Fixing Broken Shit: How We are Always Cleaning Up Some Mess

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Fixing Broken Shit: How We are Always Cleaning Up Some Mess

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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 requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Art

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Abstract: Something’s Not Quite Right 2
Introduction: How to Know If It’s Broken 4
Realizing It’s Been Broken for a While 8
Assessing the Damage 11
Deciding to Fix It 14
Taking it Apart 17
Examining Damaged Components 22
Putting the Pieces Back Together 26
Conclusion: If that Doesn’t Work, Next Time Do It Better 35
End Notes 37
Illustrations 39
Illustration Citations 58
Bibliography 60
Abstract: Something’s Not Quite Right
My artistic practice deals with identifying and breaking down expectations that are placed on women in America; both in their personal and public lives. I have combined the ideologies of two previous feminist art movements: The Pattern and Design, and Deconstructivist movements. This creates a visual language that is unique to my time, while acknowledging the successes and contributions of the past. This thesis will analyze how my work draws elements from the past and expands upon those ideas to progress the feminist plight.
Introduction: How to Know If It’s Broke
“It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs.”

Ten years ago, this quote would have seemed ridiculous to me. I was fifteen years old being brought up by strong educated women in the South. Trust me; it never felt like there was a shortage of things to say. However, as I’ve gotten older and my world has broadened and become more complicated, I’ve found that this passage rings true in many ways. Utilizing the very language that created the current infrastructure to criticize it feels futile. Rather than using existing vocabulary to challenge social structures feminist artists through the decades have created their own artistic vernacular. Each artist has developed and composed a kind of dialect unique to their existing cultural realities, allowing for their personal lives to subtly or overtly seep into their work.

I lost my father at a young age, leaving my grandfather and my two younger cousins as the only men in my immediate family. Men were not around consistently enough for me to understand the gender power dynamics that are at play in society. This created a kind of equilibrium within the dynamic of my family. I lived a privileged life as an upper-middle-class white female, but I didn't understand how few girls were treated in the same manner as myself. I was never taught to think less of myself because of my sex, and despite the pressures of the media, I appreciated the body I had. I loved myself. After maturing and becoming more acquainted with other women, I began to realize that my experience was not the norm. I have come to understand that most women are not comfortable with their self-image and that the comparisons they make seem to be tied directly into media imagery.

American media has created an unrealistic image of women that is unattainable. Because of these expectations we are always examining our appearance which increases this feeling of
inadequacy. Naomi Wolfe wrote the key feminist text *The Beauty Myth*. Within its pages, she dissects how the images of feminine beauty are used as a political weapon to prevent women's advancement. Magazines, television, and movies systematically promote the idea that something is missing in our lives and that the key to our happiness is out there, ready to be purchased. It creates a mentality that causes us to seek perfection and criticize imperfection. The beauty culture has shaped women into people who over-scrutinize and criticize their bodies and who seek physical validation from men. My work deals with identifying and breaking down expectations, specifically pejorative feminine tropes in America.

I select objects that represent larger social structures and use a method of deconstruction to destabilize and transform both the subject matter and the institution(s) that it represents. By problematizing the object, I call into question the arbitrary societal norms it represents. Dismantling the item encourages the audience to reexamine the larger existing social structures by metaphorically displaying the elements that composed these reductive ideas. I use my practice to address such issues that I find unsettling: gender inequality, objectification, and the trivialization of historically feminine practices. My artistic practice allows me to tackle social problems, gender generalizations, and my personal inability to find inclusion in a society where I neither hold nor seek a clearly defined role.

I am deeply invested in combining the ideologies of two feminist art movements, the Pattern and Decoration (P&D) movement and the Deconstructivists. Two of P&D's primary goals were to elevate the forms of creating outside of the canon of art and to address the personal lives of women. While this movement was successful for a short time, the interest waned, and the popular opinion in America shifted to dismissal. Shortly after this the Deconstructivist movement began. The Deconstructivists surmised that the representation of women had become
more powerful than the women themselves. This movement focused on creating intellectual works that criticized the male-dominated power structure. The female Deconstructivists of the 1980's focused on disassembling and recontextualizing material from mainstream media that could have a potentially harmful impact on women and men’s perception of women. Due to the success and acceptance of the Deconstructivists women breached the power structures. Feminist artists were now able to explore artwork in a more personal way.

The feminist artists that have come before me expanded the possibilities of feminine art subject matter. The manner with which society addresses issues must mature with progress rather than remain stagnant in dated ideologies. Our artistic language will evolve to address new issues when there are no appropriate words. I believe that by using elements from both movements, I have created a vocabulary that is unique to my place in time. My work criticizes prevailing anti-feminist views while allowing my personal life to blend in without losing conceptual validity. To elicit change, we must continue to look to where power emanates while understanding the impact that our personal lives have on the way we perceive the world. To effectively contribute to the feminist dialogue, we must first know the evolution of the conversation.
Realizing It’s Been Broken for a While
It’s almost impossible to talk about the progression of feminism within the art historical establishment without addressing the dominance of white men inside of that institution. It is critical to acknowledge that women (and other marginalized people) have been largely misrepresented and neglected throughout art history. Even now it would be false to claim that all of the demographically diverse artists of the past have been properly accounted for and represented within the art-historical canon. Clearly, Western art history is biased. The power in place was responsible for establishing the relevance and value of artworks. If they did not deem what you were celebrating to be of significance, the work did not gain representation or an audience. The emphasis of the past was placed on Caucasian males, creating a disproportionate representation of the grandeur of their work.

Certain publications have acknowledged that the influx of female artists’ representation into the institution of art was partially facilitated by the developments and innovations of various male artists working during the time. Edward Lucie-Smith of ArtToday credited Joseph Beuys as being chiefly responsible for discovering the use of the museum as a practical political platform. Following his lead, female artists began to recognize art as an effective instrument of propaganda. They also discovered the ability of the museum to grant their causes both visibility and credibility. Peggy Phelan in Art and Feminism stated that Jackson Pollock's work made it possible for the act of painting to enter the realm of performance. His work allowed different sets of possibilities to manifest within the practices and discourses of post-war American art. This trajectory would not have been feasible had these new methods not been legitimized by those already ingrained within the existing system. Both of the writings above speak of the art
community as if it were primarily an exclusive men’s club. Museums had become a restrictive power system solely responsible for the evolution of art.

The pivotal feminist texts of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystic* (1963) awoke American women’s consciousness to the discrimination they endured. Misogyny devalued their labor and hyper-idealized their bodies. Women began to question the larger political structures that were in place, forming consciousness groups where they would speak about personal instances of discrimination. These discussions allowed them to identify patterns and acknowledge them as consequences of political constructs. Feminist artists of the time reacted in kind; creating activist works that protested the lack of inclusion of female artists in museums and elevated the degraded language of decorative and craft based art which had been deemed feminine. Their intent was to alter art history and improve the general public’s view of women and any extension of the female identity. Art became the arena for an inquiry into both a political and personal revision of the status quo.
Assessing the Damage
The Pattern and Decoration (P&D) Movement started in the 70's as a critique of Minimalism and artistic institutions that would not accommodate craft-based practices. Their style was adopted from pre-existing craft practices and non-Western imagery that existed long before the rise of the P&D. Works from this time have been called funky, funny, fussy, perverse, obsessive, riotous, accumulative, awkward, and hypnotic. All of these descriptions focus on the visual. The aesthetic’ beauty’ of P&D artwork often outshone the conceptual components causing many critics and viewers to connected it to pictorial arbitrariness and exoticism. This disregard any theory, much like the way a beautiful woman is thought to be nothing more than her looks.

P&D artists dragged the fine art formats into the realm of supplemental forms as a method of challenging the hierarchical relation between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art forms. Miriam Schapiro, a leader of the Feminist art program at CalArts, created Mary Cassatt and Me (Figure 1), a work which reproduced Mary Cassatt's Woman at Her Toilette and framed it in an ornamented fabric quilt. By making her contribution the frame around the piece, she creates an analogous social position that Cassatt occupied as a female artist in her own time. The central image depicts a woman framed by a mirror crafting her appearance, absorbed in her image. The frame that Schapiro has added acts in response to Cassatt's. It asks the viewers to expand their gaze into margins. Mary was marginalized as a female artist in the 1800's and from where Miriam has placed herself, it doesn’t appear like much has changed.

Emblematic of this period was Womanhouse (Figure 2), a project that sought to reimagine the domestic space, organized by prominent female artists including Faith Wilding, Judy Chicago, and Miriam Schapiro. Twenty-four female artists came together to refurbish a house in Los Angeles, transforming each room into an exhibition space, blurring the line between public
and private. The multi-room collaborative installation celebrated that which was considered trivial: cosmetics, linens, tampons, and underwear. The inclusion of these items in the revolutionary installation elevated these mundane objects to the material of high and critical art. From the *Crocheted Womb Room* to the *Nurturant Kitchen* each room embraced the female narrative and feminine modes of production.

Despite the satirical efforts of *Womanhouse*, many viewers denounced representational codes that would have allowed for the work to be seen as a critique of women’s infantilizing consignment to the home. This disregard caused many feminists to believe that the sex/gender binary system had to be abandoned before a non-sexist culture could exist. This change in theory also caused a shift in the overall state of feminist art practice: the previous power structures had to be deconstructed and questioned before the personal lives of women could be addressed.
Deciding to Fix It
Cinema was the dominant media outlet of the early 20th century. Most of the Western culture was fascinated with Hollywood and the idyllic female film stars. Stars were used as signifiers in a complex social discourse of sexuality and commodity. Marilyn Monroe once said, "That's the trouble, a sex symbol becomes a thing, and I just hate to be a thing…". In this statement, she flawlessly illustrated the problem with the portrayal of women in the media, in both the past and in the present. The aesthetics of film were created by men to be consumed by the male gaze. The film industry intended the actress to be looked at as a spectacle.

Laura Mulvey, a prominent film theorist and author of *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) discusses how the camera renders the female subject into raw material for the gaze of men through the methods of scopophilia and fetishistic scopophilia. Scopophilia is the erotic basis for the pleasure of looking at another as an object. Fetishistic scopophilia builds up the beauty of the subject matter and transforms the action into something satisfying. Ms. Monroe personified females, playing an integral role in performative politics. Marilyn was a representative of the recognized female stereotypes. When anyone is placed on display, whether on a screen or in a magazine advertisement, they become a proxy and their on-screen actions are both a projection of their demographic and one onto that same demographic. This representation is extremely problematic. When Marilyn becomes an object in the eyes of viewers, it affects the perception of women, in general.

"Women are bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning." 

The public production and distribution of video cameras in the 1960s had an enormous impact on the art world. Many feminist artists felt that traditional modes of production such as
painting and sculpture were tainted by the language of patriarchy. Due to its lack of history and association to the pre-existing hierarchies, women were especially drawn to this new medium. Video allowed them to investigate the notions of beauty, identity, and gender on their own terms and through a lens and language of their making. Video and photography were also better mediums for public distribution allowing feminists to reach a much larger audience. VALIE EXPORT and Pipilotti Rist, despite their different time in history, both worked under the second wave of feminist art theory of postmodernist deconstruction.
Taking it Apart
“We cannot accept that women somehow are just less creative than men, less intelligent, less innovative, less thoughtful, or less important as articulators of modern human experience, it is unhistorical. It would also be completely unmodernist to do so.”

This type of mentality is what brought about the feminist deconstructivist logic. Women of this movement felt that the P&D had focused too much on the personal lives of women without looking critically at women’s conditions within a society that privileges men. VALIE EXPORT was one of the first female artists to tackle the medium of film. EXPORT was part of a generation of women artists who used their body as a mirror of societal space to address gendered perspectives. In her video performance Hyperbulie (1973) (Figure 3) EXPORT crawled nude through a narrow passage of an electrical fence receiving a shock every time she accidentally brushed against its border. By alienating the female body in opposition to a male-connoted public space, EXPORT altered how the (mostly male) audience viewed her. She stretched her physical limits, questioning mental and physical identity. Her choice to be naked while representing an act of struggle spoke to her humanity and vulnerability eliciting sympathy from the audience. This situation negated any pornographic or sexual associations her nudity previously could have held.

The 1990s brought about a new group of female artists who grew up watching MTV. The women of this generation had no qualms with creating art that blended with pop culture. This fusion led to the use of witty and playful techniques as a way to examine feminine, social, and sexual behaviors. The body was still a standard tool, and theme as it was in the 70s but the energy of the works had collectively shifted. Pippilotti Rist's work illustrated this progression thoroughly. Ranging from the serious, hard-hitting approach of earlier feminist artists; like her
piece *I’m not the Girl Who Misses Much (1986)* (Figure 4). Where a blurry bare-breasted Rist sings and dances manically until she collapses from exhaustion. Rist then transitions to a more spirited way of addressing a serious subject matter in *Ever is Over All (1997)* (Figure 5). In this work, the artist dons a flowy dress carrying a flower while gaily walking down the street.

The flower has become one of the most recognized gendered icons. Although a flower contains both male and female reproductive parts, it has been stereotypically assigned to the province of the feminine. Blossoms have come to represent women, becoming synonymous with birth, fertility, beauty and the vagina. The flower symbolically alludes not only to femininity but is directly associated with the vulva. This association can reduce a woman to her most primal function and suggests that a woman’s sole importance lies in her ability to reproduce. Early female artists like Georgia O’Keeffe’s aesthetic relied heavily on these floral types of imagery. Retrospectively, the use of this symbol may have caused female artists who utilized them to descend deeper into the confines of the existing patriarchal society.23

In the video piece, *Ever is Over All*, Pipilotti Rist uses the flower and morphs its meaning, utilizing the natural versatility of the object. The work consists of two videos playing simultaneously, each containing separate soundtrack. The screens merge in the center of the piece to create a link between the two different visuals. One video transitions from close-ups of individual flowers to panning over a field of flowers. The second video is Rist depicted as a stereotypical woman: composed, well dressed, and smiling. As she walks down the sidewalk, she swings a flower like those viewed in the conjoined video.

Rist uses the bloom’s traditional function to lure her viewers into her piece. She allows for a “natural order” to exist just long enough for the audience to let their guard down. She then uses this key time to transgress gender assumptions of the female and the symbolic associations of the
flower. In a moment of visual calm and serenity, flowers ruffling in the breeze on one screen, Rist swings her flower on the opposing screen and shatters the windshield of an unsuspecting car. This moment breaks all expectations. After this shift, the viewer begins to reassess what he or she is actually seeing. It becomes apparent that although the artist is carrying a weighted flower, it represents more, a weapon.

The videos both focus on the feminine: beautiful flowers and a well-dressed woman; while the vicious action is associated with the masculine. These elements subtly play into existing stereotypes, that a woman's value is in her appearance and that a man is violent by nature. Rist works to subvert the unitary subject system by allowing a single object to represent both masculine and feminine. Violence may be more actively associated with men, but the video problematizes the act by having it committed by a woman. Despite it being a flower, the blossom's phallic shape relates it to a man. Through the overlapping of the two videos and the doubled image of the flower on both screens, she is conflating that which is male and is assumed to be associated with the female. The work begins to confuse gender assumptions by deconstructing both what we see as feminine and what we view as masculine. One begins to realize that everything in the piece, from the violent act, the way she is dressed, to the sound, confuse gender binaries. Everyone has the capability to be violent or frivolous.

I look to the past to identify what I consider strengths and weaknesses of the feminist artists that have come before me, and how my work can resolve those problems. In the Pattern and Decoration movement I saw the innovative use of materials and an analysis of the domestic, but an absence of historical awareness (relevance). Women were not taken seriously enough, and their use of craft and feminine materials caused their insightful critiques to be misinterpreted as frivolous decoration. The Deconstructivists recognized the inferior way that museums viewed
women. Artist like Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Cindy Sherman created works that transcended the putatively narrow frame of feminism and focused on a larger scale of how women are portrayed in the media. However, by solely addressing the public and media stereotypes, Deconstructivists disregarded half of the feminine dilemma, the personal.
Examining Damaged Components
The intimate lives of women are riddled with traces of undisguised discriminations. Women are far from being liberated from the home. The workload has merely been redistributed to include a career along with household obligations. A survey done by the Pew Research Center which monitors social and demographic trends found that in 2011 women were spending almost twice as much time as men doing housework and childcare. This finding illustrates how a woman’s role publicly may have progressed, but how the role of within the home has remained the same. Mothers pass down their knowledge and beliefs to their children, and then they pass down that philosophy to their children. Before I became my own person, my mother’s words were my truth. These inherited value systems can become a vicious cycle of oppression where victims are unaware of injustices because they were never taught to view the actions as misguided. If women raise their child in the mentality of previous generations without the knowledge of social progress and new ideologies, how can we expect any change?

There is no doubt that there have been improvements in gender equality: women no longer are expected to stay at home. Legislation has been put in place to assure that women are paid equally to men, and Title IX has been enacted to protect against gender bias in educational programs. There are also many conditions that have worsened. Women are still grossly underrepresented in museums. The Guerrilla Girls updated their famous bus ad from 1989 (figure 6) in 2012 (figure 7) and found that after thirteen years had passed rather than women representing 5% of the artists in the modern section of the MET it had dropped to 4%. Despite the legislation that was passed in 1963 and 1973, the wage gap and reproductive rights are still continuing problems. Women receive seventy-nine cents for every dollar that men make, and the government has made little to no effort to address work-family policies. The presence of women
in leadership positions is staggeringly low (in 2015 less than 20% of Congress were women) considering that we account for half of the population.

As we have become more accepting of untraditional ways of living, blatant sexuality has become more socially acceptable. Many media outlets have exploited this acceptance as a way to further heighten the sexual portrayal of women. Commercial imagery has been marketed and tailored exclusively to please the visual tastes of men. Photographs that previously would have been found inside an issue of Playboy (figure 8) are now commonplace advertisements (figure 9). This type of imagery creates a very complex dilemma. There is nothing wrong with a woman having a fulfilling sex life. The problem exists when women are continuously portrayed by an institution regulated by men as willing participants in suggestive derogatory acts (figure 10). This reoccurrence creates a pattern for consumers. If the media continually alludes that women are always receptive to sexual acts, it implies that that is inclusive of all women. This kind of thinking and projection is a contributing factor to rape culture.

Not only does the portrayal of women in popular culture affect the way others perceive them in everyday life, but it also has a drastic effect on the women. A common trend in advertising is to show only fragments or parts of the woman, in turn dismembering her body. Dismemberment ads covertly encourage women to look at their body as individual pieces. This often causes women to view the elements of her body as separate entities. Women often feel that when one ‘piece' of their body is not perfect that their entire body is ruined. Dismemberment advertisements have been found to cause appearance anxiety, depression, body shame, and eating disorders. There was a study done in 2004 to define the role that objectification plays in eating disorders and depressed mood. This study consisted of 286 undergraduates, men (115) and women (171). They found that self-objectification leads to self-surveillance, which leads to body
shame and appearance anxiety in women. The men involved experienced much lower levels of self-surveillance, suggesting that women are far more likely to experience self-objectification than men. This does not just affect older women; it has started to take root in younger generations. Girls are buying cosmetics at an increasingly earlier age, and girls as young as seven are showing signs of disordered eating. Society and the media tell girls of all ages that they are not quite good enough.

Artwork is responsive to political illumination and can be used as a way to highlight injustices. This obsession with appearance is why using art as a medium to address female beauty/stereotypes is nuanced. The physical confrontation that occurs between audience and object while viewing the artwork has a sensibility that reading just cannot conjure. Sometimes there are no words to explain how you feel about something. Many gendered stereotypes seem to be derive from physical appearance. Using the visual language of art seems like speaking the same language as your oppressor. The physicality of sculpture, painting, or performance gives an enticing presence to an intangible problem. It prompts viewers to see their relationship with the physical object and analyze how they fit within the larger issue of the work.
Putting the Pieces Back Together
Gloria Steinem once said that “The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn but to unlearn.” She asks for us unlearn who we are told to be and to become who we want to be. My work deals with identifying and breaking down expectations, specifically pejorative feminine tropes that exist in America. I select objects that represent larger social structures and through methods of deconstruction, I destabilize and transform both the subject matter and the institution that it represents. By problematizing the object, I invite the audience to question the social structure while allowing them to see the potential of the transformed alternative.

We live in a generation that is accustomed to media saturation, instant gratification, and the novelty of new technologies. My work places components of contradicting ideas, like a digital video and a craft practice, together as a method of transformation. While in conversation, the two elements subvert the reading of the opposing object. My use of craft is a direct reference to the history of feminine work, but it also functions as a direct connection to humanity. Old fashion images and objects resonate with audiences in our high-tech world. We seem to be attracted to the sensuous, tactile ‘information’ of craft and its relation to a more simple time.

A simpler time in many of our lives was our childhood. We absorbed so much while remaining oblivious to the harsh realities of the world. *The Construction of Memory* (Figure 11) is a piece about the loss of childhood, that moment that we realize the world isn’t always fair. A simple outline of a house, like one a child might draw, is constructed from hundreds of covers stranded together. I chose clovers because of a distinct memory of making daisy chains in my schoolyard, and being more at ease than I think is even possible. For months I collected clovers, sitting in the grass relentlessly picking at the ground. At first the act was tiresome and inconvenient, but after a while it became an escape. At a given time I would stop whatever I was
doing, go to the park and wonder around until I found of patch of clovers. I would then take my collection of clovers and sit for hours meditatively weaving a lengthy chain (Figure 12). Over a period of weeks I completed an abundance of clover chains. This would be my primary medium for constructing this piece. I would use clover chains like wooden support to build my structure. Using these same clovers, I created a space that existed yet does not exist. The architectural form hovers above the ground like a ghostly presence waiting for its own demise. The fragility and ephemerality of the work is an allegory for the preciousness and fragility of memory, and how easily it can be destroyed.

The strongest memories that I have are in Kentucky with my family and friends. I found that when I moved away there was a lot of strain on my relationships. 267 Miles (figure 13) is a sculpture that embodies the struggle that I felt. The task of appeasing everyone while away from home made me frustrated and resentful. I was tied to these people but felt held back by this sense of obligation. The two doors are humanized, straining to meet, but separated by the very connections that join them. They stand suspended in space, like myself, in a state of unrest neither here nor there. The 267 miles from my current apartment to my home in Kentucky seems the nothing and everything. The real struggle is not cutting those ties from home but building a home where I am now.

Domestic spaces are a common thread that runs throughout my work. I often use the home in direct relation to women; like the video piece of a woman's hands knitting (Figure 14) inside the pillared doors of In Closed Spaces (Figure 15). The home elicits a feeling of comfort and security. It creates a state of belonging, a place where you feel most yourself. The imagery of a home creates a sense of trust between myself and the audience which subconsciously causes them to lower their guard. This creates a window of opportunity for me to address difficult
subject matter that audiences may not have been receptive to before. Despite generalizations of
women often being pejorative and simplistic, these stereotypes are widespread and recognizable
to a broad audience. The idea of a woman's place being at home knitting is outdated — clichéd,
and expected — but it is a comfort for the viewers. It is a role we have seen portrayed and the
audience assumes they know what to expect: creating the perfect opportunity to change and
shock the viewer's perception of women.

When approaching the darkened room of In Closed Spaces, a synthesized melody
permeates the air. The only light emitted is by a monitor enclosed in the center of the work. A
ring of doors surrounds the screen, concealing it from the audience's gaze, suggestive of a private
moment. To view the video, the audience must become voyeurs. They have to violate what is a
clear request for privacy; disregard barriers, and bend awkwardly to peer through a small crack
to catch a glimpse of the action. Once pressed to the door, straining to peer inside, you see a
woman's hands and a red fabric. Rather than being met with some perverse act going on behind
closed doors, like many would expect, there is the banal action of a woman knitting.

Upon recognition there is a moment of 'Is that all there is?'. Disappointment starts to
creep in, creating the question, "What did I want to see?" The audio builds drawing your
attention. The extreme contrast between the darkened space and the brilliance of the screen help
create a sense of voyeuristic separation, manufacturing the illusion of looking into a private
world. Fetishized scopophilia then builds up the beauty of what is being viewed, making the act
of watching satisfying in itself. The rhythmic motion and accelerated pace become fetishized.
The measured movement of her hands and the repetition of bobbing needles start to mimic a
variety of sexual acts. Could this be a buildup, a euphemism for sex? The audience sits waiting
for fruition, anticipating a crescendo that will never arrive. In Closed Spaces addresses the
hypersexualized way that women are viewed in America. By making the audience voyeurs, I am calling to their attention the role they play in objectifying and judging women. Media has conditioned our society to be hypersexualized. So much so that we can take an innocent act, place it in a different context and our minds twist and skew it until we perceive it as lewd.

“Objects are a trove of disguises, concealments, subterfuges, provocations and triggers that no singular, embodied and knowledge subject can exhaust.”38 The sight of a familiar trinket can draw out a wide range of reactions from previous interactions or associations. The kind of objects I select are not meant to be emotionally charged, rather I want them to have a sense of unknown familiarity. I seek objects which may appear to be benign or ambiguous when in reality they represent the conflict between craft and industrially produced items as evident in Vacillate (Figure 16) and Dancing Down the Staircase (Figure 17 and 18).

The work Vacillate is a human scale wire mesh screen that has been manipulated and deconstructed. The blackened screen sags against the wall, hung like the skin of an iridescent serpent; spotted by bits of raw metal that had broken through the darkened finish. With each arch from the wall, the screen creates a void that is simultaneously filled with the projected shadow. While the three-dimensional object may take precedence during the initial view, it is the shadows projected on the wall that injects the work with poetic value. The shadows are the uncanny element that lures in the audience. Theatrical lighting and deconstruction are employed to illuminate the three-dimensional and illustrative qualities of the screen. The shadow creates a dichotomy between itself and the physical object. Their relationship challenges the boundaries of drawing and sculpture.

My work alludes to systematic undercurrents through the use of mass-produced objects. I challenge inherent assumptions about decoration, beauty, and high versus low culture.39 I push
and manipulate the material to conform to my desired end. By utilizing the processes of accumulation, manipulation, and deconstruction, I allow for an altered reading of the found object to symbolically address formal and ideological female tropes. Through deconstruction, the viewer can appreciate the subtle attributes of an object and understand its versatility and potential symbolically. Rather than allowing my art to be simplified and categorized, it resides in a transitional space that is undefined.

Metaphorically all of my work functions partially as self-portraits. My thoughts and opinions are deeply embedded in each piece and can not be extracted from it, thereby making all that I create an extension of myself. I do not wish to be labeled, and therefore, I do not want for my art to be classified. I feel that labels identify us as one thing or another and ask us to fit within confined parameters of what is acceptable behavior for that designation. Societal roles are merely stereotypes that have been deemed socially acceptable. By categorizing everything we reduce it. We take away the potential for it to represent something more. By creating works that oscillate between many different mediums, I reject the reductive nature of labels. *Vacillate* becomes a source of uncertainty because of its ambiguous nature. It causes audiences to question not only the medium and method with which it was created, but also the artist’s intent. Is the work a product of creation or destruction? Both *Vacillate* and *Dancing Down the Staircase* make use of opposing artistic practices as a method of escaping the reductive nature of an assigned medium.

The sculpture, *Dancing Down a Staircase* stands at human scale and is constructed entirely of interlocking embroidery hoops finished in a high gloss white paint. A slide of Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* is projected onto the form. This work meets the ground at several points, balancing precariously as if it could fall with a slight shift in the air. Some rings
are unaltered round hoops; other are stretched and pulled becoming more referential to ribbon than the spherical object of the embroidery hoop. The work is light and airy due to the linear quality of the material. There seems to be more open space within the works core than there is physical mater.

The *Nude Descending a Staircase* projection is directed toward the ground but is intercepted and skewed by the sculpture. Lines and slivers of the painting rest on the slender surface of the hoops. The image would be unrecognizable were it not for the edges that expand past the perimeters of the piece. The unmarred border acts as both a frame for the work and a reference to the unaltered masterpiece. This action of creating a border also refers directly back to Schapiro’s *Mary Cassatt and Me*. The Duchamp painting is obstructing and altering the structure on which it rests, changing the meaning and the aesthetic. The painting itself is marred by the upright sculpture. Shadows from the arrangement create a swirling scribble of black lines on top of Duchamp’s nude figure; like a vandal making a mark on the face of art. The projection from above transforms and activates the tangle of wood, while the clutter of hoops rejuvenates and redefines the image. Each component of the work has something to say, but it’s not until they are put together that a real conversation starts to happen.

In this work I am attempting to blur the barrier between high and low art. The Duchamp projection references both the ready-made and art historical masters (predominately male), while the embroidery hoops speak to craft and woman’s work. This piece conflates the two. Both elements of the work have an effect on how the other is visually perceived. The projection is broken up by the embroidery hoop and the sculpture is transformed and illuminated by the projection. Any change or evolution that occurs to one will affect the trajectory of the partner.
Duchamp’s ready-mades questioned the default of high art mediums; by projecting his masterpiece onto my sculpture, I continue that line of questioning.

The aesthetic demands of female beauty standards have been severe throughout history, causing women to use body altering corsets to cosmetic surgeries in effort to become more visually appealing. The body’s presence within my work is crucial. Its depiction can be as obvious as a ceramic bust, as subtle as line work that mimic veins (Figure 19), or implied by a vacant dress. I believe that the presence of a human form not only references the feminine struggle, but also allows for an obvious visual association between audience members and the work.

Marriage looms weirdly in my future. It seems far-fetched from my current state of ‘singlydom’, but it feels like an unavoidable inevitable destiny. I feel as though women are subject to a marital status. We either "are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being.”

*Tied in Knots (Figure 20)* is an installation piece that consists of three components that interact with one another in the space. The work consists of a distressed wedding dress, a hollow truncated torso, and a video projection. Upon entering the space, the audience is met by a repetitive, almost meditative, scratching sound. The noise is simultaneously irritating and meditative. A reconfigured ‘dress’ is suspended above the viewer’s heads leaving its tattered ends at eye level. The light the floods the dress from behind emphasizes the sheer material of the dress. What once represented purity now is made to look more like a negligee than a wedding dress. Closer to the ceramic body, the sound is amplified. The shortened body is anchored to the ground. The forms location forces the audience to look down upon it. After a closer inspection the body appears to be crumbling, missing bits from all over. A flickering light emits from the center of the bust. Using the voids in the ceramic body as peep holes, one can make out a
projection on the inside of the piece. The video is only accessible by bending over the figure and peering into a hole at the right angle. The video is of a woman sitting, shredding a dress with cheese grater (Figure 21). The video changes scene several times from a church, to a cellar, to what looks like a storage space, but the woman continues the same rhythmic action throughout the entire video.

This work is very much about me and the struggle that I feel with fitting into a designated societal role. It illustrates my state of mind at the moment. I am in turmoil, conflicted about departing from childhood moral conventions, to shaping my own critical outlook on life. Tied in Knots expresses my feelings of futility, exhaustion, and vulnerability in this transitional period. It is inspired by Martha Rosler’s Semiotics of the Kitchen (1975), and Étant Donné (1966) by Marcel Duchamp. When working on this piece, I was trying to deconstruct a wedding dress with a cheese grater and then realized how absurd and violent the action seemed.

I used Rosler’s method of repressed rage at domestic servitude as the containing signifier of the language. The character in my movie is dutiful and obedient, working away at the dress bit by bit. The aggressive nature of the action is heightened by the rudimentary camera work, causing her to appear like a numbed actress in a horror film. Étant Donnés is an important element to my work because of Duchamp’s interest in the gaze. Whereas I believe Duchamp was interested in subverting the view of the sexualized feminine body by creating it with commonplace objects, I am interested in completely revising the relationship between the viewer’s gaze and the subject. I have my viewer becoming ‘peeping toms’ not to view an objectified woman’s physicality but to witness the futility of her tedious task. This reveals emotional undercurrents of the woman’s internal struggle, just as I struggle to find my place in this male dominate world.
Conclusion: If that Doesn’t Work, Do It Better Next Time
Susan B. Anthony, the feminist pioneer, gave a progressive speech in 1877 called *The Homes of Single Women*. “Even when a man’s intellectual convictions shall be sincerely and fully on the side of freedom and equality for woman, the force of long existing customs and laws will impel him to exert his authority over her.” In this speech, she prophesizes that for women to transition from the position of subject to sovereign there would need to be an era of self-sustained, self-supported female run homes. Do we not owe it to the women of the past? They sacrificed so much so that we, their daughters who will inherit this earth, could have more. It would be a travesty to squander the efforts of our mothers and grandmothers simply because we have become complacent or fear the daunting responsibility of being courageous. Women must have the audacity to grapple with deeply rooted gendered truisms that need to be addressed if we ever hope to be free. Through my work I can bring about a new understand of what it means to be a woman.
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28 Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 47.
34 See included DVD for a clip of *In Closed Spaces*.
36 See included DVD for a clip of *In Closed Spaces*.
37 Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*
42 See DVD for a clip of *Tied in Knots*
43 Elmgren, Michael, and Ingar Dragset, *Home Is the Place You Left Behind*, 27.
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Illustrations

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 4

Figure 5


Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 11

Figure 12


Figure 13

Kendall Brown, *267 Miles*, 2014, screen doors h:6’ x w: 2’ x d:3’6”.

49
Figure 15

Kendall Brown, *In Closed Spaces (exterior view)*, 2015. Interior doors, wood panel flooring, television monitor, h:7’x w:3’6” x d: 4’.
Figure 16

Kendall Brown, *Vacillate*, 2015. Wire screen, h:6’ x w:3’6” x d:1’
Kendall Brown, *Dancing Down Staircase*, 2015. Embroidery hoop, gold leaf, and *Nude Descending a Staircase* projection, h: 6’ x w: 3’ d: 4’
Figure 18

Kendall Brown, *Dancing Down Staircase (alternative view)*, 2015. Embroidery hoop, gold leaf, and *Nude Descending a Staircase* projection, h: 6’ x w: 3’ d: 4’
Figure 19

Kendall Brown, *Vacillate* (detail shot), 2015. Wire screen, h:6’ x w:3’6” x d:1’
Figure 20

Figure 21

Illustration Citations

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

Figure 5.

Figure 6.

Figure 7

Figure 8.

Figure 9.

Figure 10.
Figure 11.

Figure 12.

Figure 13.
Kendall Brown, *287 Miles*, 2014, screen doors h:6’ x w: 2’x d:3’6”.

Figure 14.

Figure 15.
Kendall Brown, *In Closed Spaces (exterior view)*, 2015. Interior doors, wood panel flooring, television monitor, h:7’x w:3’6” x d: 4’.

Figure 16.
Kendall Brown, *Vacillate*, 2015. Wire screen, h:6’ x w:3’6” x d:1’

Figure 17.
Kendall Brown, *Dancing Down Staircase*, 2015. Embroidery hoop, gold leaf, and *Nude Descending a Staircase* projection, h: 6’x w: 3’ d: 4’

Figure 18.
Kendall Brown, *Dancing Down Staircase(alternative view)*, 2015. Embroidery hoop, gold leaf, and *Nude Descending a Staircase* projection, h: 6’x w: 3’ d: 4’

Figure 19.
Kendall Brown, *Vacillate* (detail shot), 2015. Wire screen, h:6’ x w:3’6” x d:1’

Figure 20.

Figure 21.
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