

Kate Gorney's installation *Once Broken*

By Jason Edward Kaufman

Reading poetry may always have been a challenge. The practice demands that one abandon the urgencies of quotidian life and dwell within language and the associations that it can elicit. The ecstatic flow of time that comes with deep concentration is a form of intellectual and creative exercise that our media-besieged minds need, but regrettably, the iPhone, email, and the 24-hour news cycle have made focus and reflection all the more difficult, if not impossible.

Meaningful encounters with visual art demand the same slowing down and attentiveness. What a relief to come across a complex and affecting work by Kate Gorney, a visual artist whose creative act begins with poetry. Her installation *Once Broken* fills a Greenwich Village walkup on the third floor of a brownstone near Washington Square Park. Gorney had already written a set of poems when she rented the two-bedroom space in 2016. Using her keen sense of how arrangements of objects can conjure memories and feelings, she set about devising three-dimensional settings for her verses, integrating texts with found items and things she made herself. In so doing she turned the apartment into the pages of her poetry book, and perhaps the interior of her mind.

Transporting Atmosphere

What is extraordinary about *Once Broken* is the atmosphere. Entering the apartment, one is enveloped in a soothing soundscape of piano music -- a Debussy-like composition with meandering motifs that descend against delicate chords -- and women's voices reciting verse in unhurried soft tones. The visitor is transported from the city streets to a state of meditative calm and receptivity.

Facing the entrance is a low alcove in which a chair sits before a miniature desk with an open guest book. Ducking to sign the register the visitor feels trapped. A wall of the space is covered with drab snapshots of desolate places, a disturbing foreword to *Once Broken*. Leaving this constricting dreary space, the apartment opens into the living/dining room, an expanse featuring mixed-media pieces, some composed of videos, wall hangings, embroidered fabrics, and vintage bric-a-brac reminiscent of a cabinet of curiosities or antiques shop.

In the middle of the room, a massive hand-made book rests on a white Mies van der Rohe sofa bed (the only modernist element in the installation). The volume contains the legend to the place: Gorney's poems printed in letterpress on fine paper. They map regions of their author's emotional life, her intense feelings about a relationship with a lover, and a sense of trauma and renewal. Whether one reads them straightaway or explores the space directly makes no difference, because the texts reappear in the corresponding sculptural vignettes and two-dimensional artworks that visually present them.

Unfurling from the head of the sofa onto the floor is a white quilted coverlet embroidered in gold thread with a reverie about sleep. "Let it slowly approach...Let it lead you painted in pointillism to the architecture of your mind and heart," it reads in part, entrancing the reader with a therapeutic tone like guided meditation. In an adjoining loft space, a video screen shows close-ups of women's mouths rhythmically reciting the poems in the book on the chaise, the voices one hears when entering. These hypnotic stimuli inexorably draw the visitor into the artist's dream world, and create a sense of excitement as to what awaits down the rabbit hole of the absorbing installation.

A closet door opens to reveal a small monitor displaying a video of the empty living/dining room. As the piano music drifts and the women chant, a ghostlike woman appears and fades away, reappears in a different place in the room, then dissolves and rematerializes again. The simultaneity of separate moments evokes time both extended and collapsed, as in memory. The figure inhabiting this virtual reality is the artist herself, who has entered the tabula rasa of the apartment and begun to dream. Inscribed on the wall above the screen, serving as an extended caption -- and perhaps the *raison d'être* of the entire installation -- is the poem, *Killing Fields*, in which the narrator, walking with her lover, interprets the snap of a twig as a gunshot that signals the end of some crucial aspect of their relationship.

This stressful interlude is softened by the titular poem, *Once Broken*, presented on the living/dining room wall as a framed collage of cut-out letters: "I see you in the horizon sailing the days of your wandering hearts vessel washed over split wide brimming with a joy whose fullness can only be known by the once broken." The text suggests that the artist has undertaken an emotional journey in which the pain of loss is relieved by compassion for the departed lover, and for herself.

Above the fireplace, melted white candles form a frozen cascade from the mantle. The soot from their extinguished flames has stained the upper wall. Rubbed in reverse through the smoky cloud, a poem, *Solstice*, expresses a yearning to entwine with a lover "in perpetual ribbons of braided affection [on] the longest night of the year." Between two windows, the door of a wall safe is ajar, partially revealing a tuft of fine blonde wisps that suggests a pubic mound. Embedded within the curls is a handwritten poem, *Eternal*, that promises "a cataclysmic reprieve is waiting inside your darkest place." Peering into this intimate recess feels almost like a violation.

In the corner is a glass table set for two. A golden model of a lady's hand holds a magnifying glass that examines the contents of one diner's plate, a surreal meal with Freudian overtones consisting of a cluster of black hair-like fibers and a pistol-shaped charm. The plate opposite remains empty save for an expectant set of flatware. Completing the spread are inverted wine glasses, various vessels and bell jars containing menacing natural history specimens -- desiccated honeycomb, thorns, a preserved scorpion -- and a tray arrayed with petit fours and ampules of mysterious ointments. The vignette suggests a psychologically and sexually fraught *tête-à-tête*

between the absent couple. Thoughts of one's own past relationships come to mind, particularly those in which emotional games played a significant and unwanted part.

Ruined Love

The tension continues in the master bedroom, a space imbued with an ominous sense of ruined love. The main element is a four-poster, replete with canopy. Lying on the white sheets is video projection of the sleeping artist. Her image is superimposed on the embroidered text of the poem *It's Late*, in which the somnolent narrator ponders her stifled relationship. From one bedpost a cord extends to a cinderblock that rests on the floor atop a sheet of composition paper inscribed with the poem *To an Old Flame*. The crude weight appears to act as both an anchor and a ball and chain.

The fireplace is stuffed with dried flowers, and across the ceiling crumpled sheets of paper flow like a river of false starts. A murky photograph of lovers hangs in an oval frame, the negative space between them forming the shape of a black heart. A white silk kimono covers another wall, open to reveal calligraphy on the lining is a poem -- titled *Optimism By Rope* -- that refers to a warrior twisting wire around "what could have been a sanctuary." Below, as a culminating touch, the artist has placed a cushion and stabbed it with a knife.

Gorney describes herself as a visual multi-disciplinary artist exploring memory, site and time. Themes of loss, anger, and reconciliation are elaborated in many other tableaux throughout the apartment. In the kitchen, the tiles are lipstick-scrawled with a poem titled *Walls* that expresses confusion and shame. Teacups brim with dead rose buds that also stock the refrigerator along with a desiccated lemon and a pomegranate, empty prescription bottles, a sledgehammer, and blue-steel razor blades that hint at suicide. A loft-bed pillow is embroidered, "Hide here," carving out a refuge from emotional wounds.

In the hall, a glass-paneled barometer case displays a scale balancing a feather and human teeth, the vitrine labeled with a poem that refers to the author's passive endurance of a lover's turmoil and her sense of impending change. A wall devoted to the poem *Defensive Driving* features a dead branch with a bottle of blood dangling by a string above the words, "You don't see the tree but I do." A niche contains a hand mirror that reflects the poem *Gold Star*, a redemptive verse expressing hope that the reader -- perhaps the lost lover -- will one day find the titular reward that the author has left, represented by a little dish of actual gold stars with an invitation to "Take one." In the red-lit bathroom, a poem sewn onto towels, mats, and tissue boxes asserts the artist's freedom with the declaration, "Death to Inhibition."

Autobiography and Empathy

Are the poems autobiographical? Gorney says that she draws upon trauma and past relationships. She had no intention to write a book of poems -- *Once Broken* is her

first volume -- but in the process of reframing her life certain phrases coalesced in her consciousness. She rarefied them in verse and enshrined the collection in a limited-edition artist book. A friend suggested that she devise an environment that could bring the poems to life in a gallery setting.

Although she had painted and made art and toys as a child, Gorney has no formal artistic training. But certain artists served as influential models, notably Sophie Calle, who responded to a breakup in her installation *Take Care of Yourself*, for which she asked dozens of women – an anthropologist, criminologist, philosopher, psychiatrist, actress, clairvoyant, et. al. -- to interpret the breakup letter she received by email. The multi-media project represented France at the Venice Biennale in 2007, and two years later was shown at Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea where it made a deep impression on Gorney who similarly uses objects and texts to express the complexity of emotional response. But unlike Calle's piece, *Once Broken* is first-person, providing a walk-through book of her own writings. The *mise-en-scène* allows the visitor to physically enter her poems, and the carefully curated objects enhance the texts by triggering associations that multiply meanings.

Some of her tableaux are reminiscent of the assemblage environments of artists like Ed Kienholz and Ilya Kabakov. One thinks of Kienholz's *The Wait* (1964-65), which presents an old woman made of animal bones sitting alone in her living room, and Kabakov's equally powerful *The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment* from the series "Ten Characters" (1981-88), in which the fictive character's room is meticulously portrayed as described in an accompanying short story. Though Gorney also bases her installation on a narrative subtext, Louise Bourgeois seems most relevant, particularly the late artist's assemblages of metaphorical objects and carvings that often relate to her own childhood. Gorney's installation proposes a comparable realm of heightened self-awareness, recollection, and symbolism, and also incorporates objects of her own making alongside used tools, weathered containers, and old photographs that convey an air of transience.

This is particularly evident in the second bedroom where a wall is carpeted with 19th and 20th century objects: opera glasses, a candle snuffer, mirrors, keys, a toothbrush, a C-clamp, rulers, a matchbook, road maps, star charts, framed photographs and postcards of people, places, and antique modes of transport. A boarding pass used by the artist indicates that at least some of these sundry keepsakes are Gorney's own, but their melancholy aspect is one shared by every family's relics. The presence of cutting tools (scissors, a hatchet) and connectors (clips, pushpins, nails) suggests the parsing and recombining of memories and feelings.

Interspersed on the reliquary wall are modified photographs of a woman. In one, her face is flanked by a mushroom cloud and the Dalai Lama, symbols of human capacity for destruction and peace. A red band across her eyes conveys rage echoed in a Medusa-like portrait that crowns the image. In another picture a figure appears with arms raised in a self-possessed display of her naked body. Among the sundry

mementos are three poems, *Truth Telling Through Fiction*, *Your Kiss is a Kind of Familiar*, and *Against the Blue*, that reflect on lost love with bittersweet acceptance, consigning it to the evanescent terrain of nostalgia.

A bookshelf in *Once Broken* has volumes spine down, their titles hidden as if the owner wishes to keep them private. The library elaborates many of the themes and concepts that emerge in the installation: *Museum of Broken Relationships: A Diary*, Arthur Gorney's *I Don't Need You Anymore*, *The Joy of Suffering*, *Book of Dreams*, and treatises on Schopenhauer, the Japanese *Wabi-sabi* aesthetic of transience and impermanence, the Buddhist Four Noble Truths and *The Way of Zen*.

Throughout history artists have illustrated literature, but few poems have inspired installation art. Gorney has recognized the fertile potential of the medium. Just as poems aspire to create an environment that engages the reader's intellect and senses, so, too, does her engrossing and beautiful installation. It is a deeply personal work – that it takes place in a residence underlines the metaphor of *Once Broken* as an embodiment of the artist's psychological home. And it is extremely touching for that very reason. The sensitive poems and their often haunting mixed-media settings invite the visitor to intimately share her reflections on an anguished chapter in her life and how she recovered from it. Immersed in *Once Broken*, as in closely reading a book of poems, the reader witnesses this drama firsthand, and by undertaking the journey alongside her, experiences both empathy and catharsis.

Once Broken will be on view until May after which ...