

Improbable Containment:

Kathleen Bitetti's ThePrincessProject.com

by Sophia Solar Michalski 2008

History is often an agreed upon set of fabrications -unknown

"She's fair game, Joe. It's always open season on princesses"
- Quote from the photojournalist character, Irv, played by Eddie Albert
in the 1953 movie *Roman Holiday*

For her solo show entitled, *Containment*, Kathleen Bitetti is showing work from her *ThePrincessProject.com* in which she uses vintage suitcases as key elements. My vantage point as acting as the muse for her *ThePrincessProject.com* offers me an unique perspective to comment on her work. As her muse I have participated in countless discussions, exhibitions, performances, and appearances. I have seen works in progress, abandoned works, and finished works from not only this project, but also from her other bodies of work. I have helped to edited many of her artist statements and grant proposals. I can attest that her work is always impeccably crafted and also always has many conceptual layers to it. Bitetti's artwork in general addresses such topics as fairy tales, the American dream, nursery rhymes and lullabies, domestic violence, the nuclear family, and gender roles. The color white and/or the saccharine colors associated with childhood are a constant in her work. The act of sewing is very important to Bitetti. Many of the pieces for *ThePrincessProject.com* are hand sewn by her and/or are fabricated on her own sewing machine. "Research, unassuming and often undetectable autobiographical references, historical references, contemporary sociopolitical issues, and humor" are very important to Bitetti and comprise the conceptual foundation she builds on for all of her artworks (Bitetti, 2007). Her *ThePrincessProject.com* is no exception.

Bitetti's title of her show, *Containment*, is very revealing on many levels. *Containment* was a policy used by the United States to "stop" the global spread of communism. The term, *containment strategy*, is often used by policy makers in describing how they try to stop the spread of a disease outbreak, a market failure, a nuclear accident, or anything for that matter that is viewed as hostile or harmful to the powers that be or to the general public. Bitetti grew up during a time frame that "containment" was utilized by U.S. policy makers in attempt to stop or impede several widespread social change movements: Feminism's various waves, the anti-domestic violence movement, the civil rights movement, the antiapartheid movement, the HIV/AIDS activist movement, and the culture & censorship wars of the 1990's. It is safe to say these movements had an impact on Bitetti's art making, thinking, activism, and political views. In the very late 1980's through the 1990's, Bitetti was involved with ACT-UP Boston, Visual AIDS Boston, the Boston Coalition for Freedom of Expression, and the Women's Action Coalition (WAC-Boston). She has been active in the anti-domestic violence movement since the mid 1980's and many of her art works directly reference this issue. Her first installation entitled, *Shelter* (1992), depicted a bedroom in a fictional battered women's shelter. The piece was part of an invitational group show that was sited at the offices of the Community Research of New England, a community based research organization

dedicated to HIV / AIDS research. This installation not only called attention to the issues battered women regularly face, but it also called attention to the fact that some battered women risked HIV infection from their HIV infected batterers. It should be pointed out that this was the first work in which Bitetti used vintage suitcases as a key element. Also since the early 1990's, Bitetti has been very active with health care reform, artists' rights, and artists' empowerment issues. All of which are directly referenced in her 2008 *Health Care for Artists- a fairy tale scrapbook*.

The use of vintage suitcases in Bitetti's work is significant on many levels. The first is that it references her immigrant past. Bitetti is a second generation American. Her family on both sides immigrated from Europe to the U.S. in the early 1900's. Bitetti's family, like many other European immigrants who came to the United States in the early 1900's, left their birthland to begin a new life and to forget what they left behind. They came to start a new life in a foreign unknown country with the clothes on their back, their life savings if they had any, and a suitcase filled with their belongings. They wanted to become American. Their native language and oral histories were usually not passed on and were lost. Photographs didn't exist or were lost. Gone was a connection to generations of personal and national histories of where their families came from. Many descendants of immigrants have not even visited the lands their families immigrated from. Often only what is still present is the food and recipes from the "old country". These immigrants assimilated and fully embraced the American dream and all that was connected with it - both good and bad. Bitetti's use of vintage suitcases clearly also reference the fact that immigrants have been and are still key to the United States economic growth and expansion. An important fact that has been lost in the current U.S. debate on immigration reform.

These vintage suitcases, however, have also been consciously chosen by Bitetti for several other reasons. All of the suitcases she is using are from the 1960's (Scordino, 2007) and that was the decade Bitetti was born (1968). The 1960's was a turbulent time period in the U.S. It was a time when the American dream, segregation, gender roles, traditional societal roles, and power structures were being challenged and forcibly changed. The suitcases also reference travel, refugees, and being on the run. Bitetti's work often directly alludes to the domestic violence and stalking commonly found in fairy tales- an undercurrent that is often over looked by the majority of those who tell these tales to children. In fact, most princesses in fairy tales are on the run, are targets of assassination, are being stalked, and/or are victims of domestic violence. It is very important to note that stalking and domestic violence encompasses much more than intimate partner abuse. Domestic violence encompasses parent to child abuse, child to parent abuse, sibling to sibling abuse and other intergenerational abuse. Stalking can be done by someone known to the person or could be carried out by a complete stranger. Bitetti's three works, *Suitcase Diptych*, *How to be a Princess Kit* (in all of its incarnations), and *Beautyrest- Not all princess are waiting to be saved*, reference all of these issues from a humorous and critical feminists world view. The brand names of many of the vintage suitcases used by Bitetti, Royal Traveler and Tiara, are also examples of how her humor is interwoven with her serious subject matter.

History and research are key for Bitetti. Her love of books, public libraries, and research dates back to her childhood and continues to present day. Bitetti often sites her work in public libraries and thinks of libraries as her second home. Quincy,

Massachusetts is the city where Bitetti grew up and lived until her early 20's. Her interest in history surfaced as a teenager and as a high school student she volunteered at the Quincy Historical Society. Bitetti's installation, *Royal Traveler* and her *Beautyrest-Not all princess are waiting to be saved*, directly come out of her ongoing artist residency in the City of Quincy through the Quincy Historical Society. These two works directly reference City of Quincy's role, the role of the Adams family, and more specifically the role Abigail Adams played in the forming of the United States of America. The history of the City of Quincy is filled with activism which began long before and continued long after the Adams family's activist contributions. It should also be noted that the model of domestic violence intervention and prevention that is used globally was created in Quincy during the 1980's.

ThePrincessProject.com unabashedly examines mainstream female role models, stereotypes, and gender roles. Women are usually the family members who purchase and regulate the children's toys and books in a family structure. Women are instrumental to transmitting the culture, social norms and the standards of a society or civilization to future generations. Bitetti has clearly articulated that as a child she never paid attention to fairy tales, "since the princesses and other main female characters never seemed to really do anything but wait around for someone to save them." These fairy tale books were not in her family home and her mother never really put much emphasis on them. Instead her mother took her "to the public library to be able to pick from a wide variety of children's book and tales." Bitetti as a child never understood why princesses always had to be beautiful (never smart or clever) and why the vast majority were blonde, fair skinned, and had blue eyes. As adult she finds these depictions of princesses to be "insulting, limiting, and discriminatory" (For the record I agree with her). It was not until later from her research that she discovered that in many of the original fairy tales, the princesses and for that matter many of the female characters, were not passive but were proactive and usually very smart and clever. These fairy tale stories had been clearly changed to disempower the princesses and other main female characters. Bitetti's 2007 *For the Ladies of the Letter Z* was inspired by her research of inspirational historical and contemporary women whose names begin with the letter Z. This piece celebrates the empowerment and achievements of women throughout the ages. Bitetti also wittily calls attention to the issues of disempowerment and empowerment through her two paper based works, *Who's Fairest of Them All?* and *Royal Traveler: Works on Paper*. (Bitetti, 2007)

Bitetti clearly has the same opinion of the Barbie doll, as she does of the "changed" princesses. Her *Royal Traveler* installation directly asks many questions. Why is the Barbie doll a role model and known to little girls and adult women worldwide? Why is a woman like Abigail Adams, who was a real person and an important historical figure not known widely? What does this say about how women hand down role models generation to generation? That work also reveals the Barbie doll's hidden past. The "creator" of Barbie was a woman named Ruth Handler and the doll was almost an exact copy of a German doll named Lili (Handler bought the rights to Lili). The biography of Lili might be viewed by some as problematic. She was a prostitute with a heart of gold. Lili incidentally was a doll for adult men not female children. This perhaps explains the over exaggerated female proportions of the doll. (Guerrilla Girls, 42)

Bitetti's artwork does not give us answers. Rather it poises questions on individual,

societal, and global levels. Her ThePrincessProject.com directly asks: What are you being sold? The best laid traps are those that the intended target does not know they have been snared. This holds true of Bitetti's work. Like the very timeless and universal fairy tales she uses for inspiration- beauty abounds in her work, but one of its key functions is to lurer the viewer in and to act as camouflage for what lurks beneath as it slowly and quietly surfaces into view.

Works Cited

Bitetti, Kathleen, All quotes from the artist are taken from various 2007 conversation notes taken by the author.

Scordino, Paula, Email and phone correspondence, November 2007. The vintage suitcases by Samsonite (the Royal Traveler and others) and the the vintage suitcases by American Tourister (the Tiara makes) were confirmed to be from the 1960's decade in a November 2007 phone and email correspondence between Paula Scordino of the Samsonite Corporation and the author. Samsonite now also owns the American Tourister brand.

Guerrilla Girls, Bitches Bimbos and Ballbreakers: the Guerrilla Girls' Illustrated Guide to Female Stereotypes, Penguin Books, 2003.

List of works included cited in the essay and/or in Containment 2009 exhibition

Listed chronologically by date started:

1. Suitcase Diptych:

“He was Prince Charming at first.....” –name withheld, (1992-2002)

“Not all princesses are waiting to be saved.” –Princess Sophia Solar Michalski,
Portable Royal Portrait 2002

2. Who's the Fairest of Them All? (2001-ongoing) (not shown in Containment 2009 exhibit)

3. Tiara Documentation: How to be a Princess Kit (2008)

4. Beautyrest: Not All Princesses are Waiting to be Saved, (2004-07)

5. Royal Traveler (2005-9)

6. For the Ladies of the Letter Z (2007)

7. Healthcare for Artists- a Fairy Tale Scrapbook (2008-09)

8. Diplomat (2008-9) (new work from this series was premiered in the Containment 2009 exhibition)

9. Royal Traveler: Works on paper (2008-09) (new work from this series was premiered in the Containment 2009 exhibition)

10. Royal Traveler: Crossings- Malta (2009) (was premiered in the Containment 2009 exhibition)

"ThePrincessProject.com reveals the system of how culture controls the feminine within restrictive, if seemingly favorable, roles. The mythology of the princess runs deep in western culture, even if there are relatively few such beings in existence. Yet the archetype of the princess and the values attached to being a princess still make appearances on toy shelves, media campaigns, tiara exhibitions, even in gay culture, fashion photography, and cruise ships. ThePrincessProject.com asks: What are we being sold?"

-Sarah Walker, painter, professor, and former director of the Clark University Gallery

The Project:

ThePrincessProject.com is an interdisciplinary conceptual art project conceived and spearheaded by Kathleen Bitetti. The Project examines gender roles, gender assignment, fairy tales, Royalty & class structures, mass culture, identity, race & ethnicity, the "commodification & branding" of individuals, and gender issues by utilizing a vast array of mediums including: new media and digital image making, sculpture, performance, installation, photography, video, and the internet. ThePrincessProject.com is designed to allow Bitetti to invite guest artists to work with her on specific aspects of the Project. The project is dedicated to the memory of Bitetti's maternal grandmother Mary. Her Royal Highness Princess Sophia Solar Michalski is graciously acting as the project's muse.

I want to raise the question of what we think is real and why, and to also cause people to look at what we hand down from generation to generation and ask why we do this" - Kathleen Bitetti

The Artist

Kathleen Bitetti has been a curator, artist, and arts activist since 1989. Since the early 1990s, her art work has involved the creation of conceptually based sociopolitical objects, installations, and temporary public art projects. Bitetti has shown her work at ICA @ Maine College of Art, New Art Center, Mobius, New Bedford Art Museum, DeCordova Museum, HallSpace, Monsterrat College of Art, Emmanuel College, Somerville Museum, Fuller Museum, Essex Art Center, Merrimack College, Phillips Academy, University of Massachusetts of Boston, New England School of Art and Design, Housatonic Museum of Art, and Artspace. Her art work recently became part of the permanent collection of the DeCordova Museum. She is currently an artist in residence in the City of Quincy through the Quincy Historic Society until the end of 2009. Her large scale public art project addressing Domestic Violence issues, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" was shown in Newburyport, MA, in April 2006. For more information on Kathleen, www.thePrincessProject.com

I'm not your stereotypical Disney princess- what people are accustomed to. I am empowered person. I have goals and responsibilities that I take seriously." Princess Sophia Solar Michalski

The Author & Muse:

Her Royal Highness Princess Sophia Solar Michalski, who is of Polish Royal decent and Italian Noble decent, is presently pursuing a degree in art history at an undisclosed university in the greater Boston area. Among her many interests are women's issues, improving the status of women, contemporary art, fashion (vintage clothing and emerging/contemporary designers), protecting the environment, and working towards world peace. She is an avid reader and is also very interested in encouraging literacy and education- especially for girls and women. She is an avid collector of contemporary art and is also a collector of dragonflies, dragonfly imagery, and dragonfly folklore. For more information: www.princesssophia.com