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The Ruttenbergs' Exquisite Rabbit Holes

By Charles Stuckey



Two years ago, Picasso biographer Sir John Richardson told me that I had to meet Kathy Ruttenberg, who makes elaborate ceramic sculptures at her outlandish headquarters upstate, a live-work space as crowded with precious animals as Noah's Ark. Subsequently, John let me in on the other half of his favorite art-world secret, introducing me to Janet Ruttenberg, Kathy's mother. A virtuoso printmaker and painter herself, Janet is as private as an artist can be, except that she can be found on any nice day out in Manhattan drawing and painting and taking photographs and shooting videos in public.

When Janet was a girl growing up in Dubuque in the thirties, she knew she wanted to be an artist. When Kathy was a girl growing up in New York in the sixties—one of Janet and financier Derald Ruttenberg's four children—she was always being asked to pose for her mother, who has relegated some of the finest family portraits by any American painter since Sargent to staircases and hallways in her apartment. But as most children will do, Janet tried to find her own path, and when not posing, she was eager to slip free of the demands of her artist mother, who was always “disappearing into the rabbit hole” of her work.

Escape proved futile. According to Kathy, “I tried so very hard to be different in any way I could from my mother, and now I give up. I want to be just like her.” According to Janet, however, it goes both ways: “I give up. My adventurous daughter is now the original, with her brilliant anti-taste and her nonstop multimedia creativity.”

Both mother and daughter are about to have a bit of a moment. Kathy's second solo exhibition is up through May 18 at Stux Gallery, which is also showing a documentary on her by David Kaplan. Except for a few very recently completed works—none more complex than the twelve-foot tree man just inside the gallery entrance, with miniature girls hanging from his branches like victimized ornaments—the visionary sculptures in the show are reproduced in a new monograph published by Charta: *Kathy Ruttenberg: “Nature of the Beast.”* Not to be surpassed, come September, in a solo exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, Janet will finally show the monumental Central Park watercolors and paintings she has been making during the past fifteen years, some now animated with her own videos. Whereas Janet looks panoramically outward from the grass to distant skylines, Kathy sees the surrounding landscape wrapped around, and absorbed by, figures she's observed up close. But green is everywhere in the works of both artists, along with branches and figures taking refuge amid plants. And nowhere is the genetic heritage of creativity more apparent than in their exquisite, if madcap, interior-design schemes.

The eye alights just about everywhere in these homes. The social rooms in Janet's apartment are filled with all kinds of art: mostly old-master prints, a few dazzling paintings she did in Scotland in the eighties, and the best collection of Kathy's sculptures anywhere. The centerpiece is Kathy's *Serial Killer*, a life-size ceramic girl on a very real tree limb spanning the mantelpiece. The window treatments are particularly inventive. In the dining room, the Jeroen Vinken curtains have been elegantly slashed. Pulled back to reveal a panoramic view of the East River, those in the living room are in fact part of Janet's print collection, the design applied with woodblocks, with bits of real fur for accents. They complement Kathy's woven worsted-wool-and-silk rugs, illustrated with girls and furry pets. The back rooms include yet

more quirky ideas, from the Louis XV chair that Janet upholstered in bubble wrap for the kitchen to a full-length Elizabethan portrait of some dubious ancestor displayed in a bathtub. Waiting by the elevator is Kathy's wall lamp with a translucent blue head sprouting from a vagina.

Unlike Janet's apartment, Kathy's home upstate has a less formal atmosphere—in large part because so many animals roam throughout it. The theme is animal art, as if the space had been conceived as a progressive kindergarten for nonhumans. There are dozens of fantastical furnishings, and although Kathy has been reluctant to show them publicly alongside her more classic sculptures, many can be seen in her guesthouse: a one-woman design showroom filled with curtains, rugs, chandeliers, glazed tiles, drawer pulls, and so on. Needless to say, the first guest invited to this house was ... Janet.



Kathy's Living Room

Part of her compound in upstate New York, it's very animal friendly: for dogs, cats, and Trixie the pot-bellied pig, shown here on the carpet by Nathalie Lete. Black Pearls, the sculpture by Alison Saar, looks like a giant charm bracelet strung across the ceiling. Photo: Thomas Loof



Janet's Living Room

Kathy's sculpture *Serial Killer* is hung above the fireplace in Janet's living room. Photo: Thomas Loof



Janet's Dining Room

Janet's prints, a series called *Leonardo*, are hung in the dining-room window. The cut and silk-screened silk curtains are by textile artist Jeroen Vinken, whose work Janet first saw at the Cooper-Hewitt. Photo: Thomas Loof



Kathy's Dining Room

In her guest house, curtains designed by Kathy were fabricated by Susan Tamara Darrow. The dining table is from the Bella Cottage. Photo: Thomas Loof



Kathy's Gallery Space

Kathy converted a former church into a gallery space. She stands next to her ceramic sculpture *Manscape*, which is currently on view in her one-woman show at Stux Gallery in New York. Photo: Thomas Loof



Janet's Kitchen

Dinner for one in a room designed by Richard Rosen. Janet covered the floral upholstery of her Louis XV armchair in bubble wrap: "I'd like to use clear plastic as tablecloths, actually. I think a lot of it is quite beautiful." The floral-print window shades were made from a scan of a painting and custom-fit by Rosen. Photo: Thomas Loof



Kathy's Kitchen

The fanciful window treatments are another collaboration between Kathy and Tamara Darrow. The rug, *Walked All Over*, is by Kathy. Photo: Thomas Loof



At Kathy's

Kathy's dress lamp-sculpture and rat-print curtain, fabricated by Tamara Darrow, greet visitors in her guest house. "It's a nice rat," says Kathy. Photo: Thomas Loof



At Janet's

Two of Kathy's dress lamp-sculptures sit on a side table in Janet's dining room beneath a Goya print. Photo: Thomas Loof

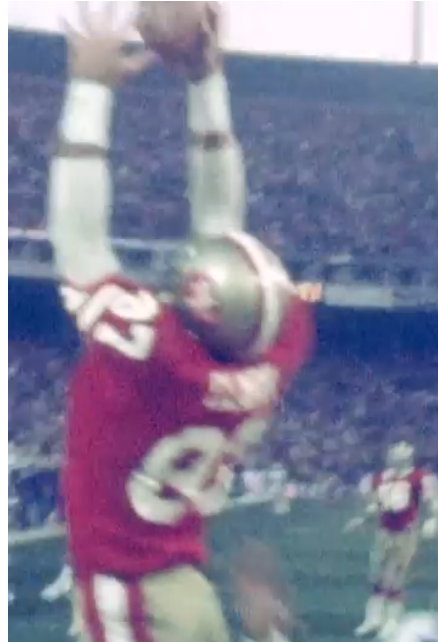


Kathy's Bedroom

A fantasy playpen with wallpaper by Kiki Smith and a rug of Kathy's design at the foot of the bed. The scone is by Kathy. Ozone, a Giant Angora rabbit ("my bedroom bunny"), and Floozy the cat are taking it all in. Photo: Thomas Loof



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LATEST NEWS FROM NEW YORK MAGAZINE

2:01 P.M.

Eruption of Undersea Volcano Near Tonga Triggers Tsunami Warnings Across Pacific

1:25 P.M.

New York's Storm Chasers Don't Have to Go to Kansas Anymore

12:59 P.M.

Wait, Who Are the Eternals?

RIP | 11:55 A.M.

Good-bye to Ed Schoenfeld, a Man Who Changed the Way New York Ate The restaurateur and food-world impresario has passed away.

By Adam Platt

9:00 A.M.

How Wastewater Became a COVID Crystal Ball

8:00 A.M.

Misty From *Yellowjackets* Is the Scariest Character on TV

7:27 A.M.

Where to Get Home COVID Tests and Why They're So Hard to Find

1:38 A.M.

Nicole Kidman Addresses Her AMC Theatres Commercial: 'It's So True'

12:26 A.M.

Ye Eases Us Into His New Song 'Eazy'

YESTERDAY AT 9:30 P.M.

RuPaul's Drag Race Recap: Jorgeous Jorgeous Girls Love Drag

YESTERDAY AT 8:03 P.M.

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Resumes Production With Letitia Wright

YESTERDAY AT 7:31 P.M.

270 Medical Professionals Send Open Letter in Response to Joe Rogan Episode

YESTERDAY AT 6:55 P.M.

Seriously, Upgrade Your Face Mask

YESTERDAY AT 6:34 P.M.

New York Definitely Doesn't Need a Longer Manhattan

YESTERDAY AT 6:30 P.M.

The Time Clinton Took Over Obama's White House Podium and Stayed Awhile

YESTERDAY AT 6:23 P.M.

Twin Parks Tenants Are Stuck in Housing Limbo

MOVIE REVIEW | YESTERDAY AT 5:49 P.M.

Do You Need a Review of *Hotel Transylvania: Transformania*? Here's One Anyway. As a wise man once said, "Bleh, bleh, bleh."

By Bilge Ebiri

YESTERDAY AT 5:29 P.M.

After 29 Days, Alec Baldwin Turns Over His Phone in *Rust* Investigation

MOVIE REVIEW | YESTERDAY AT 5:22 P.M.

***Belle* Is a Spectacular Retelling of *Beauty and the Beast* by Way of the Metaverse** Mamoru Hosoda's new film deftly blends teen angst, fairy-tale fantasy, and a virtual online world.

By Alison Willmore
