



Clockwise from above: "Envy" acrylic on wood; artist Kristen Ferrell; "Only Partially in Attendance" acrylic on wood; "Love Hurts."



## KRISTEN FERRELL

Running on caffeine and nicotine, Kristen Ferrell talks rapidly, describing her love of the dark old masters (Bosch, Dürer, Goya) and in the same breath revisiting her difficult childhood (Ritalin, lithium, Baptist group home). Given up for adoption by drug-addicted runaways, she was raised by conservative Christian parents in Kansas, where art became her coping mechanism.

"Everything I do and have been through, it's two opposite forces meeting," she says. "I'm really attracted to that. There's loveliness and grotesqueness in anything, so when I paint something really pretty, I put a little horror into it to bring reality to it in an unreal way."

Her art shows beauty and innocence (bluebirds, bunny rabbits) intertwined with grisly dysfunction (severed fingers, artificial limbs). The results are an unsettling blur of the natural and the unnatural: a colorful top is crowned with happy baby deer heads and insectile legs in her painting "Little Spinners," while a catlike creature licks sewed-on fingers in "We Were Never Meant to be in Boxes or Behind Counters, Part I." The titles are sometimes the only clue to her wry sense of humor, a needed assurance that there's hope for these tortured misfits.

"I'm not sure if anyone catches the humor or they just see the horror," she says. "What other people see doesn't really matter to me as long as they feel something. Maybe it's because I've been in those upsetting, awkward situ-

ations. 'Welcome to the Dollhouse' was my childhood. I can't tell you how many times I got beat up in a bathroom. It's so messed up that you've just got to laugh. That's the only way that I can respond to it, by laughing at it in order to not actually experience it."

Besides her paintings and a clothing line, Ferrell has begun making hand-painted nesting dolls featuring her spooky characters and sculpting denture and severed finger cupcakes for Strychnin Gallery in Berlin. A set of limited-edition flash sheets is forthcoming this spring, followed by a group show in July in Berlin called "Midsummers Night Madness."

Among her personal tattoos are a chicken chest piece, a cover-up featuring a rooster with a rotting leg and a banner reading "Kansas," and the words "Hee Haw" on her knuckles flanked by ears of corn on her pinkies.

"What's funny is I don't have a lot of tattoos on me that I've drawn," she says. "My two favorite places to go are Big Daddy Cadillac's in Lawrence, Kansas, where Carlos Ransom does the most beautiful color work I've ever seen, and a place called White Lotus in Laguna Hills, California. Chris Stencil owns the shop. I'll give them an idea and I let them play as much as they want, so it's kind of a collaborative deal. But I also think everybody's got to have a few bad tattoos in order to be credible. I've got some of the worst tattoos ever, and I love them as much as I love my really good pieces." —*Chauncey Hollingsworth*