Soloway, “Kristan Kennedy meets a clock,” news release, April 2014, [http://soloway.info/Shows/31Kristan-Kennedy/Kennedy\\_PressRelease.html](http://soloway.info/Shows/31Kristan-Kennedy/Kennedy_PressRelease.html), accessed January 15, 2019.

4. Frank O’Hara, *Nakian* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 16.

5. Lauren K. Lessing and Mary Schafer, “Unveiling Raphaelle Peale’s *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception*,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 43:2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2009): 235.

6. Josh Teal, "Some Guy Explained Why Nelly Used to Wear a Plaster on His Cheek," *LADbible*, November 2, 2016, <http://www.ladbible.com/more/inspirational-some-guy-explained-why-nelly-used-to-wear-a-plaster-on-his-cheek-20161102>, accessed February 09, 2019.

7. Sam Gilliam, quoted in Donald Miller, "Hanging Loose: An Interview with Sam Gilliam," *Artnews* 72 (January 1973): 43, and in the next sentence, *ibid*.

*Meagan Atiyeh is a Portland arts consultant and writer. She is the senior advisor to The Ford Family Foundation's Visual Arts Ecology Program, having recently left the position of Visual Arts Coordinator for the Oregon Arts Commission, where she oversaw the public collection of the State of Oregon. Atiyeh holds a Bachelor of Arts in Writing, Literature and the Arts from Eugene Lang College of The New School in New York. Her writing has appeared in numerous exhibition catalogues as well as The Oregon Review of Arts, and Deviant Fictions: An Anthology of Northwest Experimental Writing. Meagan has also served on the boards of the University of Oregon Architecture and Allied Arts and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center.*

This essay was edited by Sue Taylor, and is among a series of writing commissioned by The Ford Family Foundation's Critics and Curators Program, with founding Editors Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director, The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College; and Sue Taylor, Professor Emerita of Art History, Portland State University. The commissioning institutions share a goal to strengthen the visual arts ecology in Oregon, and a key interest of increasing the volume of critical writing on art in our region.