

## Raw and Unapologetic: Kim Dorland's Portraits of Wife Lori at Mike Weiss Gallery



Kim Dorland /For Lori / Installation View / Mike Weiss Gallery, New York / 2011 / Image courtesy of Mike Weiss Gallery, New York.

**NEW YORK, NY.-** The following is an interview of artist Kim Dorland by his wife and muse, Lori Seymour, in response to his exhibition For Lori at [Mike Weiss Gallery](#).

**Lori Seymour:** Why do you paint me so much?

**Kim Dorland:** In the beginning I felt like it wasn't cool to say that I paint my wife because I love her, so I would say that you were my stand-in or that it was because I knew you so well – and there's truth to that. But, at the end of the day, I paint you because I love you and I miss you when I'm alone in the studio.

**LS:** So you're admitting to the smoochy truth of it?

**KD:** Yes. I paint you because I adore you.

**LS:** And why do you think that resonates so much with your audience? They're very popular paintings.

**KD:** Because they're really truthful. I think people recognize the intimate relationship between us – the deep intimacy between two people who've been together since we were kids.

**LS:** It's strange for me to be "that girl in the painting" You have to admit it's very strange how many people we meet that are like "hey, I have a painting of you in my living room."

**KD:** It's crazy. But it makes sense. There are literally no paintings of you left in my collection except for the ones I held back because I thought they were important.

**LS:** Portraiture is pretty "conservative." And painting the same person over and over and over again and, basically, admitting to your monogamy is a little conservative too. But you're not known as a conservative painter because of your aggressive material use and some of the other subjects you've painted.

**KD:** The portraits started around 2007. I had show after show after show. And I was painting like a madman to keep up. So I was going into the studio, making a painting and leaving and feeling a little agitated, and I thought to myself 'what if you chose something "boring" like a portrait?' And the obvious choice was you. The paintings I was doing at the time – the suburban scenes – were big spaces with large groups of people inside of them. So focusing in on one person in a fairly conservative mode was a real challenge. But then to disrupt the whole process I would work on the painting for a long time. I'm typically a fast painter, so that turned into this material thing, where the material started to evolve and take on form. And as I was painting it became clear that the portrait's not done until it represents you, your presence.

**LS:** So, talk about the material approach, because the way that you paint me, it doesn't necessarily look like me—

**KD:** It does though. They're identical to you.

**LS:** But they're not literal. People ask me about this all the time and I've never quite been able to put my finger on it. You're able to work them until they become me, even though, technically, it's just a mess of paint.

**KD:** Material is obviously the thing that I'm very interested in. And, for me, painting in a "realistic" way looks weird. It doesn't fit me. I want the paint to become like the flesh, for the paint to carry your presence. And it generally doesn't work until the paint becomes – the only word I can think of is "explicit." And I don't mean explicit in a sexual way – although there might even be that in it. It doesn't work until the material is expanded and built to a point of almost falling apart. It also references a lot of history. Like Rembrandt – that one image you always see of the nose on that one portrait. Or British painters like Aurbach and Lucien Freud...Leon Kosoff. There are a lot of people before me who have realized the presence of their subjects with a material explicitness. And that's just how it has to be with you. I couldn't imagine just painting a picture of you – it would be so boring. It would be almost trite. It doesn't really express anything. What expresses my relationship to you is heavy material.

**LS:** As your portraits of me evolved and got more and more material, the paint handling got more aggressive – a lot of slashing with palette knives and extreme thickness, paint literally thrown at the canvas. I get asked all the time, and I know you do too, about violence, whether it makes me uncomfortable the way you paint me. I've never seen it that way. I've always thought the portraits were really sweet. What do you make of that?

**KD:** That's always been unsettling to me. These are truly loving portraits of the person I know the best. I'm not trying to shock people. They're the most honest things I do. But my approach to making paintings happens to be very bombastic. At the time of a lot of the portraits in this show, I was really thinking about De Kooning and Baselitz. They're both huge influences for me. And I was thinking about the way that they approached painting. For me that's what great painting is all about. It's like a big dialogue. So for the paintings in this show – especially the 3 large portraits from 2008 ["Coy Girl," "For Matisse," "Silly Smile"] – I was thinking about a specific time of De Kooning's

work and a specific time of Baselitz's work. I was interested in the way they were moving paint around and I took it for myself. When people talk about De Kooning's women as violent, I don't see it. I think people get confused over style. It's just the way that De Kooning moved the paint around and it's just the way that I chose to move the paint around.

**LS:** But then one of the paintings is called "For Matisse."

**KD:** Matisse is the greatest colorist possibly ever. And I think about color a lot. So that was my homage to Matisse through color. Possibly those three paintings actually owes more of a debt to Cubism than to anything Matisse ever did, but I was thinking more about Matisse's color when I was doing that painting - especially that beautiful purple.

**LS:** What about someone like Alex Katz, who has painted his wife, Ava, over and over and is very well known for it? I always thought it was so touching that Ava was his muse. And then I sort of realized that you were doing the same thing with me. I didn't really put it together for a while.

**KD:** I'm a really big fan of Alex Katz - the sort of cinematic way he makes paintings. And I really love his Ava paintings. There's a long history of the muse in painting. But I never looked at anybody and said 'they paint their wife and that could be really interesting for me' this whole portrait thing came very naturally for me.

**LS:** So talk about the new painting in this show. It's the same scale, the same subject matter, but it's very pretty. I don't think anyone is going to look at this painting of me and ask about violence.

**KD:** It's a reaction or a response to the older work. My interests are different now. When I did the older portraits that was new to me. It was raw and uncut and surprising. I just emptied myself into those paintings. But now that's actually become easy. I'm finding it more challenging to make more "composed" paintings. It's not that I'm bored. I'm finding it more of a challenge to make paintings that are calm and less about the flashy licks and more about forcing myself to make something that is more restrained. Beauty is a difficult thing for me because I've always been flirting with beauty but I always had to find a way to make it ugly at the same time. Just leaving something beautiful is actually harder for me. It's like walking into a room with no clothes on.

**LS:** So are you admitting to being a grown-up?

**KD:** Yes, I'm admitting to being a grown-up. [laughs] When you're younger, it's like you have to prove yourself by adding that thing that agitates you and the viewer. It's kind of like nudging them as they're looking. I think there will always be this push and pull between beauty and aggression - that's what my work is about. But for me there's somehow more truth right now in making something with more poise and composure and actually leaving it there. When you're young irony and cynicism and nostalgia and aggression are what fuels you and it's important to go through that because you teach yourself a lot. But at some point that fuel runs dry - especially with cynicism. I suppose in a way adding some of those nasty or ugly elements to my paintings was a cynical act- cynical against beauty. But, at the end of the day, - at least this is how I feel now - cynicism has become very tiresome and beauty never does.