

4-25-2015

Interview with Kathleen March

Kathleen March

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Recommended Citation

Catherine Fisher, "Interview with Kathleen March" (2015). *Makers@PPL: Stories in the Making audio interviews*. 10. http://digitalcommons.portlandlibrary.com/pplhistory_makers_audio_interviews/10

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Interviewee: Kathleen March
Interviewer: Catherine Fisher
Makers@PPL, Portland, Maine
4.25.2015

CF: We are at the Portland Public Library for Makers@PPL Maker's Fair. This is Catherine Fisher and it is the 25th of April, year 2015. And I'm here with Kathleen March, who has come by, generously, to talk about what you make. Right? So, where does your creativity take you? Where does it lie?

KM: I think it started with watching mother and grandmother crochet and embroider and preserve canned food. From there, I think it was that, when I went to school, I liked school, I liked making things with words. One of the things that I always wanted to be was a writer. I ended up being a teacher, an educator, but I never really stopped being a writer. Also, I never stopped loving fibers and art. I just didn't give myself enough time to pursue those interests because I needed to make a living. To make a long story short, I was fortunate to be able to take early retirement from the University of Maine, and the first thing I discovered, at about the same time, were book arts, or artist books. I went to the Stone House course with Rebecca Goodale last summer, then another art course in the fall, then another art course this spring, and low and behold, I'm hooked on books. But hooked on books in the sense of making them. So I can combine my love of word and image and hopefully can continue to be a lifelong learner. That's not the only thing: sometimes I will include the crocheting in with the books, so they become multimedia works. One of my pieces in my exhibit is crocheted, and both books have fiber in them. So I guess that's the story. Colors are just fabulous.

CF: Color is a special motivator for you, is it?

KM: Yeah. I go through stages where I love one color or I love one combination more than another. As a child, my favorite color was yellow, and I found out not too many people like yellow. I said, "But it's such a happy color, I don't understand." But when I go to work, recently, it's been blue. I remember reading years and years ago about Picasso and his blue period and his pink, rose period, whatever. I said, "This doesn't really happen." Well, I think it does. I think that the colors take you to a place. Actually, blue and yellow together take me to a very nice place, so I guess that's probably why I'm doing it, along with the texture and the materials, and the process is very important to me. With books, you can do anything.

CF: Crochet, of course, is textural. But would you say is crochet is also textual?

KM: Yes. Yes, because in languages, and I do Spanish, English, and Portuguese, the same word for text and to weave ... it's the same root. So a text is words that are woven together. I've constantly got that in my mind. I made a scroll book that was very simple to make, but it was crocheted. It wasn't made out of paper or parchment or anything like that. I just used the crocheting to lend the double meaning. I'm interested in poems that talk about weaving or crocheting or whatever you do with fibers to put them together into a surface that's like a page. But the page also will, if it gets big enough, it will cover you and keep you warm. It will comfort you. It does all sorts of things.

CF: So you're wrapped in a book?

KM: Yes. Yes. Books are home.

CF: Books are home?

KM: Yeah. You can walk right—well, there's a theory, a feminist theory, that says women walk into books and they move around inside them. Books are spaces for them. I'm not sure if I believe that, because I'm not sure that men don't do that too. However, they say that men hear the voices more and women relate to the space. I don't know, but it's a nice thought, because I know that when I was little, I would be reading a book, and my mother would call me for supper, and I never heard her. Because I was so in the flow, as they call it, of the creativity of the author. I just have to stay close to books, and whatever it is that I do seems to take a ... like, the crocheting might take rectangular form or long form, but it's still related to the page. In my mind, it's still related to the page.

CF: Do the dimensions of your artist books vary?

KM: Well, the last, the two that I did—it's funny, I didn't plan on it, but they're very long. They're like rivers. That also ties in with nature, and fiber does anyway. These tended to be long, and I think of the image of Penelope, who wove and wove and wove, and wouldn't give in to any of the suitors. She had to unravel. I don't like to unravel. I just like to keep working, keep crocheting, and make something long that shows that you've been ... Two feet of text or cloth or fabric, at one point. A month later, you're at twenty feet. That type of thing, that shows connection. There is a book that I wanted to mention. It's on my reading list because I don't have time yet. It's called *Crocheting Saved My Life*. The whole idea of how crocheting, knitting, or felting, or any of these—sewing, embroidery—they order your life. Women have done this for so many years. Centuries. Generations. There's something very calming and very soothing and very healthy about sitting with that needle, with those needles, or that hook, or working on a project that later becomes a work of art.

CF: There are a couple of things I want to ask you about. When you're saying, "At this point, I have one foot," and then at [that] point, you have two feet ... Would you say that somewhere embedded in that piece that you're making is sort of a record of your making?

KM: I think so, because you really do look at all the stitches. But they become part of you because you have produced them. It's a body of work, just like a body of—if you write ten novels. All of those are kind of a documentation of where you've been, what you've thought. That's why I'm not one of the people who's in love with virtual reality and digital art and things like that. Because I really need the tactile, the touch, the textile, the feeling of reality. I grew up in a time when that was what you had. You had really real sheets made of real fiber, and people sat around and did things with their hands. Sometimes they did things with wood and they used other tools. But that's what I grew up with. And I think that's why I came here, when I was told about it.

CF: You said now that you've had the opportunity to stop teaching, you've taken a few classes. And then you were talking about women sitting ... you know, that act of making is so important. Do you like to make in community? Make in a space with other people at the same time?

KM: Yeah. I like the being alone sometimes. And I really like being with a group and just enjoying and laughing and talking about what we're doing and looking at each other's work and offering something. I taught for more than thirty years, so I'm used to being in a group. I'm used to being the leader or the guide—let's say the guide—and telling people what to do. But as the years went by, I didn't want to tell people what to do. I wanted to encourage them to do it themselves. So when you go to a class, and I've noticed ever since I took the Stone House course last summer—and I'm taking it again this summer—I have noticed that a lot of mature women—men too, but especially women—are very interested in art. A lot of people, it's like they've been waiting their whole lives to come to art. I don't think this society values it enough. I think a lot of people do. I think on the whole, higher education doesn't value the arts enough. I think we need all of the knowledge. We need the technology, the science—we need all of that. But we also need the humanities and the arts. I tell my students that every single day in class, if I'm in class, "If you feel the urge to do something creative, you need to do it. It's not all about the job you're going to get," because that's not good. I just think that we need to think more about the value of creative thinking and producing things ourselves. Not importing it all for as cheaply as we can because, unfortunately, that's proven fatal. Some of it. Because some people don't have scruples—many people don't have scruples when it comes to turning a profit. So we don't make our clothes. We buy them cheaply, and they're made in sweatshops. I've known stories about that. I think that anything we can do to be more connected to the art that we are able to make as human beings would be very healthy for the world.

CF: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about in terms of your own making? We didn't talk too much about your writing and what kind of writing.

KM: I'm really interested in fiction, novels, and I have a number of things. But again, I wasn't told that I could be a writer. I wasn't told that I could be really anything. Nobody took notice because girls didn't matter as much. It sounds like I'm saying the same old thing, but it's true. I figured I'd like to finish four novels and get them published. But right now, I'm also having the time of my life learning, like a 101 student, how to have a book not just be text, not just be words on the page, but also be color and form and maybe three dimensional. I have no desire to be famous or important or recognized. I just want to be able to explore these worlds at this point in my life.

CF: Wonderful. Thank you so much.