

# KIRSHA KAECHELE



**Kirsha Kaechele currently has six houses situated on one block, just off Saint Roch Ave, with a former old bakery at it's center. She calls it her "site specific installation art museum." In this cluster of buildings she shows contemporary installation art by local and international artists. Named "Kirsha Kaechele Projects," it is something of a satellite art space, well off the beaten track. BY TONY CAMPBELL PHOTOS BY LIAN CHANG**

**Kirsha Kaechele:** If this is too noisy I can move to my room.

**Tony Campbell:** No, I can hear you just fine. So what inspired your move to St Roch area in the first place?

**KK:** Well, I fell in love with the area upon my first arrival in New Orleans. I had been in N.O. a few months and the first time I drove down St Roch Avenue I couldn't believe I had missed the area. I told my friend Jeff Matson that I would really like to live there and he told me that was not a possibility and that I was out of my mind. Then later with Matt Vis, I discovered the Bakery and realized that the neighborhood streets were named Music and Arts, and I must admit I found that inspiring.

**TC:** I remember you talking about that. So you first acquired the space you call the bakery in 2002 and from the get go an art space was planned, right?

**KK:** Absolutely. I was working at the time with Matt Vis, and from inception we intended it to be the home base of what we called Art Group, which stood for About Realizing Truth. We were all lit up from a road trip to Marfa where we'd seen Erwin Redyl's beautiful LED piece in an old ice house- we had made the trip in a 67' milk truck we'd transformed into a moving art piece! Life was art, and our intention was to use the space for installation based shows as well as performance and interactive art events.

**TC:** It's my impression that in KK projects your focus is installation projects and Architectural interventions, is this the whole story or is it broader than that?

**KK:** Ah, Installation Art and Architecture, my two loves... they and a few wonderful men to round things out! (laughing) I definitely hold a specific interest in site-specific installation Art. Before this space I had a vision for an installation museum in a building in the warehouse district- a more polished white box version, with a program similar to the Tate Modern's. But I hold an interest in Art in the broadest sense. (To waiter) Oh I'll actually have another glass of wine, thanks. I'm sorry.

**TC:** That's ok.

Since buying the bakery your exhibiting area has grown to include six houses are these spaces to be utilized for art whilst under construction only, and then to have new lives as homes or will they remain art spaces?

**KK:** My intention is for them to remain art spaces, I would like to start an artist residence program along side the exhibition space, but the main objective is for them to remain art space and in effect to work as a Museum spread throughout the various houses.

**TC:** What do your neighbors think about these Art and Architecture installations popping up around them, and are they involved in some way?

**KK:** On the whole their response is positive, my long-standing neighbors are intrigued by it. A lot of positive energy is coming to the neighborhood as a result of simply spending time there, and I know they love the improvements led by the St Roch Project, which they know I am a part of. They tell me, "You go on, girl! Go get it!"

**TC:** How many of your long standing neighbors returned after the storm and how many are new arrivals? I know you were well known in the neighborhood before Katrina.

**KK:** Unfortunately, very few have come back. Those who owned houses around me come back regularly on visits, they are aware and they like what's happening - Bill Murphy and Benjamin and I have planted trees and worked on their gardens. Those who have come back appreciate my interaction with the kids. The neighborhood kids are always involved in all of the projects and that's something I would like to develop further. At the last dinner a young boy from around the corner sat with, Dexter- he is the best- and one of my sponsors who is very white and very privileged and would never have come to that neighborhood, he found himself in tears. As a result he is very inspired to engage. Bringing these disparate elements together is a lot of what moves me.

I do have some new neighbors, who have arrived in the last month or two, they traveled down from different parts of the country, and they have not received the projects positively at this point. They are from a more vigorous liberal background with an, I should say, a

more gutter-punk aesthetic. They are not appreciating the international art world element that I'm introducing to the neighborhood! I think it makes them uncomfortable.

**TC:** So the newest arrivals have the biggest problem more so than older neighbors.

**KK:** Yes. I could blow it off and say they don't understand what I'm trying to do, but one of their criticisms is well taken in that I can further involve the neighborhood. There are benefits to having an art space in the context of half falling down houses and an economically depressed neighborhood. The very elements that some would consider problematic offer the opportunity to greater enrich the conversation that the artists are having with the site- the site being not only the houses but also the community. So I'm discovering and learning.

In many ways this is an accidental art space, and as I go I'm discovering how my project communicates with the neighbors, and I'm excited by how it can. That might even mean the gutter punks. After the performance they staged at my recent opening, I brought them a homemade cake with a file baked in it: the genius idea of ... to break out of jail with (One of the girls went to jail after spray painting "art fags go back to new york!!!" all over Margaret Evangeline's piece.) I tried to give them some Pabst Blue Ribbon to go with it because I thought it was their preferred choice but they informed me that they actually like good beer... It's a conversation.

**TC:** Has Katrina shaped the KK project allowing you to expand and acquire abandoned and damaged houses?

**KK:** Actually I owned 4 of the houses before the storm and the recent additions were all derelict pre-storm. However, by the circumstances of the storm, my want of a white cube space has been replaced by an appreciation for these houses as an art space, their age, abandonment and disaster-state make for a more interesting context than my initial warehouse district minimalist vision. I've come to realize they serve as an equally valid home for contemporary installation art.

**TC:** Have any of your artists expressed being intimidated by showing in the post storm landscape of New Orleans? It's a very loaded environment and a lot to compete with as an artist.

**KK:** No one has expressed that directly. I'm sure that must come up. Personally I'm afraid that showing installations in this context may only work temporarily, being that the houses are so unique and the circumstances so specific. That said, I have come to realize that the white box convention is equally specific! We think of that type of space as universal and infinitely flexible, but in reality the white box is a very distinct flavor! Given this realization, I think spaces like the decayed houses provide an interesting alternative. Artists are used to showing in conventional museum spaces to the point that it is predictable, I think it is a delightful and growth orientated opportunity for them to have a conversation with a space which is older often than the artist themselves, and holds so much history. The result hopefully is... a discovery, the exploration of work that is not so engaged with the aesthetic of the time, or the popular conversation of contemporary art, but holds a message that transcends this specific time and its trends. Surprisingly!

**TC:** So was the decision to paint one of the houses white including the yard and broken windows a tip of the hat to the white cube convention. It is quite startling.

**KK:** Yes it is startling.

I think that that was part of my personal process of becoming comfortable with showing art in this unlikely setting. By painting this space white- it's a ritual in a sense. The action proclaims this broken house with its junk outside an official art space.

That's one part of the project but the other is more rooted in the new age element in my upbringing. That contributed a sense of purification or a blessing maybe, blessing what was once a problem and transforming it into a celebration.

**TC:** Your project so far, often deals with the marriage of Art and Architecture. I get the feeling that there is some liberation for an Architect working in this sphere, they don't have a client and it must be a chance at unbridled creativity.

**KK:** Yeah, I think you just put it perfectly. I think the architects appreciate the opportunity to free themselves of the confines of budget and function.

But that said, I think what makes Art great and Architecture great is engaging those confines, working within them, finding what seems to be a limitation, and turning it into an inspirational force.

**TC:** Let talk about collaboration and the institutions you have worked with so far.

**KK:** My recent show (Dehisce and a Course in Minerals) was a collaboration with a curator from New York, Koan Jeff Baysa. I met him at Art Omi, a residency and sculpture park in upstate New York. It was a very interesting and spontaneous collaboration. He brought artists from all over the world who were interested in showing in this context in New Orleans.

I definitely see continuing to work with artists and curators from outside of New Orleans.

Also expanding my involvement with the local community. I see classes, or creating living installations involving neighborhood children, the neighborhood in general and the local economy. By deepening that relationship, the neighborhood is connected to the greater world and the project is richer. Both thrive.

**TC:** Importing artists and curators to New Orleans seems important to me, as we are often weary of our environment. They bring fresh eyes.

**KK:** Yes, fresh eyes.

I also have visions of extending beyond the neighborhood in the greater space. For example one of the shows, which is in the early stages of planning, is a land art show that would involve international artists in collaboration with ecologists, and would involve the Louisiana wetlands and agriculture.

**TC:** When we first met the only property here that you owned was a garden in the Irish Channel and you were all about the plants, I wondered when the plants would appear in the KK project.

**KK:** Absolutely, nature makes a great medium. With the exploration of art in general I'm interested in collaborating with scientists, mathematicians, ecologists and historians. Basically, every direction the work can be expanded in and the more functionality introduced to the work the more interesting it becomes. For example in the land art project I expect the work to be not only great artistic pieces, but to address ecological and agricultural issues. At one point in my life I would have seen this as distracting from the art but now I see it as enriching art.

**The New Orleans based Irish artist Malcolm McClay recently noted to me that local visual artists have quietly and quickly recovered since Katrina. Perhaps it's their flexibility and the need to process this environment through their practice. I feel KK projects brings a spot light to this activity promoting emerging as well as established artists and encouraging cross discipline projects of a local and international flavor**

**Flavor is also evident in Kaechele's theme orientated dinner party with elaborate menus, which she throws on opening nights, often having up to 200 seated guests. Each course is an artwork in itself. Rumor has it that the menu offered a field mushroom soup with an "activated field", or psychoactive option. Presumably for discerning art adventurers only.**

**KK projects have recently experienced a spate of attacks on the exhibited art works. Installations were graffitied with, "Art Fags go back to New York" Kirsha Kaechele, true to form, felt this action added to the work's dialog, but the artists felt different.**

**When Damien Hirst's pickled sculpture "Away from the Flock", was vandalized with the addition of black ink, I also suspect a disgruntled artist looking for some attention.**