Open Up

Jacquelyn Marie O'Brien
jo9941@rit.edu

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of Art
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Fine Arts Studio

Open Up
by
Jacquelyn Marie O'Brien
12.01.15
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Thesis Title: Open Up
Thesis Author: Jacquelyn Marie O'Brien

Chief Advisor: Elizabeth Kronfield

____________________________
(Signature)
Date: ____________

Associate Advisor: Jane Shellenbarger

____________________________
(Signature)
Date: ____________

Associate Advisor: Tom Lighfoot

____________________________
(Signature)
Date: ____________

Chair, School of Art: Glen Hintz

____________________________
Date: ____________
Open Up

Humor in fine art has been considered low-brow. Frequently, “serious” artists have the notion that using humor or humorous materials reduces the validity of the work. Likewise, feminism seems to have similar implications, in that the word is not taken seriously because of stereotyping; straying away from the original meaning. I assert that humor and feminism can offer valid social and cultural critiques in a relatable way. Discussing concepts such as gender repression, contemporary feminism, and the accessibility of art, with the intention of removing the overarching exclusion often associated with these concepts, has required my work to be accessible to many viewers who may not have had much time in the contemporary art world. My hope is to provide an open and honest doorway to aesthetic appreciators whether they have been exposed to contemporary art and ideas or not, so that there may be an entrance point to discuss gender repression, feminism and their place in the gallery.
Meeting the Patriarchy

When I was twelve my father left our family in the middle of the night and I never heard from him again. Living in a home where my mother was my parent and experiencing the rigors of her being a single parent exposed me to what it was like to be a woman in the world. She was constantly dealing with implications of those experiences and the way social patriarchy was undercutting her success. I observed her efforts being thwarted because she was expected to behave a certain way, to have a nuclear family with a working husband, and a fully manicured lawn, not to be a single mother who was struggling to pay bills with four children and no husband in sight. My mother did not conform to gender roles and consequently she was punished. I remember feeling such injustice that people would dare to judge her for surviving and providing for her family. It was not until much later in my adult life that I realized that many of the judgments and shaming that she faced was because of the patriarchal structure that limits women through a certain set of rules and expectations. These observations drove me to explore the idea of binary gender assignment, gender repression and societies' expectation of what gender is supposed to look like.

In preparation for my thesis I have been reading, observing and taking in many different facets of gender roles in society. Bad Feminist by Roxanne Gay, has been extremely informative. The premise of the book is autobiographical in nature, focusing on what it is like to be a modern day feminist impacted by social culture and conflicting gender expectations in a humorous way. The book as a whole serves as a guide for women who identify as feminists and those who are committed to equal gender rights to navigate through social culture. What is most compelling about the book is it's stripped down nature. The book is meant to be unassuming, down-to-earth, accessible, and pointed. The style of the book embodies my philosophy on perceived accessibility of art and academic gender discussion. My philosophy is that many parties have not been afforded the privilege to academically discuss
gender, much less feel comfortable in the gallery setting. These privileges often seem to be extended into bias and prejudice. I strive to make gender discussion and comfort in the gallery setting a priority. Roxanne Gay uses humor as a way to connect to her audience, similarly to the way I try to connect to the viewers of my work. Humor and accessibility are key elements to how I conceptualize my work and how I draw the viewer in. Reading Bad Feminist I felt a sense of kinship with the author and a reinforcement of my own beliefs.

Artists who have influenced me are Swoon, Judy Chicago, Barbara Kreuger, Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Bruce Nauman, Kathleen Hannah, Nancy Spero, Louise Borgerious, Gureilla Girls, Casey Jenkins, Janine Antoni, Kara Walker, Yoayoi Kusama, Hannah Wilke and Marina Amabromovic. Each artist has impacted me in a specific way, however, I feel that I have gained the most strength from the conversations and high level of craftsmanship each artist displays. Judy Chicago is important for instance in the way that her work inspired me to continue a conversation, she began in the piece, “Dinner Party”. In that work, Chicago displayed 39 different dinner plates around a stylized table and environment. Each plate had a different articulation of the vagina or harkened to the vagina that was a portrait of a famous or mythical woman. One critique of “Dinner Party” is that it was not representative of who the plates were made to reference. Because this work is very well known in the feminist art world it was a major inspiration for “Cunt Cushions”. My work was a critique of “Dinner Party”, by making small pillows that are dinner plate sized. I consciously created the cushions to be non-identifiable as a certain person. They are meant to be any person identifying as a woman. For my work, the vagina is a symbol of power and the assertion of identifying as a woman. This can come from any human who identifies as such from any walk of life. It is not necessary for that person to have been born as binary female.

The work of Casey Jenkins was exceptionally powerful and motivating helping me to fully accept my artwork as valid. In Casey Jenkins's piece “Vaginal Knitting” she places a mass of spun wool into her vagina and knits a long line of fiber during a span of her menstrual cycle as a
performance piece. Her honesty, softness and unapologetic nature is inspiring to me because it is clear she assigns value to her own artwork; which is often a personal struggle for me.
Allowing Self to be Self

The work changed as I made it. Throughout the last two years, my initial concepts have shifted from materiality, to weight, into feminism and finally into gender repression. This evolution came into being very steadily and, at times, without my conscious knowing. Other developments seemed to happen entirely by accident. Taking risks with materials and processes pushed me into an entirely new body of work. Material explorations fed my concepts over time. After creating cast colored plastic and concrete tests and maquettes, I discovered certain relationships I was drawn to; for example, hot pink and natural concrete. This initial reaction caused me to investigate what the relationship meant to me as an artist. The combination of allowing myself to take risks and experimenting with a different way of making (letting humor be a possible vehicle for my work) led to the creation of the thesis. Humor was something I feared previously because I interpreted it as weak or inherently less successful. This is an idea that I have been able to overcome. My fear of accepting what I wanted to make and being able to make it was a real struggle. While exploring a drastically different set of materials, inundating myself with new information and immersing myself into contemporary art culture, I became my own artist.
Section 3

A Transition

The shift in the work, from what I was making during my undergraduate experience took the whole time I was in graduate school. It was difficult to allow myself to make work that I fully identified with, contained genuine honesty, and that I embraced as an artist. My making was stuck because I did not know how to allow myself to just make what I actually connected with which was gender, feminism, humor, gallery inclusion and openness in the art culture. I felt that the subjects were not possible for me to explore because they were too cliché. Being a female artist, using the vagina and humor to convey my concepts, is something I feel could be worth an “eye roll”. Introspective and serious investigation of feminist theory and contemporary art culture brought me to a place where I found resolution with making what I wanted to make and made me a better artist.

Finally, I was making what I felt to be honest and good. The work began to fall into place and led me to new work that I had never expected or pictured myself making. For me, graduate school was a “game-changer”. In my proposal, I discussed my interest in talking about gender repression, feminism and gallery exclusion. These concepts remained central and key to the work I produced for the body of my thesis work. What seemed to change the most was my material representation. Initially, my focus remained with casting elements (plastic, concrete, metal) and the use of extreme color. Fiber became an equally important element in the work post-thesis proposal. My use of fiber was not entirely new. In the work, “I Can Quilt, Bitch” (Illustration 1) I had entered the pool of fiber materials and a commentary on 'traditional' female activities through quilting. However, at the time, I had not realized that fabric and traditional processes would play such an important role in the concept and making of my thesis work. The integration of fabrics and “traditional female processes” became another way to discuss the expectations of gender in calamity with contemporary feminist thinking. As I delved into my work and critically evaluated it, I began to make connections that were
woven through my artwork. Previously, I was working with turn of the century female attire for all age groups, using fabric objects with materials that had weight. I began to make concrete castings with shoes, aprons and clothing embedded inside or squished between cast layers. At the time, I was not able to make a serious connection between the work and what I thought I could make the work about. I was under the impression that I would not be able to make work about women, it was too cliché.

My body of thesis work became a culmination of all that I was learning and accepting about my artistic practice and concepts. In “Stand Up Straight” (Illustration 2), I cast a five-foot tall concrete rectangle that was built in three parts. The work is mounted on a tiled base and has bubble-gum pink vinyl compressed between the parts. This work is about gender repression in a guttural sense, showing physical pressure as a highly gendered color; bright pink. This pressure is meant to convey a true pressure on gender assignment and how binary gender is represented in our culture. If you are a girl, you wear pink. The tiled base is a reference to the domestic, since the traditional role of the binary gender of women is in the home. Material combination is key to my work, because how materials collide produces the tactility that I value in the work. When making “Stacked” (Illustration 3), I realized that the cast blocks needed context. That context was a reference to the gender roles of the home. It important to reference domestic space; which was accomplished with a crocheted rug. The work is five small cast concrete blocks that are pulled together by a threaded rod with one block is off kilter exposing bright pink and sparkly plastic. This relationship speaks to the repression of gender roles and how limiting they can be to those who do not conform. For example, for a genetic male to identify as a female is often not readily accepted, she is forced by society to accept stereotypical male gender roles. This experience is damaging and forces the individual to have a false construction of self. The work examines the cracks in this life, showing that exposure of the true self is restrained by pressure to take a typical gender identity.

The idea of identity is explored throughout much of my work. In “Build Your Own” (illustration 4), the audience is given the opportunity to construct a vagina on a large Velcro board with
various sized pieces of the vagina's anatomy made of different colored felt. This work embraces the concept of humor more fully than the concrete works. Offering a way to bring the viewer in begins to break down the “rules” of the gallery space, allowing those whom might not necessarily participate in a gallery experience to be involved in the conversation. A large part of the current work is about including atheistic appreciators into the discussion of gender repression through the use of art in the gallery setting. Using humor as a way to discuss dire issues in society is a relatable way to bring people into the conversation without the presumptuous nature often associated with the gallery. I want those who might not have had the privilege to engage in the art world or academic gender discussion to have an entrance point into the conversations. The Velcro board has enough room for multiple people to work on “their vagina” and discuss what they are doing and hopefully why they are making it. I was delighted to overhear strangers engaging with each other. In the work “Large Cunt Cushion”, there is a marriage of “traditional female work” in the crocheted vaginal anatomy on the cushion and the satire of using that process to make a huge, brightly colored vagina. In this work, and “Cunt cushions”, I feel that there is a culmination of everything that I have been making and this is what I am currently spending a lot of time exploring. The use of traditional feminine processes with social, gender satire is a dichotomy that I find compelling and successful in these works.
Being Okay With “Cunt”

The cunt, I assert, is not just a representation of women. It is about strongly identifying with a powerful element of yourself, an element that makes you feel like an individual. It is about empowering a part of your anatomy that is over sexualized in traditional gender construction as being only for sex when desired by the patriarchy and for birth, thereafter. The work is about how gender is repressed through its binary definition and what is actually desired by the participants of our society. And what shifts we need to make as a group of humans in order to flourish as a people and love each other for who we are regardless of gender expression.

I have begun to believe in my work and its successes. I feel that the work I have made for this thesis is successful in the material polarity I created and the conceptual assertions I constructed within the physical work. I understand that I could do more, however, that I could become more immersed and create more successful relationships in the work to help the audience engage further. A future goal is to increase the interactivity in my work, which was begun in “Build Your Own”. I used humor and play to draw people into what the work is really about, to want to look further than just the fun of it. Also, I want to continue to explore the use of traditional feminine processes and materials to offer a juxtaposition of ideas and materials in respect to binary gender. My use of fiber was exciting and opened me up to a new world of artists, such as Casey Jenkins and her work “Vaginal Knitting”. One of the elements that I believe is successful in the work, is the relationship between the hard industrial materials and the soft domestic ones. I would like to continue my investigation of casting hard materials in contrast with fiber. This body of work has led me down a different path of expression that I didn't think I was capable of making. It has made me the artist I want to continue to be and conceptually informed in what I am truly interested in discussing. This body of work has compelled me to research further and investigate more through making artwork.
List of Illustrations

Illustration #1

Illustration #2
Bibliography


