

Self Examination

by Kay Chernush
Design and end notes by
Ethel Kessler
Self-published, 2006.
Printed by Anaconda Press, Inc.
\$200.00 for signed, limited edition
artist's book. 40 pages.

Reviewed by Susan Soroko

Set in a silver metal case, *Self Examination* might contain x-rays or secret contraband or photo paper that should only be opened in a darkroom. But the book inside, nestled in a customized channel and graced with a black satin ribbon is not something that should be kept away from light. Somber. Graceful. Shocking. Revealing. Full of confidence, doubt, humor, reflection, fragility and grief, photographer Kay Chernush became her own subject and story after a diagnosis of breast cancer.

The engraved cover of the exterior box and the metallic cover of the spiral book signal a serious endeavor, and the tale inside lives up to doing its part in telling this story. By now it's almost an "everywoman" story. Hundreds, thousands, probably millions have gone before on the uncertain journey of breast cancer treatment, but Kay Chernush knew that she had to take a step back to get a closer look.

After spending more than 20 years as a successful, challenged and fulfilled photographer, Kay was just beginning to turn to personal projects. Her work as a professional covered a gamut of subjects, clients, destinations and assignments that provided opportunities to experience a life of travel coupled with career success that most people never imagine. But nothing prepares any of us for trauma. It would have been an easy call to step away from anything but medical care, yet somewhere along the way, Kay heard something akin to the ancient words of Socrates: "An unexamined life is not worth living." So she turned the camera on herself.

The images are clinical, wondrous, searing, painful and tender. Hospital reports and medical records, which often reveal nothing to the untrained eye, are woven together with bandages and other ordinary symbols of common pain. She opens *Self Examination* with a sentiment set as a title: "In my dreams I

Q&A with the Author

Kay Chernush's Self Examination intrigued me for many reasons, not the least of which was the fact that it was self-published. As the formal publishing industry endures many changes, I asked Kay about her decision to go this route and her experience along the way.—Susan Soroko

SS: What made you decide to create this book as opposed to just exhibiting the work? Was the book planned as a companion to exhibiting the work?

KC: After exhibiting the first six images I created for *Self Examination*, someone suggested that I do a monograph. I started thinking about that and felt that I might actually have something more to say. It's ironic that I started out being (wanting to be) a writer. I had several interesting jobs on the periphery of journalism—first at *The New Yorker* (typing pool, editorial assistant to Roger Angell and William Maxwell), then at *The New York Times* Paris bureau as an editorial assistant to C.L. Sulzberger, and finally as a writer in the Public Affairs office at the Peace Corps. I got into photography when the Peace Corps sent me to the Sahel region of Africa in 1974 to cover its projects during a severe drought and famine. I was told I had to bring pictures back with my stories and said, "Oh, no problem, I'm a competent amateur." But of course I didn't know how to load a camera at the time—and had to learn fast. That experience got me hooked on photography, and afterward I spent all my free time shooting and learning, until 1980, when I gave up my cushy 9 to 5 job with benefits and went out on my own.

Anyway, I created more and more images in the series. So I would say that my impulse to create the book was because I had more to say—and because I wanted to send what I consider to be a beautiful and life-affirming message out into the world. The book wasn't really planned as a companion to the exhibition, but I think the text amplifies what I was trying to accomplish with the images.

SS: Did you start out approaching publishers before deciding to self-publish?

KC: No, this was always conceived of as a limited-edition artist's book. What got me off the dime was a competition at the National Museum for Women in the Arts, for "the book as art." I didn't win, but my reward was completing the book.

SS: What were your expectations for the book? (For example, companion to exhibits, selling it in specialty stores, links to on demand, contribution to breast cancer research.)

KC: I am still exploring all these options, plus finding a publisher so that the book can find a larger audience. At present I only have the PDF on my website, with a notice that it is for sale. The price is \$200, half of which goes to a breast cancer navigator program for underserved women through Smith Farm Center for the Healing Arts. Or people can designate their own preferred breast cancer charity.

SS: What made you go to an area printer as opposed to an on-demand publisher like Lulu or Blurb or Shutterfly?

KC: I worked with a wonderful designer, Ethel Kessler, who designed the U.S. Breast Cancer stamp and who herself had breast cancer many years ago. It was a project of love and collaboration. Ethel knew the printer, Anaconda Press, and the printer also gave it their all because they loved the idea and the images. The quality we achieved was much greater than an online publisher.

SS: Are you happy with the results?

KC: Yes. Of course one always sees things after the fact that could have been done differently. I tend to be obsessive and perfectionist. So one thing I accomplished with this project was to be able to let it go. It is what it is. It's where I was at that point. So yes, very happy.

SS: What's the distribution mechanism?

KC: None that's really adequate. Word of mouth. My website. Still working on this.

wear satin and lace." Here, delicate lingerie, a bra, is rendered protective by Kay's digital skills. A shield of sorts, with the vulnerability of preset openings. Apropos to the rest of the book, we see defenses and vulnerabilities occupying the same human landscape. In another image titled "Warrior," we see rusted armor, like an acid-burned chest plate, set over partially exposed breasts. Maybe that's how archeologists work: while searching for treasure and beauty, they must be willing to imagine far beneath a crusted surface.

With minimal text, Kay balances the images with just enough of a story to let us in on a few secrets. Yet she never preaches a word that others couldn't possibly understand. Aside a photo titled "Deconstruction/reconstruction," she says "The plastic surgeon asks how big I want my breasts to be. I answer with an old French saying, 'Just big enough to fill the hands of an honest man.' He is humorless, impatient, smug and disdainful. I change doctors." As awareness of breast cancer increases, Kay makes an unapologetic and fresh contribution, a reminder that all women, damaged by this disease or not, must walk side by side.