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Puffery

Whitney Warne

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Puffery

by

WHITNEY EMMA WARNE

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For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY

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Approval:

Patricia Ambrogi
Committee Chair

Date

Christine Shank
Committee Member

Date

Carla Williams
Committee Member

Date
“Puffery” could not have been made without the dedication and inspiration of a few truly amazing people.

To my committee, Patti Ambrogi, Christine Shank and Carla Williams: Thank you for your honesty, unwavering support and occasional kick in the skirt. I treasure the immeasurable knowledge you’ve shared.

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ABSTRACT

The external body is a place to perform a version of ourselves, rather than be ourselves. To perform is to strike a balance between the self and the rules, between individual action and gesture and the script—between what you know and what other people tell you to know. Puffery explores the culturally constructed performance and expected behaviors of the modern female. I have created video and photography documented durational performances that question a female’s relationship with exterior presentation. Viewers watch as she exposes her façade—examining it and breaking it down in an effort to negotiate self, power, and control.
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INTRODUCTION

Within a language that rests on univocal signification, the female sex constitutes the unconstrainable and undesignatable. In this sense, women are the sex which is not ‘one,' but multiple. — Judith Butler

I am an American, upper-middle-class, straight, white, highly feminized female in her early twenties receiving my Masters of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts from a private institution. My experience is not common. I am not average. I am not “every woman.”

I was born into a specific set of demographics: my country of origin, class, sexual orientation, race, and education level combine and create identity, complicating my personhood and taking me further away from a generalized experience of “woman.” It would be reductive to say that as a woman, I can speak on behalf of all women. In reality, my upbringing limits my perspective.

My graduate thesis, Puffery, explores the culturally constructed and expected behaviors of the upper-middle-class female. Through video-documented performance and photography, the audience witnesses a struggle to negotiate self, power, and control. The character I’ve created
questions external expectations, often struggling to locate internal motivations and desires in habitual actions.

She borrows my body and builds off my personal experiences to perform durational performances of physical and cultural rituals. My character acts out, acknowledging and negotiating her position within the action.

The physical body is the site of my investigation. My character presents herself to be viewed. She explores the intricacies of ordinary actions, challenging bodily boundaries and examining the emotional repercussions betrayed by the reactive flesh. John Berger spoke on seeing women:

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.²

The pleasure and pain of being bound to my body, of deriving self-worth from my physical embodiment, connects me to other women. I am a person who walks into the room to be surveyed. The style of my hair and dress, the way I shake a hand, the amount of control I wield over my movements, and the structure of my speech are just a few of the ways I communicate the rules of my upbringing. Some of these lessons are
explicitly taught and others are absorbed. Over time the regulations of parental and institutional discipline become self-discipline: the internal conviction and embodiment of a cultural ritual or ideal.

Obedience to cultural standards of the upper-middle class is my character’s second nature. As I unpack her physical and mental attributes, we see that these actions are authentic to her upbringing, but not always consistent with her real and spontaneous desires. She explores her internalized expectations and well-rehearsed actions through performance, negotiating her own agency, power and control over the rituals she engages in. By simultaneously embodying an action and critiquing it, my character shows the façade, examines it and breaks it down. Revealing that superficiality lies not only in the clothes and the act, but in the denial that propensity exists to some degree, in all of us.

TRAINING THE DOCILE BODY

A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved. — Michael Foucault

The lines and motions of the body are rehearsed. Learned actions intertwine in brain synapses and become default settings. A once
unnatural act becomes innate. Teachers, coaches, friends, and parents nurture patterns in speech and rhythms in the body. Eventually the spontaneity and freedom of childish manners are traded for class and gender-appropriate social etiquette and puffery: exaggerated actions designed to mask the self behind optimism and grandeur. The body and mind easily succumb to training and eventually internalized self-discipline takes over. We carry the lessons of our instructors—the perfect machines of culture’s making.

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The screen fades in to reveal a young woman framed close to the head and shoulders, standing on a stage. Her hair curls in ringlets around her face, swooped up in the front by a sparkly tiara. Purple eye shadow covers her lids. Her face is caked in foundation and too much blush. Her neck is noticeably lighter in tone. A double-looped strand of translucent beads hangs around her exposed neck and chest. The floppy fuchsia straps of her dress hug the middle of her upper arm and the material is gathered at the bodice. She stands primped and prepared, ready with a hopeful demeanor.

The motion starts. She begins jumping up and down, athletic and purposeful. A slight blur occurs on the edges of the frame. Initially, we are unaware of the jump rope rotating around her body, invisible outside the
frame. The crack and swish of the rope circling her head and smacking the floor underscore her arduous activity. She jumps continuously with no more then a few breaths between cycles. We hear the rope hitting the floor, then wrapping around her feet and coming to an abrupt halt. Every failure is followed by another series of jumps. Occasionally, the rope twists around her neck, tangling with the beads. Her breathing quickly becomes heavy and forced. Sweat forms on her forehead and drips down the side of her temples. Her face reddens from the stress. Thirty-one minutes later, she drops the rope and breathes. She is visibly wrecked, exhausted from the effort and surrendered to the exhaustion. Her shoulders slope in defeat. The screen fades to black.

Figure 1. Jump Rope (Video still), 2010.

Little girls step-jump through jump ropes one foot at a time, moving in a stilted gallop. Adult athletes approach the rope with high intensity.
Olympians jump rope to improve cardiovascular stamina. Boxers jump rope to build footwork. Wrestlers sweat off those last three pounds, jumping until they’re lean. The adulthood activity transitions the fun childhood pastime into a practice of extreme physical exertion designed to train the body.

My character did not physically train for “Jump Rope,” but mentally she’d been training her whole life. Nancy Friday presents an in-depth look at feminine training and beauty in her 1996 book, The Power of Beauty, in which she quotes psychologist Paul Ekman:

‘Within the first years of life children learn to control some of these facial expressions, concealing true feelings and falsifying expressions of emotions not felt. Parents teach their children to control their expression by example and, more directly, with such statements such as: “Don’t give me that angry look.”’

These corrections in daily behavior construct character. “Jump Rope,” set the tone for the resulting work and provoked my identification of the problem: This character is a pawn and a product, a person constructed to perform perfection since a very young age. Perseverance is a symptom of perfection—but so is failure.

The experience of growing up within certain parameters can be likened to the process of soldier selection Michael Foucault writes about in his
essay “Docile Bodies.” He introduces us to seventeenth-century France where soldiers were chosen based on natural ability and innate mental propensities. By the mid-eighteenth century it was thought that any male body could be trained and coerced into becoming a soldier. Natural talents no longer mattered.5

This generalized selection process mirrors the adjustment and augmentation of the female body. Training in childhood and adolescence can make women physically, mentally, and culturally “docile.” Simone de Beauvoir also wrote of the trained, docile, female body in her 1949 book, The Second Sex:

To be feminine is to appear weak, futile, docile. The young girl is supposed, not only to deck herself out, to make herself ready, but also to repress her spontaneity and replace it with the studied grace and charm taught by her elders. Any self-assertion will diminish her femininity and attraction.6

The adolescent female body, docile in nature, moldable by design, internalizes feminized discipline to whatever degree it is taught. As a result of this training, bodies become separate from desire. The external is a place to perform a version of ourselves, rather than be ourselves. Foucault writes:

[Discipline] dissociates power from the body; on one hand it turns it into an ‘aptitude,’ a ‘capacity’ which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjugation.7
My character searches for power and agency in her prescribed actions, but relying on rules from external sources leaves large cognitive gaps in the understanding of a “true self.” As Judith Butler writes in Gender Troubles, the “truth” of my sex “is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms.” In my work I explore these “regulatory practices” within my own cultural “matrix of coherent gender norms,” sourcing my material from a range of historical applications of etiquette and contemporary pop culture, such as the act of placing books on one’s head and the Brazilian wax.

“Jump Rope” examines the ritual of exercise and beautification and how these repetitive behaviors become internalized expectations in women’s psyche. Armed with the tools and belief in her aptitude and the cultural standard of physical beauty, my character jumps continuously for thirty-one minutes—a feat in which any competitive athlete would take pride. She jumps in spite of pain and continues regardless of her own desire. Her physical body may change but her docile nature and allegiance to the cultural matrix remains.
One is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman. —Simone de Beauvoir

The “Jump Rope” character is an innocent young woman in fuchsia taffeta, exhausted and blindly allegiant to imposed cultural standards. She builds off this initial experience, continuing the struggle to negotiate her power and control within layers of learned behaviors. De Beauvoir wrote at length about social conditioning of females. Akin to Foucault’s description of soldier training, feminization of young girls also requires docility. A young girl learns the importance of beauty and the advantages of preening for a man. She adopts his language, becoming his opposite in every way. This language and posturing extracts spontaneous movements from her bones and muscles until her flesh and words become controlled, tight, reformed, and timid. Her voice is restricted, speaking only when thoughts are clearly in line with desired paradigms. She speaks to please.

The need for a female to please has not disappeared with the advent of women’s rights and economic freedom. In The Power of Beauty, Friday admits to her own need to please:
I believe we all, men and women, give up far more then necessary to fit the rigid standards of adolescence.... Reining [the pre-adolescent girl] in, forcing her to obey the restricting rules by which all girls had to live made me acutely self-conscious, overly cautious, unsure of myself, second-guessing everything for the rest of my life. And angry, don’t leave out anger at abandoning myself, teeth-grinding anger that I dutifully swallowed and ‘forgot.’

Men and women navigate society using rules to construct daily interactions. These rules come in the form of manners and etiquette, both formally taught and silently transferred. Most social situations set rules for optimum engagement. Consider playing golf or an online video game, or dining in an upscale restaurant. Modern femininity is no exception.

As with any social class or gender, understanding and internalizing rules depends on the intensity of teaching and absorption during childhood. Maintaining etiquette and social civility becomes a lifestyle choice as we break free from the homogeneous nest. Even when demographics become diverse, training is hard to break. In Choosing a Self, Shelley Budgeon analyzes the formation of identity. She writes:

Choices are engaged with via an understanding of the self as being a particular kind of person. This understanding is influenced by ascribed statuses, but not determined by them. Indeed, there is a tension between the self that is chosen and the self that is conceivable—often the result of external expectations, material circumstances, traditions, and so forth.
The training of a person resonates in the most basic of their movements. In his book Class, Paul Fussell researches the behavioral distinction in the American hierarchy. He quotes John T. Molloy:

‘Upper middle class people and lower middle class people not only stand and sit differently, they move differently. Upper middle class people tend to have controlled precise movements. The way they use their arms and where their feet fall is dramatically different from lower-middle-class people, who tend to swing their arms out rather then hold them close to the body.’

I explore the expectation of the upper-middle class’s controlled actions through the historical practice of a woman balancing books on her head.

“Posturing” opens on a young woman positioned against a vibrant yellow background that accentuates the red of her modest, feminine dress. A strand of pearls wraps around her neck and she wears shiny pearl earrings. Her hair lays neat and straight, hanging long down her back. She focuses on keeping the tall stack of books neatly balanced on her head. As her left arm comes into view, the woman reveals her ruse. She has not
been balancing those books, but doggedly concealing the armature that allowed her precarious position. Without adequate support the books begin to fall, one by one.

*What To Say To Get Your Way* topples first. *How To Be A Lady* goes next, followed by *Leadership and Self Deception* and then *The Definitive Book on Body Language*. Each time she uses both hands to correct herself and then removes the supports, hoping her posture will steady their weight. The tower is too tall. The *48 Laws of Power* and Emily Post’s *Etiquette* remain on her head unsupported for a few moments, working in tandem with her posture to balance the weight. The books fall simultaneously toward the camera but are caught. “Power” faces the camera straight on. She re-adjusts. Then *Power* falls. Left with *Etiquette*, a heavy, historical book originally by Emily Post but now carried on by her daughter Peggy Post in its 17th edition, she breathes steadily and calmly. She flinches; *Etiquette* falls with a loud thud. Relieved of the weight, her posture does not relax.

In *48 Laws of Power* Robert Greene examines the historical foundations and implementations of power:

Power’s crucial foundation, is the ability to master your emotions. An emotional response to a situation is the single greatest barrier to power, a mistake that will cost you a lot more then any temporary satisfaction you gain by expressing your feelings. Emotions cloud
reason, and if you cannot see the situation clearly you cannot prepare for and respond to it with any degree of control.\textsuperscript{13}

Modern etiquette books boast about women’s equal power but also acknowledge that this power comes partially from keeping up pleasing appearances. One example, 2009’s On Being a Lady, states, "A lady knows that her posture is as important as any article of clothing on her back."\textsuperscript{14} From this perspective, power and control are negotiated through posture and appearance. The message clearly states: Equality is possible as long as perfect appearance is performed.

Much of our modern etiquette and value system stems from the Victorian era, a time of prudish politeness and sexual secrecy. Scandal was underground and manners were a codified language denoting social hierarchies. As the Victorians moved towards cities and lived closer together they developed behaviors that allowed them to remain more emotionally detached in public. Marjorie Morgan is quoted in the essay “The Sociogenesis of Emotion,” stating that, “the ‘emotion-curbing conventions’ of etiquette were gradually diffused [from royalty] amongst the developed middle classes of urban-industrial English society.”\textsuperscript{15} Psychologist Paul Ekman calls these codes of behavior “display rules” and believes that once a specific type of emotional management has become innate, it is very hard to recognize it or change.\textsuperscript{16}
Etiquette, or “display rules,” is a structure designed to quell the masses and stop free flowing ideas and movements. The genre of etiquette books emerged in the 1830s separating manners from morals. A person could be uncouth and generally despicable, but attention to external detail and niceties maintained their status as a respectable high-class person. Following the rules created a society of disciplined, docile bodies.

“Posturing” speaks directly to the Victorian practice of women balancing books on their heads to obtain perfect, controlled posture. The titles my character balances refer to modern and traditional ways we mold ourselves into someone who is outwardly likable and pleasing to the public. Titles such as What to Say to Get Your Way and Leadership and Self Deception speak to how people can manipulate and inflate themselves to resemble cultural ideals. But without adequate support, books begin to fall. The illusion of success is maintained only as long as the books remain on the head. Perfection falls with Etiquette.
SELF CONTROL

Power requires the ability to play with appearances. To this end you must learn to wear many masks and keep a full bag of deceptive tricks. Deception and masquerade should not be seen as ugly or immoral. All human interaction requires deception on many levels, and in some ways what separates humans from animals is our ability to lie and deceive. — Robert Greene

The methods and expectations used to contain and realign a body have strong implications for the emotional core. We cover ourselves in layers, coating our bodies in external puffery. Women slip themselves into stretchy, “shaping” materials designed to squeeze, tuck and control the “imperfect” body. Perhaps, the woman appears sleeker—the lines of her body are smoother and her belly button doesn’t show through the shirt. The refining nature of the “shaper” renders the spontaneous flesh solid and structured. She appears closer to perfect.

As Butler writes, “Gender is a repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”
The photos in the series “Self Control” were taken to reveal the controlled nature of these contemporary corsets. The male gaze might imagine her barriers to be flimsier, perhaps a pair of panties and a bra with a fickle clasp. In reality, she is encased and squished, her secrets exposed. People experience the last layer of defense before the flesh.

Control and improvement are touchstones in the pursuit of feminine beauty. In Choosing a Self, Susan Bordo is quoted as saying, “Female bodies become docile bodies...whose forces and energies are habituated to exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, make-up, and dress.” In vain search of improvement, women force their bodies towards rigidity to match their flawless, well-mannered interactions. If working out and eating healthy fail to produce perfect results then stretchy, structured elastic holds in undisciplined flesh. This stretchy material becomes the rule and default status for the body, the corseted
flesh becomes a metaphor for things unsaid, spontaneity covered in fakery.

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Consumption articulates identities and communities, but according to influential models for talking about it, the girl market describes a demographic wrapped up in negotiating their own power and powerlessness through consumption. — Catherine Driscoll

In “25 Chicken Wings in 12 Minutes,” my character sits down at a beautiful table, complete with a yellow tablecloth, white napkin, bone china plate, gold-rimmed goblet and silverware. On the plate lies a massive pile of chicken wings. The woman sits poised and ready for the meal, pulling on delicate white gloves to shield her hands from the task before her. She removes the fork from its place on top of the napkin and tucks the corners of the white cloth into her black and white lace top. She is dressed and ready to consume.

The woman eats the large chicken wings quickly and aggressively, enjoying the meat and cleaning the bones. The sound of the flesh tearing compounds with chewing noises and nose sniffles. Her gloves redden with every wing. Her mouth becomes inflamed from the spicy sauce. The pile of bones grows, her pace slowing with five or six wings to go. Pauses between wings start to widen. She drinks water and pants, looking pained and nauseous. She finishes the wings and breathes as if she’d just won a
marathon. After twelve minutes of constant consumption the screen fades out with her hunched over, facing the plate of cleaned bones.

“25 Chicken Wings in 12 Minutes” explores the feelings of lust and disgust in relation to consumption. For twelve minutes she battles desire, wanting the full plate of meat and consuming it. Tiring and growing disgusted, she continues, unable to rest until every last shred of meat is ingested. The lack of pleasure in this excessive consumption and the compulsion to finish this sickening activity signifies her loss of power and self control. The bones on the plate speak to the guilt of the act—the remnants of regret.

**POWER AS PROTECTION**

Power is a game…and in games you do not judge your opponents by their intentions but by the effect of their actions. — Robert Greene

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Figure 4. 25 Wings in 12 Minutes (Video still), 2011.
In order to display good manners, to appear successful, to look attractive, there must be an audience. While it is true that some standards of etiquette are relaxing, I argue that codes of dress and sexualized behavior for women are becoming stricter and more aggressively codified.

In “Finger Trap” the scene opens to a woman making out with a man. The couple appears against a dark grey backdrop, each wearing white undershirts. Her long brown hair falls down her back and his long brown hair brushes his shoulders. They are bound at the index finger, connected by a Chinese finger trap. The couple engages equally in the game of control and patience, pulling back and forth, connected and negotiating their inter-dependent bond. The kissing continues and the intensity increases but the female begins to meddle with the trap. If working together, the bamboo casing can be easily released when both people
meet in the middle, enlarging the openings and freeing the fingers. My character does not want this battle to end mutually. Distracting her partner with heightened affection, she uses another finger to slowly free herself from the confines of the trap. The kissing continues as her finger slips away unnoticed. She pulls her lips from him and he leans towards her to continue the kiss. Realizing that she is no longer interested, he straightens up. His finger remains erect in the trap long after her escape.

My character remains distant, civil, and emotionally commanding, exemplifying a current strategy for feminine power and emotional control. Her chances of getting hurt are slimmer and her power over her partner strengthens with every deception. The act of sexuality, rather than the authentic emotion of feeling sensual, removes her from her partner. This sexual etiquette allows people to deny their true selves and emotions, using power to shield them from pain. The person who loses emotional control stands a greater risk of losing the game. Douglas states:

The media began to highlight this message: it’s through sex and sexual display that women really have the power to get what they want. And because the true path to power comes from being an object of desire, girls and women should now actively choose—even celebrate and embrace—being sex objects. That’s the mark of a truly confident, can-do girl: one whose objectification isn’t imposed from without, but comes from within. The best way to gain this kind of power is to cater to what men want.
The modern media message transforms sexuality into the “act of sexuality,” “the act of enticement” and “the act of love.” TV, magazines and the Internet saturate viewers with images and examples of how to “act” appropriately in relationships, though this acting is often far from authentic.

In The History of Sexuality, Foucault talks about the “speaker’s benefit,” wherein if “sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of deliberate transgression.”24 He goes on to explain that those who speak about sex are seen to have power over the action and as a consequence, themselves.

**LANGUAGE AND THE BODY**

She simultaneously longs for and dreads the shameful passivity of the willing prey. The thought of appearing nude before a man overwhelms her with excitement; but she feels also that she will then be helpless under his gaze. — Simone de Beauvoir25

Sexual currency in the name of self-interest now gives women a powerful position from which to negotiate in a man’s world. Take the terms “Tease,” “Prude” and “Frigid.” These derogatory linguistic marks are most commonly employed by men to the sexualized but not sexually loose female body, often said to incite guilt or shame for not delivering on what
their bodily appearance advertised. If a woman misrepresents herself or represents herself accurately but not to the liking of the male, his language becomes the mark on the flesh—a qualifier of the exterior. Women are asked to examine their own behaviors and bodies in relation to words like “slut,” “virgin,” “bad girl,” “good girl.” These sobriquets become part of the exterior presentation, a linguistic mark for the sexual nature of the recipient.

In “Frigid.Tease.Prude” the scene opens on a young, bare necked woman. Her head cranes upward, stretching the skin tightly over her throat. She begins to rub herself, running her hands over her neck, massaging and scratching. Tiny black flecks appear on her skin. The scene cuts to a woman’s back. A large red spot is apparent right above the black bra closure. Her hands rake across her skin. We cut to the image of the same woman’s breasts covered seductively in a black bra. She
repeats the same gesture, aggressively caressing black flecks onto her bosom. The three scenes weave in and out, moving from one body part to another. Eventually letters begin to appear on the body. The scene fades out before words fully appear, her hands rubbing the flecks onto her reddened neck. The audience is left with the remnants of the action, wondering what words could say that the body could not.

Butler speaks to the ability of language to construct gender, believing that since the origination and perpetuation of language is male dominated, women are automatically subjects under the laws of speech. She writes, “The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power: hence, there is no position outside this field.”

According to Butler, gender is a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment that the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform. Acts, words, gestures, and desire affect the internal core of a person but they are manifested externally on the surface of the body as marks of gender. These performative fabrications appear as truth. We attempt the illusion of concrete gender because we assume that our actions are a result of the internal “truth,” not actions that are prescribed and expected.
AN EXHIBITION

The scene opens to a woman wearing a royal blue dress with a modest neckline and hem length. Pearls dangle from her ears and hang in a strand around her neck. Her hair falls neatly down her back and her modest make-up matches her skin tone. Her glossed lips are poised and prepared to speak.

The woman extends her hand to everyone who approaches. A firm grip cements her sincerity with physical confirmation. She smiles and nods, thanking her attendees for their gracious presence and support, courteously responding to inquiries as to how she’s doing and what she’ll do next. She strolls around the room, back straight and stomach tucked, aware of her audience’s gaze. Her heels tap the floor with every step—her body announces her presence.

In these moments, the woman becomes both more and less herself. These are the events for which she’s prepared. Times of high profile call for the appearance of a controlled hand and collected mind. How she performs on this evening is of critical importance and she acts accordingly. Aware of the expectations, she strives to meet and exceed them.
Those of you who attended my opening will realize that I just described my performance at Puffery. It was important to the integrity of the work that I follow through with my characters actions in this public performance. Every last detail of the presentation was carefully planned and executed. The individually addressed show cards and posters printed on fine paper became pieces in their own right, the perfect invitation to an elegant party. The pictured cake was tasteful and beautiful, iced in flowery puffery. The gloved hands present the viewer with the cake; offering an enticing view of something just beyond the surface.

My letter pressed business and comment cards were designed to incorporate the silhouette of my “Posturing” piece, by far the most prim of my works. This logo became the signature for my work, finding its way onto

Figure 7. Puffery (Postcard), 2011.
my title cards and artist statement. And as they exited the show, attendees were kindly asked to share a thought or comment on an individual comment card and then slip their thoughts into the privacy of the envelope.

The refreshments were carefully arranged. Elegant white platters and glass bowls were filled with fresh fruit, French truffles and cookies. A flower arrangement balanced out the glass pitcher containing water flavored with mint, lemon and lime.
A familiar cake sat at the entrance table, enticing the audience who were unable to partake. The confection performed, wilting and withering as the night carried on, melting under the bright spot lights.

**HER STORY**

The visual exploration of the body reaches back to antiquity. The technology of the camera enabled artists to record a moment in time—an action or event. Performance art emerged from this new freedom, allowing time-contingent creations to become a solidified, documented image—a record of an idea that moved.

As practiced models and daily performers, many women artists found their voice through their bodies during the feminist movement. No longer only muse for a man, women were allowed to express their frustration, joys and individual struggles to an audience hungry for a different perspective. This opening of ideas, time and space allowed women to be in front and behind the lens, creating by themselves, for themselves.

A few women predated the Feminist movement of the 1970s, quietly paving the way for later successes. Claude Cahun emerged in the 1920s as a part of the Surrealist movement, pioneering the visual discussion on
the struggles of a female gendered person in a man’s world. Cahun’s dual ability to be complicit and critical of culturally constructed behaviors was fundamental to my character development. In her photograph, “Don’t Kiss Me. I’m in Training,” made in 1927, Cahun speaks directly to how women were trained to be one type of person. In this image Cahun gazes calmly towards the camera, relaxing in a chair and holding two large weights. Her buzzed hair and boyish body evade normal stereotypes of femininity. Small hearts painted on her cheeks and circles painted over her small breasts call attention to her lack of female endowment.

Foundational to my exploration of durational performances was the work of Marina Abramovic. Her work of that period centers on durational, exhaustion pieces exploring the thresholds of pain and the human body. “Art Must Be Beautiful,” created in 1975, shows her running a brush through her thick, brown hair, violent and quick, repeating, “Art must be beautiful. The artist must be beautiful.” The audience watches her scrape her scalp, aggressively attacking her own body for the sake of beauty. Mimicking life, Abramovic’s endurance performances often last as long as is needed, letting exhaustion and bodily limitations decide the finale.

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Friedrich Nietzsche suggested that gender does not exist beyond the expression of gender.\textsuperscript{27} Butler took that argument further, concluding that
one gender could not exist without its counterpart, solidifying male and females roles in opposition to one another. And Berger observed that women are subjects of a male gaze, their counterpart and measure of oppositional success. This differentiation exists within the female gender as well, dividing the sex into dual roles of “good girls” and “bad girls.”

The definitions of “good girl” and “bad girl” are as abstract as the legal definition of obscene. The contemporary performance artist Kate Gilmore falls safely within the realm of “good,” examining women’s struggle in two-piece sweater sets, A-line skirts and demure heels. Often depicted kicking holes in dry wall or building mountains out of chairs, she reaches for the metaphorical glass ceiling but never succeeds. Often her foundation is knocked out from underneath her feet, leaving her teetering and trying to maintain her feminine composure.

Laurel Nakadate wields a different sort of control, exerted through sexual prowess and an exhibitionist’s confidence. This “bad girl” often engages men to perform with her, exploring the power relationship between the young, beautiful woman and the older, horny man. In her 2006 video “Don’t You Want Somebody to Love You?” she engages in mutual twirling sessions, where both she and her male partner dress in their underpants. We watch them as they twirl, gazing at them as they gaze at each other.
Similar to my character, Nakadate and Gilmore physically embody their pieces, exploring the boundaries of good and bad, and the gendered female’s relationship to the performed action.

**PERFORMANCE AS PRACTICE**

In time, our faces become maps of our lives. —Nancy Friday

To perform is to begin and complete an activity in accordance with the requirements set forth. It is to actively participate in a narrative or task with an end goal in mind. It is to be a part of something, which can be self-motivated but is more often motivated by others. An active performer engages with his or her task, becoming both physical author and agent of prescribed information. To perform is to strike a balance between the self and the rules, between the individual action, gesture and the script—between what you know and what other people tell you to know. In *Gender Troubles*, Butler states:

As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of mundane meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimization.
In “Grooming,” my character is the performer and recipient of a culturally prescribed action she embodies. The scene opens to a young woman with her back to us. Her long, luxurious hair hangs down. She wears a feminine, flower-printed dress, juxtaposed against a backdrop of deep red.

![Figure 10. Grooming (Video still), 2011.](image)

She begins counting as she runs the brush through her hair, one methodical stroke at a time: “One, two, three, four…….” At this point another audio layer enters and another female voice speaks. “Ok, take it all up to your waist.” The overlaid audio is a conversation between a pubic hair stylist and the voice of the woman brushing her hair. At first it is not clear what they are speaking about, but the dialogue points towards the grooming technique known as the Brazilian wax where most or all hair is removed from the woman’s pubic area. The video runs for six minutes while the viewer simultaneously listens to the history of the Brazilian,
experiences the pain of the woman being waxed, and watches the beauty of a head of hair being brushed one hundred times.

In this piece, the character brushes her hair and the customer, who is the same, receives a waxing. Most women can relate with some familiarity to an overarching concern for grooming, cleanliness, and attention to hair and personal hygiene. The way we maintain our pubis can signal our sexual feelings and desires to sexual partners. Strict standards of cleanliness and grooming also apply to head hair but the standards are very different. While no-hair is the current waxing style, long healthy head hair has always been considered a feminine signature of beauty and desire. Both areas are subjected to their own set of standards that women maintain to varying degrees.

In Ways of Seeing, Berger explains our methods of “looking,” devoting a whole chapter on the way society looks at women as objects: “Men act and women appear.”30 In this way, most women grow up as unintended performers, playing parts ingrained through rules and expectations, practice and perfection, discipline and self-discipline. As the initiator of the performance, my character participates in and critiques the actions that meet cultural expectations. The woman cries out in pain, contradicting the complicit nature of the action. The standard is set by
internalized daily performances preparing our bodies for another. The character may have been acting the part at one point, but repetition and ritual can turn any act into an inherent part of being. Berger states:

A woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste—indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence. ³¹

My personal experience is crucial to informing and constructing the character in my works. By putting myself in front of the camera and scrutinizing my internalized habits, I make public my most private struggles and innate assumptions. Situated in the studio, my character does not confront reality but she is aware of it. Budgeon writes:

To construct a narrative of oneself is to locate oneself along a trajectory that gives a coherent shape to past, present, and future...... This trajectory is the product of a process in which the past is mined for experiences and events that can account for the present... One’s self-narrative is never complete or stable. ³²

While I play a character based on real events from my life, the woman on the screen is not myself. I influence her and lend her my body, but when the camera is rolling she performs based on the lines she was given and the role she was born to enact.
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NOTES

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