Poet Kathleen Peirce joins Guggenheim ranks

By Ann Friou
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Poet Kathleen Peirce, professor in Texas State’s M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing, is one of only nine poets in the U.S. and Canada to win the coveted Guggenheim Fellowship in 2007.

She joins scores of Nobel, Pulitzer, and other prize winners who have appeared on the roll of Guggenheim Fellows, including Ansel Adams, W.H. Auden, Aaron Copland, Martha Graham, Langston Hughes, Henry Kissinger, Vladimir Nabokov, Isamu Noguchi, Linus Pauling, Philip Roth, Paul Samuelson, Wendy Wasserstein, Derek Walcott, James Watson, and Eudora Welty. Additionally, Peirce is one of only two Guggenheim Fellows at Texas State; Novelist Dagoberto Gilb, also a member of the creative writing faculty, was named a fellow in 1995.

The Guggenheim Fellowship—a one-year $39,000 award—will enable Peirce to take time off from teaching to travel and write. She plans to explore cultural and personal loss and transformation in writing a book-length poem, tentatively titled The Green Vault. American poets have produced a number of book-length poems in the past decade, Peirce said, explaining that writing one is “the greatest challenge I can imagine for myself. To go forward as an artist, I have to do the things I don’t know how to do. I write in the direction of what I don’t have. It’s a relationship with the unknown, at least for me, and I think for many poets.”

Peirce is interested in what it means to be intensely sentient in an ordinary, daily way. Her award-winning collections of poetry (she’s published four volumes since 1991) explore the transformative qualities of mundane events—the touch of a beggar’s hand at a border crossing, the quality of light on a fall afternoon, the longing to share joy with other people. Her poems also reveal her deepening questions about loss—the loss of innocence, of love, of her parents, of youth, of sadness. Loss and transformation have always been her subjects, Peirce says, even before she began to write poetry. Her focus on the sentient life has opened her to encounters that make loss and transformation “recognizable, durable, and endurable”—encounters that often translate into poetry. “You would be right to think that Eros is at home here,” she said. “So are death and hope and surprise.”

This is a major award that confirms Kathleen Peirce’s stature as an important voice in contemporary American poetry.

—Michael Hennessy,
Chair of the Department of English
In 2004, Peirce won a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, during which she spent time in Europe. “What I felt walking in the streets and museums and churches and cemeteries of Berlin, Prague, Budapest, and Dresden—especially in the sense of the political histories of those places—made for an operatic leap in the intensity of encounters which came, as they must to a traveler, quickly and briefly and with a relentless pace,” she said.

A profound encounter during a visit to The Green Vault in Dresden, Germany, set her on the path to creating her major poetic work about loss and transformation. The Green Vault, located in the Dresden Royal Palace, is one of Europe’s most famous treasure chambers, containing artworks of gold, silver, precious gems, enamel, ivory, bronze, and amber, from the Renaissance to the Classicist periods (see http://www.skd-dresden.de/en/museen/ gruenes_gewoelbe.html).

“There, I saw a small, beautiful statue of Daphne, a mythological figure who was changed by the gods into a tree,” she said. “The statue was silver; her hands had been turned into coral branches, and a coral branch grew from the top of her head. I was held very still by the statue, and in an attempt to record that encounter, a new voice began to weave and unravel in a way I’ve come to recognize as myself very deeply alive—which is to say, really writing.”

The statue caused Peirce to think about transformation generally and about Dresden’s having transformed itself after its devastation in World War II, and the idea for a book-length poem emerged. She began writing toward the long poem during her National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 2004.

Then, in 2007, she won the Guggenheim Fellowship, created by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation of New York to help scholars and artists engage in research and creation under the freest possible conditions. “I have a good start on the poem, but it’s slow-going and hard to do while I’m teaching. The fellowship will enable me to take some time away from the classroom to travel and write. The time (which is the real gift) awarded me by the Guggenheim Foundation will provide me the solitude to work without interruption. I hope to do my best,” she said. She plans to return to Dresden, and she may go to Yucatán in Mexico.

The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation of New York has been making the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship awards for 83 years. The 2007 fellowship winners include 189 artists, scholars, and scientists in the U.S. and Canada, selected from almost 2,800 applicants for awards totaling $7.6 million.

Peirce’s poetry collections and teaching have received numerous honors. On the cover of her 2004 collection, The Ardors (Ausable Press), poet Norman Dubie wrote, “The arguments in the more formal of these poems are nearly Miltonic.” The Oval Hour (University of Iowa Press 1999) won the Iowa Poetry Prize from the University of Iowa Press and the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, and was a finalist for the Lenore Marshall Prize as well as the Los Angeles Times Book Award. Divided Touch, Divided Color (Windhover Press 1995) is a handmade, fine arts press book that brings high prices from collectors. Peirce’s first collection, Mercy (University of Pittsburgh Press 1991), was published three years after her graduation from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop and was awarded the Associated Writing Programs Award for Poetry. In addition to winning the NEA Fellowship in 2004, Peirce was inducted that year as a member of the Texas Institute of Letters. She is especially proud of her Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching presented by College of Liberal Arts Dean Ann Marie Ellis in 1999. In 2007, she was named Texas State’s Honors Professor of the Year.