CREATURES: SERIES OF SCULPTURAL COSTUMES

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts

by

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I would like to thank everyone who helped in the making of Creatures: Series of Sculptural Costumes. First, I would like to thank my Kent State professors, especially those on my committee: Paul O’Keeffe, Isabel Farnsworth, Janice Lessman-Moss, Kathleen Browne, and Darice Polo. I have been extremely appreciative of your guidance. I would like to thank my loving family who has been supportive from the beginning. I would like to thank Mike Andersen for his soundtrack and continual emotional support. I would like to thank my models, Caitlin Philpott and Chatiera Ray. And finally, I would like to thank all the amazing friends I have made at Kent State University, and their support and input during the creation of my MFA thesis.
CREATURES: SERIES OF SCULPTURAL COSTUMES

For my MFA thesis Creatures: Series of Sculptural Costumes, I have created a series of hyper-feminine costumes for imaginary creatures. The creatures have been ‘documented’ as if they truly exist. The work began as a series of drawings and has evolved into costumed pieces worn over the top half of the female body\(^1\). The covering of the head transforms the female body most drastically from being human. Creatures: Series of Sculptural Costumes explores the playfulness of dress, as well as the history of beauty and female sexuality. The work also pushes feminine artificial adornment to an extreme level of excess. This examines both the humor behind constructed beauty ideals, and the serious subject of female vulnerability and social acceptance. The exhibition presents five costumes through video, large-scale digital photography, and a mannequin display.

Construction and Techniques

Creatures: Series of Sculptural Costumes does not fit neatly into one category of art practice. There are ties to sculpture, performance, fashion, dance, music, photography, video, and textile work. My practice has allowed me to collaborate with others. The costumes are worn both by hired models and myself. I was behind the

\(^1\) The creatures parallel Nick Cave’s Soundsuits in the treatment of the covered figures, however the concept and construction of the works differ.
camera when my model was performing. I felt the video needed sound to integrate the clips together. Mike Andersen, a musician, composed the soundtrack by timing the changes in movement. The collaborative elements have stimulated unexpected variation.

Adobe Photoshop was used to edit the photographs. Final Cut Pro Express was used to edit the video. In both programs, I played with color saturation, contrast, and shadow to heighten the surreal qualities of the footage. The video footage was occasionally sped up, slowed down, or reversed to enhance the mechanical animal-like movements. I found this also helped the footage flow from one clip to the next.

The sculptural components are sewn fabric forms. Sewing techniques were self-taught since my start into the MFA sculpture program. Prior, my knowledge did not exceed beyond the basic hand stitch. New technical skills include embroidery stitches, smocking, stuffed forms, pleating, and gathering (Fig. 7). Paper patterns were designed for a few of my repetitive structures. The sculptures themselves were free formed. I began each costume with a selection of fabric combinations and worked from the head down to the waist. I tried to alter the proportions of the female body by adding pillow-like forms near the head and letting the fabric hang. Reptilian or avian components are apparent in the patchwork, ruffles, and tiles.

The sculptural costumes needed a way for the viewer to see all the minute detail work that became lost in the video and photographs. Two costumes were displayed on mannequins. The other costumes were neatly arranged on the floor. I felt live models would take away from the rarity of the creatures. Instead, all that remain are the ‘skins’
of clothing and documented footage. The mannequins are static and allow the viewer to examine the costume more closely.

The installation unifies all the elements of Creatures: A Series of Sculptural Costumes. My work is tied to fashion’s commercial appearance as well as fashion’s large role in continually redefining beauty. The poster-size images were a play on fashion magazine photo shoots. The images were directly printed on sintra board. The mannequin installation pulled from fashion museum or store displays. The wall behind the mannequins was covered in red velvet butterflies and rhinestones, which referenced the costumes. The hyper-saturated color was equally seen in both the photographs and the video.

Feminism and the Hyper-feminine

It has taken me several years to assess where my work belongs in feminist theory. Feminism is not easy to define. There are two large genres of feminist art under second and third wave feminism, which both contain overlapping ideologies as well as fundamental differences. The differences between the genres correlate changes in the overall female experience. Young women today do not experience much apparent gender inequality and instead are free to fulfill their life goals. My work mostly parallels third wave feminism began around 1966 and continued throughout the 1970s. Third wave feminist art movement is primarily the 1990s. Third wave feminism is often also controversially coined post-feminism. Overall, art created during the 1990s focused primarily on identity of gender, sexuality, and/or race.

However, there are still derogatory misogynistic aspects of culture portrayed in film or pop music.
wave feminist ideals; however the hyper-sexualized elements so often embraced in third wave are instead replaced with hyper-femininity.

Within the second wave artists, I am most influenced by the work of Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke, Valie Export, Rebecca Horn, and Yoko Ono. Each plays with female body issues, vulnerability, and elements of clothing. The 3rd Wave artists who have influenced my work include Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood, Pipilotti Rist, Sophie Calle, Wangechi Mutu, Kara Walker, and Marilyn Minter. Walker’s silhouettes were the inspiration behind the drawings that started my series of Creatures. Through Taylor-Wood and Calle, I recognized the power of audience interaction one can have with work presented in video or photographic form.

Hannah Wilke provocatively used her body to address her feminist agenda in the making of works such as *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1974) and *So Help Me Hannah* (1978). Many second wave feminists argued her quasi-pornographic imagery would play into satisfying the ‘male gaze’. Even feminist art critic Lucy Lippard snubbed Hannah Wilke for “confusing her roles as flirt and feminist.”

My earlier work received similar reactions from female audiences. The work was criticized for appealing to the male gaze. This was primarily due to my use of staged poses and exposing the female form from the waist down (Fig. 1). This feedback helped

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4 Wilke’s *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1974) and *So Help Me Hannah* (1978) are also much a blend of fashion, commercial photography, and high art. Wilke’s work was ahead of her time, more closely fitting third wave’s search for sexual identity.

me to reconsider what I was trying to get across to the viewer. As a result, Creatures: Series of Sculptural Costumes is not as hyper-sexualized as some of my earlier work and merges elements of sexuality with animal-like movements. Nudity from the waist down would have been a distraction when performed. My work instead portrays the contradictions present in today’s young women, a hybrid of self-confidence and insecurity.

The lack of femininity and domesticity is a consequence of second wave feminism. Domestic skills, such as sewing, are rarely passed down from mother to daughter. Young women of my generation are flocking to femininity because of its absence. It is almost a throwback to the 1950s. I believe this is one reason why I have been consistently drawn to what evokes romanticized ‘feminine’ beauty. In this body of work, I use such feminine clichés as butterflies, flowers, ruffles, lace, the color pink, and elements of the fairy tale. This reflects my attraction to the feminine as well as the humor behind such notable clichés.

Beauty

Popular culture depicts the wealthy subculture as ‘beautiful’. The celebrity has become an idealized human form, yet this is often achieved through plastic surgery and styling. There is a constant strive for perfection. Creatures: Series of Sculptural Costumes parallels the evolution of beauty by creating monstrous female forms. The work expresses the vulnerable side of glamour.

The cultural obsession with material wealth is why I have chosen to include glitter and rhinestones within my pieces. The rhinestones and glitter may still look cheap. It is
my way of suggesting luxury with limited funds. The elements of excessive adornment are fully intentional within the costumed creatures.

In 17th century Europe, rhinestones began as cut-glass paste with colored foil backings to create the illusion of wealth and grandeur. It helped blur class boundaries between the middle and upper classes. Many of the clothes had sequins and faux glass-paste so that when the light reflected off the surface, the clothing would shimmer. Today, the same goes for attracting the attention of fellow peers with so-called ‘bling’ status symbols.

The heavy application of silver glitter was largely influenced by a video of Mariah Carey singing into a microphone entirely covered in Swarovski crystals (Fig. 8, 9, and 11). There is no practical purpose other than adornment and self-indulgence, which adds a level of absurdity.

There is humor behind socially constructed beauty ‘norms’. Women have historically endured constant modification of their bodies to fit the ideal female form. Aesthetic alterations have varied throughout history and culture, from corsets to plastic surgery. The ideal weight of American women has also fluctuated through time, from feminine curves to androgynously thin. These cultural ‘norms’ can be viewed as ridiculous or self-abusive. Fashion trends can also become comical within a decade.
Identity

Identity is a large factor within my work. Clothing acts as a second ‘skin’ functioning as a cultural reader for the general observer to assume one’s identity. Dress can temporarily alter one’s identity. One is, in a sense, hiding behind clothing and appearance. Though my costumes do not hold the same functionality as clothing, Creatures: Series of Sculptural Costumes psychically displays how identity provided through clothing can be a form of costume.

The make-up of Creatures combines the contradictory components of women in today’s society. The top half is docile, sweet, and fully covered in fabric. Elements of female domesticity filter through the homemade, often hand sewn costumes. The fabrics selected are generally feminine and innocent. The color palette consists primarily of soft pastels. This is contrasted with the bottom half, which is distinctly feminine in the curves of the legs and bottom. These are parts of the female body that are hyper-sexualized and gender relegated as female. The fishnets culturally read as a sexualized component. The high heels accentuate the curves of the legs.

The stances are both awkward and seductive. These contradictions are based on my observations of young women on a college campus. It is still very much a period of

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6 Felshin, Nina. (1994). Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art. New York, NY: Independent Curators Inc. p. 7. “Clothing is where our interior selves meet the world. Not only does it offer us protection, both physical and psychological, but it is a system of signification that communicates messages about our identity.”

developing one’s sense of self. Ones identity is in a state of constant self-modification. Also, young women often wear clothing that may attract sexual attention, yet do not usually want the attention reciprocated. These young women are awkward and growing into becoming comfortable with their sexuality. This is the focal point of what I hope to portray in Creatures.

The sculptural ‘skins’ would obviously not be functional in everyday society. Instead, the imagery evokes an imaginary realm. I want each work to be seen as a creature, rather than a woman in a costume. Placing the creatures in isolated outdoor settings was a way to distance them from the everyday world. They become more mysterious and mythical. I also wanted the viewer’s experience with the works to be surreal as well. The video captures the creatures creeping towards the camera and embracing the spotlight. The movements are graceful and animal-like. The viewer becomes a voyeur, and the creatures are mutually curious in return. There is a level of play with the audience.

Conclusion

Creatures: Series of Sculptural Costumes has provided groundwork for further exploration of my hyper-feminine creatures. The imagery has room to become more narrative and the creatures could interact with each other. The making of this exhibition has been an enjoyable experience overall. The work is a fusion of varied art practices, which parallels the contemporary art realm. Collaborative efforts could easily expand. The sewing has become a compulsive element for me. I take pleasure in tiny details and working out the challenges in building the forms. Observing young women’s search for
self-identity largely influenced my work. The figures are both seductive and awkward in their stances. The sculptural costumes physically display clothing’s role in transforming one’s identity. The final imagery allows the viewer to observe the creatures in their habitats. My work is a voyeuristic stage where bodily grotesque feminine personas perform a fragile balance between innocence and overt flirtation.
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