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Pageant: Manufactured Beauty

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Pageant: Manufactured Beauty

By:

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A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

*Pageant: Manufactured Beauty* explores why the female body is abject and how that body is mitigated through sexually objectifying images. This paper discusses how the female body has been objectified in order to “correct” the elements of the body that are considered abject, through an exploration of psychological studies, philosophy and analysis of contemporary art and popular culture.

The effects of these images on the women who view them is often a desire to conform their own bodies to the images in order to gain social acceptance. Clothing and the decoration of the body, it is argued, are the methods women use to objectify and manipulate their bodies.

The doll, in both popular culture as well as in my specific artistic practice, is used to represent the objectified female body. The doll is presented as the so-called perfect woman because it represents a physically ideal female body that has been cleansed of all abject features. In addition, the doll acts as a learning device for the girls who play with it, teaching them through play what the ideal female should look like and how she should act.

Finally, it is argued that the effects of sexual objectification on both girls and women have resulted in unreasonable societal preference for a hybrid between the two age groups. My artistic practice focuses on recreating this uncanny middle ground between girls and women through the creation of dolls that do not easily fit into either category. The disturbingly humorous results critique the absurd expectations society has placed on women.
Chapter 1: The Monstrous Feminine

I didn't particularly like my outfit that day, but I didn't dislike it either. Clothes were clothes. They were clean and they fit. Well... they kind of fit. They were shapeless in the way only children's clothes could be. Flattering was not what the designers had in mind when they sat down and drew the sappy smile of the cartoon puppy that now graced my chest. Nor were they thinking all too clearly when they decided that what this outfit really needed was a pair of matching shorts. I was in fifth grade.

I had in fact made two fashion faux pas that morning. In addition to the truly awful outfit I was now wearing, I had also forgotten one other crucial undergarment: a bra. Well actually, I hadn't forgotten it. I didn't own one in the first place. Maybe that's why that stupid puppy was grinning so broadly... because his simper was doing nothing to hide the points of my nipples poking out from behind the cloth.

It was recess. Like a scene from a bad tween movie, the girls of my class trapped me behind the terrace on which the playground was built. There were roughly 10 to 100 of them ringing me against the wood of the terrace. Escape was impossible. I don't have to remember what was said, only what I understood. That me, my puppy dog shirt and my pointy nipples were just all kinds of awful. Eventually, an opening appeared in the ring. I took my chance and busted through, nearly knocking over one of the smaller girls in my desperation to escape.

That evening, I ripped off the puppy dog shirt and buried it deep inside the bright yellow donation bag. For the first time in my life, I asked my mom if we could go clothes shopping because my old clothes didn't fit anymore.

Not “fitting” into one's clothes is as good an analogy as any for the trials and tribulations of female adolescence. The natural growth of our bodies, once noted with triumph by ever-climbing pencil marks on the inside of the door, is now something to be feared and wondered at. The road to womanhood, as seen in my recollection, is not clearly defined and does not begin nor end with menarche. This thesis shall explore the perception of the female body as it exists in late 20th and 21st Century Western culture. However, the roots of the liminal space the female body inhabits has roots of Western civilization. That space is in part
dictated by our ever-changing bodies and the societal expectations that come with those changes.\footnote{1}

Becoming an adult is not an easy task. It is a progression of physical and mental development, coupled with a growing appreciation for one’s role in society. As we mature, society alters the way it interacts with us based on our new status. For women, those expectations carry a latent negativity. How society views the appearance of the female and subsequently how it views the whole person is linked to the fact that the female body is viewed as dirty or abject.

Julia Kristeva in her book, the \textit{Powers of Horror}, describes the abject as an object or idea that is universally considered to be disgusting or repulsive. For example, feces, bodily fluids, corpses, and sewage all share a common element. Each has to do with the corruption of a “pure” thing into a dirty or “impure” thing. We fear the abject not because we are actually afraid of the object itself, but because we fear the concept that the object implies. For example, when we are afraid of approaching the corpse at a funeral, what we fear is not the dead body, but the idea of dying. In short, we fear the transformation, of becoming something perceived as less or at least different than what we are.\footnote{2}

The transformation from girl to woman is full of drama. Despite recent trends that encourage parents to celebrate menarche, rather than vilify it, the latent fear remains. No matter how much celebration occurs, nearly every other encounter a girl will have in association with puberty will be seen in a negative light. Whether it is adult female relatives complaining about their menstrual cramps or a young girl being bullied for not wearing a bra, the process of going through puberty will always be uncomfortable. The girl recognizes that in just a few short years, she may not resemble in any way the little girl memorialized on the fireplace mantle. She will have transformed into a different person.
In an earlier series of my work, entitled *I Am Made Whole* (Figure 1), this transformation between the pure whole and the abject fragment can be seen. The organ-like objects epitomize our fear of the abject because of their disembodied existence. Since they clearly evoke probable bodily structure, it is natural to assume that they came from and were removed from a larger entity. The removal and alteration of a whole body recalls injury, a fact exacerbated by the raw and lesion riddled surface of the objects.

*I Am Made Whole* 3 (Figure 2), however, begins to truly address the specifics of the abject female body, or the monstrous feminine, due to its resemblance to the female genitalia. Combined with its visceral, diseased appearance, *I Am Made Whole* 3 is able to describe this location of the body as painful and potentially frightening. It is not only painful and disgusting because it is a damaged fragment, but also because it represents an area of the body already associated with “injury”. The “injury” I am describing is that of menstruation.

Jane Ussher, a psychologist specializing in gender factors underlying mental health and identity, writes, “[...] depictions of menstrual blood are completely taboo; it remains the great unseen, the shame that must be hidden . . . [the sight of blood] would too abruptly [dispel] the fantasy of the female body that does not leak.”

The fear of pain, of fragmentation, is most visible in our fear of blood. By bleeding, we are literally being drained of our vitality. In an instinctual response to an injury, we attempt to correct it. The fact, then, that women bleed every month as part of their natural reproductive cycle is both revolting and terrifying because a woman cannot “correct” the “injury”. Since she cannot fix it, she must hide it.

It is the act of leaking more than the blood that is the most shameful or disturbing aspect of the female body because “leaking” implies disfunction and a lack of control over our own bodies.
A consequence for men, then has been to separate themselves from women. We becomes I and Other, Us and Them. The combative separation creates a situation in which there are winners and losers. Women, by virtue of their out-of-control bodies, become the “losers”. In keeping with a long history of discrimination against the supposedly “weaker” members of the human race, women have become second-class humans at the best and mere objects at the worst. Sandra-Lee Bartky, in her book *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, accurately describes the problem of the female body as it pertains to the power struggle between the sexes, “[...] by being too closely identified with [their body]... [a woman's] entire being is identified with the body, a thing which has been regarded as less inherently human than the mind or personality.”  

The woman's existence as merely an object of man's will can be reinforced by man's own sense of his sexuality. It is the man whose body penetrates the woman's. She is but a receptacle of his “will”.

The downgrading of females to something that merely serves man has its roots buried deep in Western culture. In Genesis, it is man who is created as separate and unique from the other animals. It is man who gives names and identity to the lesser animals. Finally, it is from man that woman is derived, owing her literal existence and reason for being to man's sexual and emotional needs.  

In the collective mind of mankind, the downgrading of the female to an object to be used by the male is necessary because it makes her easier to control, thereby making her abjectness less frightening. The man’s domination over the woman effectively compensates for her lack of control over her own body.

The reduction of women and their abject bodies to something that is less human as a means to mitigate the so-called problems of the female body is a form of objectification. Sexual objectification is a specific process where not only is the body reduced to an object,
but an object whose only function is sexual. This form of objectification allows the body to not only be cleansed of any evidence of abject substances, but in doing so, the body is transformed into a desirable image of femininity, as dictated by male tastes and needs.
Figure 1

*I Am Made Whole 2*
Welded wire armature, paper pulp, wax and gelatin pill capsules
24” x 12” x 9”
2014
Figure 2

*I Am Made Whole 3*
Welded metal armature, paper pulp and wax
36" x 16" x 9"
2014
Chapter 2: Mitigation Through Objectification

One of my roommates during my undergraduate studies was very pretty, and her boyishly short hairstyle did not in the least detract from that fact. Thanks in part to her perfectly symmetrical and lump free cranium, she was one of those lucky few who could pull it off.

One day after a weekend visiting home, my roommate returned to our little dormitory room in a state of heightened huffiness. Tossing her backpack into a corner, she threw herself onto her computer, took a long drag on her iced tea, and tried to pretend as though she hadn't just surged through our dorm room in a maelstrom of passive aggressiveness. Completely confused, I tentatively asked what was the matter. She turned to face me and uttered in a voice fit for a soap opera,

“Do you know what my Mother's friend said to me!?" Having never even met her mother, much less her mother's friend, I chose to wait rather than begin listing off every incredulous thing her mother's friend might have said.

“She told me that I looked like boy! That a woman should take more pride in her appearance. That women were meant to be MAINTAINED!”

The obsessive action of confronting the abject female body has spawned an equally compulsive reaction of attempting to correct it. Evangelia Papadaki elegantly described the pressure experienced by my college roommate and all women in an article for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy in 2014. “In order to gain social acceptability, women are under constant pressure to correct their bodies and appearance […], and make them [their bodies] conform to the ideals of feminine appearance of their time." 7

The method of correction we, as a patriarchal society, use is sexual objectification. Kant, in Lectures on Ethics, described purely objectifying relationships as a situation where one party is the consumer and the other the consumed, “[…] sexual love makes of the loved person an Object of appetite; as soon as that appetite has been stilled, the person is cast aside as one casts away a lemon which has been sucked dry...” 8 Sexual objectification is
Sexual objectification is troubling because the consumption of sexually objective material perpetuates the belief that women are merely objects for consumption. The material present in our society that is most commonly associated with sexual objectification includes images seen in advertising and popular culture. Images produced in these contexts have objectifying features that usually do one or both of two things. First, the images may use a sexualized female body as though it were an object, where the body becomes a prop or background on which to promote the product being sold. The second is an actual alteration and modification of the image of the body in order to make it more attractive and subconsciously less abject.

In order to understand why objectification of the female body is so common and attractive as a form of mitigation for the abject, it is first important to understand how the brain perceives the difference between objects and people.

The human brain is designed to identify the human body. To do so, it has evolved two processes of viewing the things in our environment in order to accurately identify and differentiate between humans and objects. When viewing other human beings, we utilize what is called configural processing. In this method, the human brain identifies separate elements, such as the features of the face, as being related to each other. It then identifies the sum of those parts as being a complete whole. Using this method, we can identify the human figure almost instantly and differentiate it from its surroundings. In contrast, when viewing objects, we use the analytical processing method. In this method, we instinctively disregard spatial relationships between multiple stimulus. This means that we see objects as inherently whole and independent from each other and ourselves.
women, however, this process of differentiation between object and person can become distorted.

In a 2012 study entitled, “Integrating Sexual Objectification With Object Versus Person Recognition: The Sexualized Body-Inversion Hypothesis”, the theory that images of sexualized women are viewed as objects was tested. In the study, researchers presented 78 people with images of sexualized men and women. The researchers showed the photographs in two formats: upright and upside-down. By turning the images upside down, the researchers were hoping to observe the inversion effect. The inversion effect occurs because of the differences in configural versus analytical processing. When viewing a person upside down, humans consistently have trouble identifying the image because the spatial relationships between human features that we rely on to identify a person are distorted. The same is not true with objects. We can easily identify an object no matter what orientation it is in.

As predicted by the inverse effect, participants had trouble identifying the male figure when it was upside-down. Disturbingly, however, the same could not be said for the female figure. When the image was flipped on its head, participants still had no trouble identifying it. This means that when viewing the upside down image of a sexualized female, participants were perceiving her the same way as they would an object.¹¹

When seeing a person, and not an object, we feel obligated to view, think about, and treat that person in a certain way as dictated by social norms, laws, culture, etc. An object, however, does not come with any of these restrictions. Objects are inert. They do not possess an agency to either act on or react to their environment. Since they are inanimate, they therefore also lack subjectivity, the ability to make or embody opinions based on personal judgment. Possessing all of these traits thus makes objects more violable. The malleability and violability of objects is of course what makes them attractive and what makes art
possible. Through the creation or manipulation of an object, I the artist or I the advertiser am able to dictate the appearance and purpose of the object without having to concern myself with its treatment or appearance. However, the very thing that makes real objects and images so attractive (and for normal purposes useful), is also the very thing that makes it so dangerous when the attributes of an object are applied to a person.

A woman in the form of an image or object is treated less as a person. The resulting manipulation and modification of the female body that comes from objectification can be explored in an analysis of a recent poster from Victoria's Secret product campaign entitled, “The Perfect Body”. (Figure 3) The posters from the campaign feature young women who are all improbably slender and large breasted. What we see here is clear evidence of both the use and modification of the body as though it were an object.

Firstly, the women are literally presented for display; lined up in a row for our viewing convenience, like products on a shelf assembled together for the ease of comparison. Their poses are neither casual or natural. Each carefully curated pose is assumed to maximize each model’s assets. In addition to the suggestive poses and attire, the image shows signs of having been digitally manipulated. Their necks and thighs are all improbably long and slender relative to their heights and body sizes. It isn't just the visual appearance of the image, however, that is showing evidence of manipulation, but the context as well. The typographic slogan “The Perfect Body” going directly over their bodies is another. By literally labeling these particular bodies as “perfect”, this implies that anyone else who doesn't look like these women is by default imperfect.

As an artist, I have drawn from imagery such as this, as well as the visual tropes used to construct it, in order to understand the process of female sexual objectification. My latest
body of work, *Pageant: Manufactured Beauty* (Figure 4), explores and critiques how the female body is viewed as an object and how objectification is a means to mitigate the abject. To do so, I have selectively mimicked the appearance and context of advertising imagery and products in order to subvert it.

The work feature hand-made dolls that are presented as though part of a collection and displayed in retail-like spaces. The display of the dolls mimics the display of the models in The Perfect Body advertisement, inviting the viewer compare the dolls to each other rather than address them as unique individuals. Their lack of individuality is further enhanced by the agentless quality of the dolls. By removing the head and placing them in generically attractive poses, the dolls lose any sense of identity in exactly the same way as some depictions in advertising. (Figure 5). Even when a model retains her head, her exclusively sexual context renders her unique identity meaningless.

The removal of identity (through lack of a head) was inspired not only by advertising, but also by contemporary art, specifically the body of work entitled *Closed Contact* (Figure 6) by artist Jenny Saville and fashion photographer Glen Luchford. The series depicts Saville's distorted body as seen pressed up against clear acrylic. This work, particularly *Closed Contact 10*, demonstrates the implied violence of sexual objectification. The female body has been cut up, leaving behind only those erogenous regions that our patriarchal society considers important. Furthermore, by pressing the body against acrylic, the artists are able to explore a sense of the effects of the female body being pressed into a two dimensional picture plane. The female body is reduced to something more closely resembling a specimen on a slide than a person.

So far, we have examined the more obvious changes made to the female body when it is sexually objectified. The female body is treated and presented as an object and all that that
implies. The female body is placed in an exclusively sexual context, through the clothing (or lack thereof) as well as the posing. The third avenue, however, the active alteration of the body, has far deeper roots than just a desire to make the body look slimmer with the aid of a little computer wizardry. The distortion of the female body itself, not just its presentation, is at the heart of humanity’s desire to correct the abject female body. Ussher describes the process to achieve the appearance of a body free from abject qualities in a subtractive way:

The female nude, icon of idealized feminine sexuality, most clearly transforms the base nature of woman’s nakedness into culture, into ‘art’, all abhorrent reminders of her fecund corporeality removed – secretions, pubic hair, genitals, and disfiguring veins or blemishes all are left out of the frame.  

Like Saville and Luchford’s *Closed Contact*, the women in the Perfect Body and other advertising images have been distorted and fragmented. Body and pubic hair are gone. Stretch marks, acne scars, even chunks of their thighs have all been removed in order to create an appropriately sanitized and therefore idealized woman.

As a society, we have come to expect and accept this image of sexually objectified women as normal. Sex, as we all know, sells. Even when the product is not even related to sexuality, advertisers have learned and taught their viewers that the sexualized female body is a marketable commodity.

We learn early on to associate the sexually objectifying imagery with desire, and that by default the woman depicted is desirable. The next step is therefore, a relatively easy one to make. If the women being depicted are considered desirable, then it is natural to want to emulate her. However, the problem lies in the distortion created when when we make
objectified images. The only way to actually resemble the image we have been presented is to treat our own bodies as objects, to self-objectify.

The most common ways women try to resemble the ideal objectified images are clothes and make-up. These things cover up the abjectness of the female body. We stand in front of mirrors and use the reflection as a flat surface to which we apply decoration.

In the same way that images are manipulated to create a more “beautiful” image, clothes are meant to create a more “beautiful” body. For women, clothes have become an alternative to real flesh. This notion of creating a new, more beautiful body from the clothes we wear is achieved in Pageant: Manufactured Beauty. In this piece, the dolls are made out of women’s clothing. The clothes are their skin.

The same tropes of beauty seen in clothing, however, are used subversively in my dolls. In Doll One, Pageant: Manufactured Beauty (Figure 7) from the installation, the clothes do not hide the abject aspects of the body, but rather recreate them from some of fashion’s most beautiful elements. The genitals become patterned with cherries, alluding to the history in Western culture of referring to the loss of a woman’s virginity as “popping a cherry”, a practice that is objectifying. Pubic and under-arm hair are also re-imagined as whimsical ruffles of lace. Where true clothing successfully hides the body, the doll’s “skin” undermines the use of clothing as a means to self-objectify as well as, in a weird sort of way, celebrate the body that we so desperately try to cover up.

The dolls I have created do more than simply explore and critique the methods by which we objectify the female body. They also embody the method through which we, as a society, teach our daughters to self-objectify. Self-objectification, like any other skill, is something that must be learned and practiced. It is skill that is learned not from a textbook, but from the very doll objects that are often the source of after school fun for girls.
"The Perfect Body" Advertising Poster
2014
Victoria’s Secret
Pageant: Manufactured Beauty - Installation Detail of Doll 5 and Doll 4
Handmade Dolls (second-hand clothing, sequins etc) and custom display cases
96” x 79” x 17”
2015
Figure 5

“Get Dirty” LYNX Shower Gel Advertisement
2007
Unilever
Figure 6

Closed Contact 10 from the series Closed Contact
Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford
C-Print Mounted in Plexiglas
96” x 72” x 6”
1995-1996
Doll 1 from *Pageant: Manufactured Beauty*
Handmade Doll (second-hand clothing and lace)  
17” x 6” x 5”  
2015

Detail
Chapter 3: Learning to Self-Objectify

My cousin’s wedding was a big affair. I was the youngest of eight bridesmaids. The other women were all proper adults. I didn’t get most of their jokes…but I knew what it meant when I exited the church dressing room to the sound of their coos and awws. They thought that the dress made me look “all-grown up”.

I was less impressed when I looked in the mirror. My hair was alright, I guess, and I had just taken a shower that morning so I was clean. No, what bothered me was my face. I looked into the mirror at the young women behind me, at their flawless skin. Skin, so different from the painful pustules that covered my own. In short order, however, the discrepancies in my visage were corrected. I buried it beneath layers of foundation that was only a shade or two off, mascara that was only a little bit clumpy and lipstick that was only a smidgen too red. When I looked in the mirror once more, I smiled toothily at the stranger reflected there. She looked beautiful!

Unlike most inanimate objects, dolls resemble us in appearance. In the eyes of a child, dolls even seem to become “alive” during play. When two things are similar, it is only natural to compare the two. For the vast majority of little girls, this one-to-one ratio of relatedness is what makes dolls likable. The mimetic ability of dolls enables children to see their dolls as an extension of themselves. Through this extension, children use toys to explore social interactions through role play. They even assume multiple personalities through their toys in an attempt to work through various social situations, often in mimicry of adult socialization. In a sense, the child temporarily becomes the toy during play.

Like all the other objects produced by a given culture, toys reflect the beliefs of the society they were created in. Toys therefore are among a child’s first introduction to the beliefs and societal expectations of the culture into which they were born. Human-shaped dolls and action figures are thus a vehicle by which to present the preferred ideal physical appearance and behavior of the body to children.
The “educational” nature of dolls and toys, as they pertain to girls, can be seen in my installation, *Doll House* (Figure 8). This installation featured dolls that each pertain to a specific natural bodily function or feature that is considered abject. Each doll came with an appropriate “accessory” that was meant to correct the corresponding defect. For example, *Tampon Tiffany* (Figure 8A), featured an overly large vaginal entrance that could be filled with a plush tampon, to plug the leak, so to speak. This artwork, while somewhat rough in its delivery, describes in a direct, even brutal, fashion the kind of implied messages that certain types of toys carry with them.

*Doll House* focuses on exploring the ways the abject body is mitigated through disciplinary practices, such as tampons and birth control pills. Real dolls and other age specific products such as story books often already have these practices built in. The resulting highly idealized, and often overly sexualized, objects resemble less the bodies of the girls playing with them, than those in sexualized advertisements, such as the Perfect Body, that are consumed by adults.

Despite recent drops in popularity and sales, Barbie (Figure 9), is still among the most popular and well established fashion dolls and embodies some of the more disturbing distortions of the female body.

Barbie, in the eyes of society and culture, epitomizes the “perfect” woman as described by Ussher in the previous chapter. She is beautifully bland with no distinguishing facial characteristics, not even the odd freckle to break up her perfect complexion. Even when naked, her idealized appearance is not diminished. Her perky breasts are not disfigured by gravity or even by nipples. She even comes with built-in underwear. In fact, if one were to estimate her real proportions, approximately 110 pounds at 5’9” tall, she would be too
underweight to menstruate!\textsuperscript{14} She is the ultimate in “safe sex”, embodying everything society loves about the female form with none of her unpleasant abjectness.

It isn't just Barbie’s appearance that makes her disturbing and uncanny, but that she is a toy. From the very beginning, we present girls with an unrealistic and unobtainable role model. This role model sets the stage for the development of a negative body image as well as teaches girls to actively objectify themselves via role play.

In a 2006 study, “Does Barbie Make Girls Want to be Thin?”, psychologists used Barbie dolls and a doll with an average body type to determine what effect viewing the dolls had on girls’ body dissatisfaction. The participant girls were shown pictures of the dolls in a story book and then were asked a series of questions relating to the dolls appearance as well as their own.\textsuperscript{15} The results showed a clear link between exposure to Barbie and a drop in body dissatisfaction in five- to seven-year-old girls. Not only did their body satisfaction go down, but most of the participants also expressed a desire that their bodies more closely resembled Barbie in terms of weight. In the viewing of the dolls with average body dimensions, little to no negative associations were made.\textsuperscript{16}

While just viewing the doll was bad enough, some past doll models have actively encouraged objectifying behavior through role-playing with the dolls. The 1965 Slumber Party Barbie (Figure 10) came with a rather unconventional set of accessories. While many of us might bring ghost stories to read with friends, Barbie brought a different kind of book entitled, “How to Lose Weight.” Upon opening the book, the only advice it had to offer was “Don't Eat!” If a book declaring anorexia to be the only solution for weight loss woes wasn't enough, the same set also comes with a scale permanently set to 110 pounds. Apparently her diet was working.
If the child identifies with the toy, becoming it while playing with it, then proceeds to play with it in a negative manner (like having Barbie stand on the scale for example), they are teaching themselves how to self-objectify, teaching themselves to look and act more like the object in their hand than the real person holding it.

While the insensitivity of this particular Barbie model can partially be attributed to it belonging to a very different time period than our current one, such blatantly inappropriate advice to girls on the appearance of their bodies sadly continues.

The 2011 children’s book entitled *Maggie Goes on a Diet* by Paul Kramer offers us a modern day version of the Slumber Party Barbie. While the book promotes a more healthy weight loss solution (exercise and a healthy diet), it fails miserably when addressing the reasons why Maggie, and in turn the girl reading the book, should go on a diet in the first place. Rather than promoting the obvious health benefits to maintaining a healthy weight, the book instead states that Maggie chooses to lose weight because she was being bullied by her peers. Upon the completion of her diet, those same bullies magically become her friends.\textsuperscript{17} In other words: if you want to be popular, be skinny.

Even with this kind of clear evidence that exposure to overly idealized images like Barbie and subtly malicious advice from children’s literature have a negative effect on the self-esteem of girls, these dolls and other products continue to be made and continue to be popular. The reason for their popularity, however, cannot simply be linked to contemporary advertising techniques nor even to cultural tastes in beauty. The source of idealized beauty, created through objectification, can be traced back to ancient history and has also undergone little to no change during that time. This reflects not only the persistence of this kind of image, but also reflects another aspect of beauty that makes objects so desirable, that they do not change.
Figure 8

*Doll House* Installation Detail
Handmade Doll (cheesecloth, latex rubber, felt etc) and Installation (shadowboxes, books etc)
Approx 100” x 70” x 48”
2014
Figure 8A

*Doll House (Tampon Tiffany)* Installation Detail
Handmade Doll (cheesecloth, latex rubber, felt etc) and Installation (shadowboxes, books etc)
Approx 100" x 70" 48"
2014
Figure 9

“Beach Fun Barbie”
2006
Mattel, Inc.
Figure 10

Accessories from the Slumber Party Barbie
1965
Mattel, Inc.
Chapter 4: Forever Young and The Legacy of Venus

There were many interesting things in my Grandmother’s basement. The vast majority of them were broken in some way. My great-grandmother’s piano, the occasional broken key slumping slightly compared to its neighbors. My great-grandfather’s rocking chair, whose back rockers still showed signs of where they’d been glued back together (on multiple occasions). These things earned a place of pride in the collection of cool old stuff, mostly because they still looked nice. The real good stuff, however, was further down. Here you could find stuff that you could still play with, kind of like a “touch” exhibit at a museum. In fourth grade, I found one such exhibit buried in a box underneath the record player. It was a porcelain doll. Well, her head anyway. When exactly her head and body had parted ways, Grandma couldn’t remember. How on Earth the head survived 40-plus years in a tatty cardboard box in the basement was a mystery and a bit of a miracle. The doll’s delicate face gave no answers. She just smiled benignly up at me through the dust. A few months later, I returned the doll to my Grandma. The head was now attached to a brand new body. It was impossible to tell that she had ever been broken at all.

The transformation from a dynamic state (a real person) to a static state (an object) is at the heart of objectification. This is because it is only in a static form that something can be altered by a force outside itself. The female body is in constant motion by nature of her constantly shifting reproductive cycles. Throughout her life, the woman's growth and aesthetic appearance will chiefly be governed by this cycle. The years of puberty, sexual maturity, and finally menopause will all alter the landscape of the female body drastically.

In order for the appearance of the female body to be controlled, it must be prevented from changing. However, not all stages of a woman’s life are held as equal. As stated by Ussher, the female body transformed into culture and art is not representative of an entire life of change, but rather focuses only on the years of puberty and the early years of sexual maturity. During this time, girls and young women in this age group (10-18 years old) not only
discover that the body they inhabit is perceived by their culture as an object, but that it also
must be preserved through careful maintenance and adornment in order to correspond to the
objectified image, an image that they have learned to accept through early exposure to
objectified imagery in dolls and other children’s products. In other words, girls outgrow their
toy dolls and graduate to using their own bodies instead.

The feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir wrote of this phenomenon in her landmark
book *The Second Sex* in 1961, saying, “[The adolescent girl] becomes an object and she
sees herself as an object; she discovers this new aspect of her being with surprise: it seems
to her that she has been doubled instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to
exist outside.” 18 The double described by de Beauvoir is the self that observes their own body
in the mirror as an outsider would and is thus able to make decisions objectively about what
the body should look like, regardless of the interior self’s desires. At this stage, the subject
has accepted the situation as normal and thus takes no action to correct it. Rachel Calogero,
a psychologist researching out of the University of Kent, in a recent study, found evidence of
this phenomenon. In her study, she showed that when women objectify themselves, they are
less likely to participate in social actions to correct the problem. 19 In a news article for *Raw
Story*, Calogero went on to say:

“[...] primarily valuing and investing in appearance domains and viewing oneself in
terms of a sexual object is related to women devaluing and investing less in social
action...this pattern seems to emerge because the more women self-objectify, the less
likely they are to report perceiving anything wrong with the gender status quo, so what
is there to change?” 20
The goal of self-objectification corresponds to the age of women when they begin to self-objectify. It is this time period between puberty and full maturity (10-18) that is thus considered to represent the height of female beauty and is therefore the fixed point from which all women will be compared and to which all will aspire. De Beauvoir once more offers a glimpse at the method used as well as the ideal appearance of the self-objectified woman, “She [the girl] is encouraged to treat her whole person as a doll, an inert object… a passive given object.”\(^{21}\) The girl learns to live her life as the object of another’s gaze.

The doll as the ultimate metaphor for the idealized, and therefore objectified, female body is pervasive in this document and in my own art practice. It is both the object through which we learn to objectify and the thing that we later aspire toward. While we have explored the role of dolls as means through which society instructs, let us analyze the doll as an object unto itself.

Unlike many Eastern philosophies, especially in Japan, where beauty is appreciated for its transient qualities, in the West, beauty is characterized by its stasis. Something is considered beautiful only if it can remain unchanged and unspoiled. This dislike for change and transformation is mirrored in our attitudes toward the abject as well. For something to change and age is a reminder that it will one day cease to exist through death. The doll, therefore, as metaphor for enduring youthful feminine beauty is perfect because a doll is an inanimate object and will never wither or die. Even though the doll I found in my grandmother’s basement had been neglected and forgotten for years, her face had remained unbroken and untarnished.

Women’s obsession to remain youthful and become doll-like can also be seen in the use of make-up and shaving. Such practices are designed to mimic the appearance of youth. In addition to making us appear more youthful, these practices also reinforce our
conceptualization of ourselves as living dolls or objects because we come to view the skin and flesh as though it were a blank canvas, in need of augmentation.

The French performance artist known as Orlan has taken this notion of treating the body as though it were a canvas to an extreme. Starting in 1990, Orlan underwent seven different plastic surgeries that drastically altered her appearance. The surgeries performed for the piece entitled *The Reincarnation of St. Orlan* (Figure 11 and 12), drew as their model classic female icons of beauty from Renaissance and Post-Renaissance artworks. From each piece of art specific attributes of the women were selected: the nose of a sculpture of the Goddess Diana created by an unknown sculptor of the School of Fontainebleau, the mouth of François Boucher's Europa from *The Rape of Europa*, the forehead of Leonardo Da vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the chin of Sandro Botticelli's Venus from *The Birth of Venus*, and the eyes of Jean-Leon Gerome's *Psyche*. The chimeric results were meant to represent the ideal woman as described by male desire. In the act of recreating herself on her own terms she is, however, able to win back the control of her own body and appearance. Her inspiration for this work came from the ancient Greek artist Zexius who would often use the best parts of his models to recreate the ideal woman in his sculptures.

The way Orlan created her ideal appearance by borrowing attributes of other great beauties is also very indicative of another important link between dolls, sexually objectifying imagery, and the obsession with stasis, their interchangeability. Real dolls are manufactured in mass with identical parts and though my the dolls from *Pageant: Manufactured Beauty* are handmade, they are made from the exact same pattern. Unique features like long legs or a chubbier body are just minor changes to the master pattern.

Like the master pattern I used in the creation of the dolls for *Pageant: Manufactured Beauty*, there is also a master pattern for the idealized female body. The conformation to this
The Greco-Roman Venus represents the first and last word in idealized feminine beauty through sexual objectification. Even in her most ancient depictions, all of the same tropes used today to describe the ideal woman are present. Her body is sexually desirable but distorted from reality through bold over-statement or subtle exclusion. It is these ancient roots that make her so important because by being created so early in human history and enduring so long, we can now see why her image has been so difficult to overcome. The standard of beauty Venus represents is much like a trusted brand name; it has been around for so long because it works.

While there are uncounted examples of Venus spread throughout the Greco-Roman world, for this discussion we analyze one in particular, a fresco from the Roman town of Pompeii entitled The Birth of Venus. (Figure 13)

Re-discovered in 1748, Pompeii has become famous for the preservation of its inhabitants as well as the remains of their way of life. The Birth of Venus fresco resides in one of the many preserved villas in the town and dates from around the 1st century AD.

The Greco-Roman Venus is important because she represents a fundamental shift in the depictions of women compared to her prehistoric ancestors. Prehistoric depictions of women, such as the famous Woman of Willendorf (Figure 14), focused primarily on a woman's reproductive capacity. In keeping with that intention, these images depict the female reproductive organs in great detail. The Greco-Roman Venus, in contrast, downplays her reproductive organs in favor of a more aesthetically and sexually appealing image. In
other words she is meant to be sexy, not necessarily fertile, a very important and very lasting feature in depictions of women.

On the surface, many of the exaggerated features of the Woman of Willendorf are repeated in the Greco-Roman Venus, albeit with a greater degree of artistic sophistication. They are both full breasted and they both have large hips relative to their overall proportions.

However, the difference begins when we compare the genitals of the two women. While the genitals of the Woman of Willendorf are fully described, the genitals of the Venus in *The Birth of Venus* are completely removed. What is left behind is simply a flat, featureless triangular patch of skin in the fork of her legs. Not only are the genitals missing, but so is her pubic and body hair and while her hips are quite wide, there are no further details that would indicate her body’s reaction to gravity. There are no wrinkles, no fat rolls, and certainly no stretch marks.

In short, it is no longer important that Venus look like she is or could become pregnant. The pleasure of both looking at and interacting with her body is what is being emphasized here, a role that would be ruined if she became pregnant. By removing the evidence of her reproductive features, her abject features, this allows Venus to be solely used for sexual pleasure without having to worry about any other aspect of her body. She has been objectified and furthermore, all of Venus’ activities are connected to what men desire in a woman, not necessarily what women desire for themselves.

The Greco-Roman Venus’ specific context directly links her and by proxy all woman to an exclusively sexual realm that is dictated by men. The use of the Venus to describe depictions of all women can be reinforced by other images of mortal women in secular contexts, existing at the same time as *The Birth of Venus* fresco. The *Couple in Bed* (Figure 15) fresco, located in the Lupanar building in Pompeii, depicts an amorous mortal couple.
Despite the degradation of the fresco it is clear from the image that the female figure possesses a near identical body type to the Venus in *The Birth of Venus*. In addition when we examine her crotch area we once more see the now familiar featureless patch of skin where pubic hair and genitalia should be. This fresco and other’s like it show that the depiction of the Venus’ body is not exclusive to her status as a Goddess but instead transcends through nearly all depictions of the nude female in Greco-Roman culture.

The body of Venus appearance reinforces this interpretation of femininity due to its enduring sexualized appearance apparent in her hour-glass figure. Her figure and context compensate for her lack of visible genitalia, effectively defining her while still successfully mitigating the abject aspects of her body. This image of Venus, with the mature female physique but lack of certain elements of maturity, namely body hair and blemishes, is what has survived into our contemporary era and has come to define our concept of beauty as well as the methods we use to obtain it.

It is not only just the appearance of Venus’ body that has persisted, but also her poses. Like her physical features, her poses have also come to be instantly synonymous with sexuality. Since classical images of Venus lie so close to the source of all contemporary images of women, it is primarily from images such as these that I derived much of my source material for posing of the dolls for *Pageant: Manufactured Beauty*.

In particular, I was most interested in the poses of classical images that were still being reproduced long after worship of Venus ceased. For example, the reclining pose struck by the Venus in *The Birth of Venus* is seen over and over again in works of art as well as advertisements, so I mimicked the same pose in my dolls. (Figure 16). Even though much of the population will make no connection between the pose in a perfume advertisement and an ancient Roman fresco, the pose is still recognizable as sexual. The repetition of these poses
in my art is thus important in order to connect my own work to the long art historical tradition of Venus-like imagery. However, in doing so I am also able to critique that tradition of sexually objectifying images by presenting that same pose in the form of something that isn’t normally sexual in nature. By aligning two such unlikely elements, I am able to disrupt the viewer’s interpretation. This disruption of the reading of my art as purely sexual is important in order to draw attention away from the Venus tradition and towards what they are actually looking at. Dolls are not normally referencing sexual desire. They are children’s toys. To present them as sexual is a perversion of the ideas of toys and childhood. This uncomfortable line of thought lies at the heart of the question my work is trying to answer: What is it that humanity really desires from the female body?
Figure 11

The Reincarnation of St. Orlan - In-Progress
Orlan
Performance/Film Still
1990-1993
Figure 12

*Official Portrait with a Bride of Frankenstein Wig*

Orlan

Photograph Mounted on aluminum

59” x 39”

1990- After 3rd surgery
Figure 13

*The Birth of Venus*
Fresco
177” x 95”
1st Century AD
Pompeii, House of Venus
Figure 14

*The Woman of Willendorf*

Limestone and Red Ochre

4" x 1.5" x 1.5"

25,000 BCE

Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna
Figure 15

Couple in Bed
Fresco
36" x 24"
1st Century AD
Pompeii, The Lupanar (Pompeii’s Brothel)
Figure 16

Doll 5 from Pageant: Manufactured Beauty
Handmade Doll (second-hand clothing)
17” x 6” x 5”
2015
Chapter 5: An Uncanny Pageant

I must have only been about four years old when a family friend gave me a doll. I remember the kind I received was very popular in the early 1990s. It was something called a water baby. The idea was kind of cool. You were supposed to fill the doll up with warm water so that it would be squishy and warm like a real baby. The problem with it, however, was that more often than not, it bore more resemblance to a boneless chicken. Its head flopped lifelessly, its limbs bent in places that limbs just shouldn’t bend, all the while smiling benignly as the cold water was slowly drained from its body to run sluggishly down the sink. After a few days of this, the water baby was unceremoniously placed in permanent “time-out” at the bottom of my toy box.

As described by Sigmund Freud, something that is uncanny is usually something that we once found familiar but has undergone some kind of transformation that has rendered it threatening in some way. These objects are often disturbing because of the perceived taint on their “character”.

In Mike Kelley’s installation, Arena 10, (Figure 16) this taint is apparent. Arena 10 consists of a number of handmade stuffed toy dachshunds. The dachshunds are made from heavily soiled cloth and have been stretched out back to front in an explicitly sexual manner, uncannily altered from our memories of our own toys. As children, we place almost talismanic importance on certain toys and blankets. They are the comforting leading characters in many of our fondest memories. Kelley, however, has turned that nostalgia on its head by giving an alternative view of childhood, one that is dirty and clouded by adult concerns and expectations.

The actual dirt upon the toys is particularly interesting. In his essay, “Playing with Dead Things”, Kelley talks about our different reactions to various kinds of filth. He notes that in the case of our own personal toys, the dirt or soiling is of great importance, to the point that
many children will strongly object to parents washing their beloved toys or blankets. For the soiling to be removed, in the mind of a child, would somehow diminish the toy. So while the soiling of our own toys is permissible, even desirable, the same cannot be said when viewing or interacting with other people's dirt.

The literal and figural soiling of the Arena 10 dachshunds is an inhibition to our emotional bonding with the object because it has become abject. A separate, unwholesome object, stained with somebody else's life and refuse. These objects, however, are more complex than the average abject object because of their uncanniness. No matter how repulsive or sick we might find them, they are still too close for comfort to our own memories. We desire them as much as we are repulsed by them. Like a moth to the flame, we are drawn into a conflict of interest where we cannot separate our own personal experience from the alternative experience implied by the toys.

The conflicted views represented in Kelley's work are created by his deft, but strangely humorous, use of the uncanny. Through his use of the uncanny, he is able to bridge the gap between two normally unrelated topics: childhood innocence and adult perversion. This uncomfortable middle ground that Kelley arrives at in Arena 10 is what society has been searching for in its use of objectification: the idealized female body, one which is both sterilized in appearance like that of a young girl and has the sexual desirability of an adult woman.

This phenomenon can clearly be seen in the popular child beauty pageants, in which little girls, some as young as four or five, are made up as adults, complete with make-up, elaborate hairstyles, and suggestive clothing. In 2011, the popular TLC television show “Toddlers and Tiaras”, a show following the lives of these miniature beauty queens, displayed the epitome of this obsession with this hybrid form of femininity via Madisyn Verst. Verst, then
only five years old, appeared on the show wearing an extremely accurate costume of Dolly Parton, complete with the padded breasts and booty (Figure 17). *Pageant: Manufactured Beauty*, intentionally represents the uncomfortable middle ground that was unintentionally revealed by the costume worn by Verst not only to reveal that there is in fact a middle ground but to demonstrate its many faults.

Ussher described the idealized female nude as a body that had been sanitized of all evidence of her corporeality, (Chapter 2, page 15) and in doing so achieves that middle ground between girl and woman. As we have seen, this ideal form is only truly possible in image form where direct manipulation is possible. Clothing becomes an alternative to direct manipulation, covering the undesirable traits of the female body while accentuating the desirable ones (Chapter 2, page 16). In *Pageant: Manufactured Beauty*, the normally undesirable features of the female body have not been covered by clothes but are instead made of clothes. Not only do the unusual embellishments purposefully fail to mitigate the female body, but the state the clothes are in exacerbate the issue of cleanliness emphasized by Ussher as necessary to achieve the ideal female body.

The clothing selected for the dolls in *Pageant: Manufactured Beauty* are not just made from any woman's clothing, but specifically second-hand girl's clothing. The second-hand nature of girl's clothing means that these clothes have been grown out of. By the time they reach the clothing racks of the Goodwill store, they are stretched out, worn, and stained. The stains in particular are problematic, especially when clothes are supposed to be a replacement for a sanitized ideal. Stains upon a toy are a triumphant mark of some childhood victory (usually involving mud or paint or both). Stains on the clothes of an adolescent become a failing. For girls in particular, the sight of a stain is not merely embarrassing but
also shameful. That shame is carried over into the viewer of the dolls but for a different reason. In addition to the disgust one feels in interacting with something that has been deemed unhygienic, there is also the disgust one feels in one's self for associating the dolls, and by proxy girls, with adult sexuality.

This association with adult sexuality is reinforced not just by the metaphorical and literal stains upon the dolls, but also by their poses. Inspired by the now overused poses of classical sculptures of Venus, these positions have none of the elegant, if cliché, feel of those previous incarnations. Like a girl's first attempt at makeup application where the lipstick usually ends up all over the teeth, the poses of the dolls seem like only naive attempts to appear sexy and sensual. *Doll Two (Figure 18)* from the series exemplifies the tension created by the awkward posing. With her torso suspended backwards over her legs, the possibility of her righting herself upon her footless legs feels painfully futile. However, such a position is also reminiscent of various sexual positions. This push and pull between awkward and sexy mimics not so much the classical sculptures, but rather the young girls who try to emulate them.

The fact that the dolls so neatly straddle the line between two extremes is what makes them uncanny. Their uncanniness is threatening because by all rights, all of their various features should be amounting to the feminine ideal. Far from being sanitized, however, the dolls have taken a wrong turn and have landed right back where we started with an abject female body (Chapter 1, page 4). Abject, because by representing such polar opposite view points at the same time, the objects fall into the frightening transient state between the two. They are in the act of transforming from one extreme to another. The viewer is thus forced into a trap of their own creation, constantly interpreting and reinterpreting the piece without ever being able to reach a final conclusion as to what they are. So too are women constantly
interpreted and reinterpreted by society; a decision cannot be agreed upon as to whether they should be pure and innocent or mature and sexually desirable. While society continues to debate, girls and women are harmed. It is not until females are accepted for who they are at any time that this harmful cycle will end.
Figure 17

Arena 10 (Dogs)
Mike Kelley
Handmade stuffed toys and afghan
123” x 32” x 11.5”
1990
Madisyn Verst Dressed as Dolly Parton
Aired August 21, 2011
TLC Network: "Toddlers and Tiaras" - Film Still
Figure 19

*Doll 2 from *Pageant: Manufactured Beauty*
Handmade Doll (second-hand clothing, lace, and applique)
21” x 6” x 5”
2015
Conclusion

Our society prefers to treat images of women, and subsequently women themselves, as objects because it makes the female body easier to manipulate and control. Doing so makes her less sexually abject. In keeping with the desire to create a more “hygienic” female, our society considers youthful girls to be more beautiful because they have not yet been spoiled by maturity. Young girls are taught directly by role-models like Barbie, and in the viewing of sexualized images, that there is not only an ideal but that they must ascribe to it. In order to embody the ideal before them, the young girls learn to treat their bodies as objects to be decorated and maintained. As they age, this process continues. Adult women continue to maintain themselves in order to more closely resemble the younger, purer model of femininity. The resulting ideal created by the overssexualization of girls and the infantilization of women is an uncanny hybrid of both: the purity and cleanliness of a girl and the sexual viability of a woman.

On the surface, the dolls of *Pageant: Manufactured Beauty* should be the so-called perfect female that embodies the best of both worlds. Their agentless bodies are freely manipulable into any desirable pose. Their skin is reduced to decorative surface. Full breasts are balanced out by infantile bodies. All abject features have been neutralized. Why then do these dolls fail so profoundly? The reason is the same reason why Madisyn Verst's Dolly Parton costume created so much outrage. It fails to reach that ideal because it is blatant. The advertising, toys, and clothes we surround ourselves with do not come with disclaimers of their objectifying qualities. In fact, most people aren't even aware that the images surrounding them imply anything more than the products they are advertising. The beauty of these images is what allows us to overlook whatever negative attributes it might possess (show picture of famous advertisement). In addition, the images of sexualized women are so prolific that they
no longer even register. We have accepted that this how women are portrayed and this is what they should look like. Thus, the only way to actually break this cycle is to disrupt the viewers gaze with something that isn't beautiful, that reveals our societal faults in such a crude manner that we must stop and stare simply because it is so different from what we normally see.

Pageant: Manufactured Beauty provides that disruption by preventing the viewer from deciding one way or another what these dolls are. They can't be interpreted as girls because they have mature anatomical features. They can't be toys because they are too sexual. They can't be beautiful because they are too uncanny. They can't be pure because they are too dirty. In every juncture, the dolls successfully cut off our attempts to bond with them and therefore accept them as “normal” and in doing so, they reveal the faults in ourselves and in our society.
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