

Being Kathleen Walsh

A day in the mind of a California designer

By David Barringer

Photography by Zen Sekizawa

DAYDREAMS ARE SERIOUS BUSINESS. It's three blocks from home to studio, but it's only six in the morning. So Kathleen Walsh walks Vinnie to the beach. Vinnie barks at a jogger, then sniffs at a prehistoric seedpod. "No, Vinnie," she says, snatching the pod. A shimmering clatter rains out of a nearby beach house. Beer cans rattling into barrels recall her waitressing days. If something happened to her design business, she could wait tables again, if she had to. Flicking seeds, she thinks of the vacant building in the gentrified downtown, her dream store. What she wouldn't give. But it's so expensive. She tosses the seedpod and hears a volleyball thumped by the Amazonian women who populate Hermosa Beach. Vinnie noses driftwood. A man says hello. Kathleen worries she looks homeless, with her patterned sundress and her scrappy little Chihuahua mutt and her driftwood. The man passes, she pockets two pieces, and as she walks uphill, past her dream store and toward her tiny studio, she fingers the driftwood, which is forked into the satisfying shape of a wishbone.



The door to Walteria Living, her three-year-old design studio, sticks, like always. *Fix it, Kathleen*, she tells herself, shouldering it open. *Fix the air conditioner, too, while you're at it. Make your life easier, why don't you?* Kathleen motivates herself the way her resourceful hero Pippi Longstocking does, the way any creative entrepreneur learns to do: by talking¹ to herself. *You can do it, Kathleen. Get it done.* At California College of the Arts, she'd worked in the woodshop past midnight, sometimes until dawn, proving her worth to her wealthier peers, to her academic parents, to herself. Now she has her own studio. Sunlight billows into the long narrow room like a soft clarity, revealing her ceramic thornbud vases made late last night and set carefully in rows, their shadows lengthening down the table like dark roots reaching toward another world. Are dreams as real as work? Where does the real world end and the dreamworld begin? The thornbud shadows reach back toward the kiln, where the vases were fired. The air still holds the odors of carbon and talc,

Vinnie trots to his water bowl in the nook. No *email*, Kathleen thinks, passing her desk. She's addicted to Google and eBay, to researching taxidermy and collecting porcelain bunnies. She likes bunnies and fawns and baby animals. She loves Japanese curios. To learn how to sculpt animal shapes, she bought, on eBay, the foam manikins used by taxidermists, who lay skins over the textured forms, intoxicated by the paradox—you kill to preserve—Kathleen envisioned a menagerie of products, her own natural-history museum. Her interests start so broad, go so deep, that she's almost sad when the final product reveals itself, the end result of all that thinking and writing. What starts in daydream ends in business. *Forget the computer*, she says this morning, heading out to the casting area.

A partial roof of translucent corrugated plastic shades a small room. Shelves hold materials and tools. A fine pale dust coats the floor and the lids of buckets. She sits at her worktable. The area is open to air, and the tops of the kilns peek over the low wall. The sizzle of beans frying in lard accompanies the melodies of Ranchera Radio playing in the restaurant kitchen

next door. She cuts her hand. Last night's plaster hardened on the table edge and has sliced into her palm. The staccato rhythm of the Spanish deejay comforts her as she focuses on the mold for her version of a Day of the Dead skull.

This troubling skull. It's defying her. Usually she writes manifestos, setting out rules, exploring an object's associations, creating a map of ideas. She thought about the practical uses of ceremonial objects and the metaphor of eternal light when creating her matchstick menorah. Skulls are also ceremonial, placeholders for our memories of dead relatives and friends. Skulls expose the vaporous boundaries between the physical and the spiritual, between the living and the dead. The tension reminds her of the tension between the artificial and the real, one of her obsessions. In school, her professor criticized her for making props instead of furniture. When she was young, she loved stylized aesthetics, custom cars, impossibly thin chairs and lipsticks, the movies *Blow-Up* and 2001: A Space Odyssey. She made a lounge named after the Woody Mien movie *Sleeper*. The artificial told her more about the real than the real could. For her recent project, Vanishing Creatures, benefiting a wildlife fund, she made precise molds of a mountain gorilla, a pygmy hippopotamus, and a koala bear—and mounted their chocolate heads on plaques, like hunting trophies.

But Kathleen didn't start with a manifesto this time. She started with the skull itself, the vessel, having first learned about the Day of the Dead in Catholic school (she grew up in L.A.). She envisions translating the ritualism of altar vessels into the utility of tabletop decanters for wine and water, but there is so much handwork involved in the skull series. The entrepreneur in her wakes up. *Is this viable? After* the manifestos, the prototypes, Kathleen has to crunch the numbers, get the most yield out of a mold, make the process profitable. Daydreams are serious business. She's 35, engaged, runs the design studio she always dreamed about, but she can't relax.

It's seven thirty. She emails Adam, her fiance and production manager; Davy, the drummer in Adam's band who helps during the busy months of August and December; and her brother, Jack. She walks Vinnie around the block, stops for an iced coffee, and then she's in the car, running the day's errands downtown.

At five, she's back in the studio with Vinnie. She'll stay until nine working on her thornbud vases, which are big sellers in Europe now that Paul Smith used them in his London shop windows to promote his perfume, Rose. The thornbud vase was her first project when she made the switch from furniture design to ceramics. Unlike the skull, the thornbud vase has roots in her normal process. It's nearly an anti-vase, so thin and fragile and prickly as to challenge the purpose of a vase. As a girl, she always wondered why flowers had thorns.



Don't pick me. Let me be. To use a flower vase, you have to pick a flower. You *kill to preserve*. Kathleen sets the driftwood wishbones beside her in the casting area. It's growing dark. She's still in sandals, feeling a bit chilly, tapping her toes. Her toenails are painted black. She'll have kids some day, when she's settled. *Focus, Kathleen, will you?* the hardest, most satisfying part is making the thorn look right, smoothed and angled, just so, on the outer skin of the vase. Over and over, she pinches an artificial thorn into something that looks natural, that pricks a finger, reminding you of the boundaries between what is and what isn't, between what you want and what you've done. ✨

Based in North Carolina, David Barringer is a novelist, journalist, graphic designer, photographer, and artist who writes frequently on design culture. His article on the development of new Chinese characters appeared in the June 2008 issue of I.D.

previous spread Walsh in her Hermosa Beach studio, with Vinnie the scrappy Chihuahua

this page Walsh's ceramic thornbud vases (above) appeared in the windows of Paul Smith's London shop to promote his perfume, *Rose Vanishing Creatures* (right) is Walsh's collection of chocolate animal trophies designed to benefit a **wildlife** fund.

