Margaret Kilgallen: that’s where the beauty is.

January 31–May 17, 2020

Mueller Family Gallery
Cohen Family Gallery & Cahoon Lounge
Margaret Kilgallen (b. 1967, Washington, DC; d. 2001, San Francisco) studied at Stanford University, CA, and Colorado College, Colorado Springs. Exhibitions have taken place at: REDCAT, Los Angeles (2005); Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (both 2004); Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, San Jose Museum of Art, CA (both 2002); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, DESTE Foundation Centre for Contemporary Art, Athens (both 2001); and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (both 2000).
Margaret Kilgallen

American artist Margaret Kilgallen (1967–2001) died at the young age of thirty-three, leaving behind an impressive body of work with roots in the long-standing histories of printmaking, American and non-Western folk history and folklore, and feminist strategies of representation. *That’s where the beauty is.* brings to light the astonishing visual complexity of Kilgallen’s short career, highlighting the major themes that unify her multilayered practice. Using her exhibition history as a chronological tool, the exhibition begins with works from her first solo show at the Drawing Room (1997), through to her first museum exhibition, *Hammer Projects: Margaret Kilgallen* (2001), and her final installation *Main Drag* (2001), created for the exhibition *East Meets West: “Folk” and Fantasy from the Coasts* at the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia (2001).

Kilgallen fervently believed that women should be more visible within the visual landscape and was committed to inspiring a younger generation of women. She wanted her work to “change the emphasis on what’s important when looking at a woman” and was steadfast in her celebration of the achievements of women who had been forgotten, ignored, or never fully recognized. At the core of her practice was the belief that beauty can be found in the humblest of places and that everything should be made by hand—scaled in relation to the human body. Interviewed for Art21 on PBS shortly before she passed away, Kilgallen explained:

> I like to see people’s hand in the world, anywhere in the world; it doesn’t matter to me where it is. And in my own work, I do everything by hand. I don’t project or use anything mechanical, because even though I do spend a lot of time trying to perfect my line work and my hand, my hand will always be imperfect because it’s human. And I think it’s the part that’s off that’s interesting, that even if I’m doing really big letters, and I spend a lot of time going over the line and over the line and trying to make it straight, I’ll never be able to make it straight. From a distance, it might look straight, but when you get close up, you can always see the line waver. And I think that’s where the beauty is.

Taking its title directly from Kilgallen, the exhibition reflects on the lasting power of her ideas and images while bringing front and center an aesthetic that reminds us that we need not only look within the commercial mainstream or readily accessible narratives for inspiration and empowerment.

Kilgallen’s celebration of the handmade pinpoints material culture’s power to reveal a greater understanding of the human condition. It is a record of a time and place, allowing us the chance to feel empathy and personal culpability within our own position in the world. Yet, what she recognized, above all else, is that by sharing, we might better understand ourselves. And *that’s where the beauty is.*
Margaret Kilgallen, Untitled, ca. 1999.
Acrylic on paper, 15 x 21 1/2 in (38.1 x 54.6 cm).
Courtesy the Estate of Margaret Kilgallen
and Ratio 3, San Francisco. Photo: Tony Prikryl
My artwork is influenced by my day job of making and repairing books, my past education in letterpress printing, and my observation of present-day forms of communication such as lettering, signs, and markings. Books and letterform have been the basis of the transmission of knowledge and a mode of communication for several thousand years. They have become so ingrained in our culture that they are often taken for granted. Today, so much emphasis is put on computer skills and communication through the internet that it is rare to receive a hand-written letter. I am interested in things made by the human hand.

Graffiti and hobo train markings are very simple forms of communication and self-expression. They are examples of the basic human instinct to mark and change our surroundings. Although the culture of graffiti and that of the train hobos are very different, they share a similar outcome, hand-written traces. It is the form of expression, whether it be lettering or imagery, as well as the person and culture it reflects, that intrigues me.

Our dependency on technology limits our ability to be self-reliant, while at the same time we are increasingly isolated from one another. I am interested in making things that show evidence of the human hand. It is important for me to be able to rely on my own skills to produce work that incorporates organic, graphic imagery and letterforms. I paint these images onto various materials including discarded paper endsheets from books, metal galley trays once used to store letterpress type, and primed wood. I present them together with images, shapes, and letters painted directly on the wall, and found objects such as used soap and matchboxes filled with insects, seeds, and other organic material. The overall feeling of the installation is nostalgic and implies the decay of culture.

Artist statement from The Drawing Room brochure produced on the occasion of her solo exhibition, Three Sheets to The Wind, on view at The Drawing Room (part of The Drawing Center), 40 Wooster Street, New York, NY, from September 13–November 1, 1997.
Margaret Kilgallen’s *that’s where the beauty is.*
was organized by moCa’s Chief Curator
Courtenay Finn for the Aspen Art Museum, where
it was presented from January 12-June 16, 2019.

moCa’s presentation in the Mueller Family
Gallery, the Rosalie & Morton Cohen Family
Gallery, and the Dick & Doreen Cahoon Lounge
runs from January 31-May 17, 2020.

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**COVER**
Margaret Kilgallen, *Untitled*
ca. 1999, Acrylic on wood
17 1/4 x 7 1/2 in (43.185 cm x 19.05
cm). Courtesy the Estate of
Margaret Kilgallen and Ratio 3,
San Francisco