The Toper
and Other Acoutrements

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ABSTRACT

Ornament is an extension of the bodily self. In adding decoration to the body, the extension modifies the form, but its essence is to be temporary. With excessive adding-on, adornment may become a growth, and possibly a weight. The ornament no longer languidly hangs; instead it ends up devouring the structure that serves as its base. It is because of this transformation, ornament, too, like structure to which it is added, has a value that is far from being decorative.

In the series of works that I have focused on during two years in graduate school, I use an accumulation of glass with the intention of merging these elements with the structure that lies underneath. I have explored attaching a series of pieces to the gallery wall or to a fabricated steel form. Because of the accumulation, the form takes on an altered shape. This layered effect becomes self-sufficient ornament. I use glass to express temporality and fragility and as a metaphor for perpetuation, beauty and decoration. Drawing is a major component to my work. There is an intimacy and lavishness attained by creating many layers and patterns in my drawings. The fragile, memory-laden and the everyday, yet non-functional aspects of these materials are my focus.

I have searched in my work for a sense of emotional and psychological intimacy. By using the wall in a direct manner the wall itself becomes an object. As in my drawings, I have used the wall to create patterns that surround the body; much like the body being consumed by an outside coating, the pattern takes over. It serves as an expansion to transform and a way of alluding to the ornamented form. The wall has a daily physical relationship to the body, and by using this
expanse to question the viewer’s sense of depth perception, I attempt to create a sense of transcendence through repetitive patterns.

My taste leans to outrageously feminine characteristics and disposition. It is parody, a sticky sweet feminine guile thrust upon the viewer: excessive, overdosing on its own sweetness it becomes nauseating and disdainful.
Dedicated to:

Eishe
Natalie
Thelma and Louise
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INTRODUCTION

Ornament is an extension of the body as self. Fundamentally we were moved by beauty; it was essential. We decorate our bodies in order to set ourselves apart from the natural world; to display strength as a hunter, or to show off wealth; to protect ourselves from the evil-eye; in honor of rites of passage, and to distinguish between the sexes. In adding these decorations to the self, the extension modifies the form, but its essence is to be temporary. By adding on, adornment is not only an extension but may also become a growth, and eventually a weight. Like a tree consumed by fungus, or a decrepit shotgun house being dismantled by overgrowth, ornament can become a germ. An over-abundance of ornament can also negate form.

When an entire art movement or epoch is named after an ornamental motif, like Rococo after rocaille, the importance of ornament is obvious. The rocaille was developed into forms that simulate a strange, dilapidated and decaying world. In function was in determining the form. In the rocaille style, lightness and grace were emphasized, and the weight of the architectural structure is forgotten. It appears as self-sufficient form. In metalwork and woodwork, the play of the swollen, flowing forms of the rocaille was pushed almost to the point of formlessness.

These ornaments too, like the structures to which they are added, have a value that is far from being decorative. A few years ago I visited the Brazilian rainforest and encountered Strangler trees. These trees are parasites that attach themselves to other fully developed trees, entwining themselves, literally strangling the root system and the life of the host tree. In the canopy overhead, or on the base of the rain forest, the Strangler trees bend from one host to another, creating an incredible environment of swirling lines made up of the weight of massive tree branches. These swirling and looping lines form Gaudi-esque arrangements. That structure itself
becomes an ornament. The ornament no longer hangs languidly; it ends up devouring the
structure that was to serve as its base. Having eroded its base, the ornament has consumed itself
to the very limits of non-entity. In this context, ornament is a looseness of form. It becomes a
stain, a residuum of itself, an image decayed; ornament existing in pure state, outside of time.
CHAPTER 2: EXCESSIVE ORNAMENT

"As for food and sex, nature demands a minimum, quite basic, for the preservation of the individual and the species. All else is ornamentation or the subterfuges we invent to celebrate life."

_Gourmet Love_, Isabel Allende

It was this central idea, encompassed in this above quote, that led me to create the piece _Plugs: Big Hair Parody_, (Fig.1), which was one of four pieces in my Graduate Thesis Exhibition. The work is composed of hand-formed glass flower shapes assembled over a metal structure in the form of a dome. These flower shapes were manipulated in hot glass and then saturated in varied candy colored crayon wax. In this piece, my use of color is a gaudy, dazzling response to the surface effects of the clear glass. The glass pieces are then threaded onto pink plastic coated cable according to the color groupings and knotted. These strands resembling Hawaiian leis were then attached to the metal structure. I employed glass multiples with the intention not of adding on or of embellishment, but of merging with the steel structure. Like a hair weave, these garlands become part of the identity of the structure. The piece _Plugs: Big Hair Parody_ specifically talks about the frivolity of art and life. There was no larger impetus other than extravagance, parody (of itself), and unqualified excess. I felt that by making the glass be what glass is, and do what it does as a material, that I was using the glass in its purest form. Instead of disguising glass or masking it, I wanted to maximize some of its characteristics. These qualities would smack the viewer in the face, and there would be no uncertainty of my intentions. I was parodying the general public’s ideas about glass, while at the same time celebrating its beauty. It was beauty as cliche: something so shiny and glistening that you are taken in and at the same time be repulsed by an
excess similar to nausea from eating too much candy. The ornament dazzles, distracts the eye
from what it conceals, but also draws the eye in; one's gaze waivars between substance and
appearance.

I constantly accumulate reference material, images or writings that perhaps end up
influencing my work or that convey a feeling I would like my work to express. The piece Plata:
Big Hair Parody took shape in reference to an image I found in a National Geographic, a shepherd
from Siberia wearing an enormously fluffy wool coat. The man in the image seems stoic,
weathered and utterly composed smoking a cigarette while completely enveloped in a massively
fluffy, furry covering. There is a sense of irony in this image: the male shepherd wears a coat that
appears to have female characteristics; the garment seems light even though it is a dense and
massive object.

It was the fluffy hairiness of this image that led me to develop the idea of a wig. I wanted to
make something extreme, dazzling and disgustingly excessive. In this image there was gender
ambiguity, the dichotomy between air and weight, sparse and lush, masculine and feminine and
a toughened life contrasted with the serenity of the shepherd's expression. In responding to this
image, I felt serenity, humor, and simultaneously a coldness and warmth. It was a covering, a
shield that reminded me of a hut where there is always from a distance a glimmer of light, where
there is absolute refuge.

In Plata: Big Hair Parody, the strands of layered glass-flower multiples become more and
more a part of the steel sub-structure. This layered effect causes the piece to be self-sufficient
ornament. Because of the massive amount of the strands, a new form is made, in a completely
different arrangement from the structure that lies underneath. There is a voluptuous impurity of
light, color and weight. The long, intensely colored strands are excessive, imply extravagance,
sampaed sexuality and a lack of restraint. Seeing the work in the gallery space, made me realize that it is very female: it is volumetric, visually soft and it has an opening, an entryway. Inside, the space it is dark and "womb-like". It has an expanse of physical greed to engulf and absorb the body. As a result, Plug: Big Hair Parody, is a sugary glass mountain, part refuge and hat: part wig and ornament.

"We are naked and we have nothing. That is why we must decorate ourselves. Without our paint how are we different from the animals?"
- At Play in the Fields of the Lord, Peter Matthiessen

My interest in hair lies in the fact that, like excessive ornament, it is superfluous, it has the ability to devour and consume the structure to which it is attached. Hair is about accumulation. But hair also serves other purposes besides the usual physical ones: it has social and psychological implications. The birds and the bees represent sexual attraction, the most powerfully primitive reason for beauty. Birds, by the array of their feathers, make themselves worthy of survival. They flaunt their plumage in ritual dance and songs that enhance their beauty and their immortality. Plants have flowers. We have hair. Hair's imperishability, its intrinsic material quality, inspires symbolic meanings. "Hairiness" indicates animal nature; it is the distinctive sign of instinct, fertility and sexuality. An abundance of hair speaks of that same animal virility.

Hair shimmers and moves, yet it is composed of dead cells, and continues to grow for a short time even after death. Hair represents and holds in its shaft a passage of time. Darwin believed that boards were ornaments that attracted women. In mythology, the beard symbolizes power and wisdom. Women's hair is considered sexually provocative that in many cultures it is
concealed for fear of inciting uncontrollable desires. Long, untamed hair is a fetish object. For women, cutting off hair is a form of mutilation. In the Jewish religion, Orthodox women after marriage must cover their hair with a kerchief or scarf or wear a wig, meaning that no man other than her husband is allowed to see a woman’s hair. Mane hair is ornament; the coy flip of the hair, our ritual dance of immortality.
CHAPTER 2: THE LAYERED WALL

“Darwin's observations of the people of Tierra del Fuego standing quite naked while sloel lashed their bodies; when Darwin gave one of them a length of cloth, instead of using it to protect his body or modesty,

"I tore it up into small pieces and distributed them amongst his companions, who immediately employed them as ornaments."

From Nudity to Raiment, Hilare Hiler

Not only do we clothe ourselves to keep warm or for modesty, we also dress ourselves to make statements. Our ornaments and clothing say a great deal about ourselves and our statements to our culture. Body becomes its own canvas. Ornament is an essential part of history. Today we know aspects of cultures, lives and history through decoration on walls and vases. We have an understanding of the people of Pompeii through the remnants of their frescos, mosaics and vases that adorned everyday life.

During my first year in graduate school at the end of my autumn quarter I began working on the wall in a more direct manner. Instead of mounting objects onto the wall, I wanted to objectify the wall itself. I had been thinking about how to further use space in relationship to the body. I was searching for a sense of intimacy, though not physically but emotionally and psychologically. The wall served as expanse to transform and a way of alluding to the ornamented body.

Layering too has been a strong characteristic in my work. In a piece which I titled Pink, (fig.2) I achieved the ability to layer and combine disparate materials and images without confusion.
The scale of this piece was 6' x 6' x 2'. These combined materials were a kind of wall collage of glass, paper, paint and text. I cut brown utility paper into snowflakes, added blue paint to the front sides of a few of them and lined them together with sewing pins. On the left side of the wall below these snowflakes, I painted a pink square directly on the wall. Color has the ability to bring up emotions and memories. The pink color used here has symbolic meanings of an intense " girly" quality. Then I wove the word "Stigma" in cursive writing that overlapped the pink a bit and continued lower down the wall, until it faded away. To the right of these images, I wove together solid glass beads with string and formed an open, airy, though weighty blanket. The work conveyed a feeling of celebration and of a feminine extreme. For myself, the success of this piece resulted in the fact that I had combined images that I was drawn to—snowflakes, jewelry, and the line quality in cursive text, and emotional and psychological responses to color into one piece.

The next wall piece I made, Haiku: Hail, (fig. 3), was comprised of silvered glass, blown and cut apart glass, beaded snowflake bandkerchiefs and tiny disks of carboned glass. The image was inspired by various Haiku poems having to do with being caught in the rain, rainstorms and snowstorms. This piece was about layered perspectives: watching a snowstorm and being in it simultaneously; at once far away and within the essence of the flake— the water molecules. It is about a simultaneous continuance and completion.

Ardo, (fig. 4), an image of two doves flying towards one another, was made during the same time as Haiku: Hail. This piece was a large-scale sculptural drawing in which I experimented with using the wall in a more direct manner. Ardo was made up of holes drilled into the wall filled to overflowing with blue pigment. This pigment was an intense saturation of color. Berlin Work, also known as Punch Work of the Victorian Era, inspired this piece. It consists of perforations
made in many layers of paper with tiny holes at regular intervals. Primarily women worked this way to create drawings who in turn gave to one another as gifts. Personal and intimate, they are fragile reminders of strong relationships. My interest lies in the intimacy of the object and the pointillist process of punching tiny holes through a small hand-held sheet of paper. At this time, I was researching the art of the Victorian Age, and an image that recurred was that of two doves holding banners in their mouths, or whose beaks were touching and appeared to be kissing. It was such a frilly, nauseating sweet image; I couldn’t help but be drawn to it. I then made drawings with pinpricks into paper with the imagery of doves kissing. A few days later, I glanced over at a drawing of kissing doves pricked into white Bristol board and immediately thought of transferring this image to the wall using the same process of pinpricking.

_Ardor_, was approximately 5’x 6’ on the wall. Enlarging the scale of the image transformed it from a hand-held drawing to an all encompassing, all over body relating image. The intimacy was left intact by placing the doves’ beaks (kissing) at the level of the viewer’s mouth. This piece dissolves and appears through pattern. There exists simplicity of the piece through the materiality, since it only exists of wax, drilled holes and pigment. It conveys an image that relates to a craft-based art and to excessive sentimental, feminine tastes. The viewer is overwhelmed by an overdose of sentimentality.

Victorian women aggressively collected, gathered, exchanged or traded. They were the guardians of domestic history. They kept records, mementos, and memorials to the ties of friendship that were to be relished in the present and saved for prosperity. Terms of etiquette, including guidelines of mourning, were held in the highest regard. Victorian women’s expressions are found on needlework, samplers, porcelain, metalwork, wallpaper, engravings, drawings and jewelry. Handkerchiefs were embroidered with tears. These images were dote
with referential imagery that contained symbolic emotional meanings. It seemed to me that the language they used was painfully sentimental. Sayings and quotes dripped with anguish, dignity and melancholy. This Victorian sensibility informed my work during the first year of graduate school. The two aspects that interested me were the ideals of that period and the materials women used to express them.

A phrase, "Left alone and deeply saddened the woman still functions" inspired me to create the piece The Merry Widow. (fig. 5). This work is a representation of a gentle sorrow, an overcoming of heartache and hardship. It was made up of four varied color handkerchiefs, embroidered text, thread and glass. I found the handkerchiefs in a thrift store, and they consisted of a solid square of color with a crocheted trim of a different color. I cut out the text in muslin and embroidered it onto the four handkerchiefs. The first one said, "Left alone and," the second, "deeply saddened," the third, "the woman still," the fourth, "functions." Considering the color of the square and trims, I embroidered a color that matched or echoed the trim. These handkerchiefs were hung on the wall at eye level in a line. On top of each was mounted a glass piece made to appear like spun sugar, actually made by drizzling glass out of the furnace onto plaster mounds then painted pink. The glass was mounted on top of the handkerchiefs to reinforce the already sappy, melancholy feel of this piece. The Merry Widow is personal in a way that decoration is a personal emotional, and psychological choice, but not in a necessarily utilitarian way. There is an intimate and emotionally-charged reference to the body, the handkerchief equals the hand to the face, the sugary glass equals the mouth, and the entire piece equals bodily secretions and fluids. There is a building up, an embellishing, and the idea of 'keeping busy' still functioning.
Ornament is linked to a moment, an occasion; it is the physical tangible aspect of a 'ritual'.

There is ornament in death, the dressing of the body covered in make-up, body-paint, Sunday’s best, elaborate multi-colored fabrics, gilded effigies and coffins lavished with tropical flowers. Ancient Egyptians permitted their hair to grow only when in mourning. In this way, too, ornament is also a means of immortality. Ornament sets the stage. It is the visual and tangible aspect of ritual and rite of passage. Ornament is expected to dazzle the eye (beauty), and to touch transcendence (leave time and space through ritual).

In Mourning Doves, (fig.6), I wanted to touch upon ornament in death. In the earlier stages of this work, I went through drawers and drawers of labeled and stuffed dead birds in the ornithological rooms at the Museum of Biological Diversity on West Campus. The birds ranged from enormous eagles that filled an entire drawer, to forty tiny hummingbirds that lay side-by side in another drawer. Some of those birds dated back to the late 1800s, while others were added to the collection within the past few years. I returned there for a week, examining the birds, snooping around and making drawings of them in a classical manner. What struck me most was that all the birds, no matter what the species, were lifeless mounds of feathers and stuffing. These drawers were comprised of delicate, dusty dead creatures that were stuffed, with an occasional wing falling off, possibly a missing foot, or batting popping out where the eye should have been. Mourning Doves was created using a process called Pate de Verre, which consists of filling a mold with a paste made of crushed glass and fusing it together in a kiln. I used colored powders to pigment the birds’ bodies, which resulted in a kind of chalky, dense glass, at intervals the underneath was exposed to reveal shiny, glistening glass. These birds were placed individually.
or in grouping on a black cane mosaic background. The mosaic became another layer, a dark solemn backdrop for these melancholy birds. In its entirety, this piece twisted towards darkness and resulted in a funerary object. I felt that this piece expressed my emotion clearly to the viewer.
CHAPTER 3: SHIMMERING PLANE

I have continued to explore the wall as a structure and as a main element in my work. I use the wall for its architectural reference and its daily physical relationship to the body. I am interested in the wall as structure and skin. I am looking for a unity between space, sculpture, and décor; a unity between art and daily life. The wall acts as a vessel and like a drinking glass, the wall has the ability to be mundane in our daily lives. Yet this vessel has the ability to celebrate its purpose by taking the ordinary and arranging it to transcend its ordinariness. The experience can be at once subtle and grandiose.

A series of attempts at questioning the viewer’s sense of depth, relating the wall to the body and conveying the feeling of transcendence resulted in Tongue (fig.6). This piece was installed for my MFA Thesis Show at the Hopkins Hall Gallery, on the far sidewalk, 34 feet across by 9 feet vertical when you enter the space from the front door. Tongue was entirely composed of 15" needles of glass melted onto copper tacks. The needles were created by stretching glass into thin rods of cane. I then brought these canes into my studio, and using a flame-working torch, I heated up the rods in a localized manner and fused the copper tacks onto the end of the glass. By heating the entire rod, I pulled the glass as thin as possible in order to make it appear hair-like. The piece Tongue needed around 1,800 glass hairs. The making of these glass hairs takes about a minute each. The copper tack ends of the glass hairs were inserted into the holes on the wall. The point of fusion between the glass and copper tack acts as a hair follicle, while the emptiness and gleaming white of the wall resembles a bald spot.

The 1,800 parts were made up primarily of clear glass. Of these 1,800 tacks, approximately 200 were made of an array of pinks, going from a subtle cotton candy pink to a blinding magenta
pink. Another hundred were made of an electric yellow with the addition of an odd number of green, orange and amber. The color formation was subtle and striking, depending on the viewer’s angle. My choice of coloration here was subtle highlights or details to impact the total experience of the piece.

There is certain desperate psychological desire for the toupee and other false hair attachments. These embellishments represent the psychological and physiological ideals of hair. While riding on the bus from main to west campus, I often observed the backs of heads and hair patterns. My interest was not in the styles of hair, but in the patterns of hair growth of the individuals. It was easier to observe these patterns in men because their hair was often extremely short—some shaved. There were swirling patterns beginning at the center of the head, blotchy spotting all over, and line formations ending at the nape of the neck.

Balding men comb forward or comb over to cover their bald patches. There seems to be a shame that goes along with a lack of hair, a vanity and a sense of desire. It may be our desire for abundance, the shame of losing one’s virility, and facing our mortality. The toupee or other hair accoutrements, are attempts at reinventing our youth.

The shape that Toupee forms is an obscure bald spot with flowing hair. Like an unruly comb-over it spreads apart and shows the hidden bald truth underneath. It has a receding hair line, a constant reminder that hair once was there and that it is fleeting. When approaching the piece from outside the gallery, a shimmering plane of transparent material and light immediately strikes the viewer. The way the light hits the glass results in an ice storm effect, glistening frozen sticks protruding out of the wall. Despite its fragility, lightness and even insubstantiality this glass piece, like hair, is a kind of exoskeleton, a kind of carapace. The wall itself appears to explode.
The arrangement of the glass hairs on the wall follows a conscious rhythm of intertwined surfaces, lines and colors. There is a mobile perspective created by swirling, cyclic, thick, deep full forms continuing into each other. This piece lacks a point of focus. There is a sense of dissolution. Translucent planes of light and color spread out in subtle flatness. Both visually and physically, as viewers we must reorient our sense of spatial reference to the wall. Like a Persian miniature painting, the images or objects that are further removed from us are the more consistent; nearer to the viewer the images that are closest are less discernible and appear further away, almost completely dissolved. As viewers you are in the images walking among them, while being in front of the piece you are not aware of it but about to be. The frontal view of this piece is a rigid flattening of imagery. There is confusion for the viewer; a frightening optical illusion takes place in which the viewer is lacking sense of depth. It is a tense and difficult space where judgment is both missing and desired. Because of the protruding glass from the wall, there is an earnest longing to adhere to the space and to achieve an understanding of the depth that surrounds us. The light hits the image in various degrees and densities, and so it is best to view the piece from the side or at different angles. The resulting object does not walk by itself, but walks with us, because of us.

Each darted, pointed increment stuck into the wall is frivolously purposeful. Thus, ornament, which is supposed to sustain and justify the wall, ends up negating it. But unlike a permanently-installed object that does become decor, its essence is to be temporary. The interest for me lies in the fact that this piece is ephemeral. There is certain impermanence like a balding person, the hairs will come out.

How is a piece of blank paper close to transendence? It is uncluttered, but how can we acknowledge it is uncluttered unless we see that clutter? The bald spot in Tapper is that blank
piece of paper. This piece is about dissolving and absorption. There is a sensual experience that occurs standing in front of the wall. It is because the glass pieces distort the viewer’s sense of depth creating a tenuous feeling causing the viewer to be aware of danger, pain and fragility. The experience is one of awe, primarily by the inherent qualities of the glass as a material, and also by a spatial and painterly totality. Simultaneously, the wall is austere and ornate, dense with decoration. The viewer is at once absorbed by the entirety of the decoration, yet halted by the structure of the wall.
CHAPTER 4: ADORNMENT AT ITS SIMPLEST

"Should you desire the great tranquillity, prepare to sweat white beads."
- Basho

Throughout my working process there is drawing. I use drawing to help clarify my ideas and focus in on my intentions. These drawings inform my work as a process of long contemplation. The drawing materials that I commonly use are gouaches, India inks, and Luma dyes. Some drawings have sewn elements added to them, while others have texture on the surface of the paper. The two-dimensional is essential to my work as flat planes existing on flat planes, layer upon layer. In the drawing titled, Studies from the Panamus Mall, Kashmir- Led Zeppelin, (fig.7), I have drawn layer upon layer of lines and dots forming images of 70’s/80’s hairstyles. There are five images of hairstyles, which vary from one to the other, drawn with an ink pen with India ink. They are made up of tiny wavy, curly lines with gold and pink “beads” that wrap around the hair and move out into the background. The background is filled with a patterning of dots, which takes on cloud formation. This drawing is made up of black dots that swallow up the pink and gold beading, resulting in an image reminiscent of the color-blind cards I was shown in the pediatrician’s office as a child.

My work is replete with ornamental motifs, meandering lines and varied textures. A common image throughout my drawings is dotting. These dots represent beaded necklaces: the bead-
adornment at it's simplest. In my most recent drawings, I make beaded necklaces that adhere to rice paper. For my Thesis Exhibition, I showed a drawing of a necklace painted with gold gouache on blue tissue paper, (fig.8). The scale of this piece was 12" x 8", and was pinned vertically to the wall shown to the right of the piece Plugs: Big Hair Parody. It is the idea of persistence that results in dots and a ludicrous look at desire that results in painting a gold necklace. It is all those connotations that arise with jewelry, ornament and gold. It is once again the cliche of the feminine by alluding to handiwork and aesthetics traditionally associated with women. The ornament becomes a fetish object, an obsession, something revered.
CONCLUSION

My tastes are outrageously feminine and have associations with the typical beliefs that women are akin to unnecessary displays of fashion and frills, excesses of gilt and glitter. My work is a parody, a dark humor, the sticky sweet feminine guile thrust upon the viewer, excessive, overdosing on its own sweetness, sickening, nauseating and disdainful. I have become interested in the way both male and female viewers alike are uncomfortable with my work. Comments like, “It’s so girly, won’t you be embarrassed to show this…” tell me I’m maybe doing something right. I am interested in making something distinctly feminine, not gender-less.

Ornamentation through its historical usage as well as its stereotype is identified as feminine. It is for these reasons that I use materials associated with the decorative arts, primarily glass and textiles. The everyday, the functional, the fragile and the memory-laden aspects of these materials are my focus.

These past two years at graduate school I have searched for a way to link ideas about nature, ornament, color, and parody of the sublime in my work. By taking steps away from my previously solemn focus on glass and nature, and my earnest attempts at the sublime, I began to discover a lighter side to my work. This lighter side includes a sense of humor, and at times a more cynical paradoxical edge. This lighter side has become important to me, as it has re-opened a way for my work to be more intuitive and more emotional. These characteristics: nature vs. ornament, color vs. the pure clarity of the glass, and the sublime vs. the paradoxical are the opposing ends that I have sought to bring together in this body of work.
LIST OF REFERENCES

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(Fig.3) Haiku: Hail
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(Fig. 8) Toupee detail