

# KITTY BROPHY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN LOWRY

apartamento - Tucson





Kitty Brophy epitomises how perception and reality are often at odds, how assumptions can be frequently wrongheaded, and the ways superficial attributes can mask deeper, darker, much more interesting depths of the soul. Behind and beyond the chic demeanour and sunny disposition is a person committed to her powerful, uncompromising art, belying the impression some observers might have of an unobjectionable, albeit elegant and stylish, rather respectable woman driving her soccer mom SUV around suburban Oro Valley in the Santa Catalina Foothills. To judge this particular book by its cover would be misguided. Also as a prelude, and impossible not to mention, is Kitty's involvement in the oft-cited and almost mythic downtown New York milieu of the late '70s and early '80s, memorialised in *Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village, 1978–1983* at the Museum of Modern Art in 2017–18. An elemental aspect of her history, surely, and undoubtedly pivotal and groundbreaking creative endeavours among a coterie of lovers and friends, many of who went on to fame and fortune or conversely early deaths or obscurity. Avoiding all those fates, pedigree secured, following her 12-year New York sojourn, she set out on a different life journey. Hardcore mountain climbing in the Eastern Sierras, earning a bachelor's degree in literature and creative writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz, toiling in the trenches of Hollywood, living, farming, and running a cleaning business on the Big Island of Hawaii, and in due course relocating to her home state of Arizona and taking up residence in Tucson. In person, Kitty can be simultaneously innocuous and incendiary, possessed of a risqué and hilarious sense of humour deployed for comic effect and in service of biting cultural commentary, some of its spiciness no doubt honed navigating vicissitudes only hinted at in the following pages.

Having fully arrived at a mature artistic style and life-affirming attitude, her youthful exploits are now just more grist to the mill (and the basis for very entertaining stories) and a fraction of her life experience. Galvanised, energised, and productive, she creates artwork straddling a fence between outright incitement, uncomfortable truths, and luxuriant, perverse, haunted gorgeousness. A youthful devotion to Charles Addams and especially her lodestar Aubrey Beardsley is partially responsible, but her breathtaking blend of satire, frankness, razor-sharp social criticism, and graphically arresting and lush paint handling is all her own. A keen and trenchant interrogator of deeply personal desires, pusher of the proverbial envelope, her atypical combination of righteous anger and hedonistic pleasure manages to delight and at times truly surprise.



This is not provocation for the sake of it but instead a sincere investigation of injustice and wrongdoing wrapped up in a complex, not easily parsed package. Painful messages and meanings are legion, but so is undeniable, exalted eroticism. Not soft-core titillation or effete pornography, instead it's heartfelt artwork that unsettles and raises topical and at times disagreeable questions about sex, selfhood, our convoluted relations to each other, and many other nuanced societal dilemmas grappled with daily by every member of the species. At times polarising, offending liberal and conservative pieties alike, her art is a lightning rod and barometer of what's allowed and what's not. Strange that genitalia in the drawn or painted form can still have this power, and, in her channelling of archaic and sometimes inexplicable taboos, can be both transgressive and shocking. No small achievement in a world in which supposedly nothing is anymore and an age oversaturated with contrived, repulsive goading. Within all this is the imperative to not always be easy, to challenge, to provoke not only thought but to summon farce and Eros in equal measure. This is art made by someone who embodies that in their life and work, and by example emboldens others to test authority and not be afraid, to be as free as anyone to do whatever they want and be human in all its myriad, impenetrable, and ungovernable ways.

#### How are things in Tucson?

Hot, but every day the big monsoons blow in so it's fabulous. Last night I went hiking at seven and there was lightning in the sunset and huge clouds. It's so exciting. I like my drama in nature.

#### In Catalina State Park?

Yes. There are numerous trails and because it's so hot I start kind of late. On paper it looks like a short hike, but it's strenuous and I've run into people who don't even have water. Once I saw this young woman wearing Keds, carrying her chihuahua. She made it, but they also have to rescue people because of overheating, dehydration, or sunstroke.

Here in Lake Tahoe, the winter version is poor souls getting lost in blizzards and their bodies being found either a few days or several months later. Nature doesn't care about you.

#### Speaking of snow, didn't you take ski trips growing up?

We'd go up to Flagstaff or Sunrise, and also went to Squaw Valley. My immediate family didn't have much money for things like ski clothes, so it was just jeans and crappy long underwear, but for a family of seven they did know how to travel on a budget and have good experiences. Once, with friends, we went to Purgatory with everyone piled into one hotel room and we had to rotate, two people per bed, but there were six people, so each night two people got the floor. I just remember that the guys were so smelly.

#### Skiing can certainly produce a dank odour. Wet clothes mixed with lots of sweat, exacerbated later by indoor overheating.

All those hormones and the guys, it never occurred to them to take a shower or change their socks. We're all in one tiny room with the heat going and then we'd go out and drink that three-percent beer. I'd always use my older sister's ID, posing as her—we looked so much alike it was never a problem. In the '70s, teenagers were allowed to travel together or alone a lot. I think our parents were just very naive about all the real dangers lurking out there and were also too consumed with their own crumbling lives and the seismic shifts in the culture.

#### Didn't you visit La Jolla quite a bit too, just north of San Diego?

Yes, my grandfather's wife, Jenny Bell, she'd been married to Sam Bell, the potato chip king, of Bell Potato Chips. Later Jenny met my grandfather George Hepburn, they were in their 60s and hooked up and got married. We'd stay there on the cliffs in the beautiful Spanish-style main house, but also Sam and Jenny had hired Dale Naegle to design the modernist guest pavilion down on the beach. A funicular took you down and you walked across a drawbridge to enter what's often referred to as the Mushroom House.

#### Looking out over the notoriously nudist Black's Beach, right?

Black's was very much a nudist beach with mostly old men and US navy guys looking for topless girls or gay sex. There was a little rock wall at the base to create a private area for beach chairs, and us teenage girls were eating lobster and drinking champagne with old naked men walking past, staring, literally









five feet away. We weren't scandalised at all, just annoyed, like, 'Dude, get your junk out of my face'.

Why is it that nudists are always pitching horseshoes?  
Or playing volleyball.

Two things that probably should never be done naked. So while all that was going on, you were already drawing?

I've been drawing my whole life. My mother was very creative and my father was a writer and took photos and all their friends were writers and artists. Even though they were

demarcation line around age 16 when I go from fashion to suddenly everybody is naked and tortured and then I got into S&M imagery.

So clothes became superfluous and suddenly there are macabre leanings.

It wasn't so much macabre, it just became less about the exterior experience and more about expressing what was going on inside my head, which was a big old jumbled tortured mess because I was a 16-year-old girl, you know? I'd camp out in the living room with my drawing board and dress up my sisters and cousins, or undress them, the girls with holsters, guns, ammunition belts, and cowboy hats, since my



pretty conservative and Catholic, they hung out with an intellectual and sophisticated social set and because we were raised that way, we had to mingle at their cocktail parties. As a child, I was interested in fashion and wanted to be an illustrator and once I discovered Antonio Lopez, I knew that's what I wanted to do.

Oh, wow. Tell me how you first came upon Antonio Lopez?

In magazines. I was reading fashion magazines and at high school was in the gifted program, and then what happened was I became a certain age and my hormones changed and all the clothes came off the figures. There's a

father had all this Western gear. I'd turn on David Bowie, get a beer, I could smoke, and I'd draw from live figures. My parents were totally fine with all this, and when I'd show them they'd say, 'We don't understand this, but we're really happy you're doing it'.

That's something to be grateful for, that support. Did you have some secret source material for your darker, more sexual leanings?

It's not like I had an S&M collection, but I did have *Playboy* and *Penthouse* and *Oui*.

We've talked about girlie mags, men's magazines, whatever you want to call them, from



that time. Compared to the deluge of gross, practically gynaecological porn that followed, those were so much better, really racy but wholesome somehow, titillating, and it goes without saying, inspirational.

That's what informed my aesthetic and me personally and my art, and that's why even now all my figures have very elaborate pubic hair. I'm from an era when women had very natural bodies and natural breasts, bushes, and some with hair under their arms.

The '70s have been vilified relentlessly and also, conversely, overly romanticised. They do seem like a far-off, exotic foreign country



from our contemporary vantage point. Case in point, adolescents and teenagers were much more part of the workforce. I had summer jobs starting when I was 11, which could have been a violation of child labour laws and does seem a bit peculiar in retrospect.

There was a huge recession and nobody had any money. I worked at Village Inn Pizza because in the '70s, all kids worked. Later I worked at TGI Fridays too.

No way, that's amazing, so mainstream and middle-of-the-road.

A huge learning experience for me. That was fun. That's where I got introduced to older

men and cocaine. You can't even imagine, it was *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* and single bars, and working at TGI Fridays was the mother lode. The hip place, believe it or not. Now they're such a cheesy chain.

I watched that movie recently, with Diane Keaton, and it's hard to believe her character would go to bed with such unattractive and unsympathetic assholes. I was only seven or eight when it came out, and experienced and saw that period from a child's viewpoint, which I'm sure has something to do with my antipathy.

You were a kid, so those weren't your formative years. Whereas the '70s were mine. It was such an important movie because it captured that whole scene. That whole time was so liberating and freeing as a young girl, but I expected a lot more, to be honest. I was enjoying the sexual revolution and drugs, though I didn't know how to handle it because I was living a life that was much more adult than my brain and body were prepared for. When I was working at TGI Fridays, there was the bartender and another guy and I said, 'OK, whichever one of you has a Porsche, I'll go home with'. Well, of course it was the bartender, 27 years old, with a long moustache, and though I was just being funny and ironic, now I've got to go home with him because I'm true to my word. It never occurred to me that you could just say no.

That's all so revelatory and also very troubling, in hindsight. But on the plus side of that era, I know you just read the late, great Duncan Hannah's '70s notebooks that came out a couple of years ago as *Twentieth-Century Boy*. Oh, that book is so great. His references are different than mine because he was older, but we were all in the same milieu. Believe it or not, age mattered then. It's not like today. I have friends who are in their 20s and ones in their 70s and I think it's great, the more integration in every way is much better, and I feel like that's what we were fighting for back then. And it only took 40 years. I mean, why not just have a big mishmash? That's kind of what Club 57 was all about.

A place for the freaks and outsiders of all stripes, a bunch of 20 year olds and a quirky librarian or middle-aged physics professor who wandered in and felt welcome there too. So we've gotten out of Phoenix into your New







York years, starting in 1978.

I'd been accepted into seven of the top art schools, but I knew I needed to go to New York. Speaking of the age difference, going this one time to Studio 54 with Kenny Scharf, we thought, 'God, all these people are so old!' And they were probably only in their late 20s or 30s. The scene was way too rich, too celebrity, and too old for us. Soon we wanted to be with young people like ourselves, and that's when the downtown scene started developing. Around 1979, suddenly there were so many clubs and bands and so much to do. Danceteria and the Mudd Club and Club 57 and we never cared anymore about the other stuff. But I should say, I was into disco, not punk.

I don't really see you as punk, though you have some very punk attitudes.

I appreciated the message and aesthetics and I definitely related to punk because I was always rebelling against everything. But it was just so male and felt kind of threatening and there was too much testosterone. I liked disco, the music, the style, nylons, and platform shoes, and doing my hair and make-up. What I'm saying is that I was exemplifying that fashion world as a teenager in Phoenix, Arizona, thinking I was going to go to New York and be embraced by it. But my tastes changed once I hooked up with Kenny and we met all our East Village friends and that whole disco thing faded away. When you're young, things change so fast; you're into something for four months and then you're into something else. Initially I was attracted to that uptown modelling world, but once I did get into it, there was so much exploitation and sexual harassment and abuse. Opposite to that, I liked the downtown scene and modelling for Betsey Johnson and Anna Sui and for Steven Meisel's art illustration class at Parsons. All that was fun and collaborative and, 'Hey, let's put on a fashion show'. But as far as so-called real modelling, my dreams all got shattered. It's hard to be disillusioned.

A trope that gets repeated over and over, which doesn't mean it's any less tragic every time. And many times the most interesting and deserving are the ones who burn out or self-destruct or get left behind. But eventually you got sober and took a path away from all that and that's why we are talking now, thankfully. Closer to the present, there's a perhaps

unavoidable nostalgia for and fascination with those years as it relates to your history. There's no need to revisit all that too much in this context, but I did want to ask about one of the lesser-known figures in that sphere, Tseng Kwong Chi.

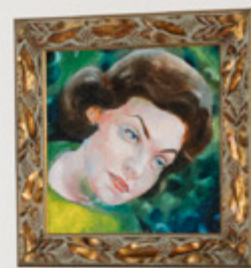
He was a very close friend of mine and our entire group. Kwong was a fabulous artist and also did a lot of commercial photography work, whether it was for *Soho Weekly News* or bigger magazines. That's how he supported himself while he was doing his *Ambiguous Ambassador* self-portraits, wearing the Mao suit. Those three prints in my bedroom are photos he took of me wearing outrageous



outfits by our friend Shawn McQuate, who designed under the name AMMO, that were shot for the *Soho News* under Kim Hastreiter, who was the style editor there before she created *Paper*. Kwong was really fun and intelligent and also quite a bit older than us and much more worldly. But he didn't really talk about his past, and actually none of us did that much, as we were all very focused on the present and so excited to be doing our thing and having so much fun.

So how did things play out in New York? I left in 1990. It was over for me and most of my friends after so many of our group died







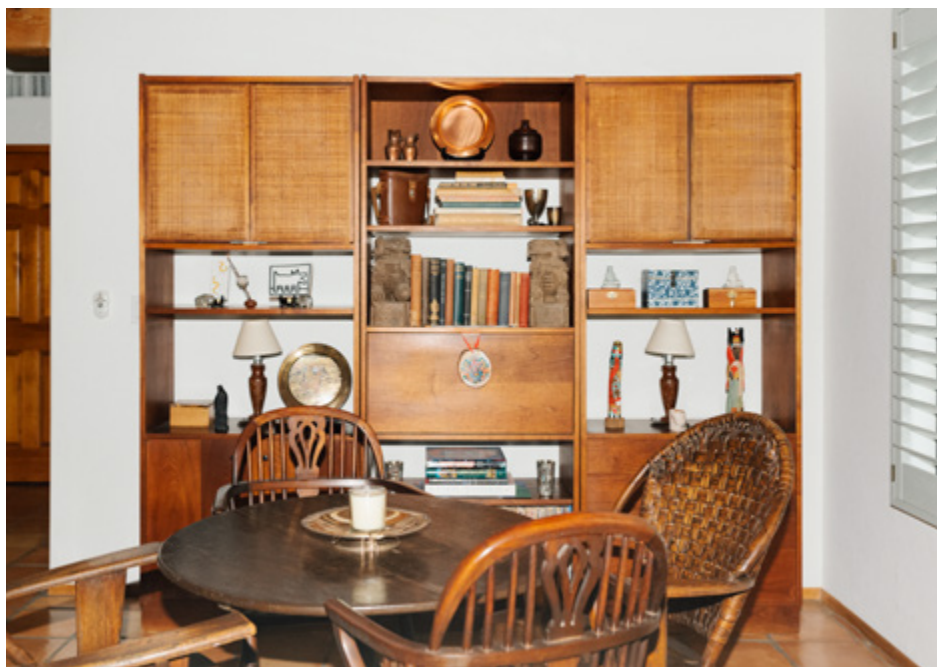
from AIDS or drugs. Before that, I'd gone to Paris but then run away from my modelling contract due to hating the way I was treated. It was a glamorous human-trafficking situation of indentured servitude, and I was too afraid to speak up. First I flew to London and hung out with Steve Strange at the Blitz and avoided eating bad English food by just consuming beer, then returned to New York, settled back into my apartment in the East Village, and landed a job at Veniero's Pasticceria & Caffè on East 11th Street. As a former model, this was heaven because I could finally eat as many Italian pastries as I wanted, and boy, did I. I went back to art school and worked there

met Anne-Marie Russell, who was extremely friendly and welcoming.

She was so happy that you were there, undoubtedly. What about Tucson John?

I'd come to take care of my mom and didn't know anybody, and he was great because he knew everyone and showed me around. He was so sweet and friendly and I'm always grateful to him.

He was a Tucson ambassador and booster nonpareil, always positive, an integral figure. Also Elizabeth Cherry must factor into this, since she put on that exhibit of your work at



boxing and ringing up pastries, when one day the boss told me I had a phone call. It was my Paris modelling agency begging me to come back, but I stood my ground and stayed put.

You got out and there's a long gap after when you lived in California and Hawaii continuing to paint, but let's get to when you moved to Tucson and began focusing and exhibiting your art a lot more and re-emerged socially. I came to MOCA Tucson because Kenny encouraged me to when I moved here in 2014. He'd been on a panel at the museum and really loved the vibe and said everybody's super cool, so I went to a curator talk and

the Clifton Hotel. I remember driving up to Oro Valley to look at it right before that and it felt like alien territory, even though it's half an hour from downtown. Those big suburban houses, the wide streets, at the base of Pusch Ridge, it wasn't quite what I'd expected.

Well, it's not like this is my chosen environment, but I wanted to live this close to nature and the layout of the house and all that is great. I'm fine with where I am, even if it's sort of bougie and I have no community up here.

There's an amusing disparity with treasures of kink hidden away up in superficially vapid Oro Valley and you in person, in contrast to







assumptions people might make based on your subject matter.

Well, I don't look goth. If somebody saw my art, they might think I was much more goth or punk-looking. I have no tattoos, no piercings.

To your credit. Dualities and contradictions are frequently what make a person intriguing.

After that, I was in *Gardens of the Pure* with Emma Kohlmann and Alice Mackler at MOCA, and that led to Jenny Borland and Matt Sova putting on *I'm Still Here* in 2018 at Jenny's in LA. That was a really big deal for me, for a number of reasons, one being that K. K. Barrett, the production designer, saw it and included my artwork in the movie *Birds of Prey*, and also that the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art bought two of my pieces. For that show I'd already been painting more, and my work had become very, very politically oriented. That particular piece, *Another Day at the Office*, hangs in my house and shows a progression of a female figure starting out full with a face becoming just a hole. It's about having your personhood and your sense of agency erased to just basically becoming a vagina and a mouth. Unfortunately, sometimes in our jobs as women, that's what we end up being treated like.

That's distressing and illuminating, and we'll return to those motivations, but first, technically speaking, you're mostly using gouache?

Yes. So in a sense it was a big shift for me adding lots of paint and these large colour fields. *Another Day at the Office* was the beginning of when I started these very graphic pieces where everything was lining up and I was dividing the page in a certain way. And I started doing extremely dense backgrounds.

Around 2015, they shift almost exclusively to red, black, and white. Was Kazimir Malevich and suprematism an influence, or Bauhaus?

Not at all, directly. But I was educated at one point in art history and I've educated myself and seen a lot, so who knows what seeps in. We're informed by everything: what we read, films, music, all sorts of things. I have to say the only artists that really influenced my work that I can point to definitively are Gustav Klimt and Aubrey Beardsley. The minute I discovered Beardsley, it just changed my life forever.

Often the women in your paintings appear to have penises, and I'm wondering if there are in fact penises or strap-ons.

No, no, no. Not strap-ons. They're either trans or hermaphrodites. Sometimes people have breasts and penises. I like to be representative of everyone.

There are a lot of threes, trios of figures intertwined or interacting. Do you have a thing with threes?

Yes, I like threes. In terms of a design, threes just look better than fours. I like odd numbers and you can triangulate. But then I've got some doubles in there too. And the black heads, they're S&M masks, for the most part. Like that fantastic artist Nancy Grossman, who I think has a similar sensibility. Depending on the piece, the masks are often about visibility and invisibility and what a figure wants shown and what they want hidden. Sometimes masks allow us to be more liberated because they hide the face the world knows us by, and one can often be more uninhibited and exhibitionist behind masks. Also women especially use make-up and hair to create a mask or a face or image they want to put out to the world. I'm getting into this in detail to make the point that it's much deeper at times than mere costuming. As far as they are interpreted, or read, I only have so much control. I know what I'm doing and I know what my intentions are, but as an artist right now, it can be confining.

It's a paradox that the faction that claims to champion freedom of self-expression seems so interested sometimes in policing other people's actions and specifically what they can and cannot depict in their art.

But people on the right do plenty of cancel culture too.

I know, both sides, it's distressing. Modern day *damnatio memoriae* abetted and exponentially expanded by the corrosive megaphone of social media.

I try to make my art and my figures all-inclusive. That's why they usually never have hair. Sometimes they have penises and breasts, sometimes they don't. We're all just humans and we're in this big melting pot. We're all struggling with all these issues and things. On that topic, I'm 62 and it's not that I'm ancient, but I've lived through a lot. What my young friends often don't understand is that



back in my day, the people who were getting cancelled were me and my friends for being liberal or gay or trans. And we fought against it. There's an aspect to the younger generation that can be so self-righteous.

There's a Bertrand Russell quote that's germane here: 'Much that passes as idealism is disguised hatred or disguised love of power'. I'm an artist and can't be told what to do. If you're going to deal with serious subjects, whether it's politics or feminism or current events, you're going to get a backlash, and that's OK. I understand that, but I'm not going to just paint a bowl of fruit or sailboats like Winslow Homer. Though I think he's incredible. It goes back to not painting to please other people and not living your life to please other people, because everything about me, my art, and my lifestyle puts somebody off somewhere, you know? It's weird because I always think I'm so innocuous and so not controversial, but trust me, someone will find something to pick me apart about. That's just human nature, I guess.

A punitively censorious environment can be trying and absurdly hypocritical. But these are the times we live in. With your work there are important formal concerns, obviously, but circling around again to motivation, anger is a salient foundational feature. That said, there's a noticeable and consistent fluctuation between, on one hand, wrathful denunciation, tempered by exuberance, playfulness, and affirmation.

You just basically summed up my art. There is that rage and it's about taking back my body, my sexuality, taking back ownership that never should have been stolen from me, but that's just the way society is. A greater rage that this is what is done to women and children and girls and even men, all the time, all over the world. I think everybody has this inside them, whether it's someone who has broken your heart or whether it's someone who abused you on a greater level. It's about that we are human beings and I've probably been guilty of it too, of stealing something from someone and hurting them, you know? I don't think anyone is not a part of that.

That's an important insight into your incentives and of key importance, but at the same time, they're women looking like they're

wearing medieval swim caps with huge, long undulating penises like tentacles and figures in elegant contrapposto stances with their hands on their asses. Sexy and even comical and I can't be the only one who thinks so. It's not pornography but certainly erotica, if that's defined as arousing sexual desire.

They are these women with giant penises or men with breasts or what have you; honestly, they're fantasy figures. No one has penises that large. Whatever somebody sees is what they see in it. And that's great. I'm all for that. Often there's a backstory, but then again some of them are absolutely just showcasing sensuality and beauty.

Paying homage to the figure and pleasures of the flesh.

Exactly. It's celebrating sexuality and the human form in all its guises, whether it's giant penises, little penises, huge ball sacks, or giant vaginas. It's all about getting over our hang-ups and celebrating being human.

There's a tension between your rhetoric and artwork that's an essential and robust component of what you do. Double and triple meanings, rawness, indicating a lively libido. Along with the pain and anger, that's just as crucial. I agree. Also they can just be beautiful to look at as figures, the painting, and the quality of the work. Some are really about just lying there, naked with legs spread, enjoying the view. The viewer is enjoying the view, and the figure lying there is enjoying being looked at and enjoying the view of what she's looking at. Quiet and sensual beauty against a sometimes very angry background. I think you can be both. I don't think it has to be one thing.

