



Tall Blonde, 1996
fabric, synthetic hair, embroidery hoop
15" diameter

inside flap:
Veiled Entry, 1995
aluminum pans, cake molds, screws

cover image:
Untitled (House), n.d.
wood ("Tinker Toys"), fabric



Natalie Kutner:
Women and Children First

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Embedded within us are precepts from the past which consciously or unconsciously influence our current behavior. My work explores the matrix of social behavior to bring to light these hidden rules and to examine their current validity. Discontinuities between observed reality and the ideals represented by American myths about family and gender roles fascinate me. Humor and irony become tools for the exploration of serious themes. In much of my work I transform, pervert or use ordinary domestic objects in unexpected ways. Manipulation of material from everyday life transmutes the ordinary into the extraordinary, often with ironic overtones. I use traditional women's domestic skills, such as sewing and needlepoint, on untraditional material, like metal and wire cloth. I pursue the tension between the material, the means of crafting, the aesthetically beautiful outcome and the questioning content.

Natalie Kutner

In early 2014, at the urging of Dr. Therese Jones, I visited Dr. Fred Kutner's home and had my first exposure to Natalie Kutner's art. I've made many such visits over the past thirty years, becoming agile in making encouraging remarks to the deceased artist's spouse and suggesting possible institutions or venues that might be interested in the work. I was completely unprepared to encounter a body of work that was as urgent, articulate and persuasive as Natalie Kutner's. The work was revelatory – demonstrating not only a mastery of a wide range of mediums – painting, sculpture, ceramics, printmaking – but more importantly, a rigorously intelligent and highly personal responsiveness to the major movements in the art of the past fifty years – particularly the feminist theory and practice that emerged in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The political, emotional and transgressive nature of feminist cultural production of that time is still the subject of lively debate and still strongly influences artists – not all of them female – whose practice is rooted in appreciation for the hidden, the forgotten, the repressed, the ignored.

The women's art movement was as political as it was artistic, flourishing outside of the interest and confines of the established art world. The Feminist Art Program – the first of its kind – was founded by Judy Chicago at California State University in 1970. In 1971, the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) retained Chicago to establish and co-direct with Miriam Shapiro another feminist art program. Its most ambitious project was the renovation and repurposing of an abandoned house in Los Angeles called *Womanhouse*. Chicago and Shapiro envisioned the space for the exhibition of collaborative installations and performances by the program's students. One year after *Womanhouse* closed, Lucy Lippard prophetically recognized the inherent power of feminist aesthetics in an article published by *Ms.* magazine that was remarkably prescient in its description of the themes and concerns that Natalie Kutner's art would encompass: "Many women artists have organized, are shedding their shackles, proudly untying the apron strings – but, in some cases keeping the apron on, flaunting it, turning it into art." Natalie and Fred Kutner moved from Rochester, New York to southern California in 1969. Although her dream of becoming a "professional" artist was deferred for twenty or so more years, it's hard to imagine that the powerful reverberations and liberating messages of those programs which flourished in such close proximity to her home would not have impacted her deeply, possibly sowing the seeds for what was to come.

Natalie Dickman was born in Brooklyn in 1937, growing up with drawing and painting lessons at the Brooklyn Museum. She met Fred Kutner when she was fourteen years old. Graduating from high school



Untitled, 1993
woodblock on paper

at sixteen, she was eager for college and to major in studio art at institutions such as Cornell, Brandeis or Barnard where she was not only accepted but also offered considerable financial support. Although her parents encouraged and applauded her academic achievements they, like many of their generation, were determined to steer their children towards professions that were likely to ensure a degree of financial security and, in the case of girls, attract a husband whose profession and prestige further secured it. They insisted that Natalie attend Brooklyn College, but she refused. Barnard was the compromise, which was within commuting distance from Brooklyn. However, the trade-off also included Natalie's acquiescence to her parents' refusal of studio art as an appropriate major. Instead, she majored in sociology but continued to take studio art and art history classes offered by other institutions. Becoming a teacher or social worker ranked among the highest professional aspirations of many women of Natalie's generation. It is intriguing to consider the ways in which her art might have evolved had her parents been more supportive of their young daughter's aspirations.

With college graduation came marriage to Fred Kutner, a move to Chicago, and the completion of a masters degree in social work at the University of Illinois in 1960. Although she wasn't actively creating art during this period, she and Fred were avid gallery and museum goers. Fred and Natalie had three children: Michael Alan born in 1962, Jean Susan in 1964, and Lynn Sharon in 1968. The experiences of marriage and motherhood with the various roles and labors that constitute "domesticity" would become one of the dominant themes in Natalie Kutner's art. For example, her work highlights the complex, dynamic and sometimes contentious relationship between the responsibilities of motherhood and the exclusion from activities and opportunities that might otherwise be available. Feminist theory both honors and critiques the ambivalence – or polyvalence – of motherhood, and while it is unknown whether Natalie was familiar with such theories and debates during the years with her young children, her later works are strongly focused on child-rearing and the domestic realm. Works such as *Cloud, 1996; Ascend/Descend, 1996; Ladder of Virtue, 1997; and Love, Honor, and Obey* utilize in their conception and construction many of the implements and objects associated with cooking – one of the most obvious activities which a mother and wife fulfills and embraces, providing – through her labor – nourishment and pleasure to her family. These works, however, upend the implements of food preparation, transforming them into threatening and potentially dangerous objects. They clearly demonstrate an ambivalence towards and awareness of how the allocations of power and responsibility in the domestic realm can impinge upon and frustrate women's experience of parenting and "homemaking" as well as impede their ability to live full and purposeful lives outside the home.

In the mid-1990's, the Kutners attended the Orthodox wedding of a relative in Jerusalem. Fred and Natalie both strongly identified as modern, essentially secular Jews, and the world of orthodoxy, bound by fixed laws and regulations ("Halacha") that determined and made purposeful every aspect of life was largely foreign to them. Natalie was no doubt aware that married Orthodox women must completely cover their hair with wigs or scarves.

She now found herself in two situations: the wedding and a planned visit to the "wailing wall" (the last remnant of the 2nd Temple and the symbol of Jewish religious yearning for 2,000 years) that required her to cover her hair as well. This sparked her interest and investigation into the erotic and sentimental (male) fantasies and taboos projected onto female hair, and I have included a number of her hair pieces in this exhibition. Created from 1996-1997, the works are obviously sexual and, at times, even sexy. They also are evidence of a vigorous capacity for irony and pun. Her fearless use of vaginal imagery – a practice that more than two decades earlier Judy Chicago had described as "central core" imagery – was confluent with her awareness of the eroticized sentimentality with which women's hair was regarded in the Victorian era. Locks of hair were not uncommonly given and cherished as tokens of affection, functioning as talismanic "keepsakes" or souvenirs of a loved one who "passed on." Kutner's use of embroidery hoops references that era as well as the restricted forms of art-making – needle-point, embroidery, for instance-- that women were encouraged to master.

My first thoughts on seeing Natalie Kutner's work and learning something of her history led me to regard her as an artist who worked essentially in isolation. Although she submitted pieces to juried exhibitions and was delighted by the occasional sale, she never pursued the triumvirate of art-world power – critics, curators, gallerists – that confer the prestige and stature that many artists work very hard to acquire. However, as my friend and colleague Lanny De Vuono, an associate professor of art at the University of Colorado Denver, points out, Kutner was not working in "isolation." Her work gives clear evidence that she was in active inner "dialogue" with many of the artists who achieved prominence and/or notoriety during the decades in which she herself was most active and productive – feminist artists for sure but, perhaps less obviously, the impact of Conceptualism and Minimalism also insinuated itself into her work.

Natalie Kutner died of Parkinson Disease in April 2014. Although I know that some difficult and sensitive questions arose for Fred in the process of reviewing with me his wife's prodigious artistic production, he was a genuine and generous guide, answering all my questions intelligently and directly. In the process of organizing this exhibition, he and I have become good friends, meeting regularly for breakfast and conversations that are wide-ranging and satisfying. I am grateful to him for his willingness to be so open, direct and vulnerable and for his support and encouragement. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge, as always, Dr. Therese Jones whose sanity and good sense are evident in every aspect of this exhibition.

Simon Zalkind, Curator



Childhood, Zipper Head, 1992
bronze, 7" x 6" x 6"