

Nancy Kiefer

Interviewed by Julianna Spallholz

JS: Is *Woman in Ill-Fitting Wig* your first collaboration with a writer? How does this particular form of collaboration work for and feel to you?

NK: This is the first one that has resulted in a book. I've played with words and visual images with people over the years, exquisite corpse style, as a way to get our juices going and to swerve over the road with new ideas.

This collaboration with Rebecca has come together through a special set of circumstances that I wouldn't know how to duplicate and certainly hadn't expected. For one thing, the paintings were already finished when Rebecca came up with the idea to write about them. What a dream, eh? And because I knew the evocative kind of work she did, I trusted the process in a way I might not have otherwise. I knew she was going to be original and the writing and images would have their own say. Not to mention she is a really magnanimous person. I didn't remember this until we were about seven months into our project, but there was a time about ten years ago when I was pretty stuck creatively. At the urge of writer Amy Halloran, I went to hear Rebecca read. Her writing images (I hadn't read her work then) were bloody and beautiful and dense, and I related in such a way that I said to myself, "I've got to get back to work." I didn't remember this until I was going through an old journal and saw a sketch I had made of Rebecca reading.

When she read me the first pieces last spring, something clicked; even the first lines had this stripped down feel to them, not exactly minimalist but like someone writing from the gut, from the cellar. I was floored. I forgot that she was writing about something she saw in one of my paintings! She asked me, "Do you know what painting I am writing about?" and I had to say I didn't. And at that point it didn't seem to matter because each of our individual arts had come together and formed this collusion.

JS: Moving through this collection of your images feels almost like moving through an album, a series of very intimate portraits. What is the story behind this series? How do you feel that the story of the images is altered by the story present in Rebecca's writing?

NK: I'd been going to my studio for a couple of weeks, looking for a way to be moved, yet kind of scared to begin. I had a large canvas on the wall, very white and pristine. Seemed too overwhelming. I said some meditative prayers, then proceeded to paint a large head of a baby straight on the canvas with a brush. When I finished, this baby looked at me and I looked back. We had this connection, even though, or probably because, it was a creepy baby, part saint and part adult with compassionate eyes but a rather scheming mouth. I am a narrative painter and often paint faces, but this felt like the face was the story, and I didn't have to add something to it. I was remembering the photographic images of August Sander, Brasaii, Bellocq and how much I love portraits. I decided I would do about a hundred faces, make them small so I would could really play and not feel too precious about them. So I cut up canvas into small rectangles and started painting. I planned on painting every kind of face. If I didn't like them at the end, I'd toss. It took about a year. They were so small you could carry them around like flash cards. Later, a street woman walked by while I was outside my studio on Rainier and proceeded to tell me stories about a few of them. She said, "Hoo, hoo, that one is a mess and I'll tell you why."

I didn't really plan this, but the paintings were open to story. Rebecca's writing filled this openness, this space. And in a way, the words did alter the images for me personally because some of the characters are lonelier than I perceived them, and their desperation goes on longer. I sometimes think I am painting images of people who are scraping bottom, just at the point of waking up, having revelations. But Rebecca's creatures have a longer way on the thorny path. Darker tales.

But enough about personal response: Once the images leave the studio they are free. They are open to interpretation. I think the images in the books are

permanently altered—they are married to the writing and that’s the mystery in art I wouldn’t try to lasso.

JS: There is to me an astounding contrast of movement in so many of the text / image pieces in the book. Your work often seems to embody a sort of weighted stillness, while much of Rebecca’s writing moves with a sometimes almost violent ferocity. How do you feel that movement affects the conversation between the images and the writing?

NK: I do know what you mean about the ferocity and movement of Rebecca’s work. It’s alive! Her writing animated the paintings. And its only something Rebecca can address because she wrote in relationship to the images and not the other way around. Here’s an added thing I never expected to happen: some of the people in the paintings have come alive and I can hear their panting breath as if running through the woods, or tossing and sighing on a mattress with no sheets. Thinking in terms of pure form, that tension between moving and stillness, action and halting is essential stuff—a sort of macabre peek-a-boo. Push and pull, halting, going. Like muscles working.

JS: Rebecca’s text pieces employ varying narrative points of view, moving from first person to second person to third person. Can you comment on the use of point of view in your images? What is your process of deciding how much distance to put between the viewer and the subject of the image?

NK: I don’t know exactly how to answer that, but I will try.

When I first started making images, twenty-five years ago, I was just trying to draw the poetry I wrote, to explain myself to my family. Later, someone told me that I violated the picture plane; that is, my images crept up too close to the edge of the border. I liked that, it represented what I wanted to say. I still do that when I want the image to breathe on you. The image can be remote and intrusive at the same time, by the demeanor, some coolness of color, a blurring, a closed eye. I also like the classical coolness, and I find that sometimes these creatures

hide in their faces, under their features. Who are they? Let's go in and see. I like playing back and forth using color and line. I drew a lot for this series, copying photographs (portraits of Joe Louis, Aretha Franklin, Marilyn Monroe, Ann Sexton, and Walt Whitman), plus sculpture and classical paintings.

JS: The dynamic between the text and the images in the book causes me to think a lot about context. I wonder how I would read the writing if it was not in the company of the images, and how I would see the images if they were not in the company of the text. Will you comment about the possible autonomy of the text and of the images in the book versus the possible dependency between the two?

NK: There's that mystery again. The writing and images have come together in this venue but I think the success of the marriage is that they have their own integrity. I love this kind of question, and I have played with it for years. Can words and images work? Doesn't one cancel out the other? How can they work? It is, for me, like playing on a tightrope. Which one is gonna fall? I've played with this a long time. I'm a big time poetry lover and I read tons of folklore. I did a show under the guidance of curator Greg Bell, using parables and poems, entitled *Story in Search of an Audience*. I took work by Borges, Kafka, Neruda, The Brothers Grimm, and tried to make work that was not illustrative, but rather, resembled something of the essence. Without disrespecting the real work, without intruding, without syrup. Some pieces made it, others did not. And in the end, the question had to be, Who cares? The cheese stands alone. I loved the process and still do. It's all play and surprise to me. Right now I am making some work in relation to Rebecca's writing, particularly the stories in *What Keeps Me Here*. Just want to paint the spirit. No illustration. Tough!

JS: Will you comment on what you believe to be the importance of or implications of artistic collaboration in general?

NK: Hmm...I think it is about tapping into that community of creative life where the play resides. I work with children and watching them at recess is the most revealing thing; the sense of play and interaction is amazing.