

dollhouse

An Exhibition of Installation

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

dollhouse is a dreamy, peachy, pretty little private space saturated with sickly sweetness. The installation consists of three rooms built inside the shell of a 1971 Airstream trailer, filled with objects, forms, and colors associated with conventional femininity. As a whole, *dollhouse* simultaneously asserts the value of this so-called “feminine” affinity for embellishment and color, and questions the ideals, assumptions, and expectations through which women and girls are jointly framed and perceived by society. In order to illuminate some of the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the work, this paper explores *dollhouse* through five interrelated sections: ambivalence, hyperfemininity, artifice, beauty, and sexuality.

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left: (fig. 1) Anna van Milligen. *dollhouse*. (in-progress). 2016.

right: (fig. 2) Anna van Milligen. *dollhouse*. (installation view). 2016.

INTRODUCTION

Constructed within the gutted shell of a 1971 Airstream trailer, *dollhouse* is a hyperfeminine fantasy space, an intimate domestic interior blanketed in a pastel pallet of peach, pink, and baby blue. Throughout a series of compartments and alcoves, a peculiar collection of found, altered, and hand-made objects is displayed in shrine-like arrangements, as if laid out for worship... or perhaps illicit consumption. Torn between a desire to touch and a fear of disrupting the ordered perfection of their surroundings, visitors are simultaneously invited in and made to feel like intruders in this perversely fascinating space.

A product of my own uncertainty, agitation, and distress over the complexities of contemporary sexism¹—mixed up with my love for pink, pretty, plastic things—*dollhouse* embodies our² shared, deep-seated cultural ambivalence toward femininity, artifice, beauty, and sexuality. Each of these themes is addressed in this support document through five distinct (yet interrelated) categories:

- I. *ambivalence*
- II. *hyperfemininity*³
- III. *artifice*
- IV. *beauty*
- V. *sexuality*

In part, I've created *dollhouse* in this 1971 mobile home to reference woman's traditional association with and confinement to the domestic sphere.⁴ In this way, *dollhouse* is a

¹ The work comes out of my personal experiences as a young, white, materially and educationally privileged Canadian-American woman, as well my observations of the experiences belonging to those with different struggles (and perhaps advantages) than I have.

² I'll clarify this statement by borrowing the words of bell hooks. When I say "our ambivalence," I mean the ambivalence belonging particularly to "white supremacist capitalist patriarchal Western culture" (44).

³ In the context of my work, hyperfemininity is defined as exaggerated normative femininity: that is, youthful (think pre-pubescent, think innocent), pretty, pink, flowery, frilly, frivolous, delicate, diminutive, submissive, passive, docile, gentle, timid, sweet, smiley, cute, quiet, nurturing, emotional. Think all these qualities, amplified and distorted to such ludicrous proportions that they caricature conventional femininity.

⁴ Already in its original form—that is, narrow, self-contained, and sealed-off from the outside world—the trailer was predisposed to becoming a private, intimate, domestic environment. To emphasize these qualities, I divided the length of the space into three smaller areas using intersecting walls, partitions, and curtains that slow the visitor's steps (and their gaze) as they navigate through tight passages, around corners, and under low ceilings. To let in daylight, I cut circular holes from the hardboard in front of the Airstream's original windows and covered them with textured plastic to diffuse the light and mask details that would otherwise be seen through the glass. Consequently, the inside of *dollhouse* is not visible from the outside, nor is the outside visible from within—lending a sense of privacy and secrecy to the space. The Airstream's former life as a mobile home also facilitates its

subtle nod to the iconic feminist work *Womanhouse*, organized by Judy Chicago and Mariam Schapiro in 1972:

[W]ith its sickly pink kitchen, its woman trapped in the sheetcloset, its bride crashing into the wall, and its endless homage to costume, make-up, and domesticity, [...*Womanhouse* can] be understood as a sharp critique of the confinement of female creativity to a limited sphere. (Wilding)

Four decades and another generation of feminists later, we live in what some have called an era of postfeminism, which foregoes the need to advocate for gender equity. Others—myself included—disagree, calling for an active feminist movement that revives efforts to address and combat sexism and sexist oppression in its uniquely contemporary breeds.

transformation into *dollhouse*: from the outside, the trailer appears as it would have in 1971, instantly suggesting to visitors a domestic connection, as well as a connection to the past. Inside, multiple carpeted rooms, painted drywall, and features such as curtains and molding continue the allusions to familiar domestic spaces.

AMBIVALENCE



(fig. 3) Anna van Milligen. *dollhouse* (detail). synthetic hair, acrylic fingernails, fake cigarette. (approx. 4 x 3 x 1.5 inches)

Twenty years ago, when psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske originally described sexism as ambivalent, they began to reveal the complex, “loving debasing attitude” our culture extends toward women and femininity (Tomasco vi). They proposed a breakdown of sexism into two related sets of beliefs:

- 1) *hostile sexism* is “sexist antipathy” toward women, while
- 2) *benevolent sexism* consists of subjectively positive (yet still sexist) feelings toward women (491).

Of the two types, the first is most recognizable and identifiable as overtly sexist, and thus harmful, and therefore worthy of condemnation. Examples include the belief that girls are bad at math, the perception that blonde women are stupid, and the assumption that short skirts are slutty. Although our present era of enforced “political correctness”⁵ frequently denounces hostile sexism, the same sentiments escape censure when camouflaged as “harmless” jokes (Mills 114-15).

In some ways, the latter type of sexism is more problematic (and persistent in a contemporary, Western setting). Since no harm is intended by these seemingly benevolent attitudes, they are more likely to be dismissed than seriously examined. Some recipients of benevolent sexism may even react favorably to subjectively positive stereotypes—such as the belief that women have, by nature, a greater capacity for emotion and stronger nurturing tendencies than men.

But what if we should insist on rejecting this benevolent sexism, in spite of its good intentions? How does one explain—in casual conversation, let’s say—that a well-meaning comment (or complement) is sexist without sounding accusatory or irrationally sensitive?

Complicating the matter further is the possibility (indeed, probability) that both attitudes will coexist in an individual as this soup of hostility and benevolence Glick and Fiske call “ambivalent sexism.” We can observe ambivalence in the ways society tends to polarize different types of women as saints or sluts, young maidens or old hags, sweet little kittens or domineering bitches (Glick and Fiske 494). Paternalistic attitudes, by which women are

⁵ “Political correctness” suggests excessive, exaggerative, and restrictive attention to supposedly innocuous or trifling questions of language reform—think accusations of nit-picking, censoring, or language policing that trivialize, simplify, delegitimize and/or outright dismiss efforts to identify sexism—over concern for “real” issues

understood to require domination *plus* affection and protection, also serve as evidence of ambivalent sexism (494). In order to address contemporary sexism, therefore, it's necessary to differentiate between the types of sexism and how they interact.

Keeping this in mind, my material investigations are both emblematic and critical of this love-hate relationship between society and women as a group, women as individuals, and femininity as an abstract concept referring to woman's supposed essential nature. A tension between desire and revulsion is present within the objects that inhabit *dollhouse*: a rubber steak and a plastic slice of bread are trimmed with white fur, pearls, and pink pompoms as if ornamented with a growth of synthetic mold; an oval-shaped frame is reupholstered with a urine-stained toilet seat cover and thickly embellished with artificial flowers; synthetic blond hair is tangled in clumps, preserved in jars, encased in long tubes and enshrined in vitrines; fake nails are scattered in little piles and embedded in surfaces. These arrangements and assemblages have the capacity to elicit fascination or contempt, admiration or aversion—perhaps both, simultaneously—and thus not only reflect ambivalent sexism, but also function as a meta-criticism of it.

Pairings of the beautiful with the strange, of the familiar with the terrible,⁶ might be further explored as expressions of the abject and the uncanny.⁷ Julia Kristeva describes the abject as the erasure of borders separating inside from outside, subject from object—“abjection,” she says, “is above all ambiguity” (9). This dissolution of identity is a crisis of “death infecting life,” a shudder-inducing reminder that the “otherness” we so fear is inside us (4). At the same time, the abject inspires a perverse fascination.⁸ I'm interested in eliciting similarly ambivalent responses in my viewers. I've filled *dollhouse* with works that muddy any clear distinction between beauty and ugliness, confuse pleasure and disgust, and allow inside and outside, self and other to mix. *pink parts* is a tiny cavity that appears to have been carved out

(Mills 100-1). The so-called “PC police” is (unfairly, of course, but understandably) painted as a band of anti-fun, anti-free speech, crybaby killjoys who don't know how to take a joke.

⁶ In the words of sixteenth century English philosopher Francis Bacon, “There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion” (235).

⁷ The uncanny, while related to the abject, is distinct in that it combines fear and familiarity. The uncanny is uncomfortably strange yet oddly familiar.

from the wall (fig. 7). Plastic pearls are nestled within the soft folds of its wrinkled insides, which are dusted in pink glitter. Pink pompoms and pleated lace line the border of the wound-like hollow. Now, the female body can be viewed as an abject body: dark and open, terrifyingly unknown, bringing life but reminding us of death. *pink parts* is a little too sparkly, sugary, and sweet to speak of mortality; however, this intimate opening in the wall, like *dollhouse* as a whole, speaks to society's enduring fixation on and discomfort with woman's perceived interiority and mysterious openness, understood as linked to her sexuality and fertility.

Emerging Australian photographer Prue Stent is one of many contemporary artists interested in creating images that are alluring and repellant, strange and familiar. Stent has recently attracted notice in the art world and online, as well as among feminists; as such, I see her as a useful reference point for locating my practice within the world of contemporary art. Reflecting the perspectives of many young, 21st century feminists, Stent argues that sexuality, fertility, and eroticism are "important creative forces rather than devices of female disempowerment" (Weinstock). She consistently depicts the nude, female form in nature, face concealed: we see genitalia covered in thousands of slick, pink fish eggs; wrists draped with delicate, curling tentacles; or breasts smeared with viscous, bubble-gum pink liquid (fig. 4 and 5). Imbued with abject beauty, the resulting images are perversely fascinating. Thus, in this attempt to instigate an ambivalent reaction to femininity, beauty, and sexuality, perhaps she and I resemble each other. Beyond that, our motives differ.

Primed to read into most contemporary art some sort of commentary on or critique of society, my first impulse is to understand Stent's work as an observation of our tendency to conflate sexuality, fertility, eroticism, nature, and the female body. However, Stent's own words betray benevolently sexist attitudes about femininity: describing her faceless nudes as "anonymous yet enticing," Stent says she likes "to focus on the female body and the essence of femininity rather than individuality and personality" (Weinstock). In so doing, Stent actually attempts the opposite of my own objectives, reducing "femaleness" to a body's reproductive capabilities—however powerful and creative they may be.

⁸ To use one of Kristeva's examples: even as it triggers the gag reflex and brings a sheen of sweat to the forehead, the skin that forms on the surface of warm milk captivates the attention—it's disgusting but impossible to look away (11-12).



top: (fig. 4) Prue Stent. collaboration with Clare Longley, 2015
bottom: (fig. 5) Prue Stent.

HYPERFEMININITY



- clockwise: (fig. 6) Anna van Milligen. *dollhouse* (detail).
(fig. 7) Anna van Milligen. *pink parts*. (approx.. 2 x 2 inches)
(fig. 8) Anna van Milligen. *peephole*. (approx. 4 x 5 x 3 inches)
(fig. 9) Anna van Milligen. *dollhouse* (detail). (approx.. 3 x 3 x 2 inches)

Hyperfemininity, like ambivalence, is a term I originally explored within the context of social psychology. Proposed in 1991 by Sarah Murnen and Donn Byrne to describe “exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic feminine gender role,” hyperfemininity is not presented by these psychologists as unequivocally negative. However, Murnen and Byrne’s study does find hyperfemininity to be associated with some unsettling and plainly objectionable beliefs:

[T]he hyperfeminine woman . . . advocated a less harsh reaction to coercion when others were described as involved in adversarial sex, and she has indicated self-blame when she has experienced it herself. . . She suggested a willingness to endorse rape myths as well (487).

According to Murnen and Byrne, the hyperfeminine woman tends to commodify her own sexuality and see it as the primary source of her value in romantic relationships, viewing herself as a sexual *object* rather than *subject/actor* (480).

As always, it’s crucial to note that hyperfemininity (as it’s defined in this context) and the associated adversarial beliefs aren’t automatically causally related, simply because a correlation was identified. The age of the study is also relevant in terms of its potential contemporary application. That said, Murnen and Byrne’s investigation of hyperfemininity does raise several pertinent questions: what has normative femininity become in the 21st century? Is it damaging? Do those who recognize femininity as distinct from masculinity see the two as truly “different but equal”? Is there any harm in adhering to conventional modes of dress and behavior? More recently (2011), Martina Cvajner writes that for contemporary scholars of hyperfemininity:

[T]he main question is how and why significant segments of the young generation of Western women, in neo-liberal and post-feminist times, are not *outraged* by the re-sexualization and re-comodification of women’s bodies in popular culture but actually perceive it as a channel for the construction of new femininities organized around an ideology of irony, sexual confidence and autonomy (358, italics added).

I *am* outraged—but also open to the idea that untamed and unruly, excessively stereotypical femininity can function as defiance, rebellion, or subversion. Consider contemporary British artist Grayson Perry and the frilly, girly dresses he wears, described by Perry as the quintessential ‘little girl’ look, the hardest-core femininity he can muster. Perry’s transvestism

can be interpreted as a subversive act, not only overturning the prohibition against middle-aged men dressing like six-year-old girls, but also asserting the non-contingent value of bows, lace, and skirts (that is, regardless of who's wearing them).

In my experience, I've found that feminine taste—"that trivialized set of aesthetic preferences that we all associate with frills and furbelows, 'unnecessary' display and ornamentation, and an 'excess' of gilt and glitter" (Sparke 15)—is frequently scorned, automatically deemed inferior to a more masculine, mature, minimal style.⁹ Because I love this "feminine aesthetic,"¹⁰ I use *dollhouse* to restore value to the devalued—to give frills and florals, pastels and pompoms the respect I believe they deserve. I rely on a few strategies to lend gravity and importance to objects and materials otherwise presumed worthless. For example, empty, plastic packaging and cheap dollarstore trinkets are displayed on foam pedestals, the physical elevation implying elevation in status. Intricate, meticulously-applied embellishments are also used to assert an object's worth. Placement, too, is carefully considered: bilaterally symmetrical compositions accentuate centrally-located focal points, and the space around individual works is often left bare—a strategy that identifies them as special, as objects singled out for contemplation. Finally, I employ lighting, scale, and framing to further direct the viewer's eye, emphasizing that which I consider worthy of attention.

I use *dollhouse* as an opportunity to create an unapologetically-hyperfeminine fantasy space filled with pretty objects, colors, and forms that suggest conventionally female behaviors, the female body, female sexuality, or female beauty. For instance, the quality of softness—in

⁹ Historian Penny Sparke, author of *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*, locates the roots of contemporary western attitudes toward feminine taste in the design reform movement that followed the Victorian era. This movement effectively and clearly delineated "the amateur world of taste and domesticity" (populated by women) from "the professional sphere of art and design" (inhabited by men) (50). In this way, feminine taste—once highly valued by the Victorians for its ability to foster beauty and comfort in the home, now disparaged for its supposed superficiality, irrationality, vanity, and tendency toward excess—became subordinated to good design (55-7).

¹⁰ Author Linda Scott (*Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism*, 2006) writes that a "stock tactic in feminist rhetoric [is] discrediting femininity by ridiculing it" (53). However, my own attitude toward certain aspects of exaggerated, stereotypic femininity is primarily expressed in a manner both celebratory and affectionate. Another young, female artist with a penchant for pastels and an affinity for feminism is Signe Pierce, a photographer and performance artist with whom I share an interest in excess, the seductive power of objects, and stereotypical femininity. Pierce's work is sparkly, sugary, and erotic, her hyperfeminine still-lives sickly sweet and sensual. While my quiet aesthetic may seem subdued in comparison, "a blend of feminism and humor dominated by the lurking feeling that something is not right" is a fitting description for us both (Jousset).

physical form, in surface texture, in tone, sound or color, in the tendency to yield to another—is strongly associated with femininity. In creating *dollhouse*, I was motivated by a “sensibility of softening”¹¹—edges are lined with lace or fur; surfaces are covered in fabric or carpet; pedestals and shelves are made of foam and Styrofoam; and circular and ovular forms are repeated throughout the space (40). I’ve limited my pallet primarily to soft, muted colors (peach, pink, and white, accented with baby blue and faded mint) to create a space that feels gentle, soothing, and sweet. Together, these features give *dollhouse* a distinctly feminine tone.

The found objects, assemblages, and sculptures on display also contribute to my characterization of *dollhouse* as hyperfeminine. I use a variety of plastic limbs and digits, disembodied and unnaturally peach. The dainty mannequin hands, curled fingers, and graceful legs found throughout the space might have originally displayed beauty products and accessories—costume jewelry, acrylic fingernails, delicate nylons—available for purchase in a variety of shops. Now, they beckon, seduce, and beguile with their subtle suggestions of an idealized (i.e., young, white, thin) female body. In a few instances, actual Barbie-parts¹² (her severed ponytail; a single, rubbery leg; a miniature pair of pink undies) can be found displayed within the space, while elsewhere, clumsy knock-offs supply their limbs and tresses.

The presence of long, blonde hair—an unmistakable symbol for Western femininity—is even more conspicuous than the occasional arm or leg. A common feminist critique of North American popular culture regards advertising’s apparent preference for blondes as further proof of our restrictive, unrealistic, homogeneous and racially-biased standards of feminine beauty. Author Linda Scott (*Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism*, 2006) calls this evidence into question, arguing that we have ignored significant historical context surrounding

¹¹ In the context of domestic spaces and decorating the home, softness was also an essential quality of the Victorian household. According to Sparke, homes of the Victorian era were decorated and furnished to express, above all, the idea of comfort, relying on “cushioning, soft textures and surfaces, soft blends of colors, [and] gentle curved forms and patterns” (27). This explains the preponderance of cushioned, upholstered furnishings and gracefully draped fabrics swathing all sharp edges (corners being the “epitome of discomfort”) within the typical Victorian drawing room (39-40).

¹² By now, feminist Barbie-bashing has become banal—but I’m convinced she’s more complicated than the blonde bimbo we make her out to be. Linda Scott points out that the first Barbie was actually quite different from the dolls of her time: neither a wife/mother nor a babydoll (the kinds of toys thought to promote traditional gender roles and encourage proper mothering instincts), Barbie was “a toy made in the image of a single working woman” and specifically marketed as a “teen-age fashion model” (254-256). What’s more, argues Scott, successful female fashion professionals produced Barbie—a sexy, independent girl who loves fashion and having fun (254).

advertising and beauty trends: according to her research, only between 1965 and 1975 did blondes actually dominate American advertising¹³. While it's Scott's point that advertising may not highlight blondes to the extent that feminist media critics have insisted, it's important to recognize that the femininity celebrated (blonde or otherwise) is available primarily to the privileged: that is, the racially-privileged, materially-privileged young woman. Indeed, the hyperfemininity saturating *dollhouse* is a very young, very white, very middle-class femininity—and I present this reigning concept of ideal femininity for scrutiny (implying the need for both celebration and critique).

¹³ This fad is attributable to three concrete factors: 1) the development of the “California Girl” ideal from the growing surfing subculture; 2) the invention of safe and reliable blonde hair dyes; and 3) the “rising popularity of the ‘natural’ aesthetic” (Scott 273). Second Wave feminists were actually a part of the impetus toward “going natural,” calling for a rejection of make-up and all the lies it told. In response, ad campaigns that wanted to market products as fresh, clean, and natural used blonde hair and a new “no make-up” look to continue selling cosmetics and hair dyes (275).



clockwise: (fig. 10) Signe Pierce.
(fig. 11) Signe Pierce.
(fig. 12) Signe Pierce.

ARTIFICE



clockwise: (fig. 13) Anna van Milligen. *vanity* (detail). (approx. 3 x 4 feet)
(fig. 14) Anna van Milligen. *dollhouse* (detail). (approx. 6 x 6 x 1.5 inches)
(fig. 15) Anna van Milligen. *dollhouse* (detail).

Conceptually significant to my practice is the difference between essentialism and social constructivism as two opposing ways of understanding sex, gender, and sexuality. Essentialism refers to “the attribution of a fixed essence to women” (Grosz 47). The basis of this essence is often found in biology, tied closely to woman’s reproductive capacities and bodily functions. Those who subscribe to essentialism may also use the apparent “universality of sex roles”—that is, cross-cultural patterns of gendered behavior and modes of social organization exhibited worldwide—as evidence of woman’s universal, natural, and inescapable essence.¹⁴ In her essay “Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism,” Elizabeth Grosz explains the harm in essentializing women:

Essentialism entails the belief that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times. It implies a limit on the variations and possibilities of change—it is not possible for a subject to act in a manner contrary to her essence (47).

Alternatively, I’m inclined to view femininity (and masculinity) as a set of artificially constructed—and thus *changeable*—roles, psychological traits, capacities and limitations that are dictated by culture rather than rooted in nature, biology, or universal patterns of behavior. In identifying femininity as artificial, I don’t presume to know what natural would be, nor do I consider femininity or artifice necessarily negative. In *Fresh Lipstick*, Linda Scott argues that “natural” isn’t easily defined, and ought not to be considered more authentic or moral than what we deem “artificial.” In fact, she says, “what is natural for human beings is artifice,” pointing to the human tendency to alter the body and modify the appearance (12).

My interest in artifice manifests concretely and materially within *dollhouse* in the use of plastic, synthetic materials (faux hair, nails, fur, marble, pearls, flowers, and gold), particularly those that convey false luxury, imitation finery, or an ability to fool the eye¹⁵. Cheap, clumsy

¹⁴ In “The Universality of Sex Roles,” for example, Stephen B. Clark points to four consistent cross-cultural patterns as proof of the universal nature of woman. “In every known society, past and present,” he argues, we can observe “sexual division of labor. . . , complementary roles in the communal and domestic spheres. . . , some form of female subordination to the male. . . , [and] cultural expression of gender differences between men and women” (36-7).

¹⁵ Penny Sparke explains that luxury—“embracing pleasure and spurning utility”—was regarded as feminine during the nineteenth century (55). Victorian housewives were responsible for exercising their taste within the home to make visible their family’s wealth and social status (30); women were thus perceived as key consumers of luxury goods (55). In time, anything gaudy, gilded, or glittering was associated with the feminine aesthetic of the middle-class Victorian housewife and rejected by design reformers as excessive, vulgar, and superficial. Materials

knock-offs of precious materials are typically regarded as inferior to that which they imitate. In my work, I treat these artificial versions as valuable and thus worthy of appreciation—not simply according to the degree to which they successfully mimic their more expensive, “authentic” counterparts, but as valuable and beautiful in their own right.

Like transgender performance artist Nina Arsenault, I not only embrace artifice—I prefer it. Arsenault’s body is her work. As a young boy, Nina was struck by the pristine, plastic beauty of a female mannequin (Bell 100). In her adulthood, she has transformed herself beyond the conventionally hyperfeminine into her own vision of synthetic beauty. Now she’s a “living doll” made of silicone, arguably more similar to the idealized mannequins she admired as a child than what we might understand as a “real” woman. Finding in Arsenault’s male-to-female transformation further proof of the constructedness of femininity is not an outright condemnation of artificiality, nor is it an assertion that “real” women lie beneath the fake eyelashes, the fake breasts, the fake tan. But if femininity is “man-made,” and if what it’s made of is essentially reducible to an hourglass-figure, then why not re-make femininity into something else? Echoing the sentiments of Judith Butler in “Performance Acts and Gender Constitution,” I would simply assert that to recognize the constructedness of femininity is to suggest its capacity for change.¹⁶ If we can change our definition of femininity from something limiting and harmful for women into something liberating and unconditionally good for all people, then shouldn’t we?

disguised to look more expensive (wood painted to resemble marble, surfaces gilded to look like precious metal, *tromp l’oeil* wall and ceiling décor imitating ornamental plasterwork) were criticized as dishonest (64). Unlike the design reformers of the nineteenth century, however, I *truly love* these materials.

¹⁶ In the mid-nineties, Butler originated her theory of gender performativity. Rather than “take the gendered self to be prior to its acts,” Butler “understand[s] constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*. . . [W]hat is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status” (520).



left: (fig. 16) Nina Arsenault.
right: (fig. 17) Nina Arsenault.



BEAUTY



left: (fig. 18) Anna van Milligen. *clean/unclean*. (approx. 1.5 x 4 feet)

right: (fig. 19) Anna van Milligen. *clean/unclean* (detail) (approx. 4 x 18 inches)

The culturally ascribed and mandated role of women in cultivating beauty—in cleaning, decorating, and aestheticizing the home and the body—is connected to the role of woman as consumer (i.e., she’s encouraged and expected to exercise her feminine affinity for beauty in the act of consuming). Penny Sparke traces the development of woman’s role as beautifier—“not only by her actions but by her very presence”—through the Victorian era in the US and Britain (16). Particularly during the nineteenth century, beauty was thought to be an essential characteristic of woman’s nature, and women were understood as “the personification of beauty in the home” (16). Although today’s Western woman is not as strictly bound to the domestic realm, she is the primary target of advertisements for products promising beauty.

But is the attainment of beauty oppressive? Like many feminists, bell hooks points to “the pathological, life-threatening aspects of appearance obsession” (33). On the other hand, Hooks argues that dismissing or even disparaging women’s love for beauty does little good (if not harm) for the feminist movement (36). Returning to Nina Arsenault, then, we might ask if her extensive body modification can be interpreted simply as empowering, expressive and creative. In “The Artist as Complication: Nina Arsenault and the Morality of Beauty,” Alistair Newton states that Arsenault “walks a line between body fascism, ‘which places a value on a person’s worth on the basis of physical appearance or attributes,’ and the liberation of self-recreation” (111). Ultimately, Newton decides that while Arsenault invites us to look at her body as a beautiful art object, she offers up that body as a site for public debate (111)—and that’s something. But is it enough to simply provoke discussion? What’s more, if there’s something problematic about reducing femininity to reproductive capabilities and secondary sex characteristics—and I believe there is—isn’t Arsenault somehow implicated in said problem?

This is where I see a marked divergence in the intentions and consequences of our two practices. Arsenault certainly challenges hetero-normativity. She undoubtedly reveals the artificial nature of femininity while asserting the legitimacy of body modification, decoration, and reinvention as valuable creative practices. But by objectifying herself and encouraging others to participate, Arsenault engages willingly in an experience that most women don’t endure by choice. As Bordo writes, “To feel autonomous and free while harnessing body and

soul to an obsessive body practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities” (24). Even if one were to find in Arsenault’s self-portraits or performances a critique of the overwhelming tendency of our culture to turn women into sexual objects, the words of Lucy Lippard come to mind: “It is a subtle abyss that separates men’s use of women for sexual titillation from women’s use of women to expose that insult” (qtd in Sprague-Jones and Sprague 421).

In my own efforts to expose social injustices, I attempt to avoid inadvertently perpetuating the problems I observe in the process of re-presenting them. I’ve employed inanimate objects (peach make-up sponges, press-on nails, doll parts) instead of real, individual women to address the relationship between beauty, artifice, and the female body—as well as allude to the gendered (that is, female) identity of the consumer in the modern, capitalist economy.

Throughout *dollhouse*, cosmetics and cleaning products are displayed as decoration, sometimes arranged and sometimes further embellished.¹⁷ Other formerly functional fixtures, like doorstoppers and doorbells, are robbed of their utilitarian purpose and rendered purely ornamental. My collection and careful curation of plastic, mass-produced objects calls to mind Portia Munson’s 1994 *Pink Project*, in which she arranges hundreds of products “created to appeal specifically to women and girls, including hair clips, pacifiers, fake fingernails, combs, dildos, cleaning products, toys, tampon applicators, kitchen gadgets and hundreds of other items, all representing mass seduction and consumption” (portiamunson.com). Or take Laura Kikauka, a Canadian installation artist who “values supermarkets, thrift and surplus stores, flea markets and garbage dumps as contemporary cultural ‘museums’” (laurakikauka.com). Like Kikauka, Munson, and other past contributors to the field of gender studies,¹⁸ I’m interested in

¹⁷ Again, I’m reminded of my affinity with the Victorian housewife and her presumed talent for ornamentation, arrangement, assemblage and display within the home. John Ruskin articulates this nineteenth century belief in woman’s proclivity for decoration when he says, “[Woman’s] intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims and their places” (qtd in Sparke 59).

¹⁸ Barbara Welter, for example, after combing through hundreds of early to mid-nineteenth century women’s magazines, proposed a recipe for the elusive but ubiquitous notion of “true womanhood” espoused by these Victorian publications. Or there’s the *Feminist English Dictionary*, the joint effort of a group of women who, recognizing dictionaries as “museum pieces of an archaic culture,” compiled a list of those entries suggesting both positively and negatively stereotypical images of women (Todasco ii).

the possibility of examining the physical artifacts of popular culture (that which we produce and consume) as evidence of society's implicit biases and prejudices.¹⁹

¹⁹ When I present these beauty implements for examination, I do not propose we classify and ban them all as inhumane torture devices. I agree with Linda Scott that we mustn't read beauty practices outside their social and historical context. "No single practice or manner always suggests either power or oppression," she argues; "Instead, like any other set of symbols, the signs of grooming must always be read in context" (12). For example, before the early twentieth century, makeup was associated with prostitution and considered immoral. As the New Girls of the 1920s began wearing lipstick, however, the practice was slowly reinterpreted as a sophisticated sign of rebellion (204). Dyed hair and painted nails, too, came to be associated with independent "career girls" between the mid-1930s and mid-1950s (236). Studying the diffusion patterns of make-up usage among women in the first half of the twentieth century, Scott found that "makeup was used first by the most independent women in the culture, *not* the most dependent ones, and reached the bourgeois housewife *last*" (205). In many other cases, it's clear that the freedom of self-expression and self-presentation is reserved for those with a great deal of power and privilege (12).



top: (fig. 20) Portia Munson. *Pink Project; Table (detail)*, 2010.

bottom: (fig. 21) Portia Munson. *Pink Project; Bedroom (detail)*, 2011.

SEXUALITY



left: (fig. 22) Anna van Milligen. *attention whore* (detail). (approx. 5 x 8 inches)
right: (fig. 23) Anna van Milligen. *my little phony* (detail). (approx. 4 x 8 inches)

Finally, I'm interested in understanding how the "loving debasing attitude" of ambivalent sexism extends toward female sexuality and autonomy.²⁰ In *The Purity Myth*, Jessica Valenti examines our continued obsession with feminine purity. She notes, for example, that both abstinence-only education and daddy-daughter purity balls have been, until very recently, federally funded in the US. An abstinence-only curriculum teaches students "that female sexuality is a 'gift,' 'precious,' and something to 'save'" (32). Conversely, in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: The Rise of Raunch Culture*, Ariel Levy documents what looks like growing support for female sexual empowerment. Ultimately, however, she argues that even where we claim to have liberated female sexuality, "our interest is in the appearance of sexiness, not the existence of sexual pleasure" (30).

In *dollhouse*, the worshipful display of sensual objects on pedestals, under plastic domes and behind sheets of vinyl suggests commodity fetishism—a perverse, sexual attachment to inanimate things. I invite visitors to enter the womb-like structure of *dollhouse* as they would a sanctuary, to approach these shrine-like arrangements as humble devotees to the cult of femininity. The layout of the space, with its narrow paths, hidden alcoves, and confined chambers, encourages visitors to slow both their pace and their gaze, while benches on either side provide opportunities for quiet veneration and reflection.

These compositional and installation-based strategies mirror society's tendency to objectify and sexualize women, and to elevate ideal femininity to impossible standards. This femininity is largely fantastical, unreasonable, and unattainable—even to the young, white, middle-class, able-bodied woman. The ideal woman is thus convoluted and duplicitous: "a creature of impossible contradictions" (Erdrich 123), her personality is an unachievable paradox of virtues and vices, not unlike Venus Pudica (modest yet seductive, sexualized yet de-sexed), or Mary (the virgin mother).

A few references to the Virgin Mary appear throughout *dollhouse*. In *attention whore*, a miniscule, sea foam green effigy of the virgin is perched upon a furry pink cushion and shielded

²⁰ Female sexual autonomy has particular contemporary relevance in the United States, where women's reproductive rights—rights to affordable contraception; to legal, safe, and inexpensive abortions; to comprehensive sex education—have recently faced renewed threats. As bell hooks argues, "If women do not have the right to choose what happens to our bodies we risk relinquishing rights in all other areas of our lives" (29).

from the outside world by a clear protective dome. Her view is also obstructed, those innocent eyes veiled by a rubbery, bulbous head covering of unknown origins²¹. Compared to *attention whore*, then, *vanity* is monumental in scale. The presence of the virgin mother is subtler here, implied by a pair of outstretched hands, white and dainty—a gesture reminiscent of traditional representations of Mary in religious art. Her stature is approximately life-size, suggested by two overlapping ovals with marble veneers. In place of Mary’s head is a long, would-be blonde wig. Still protected by its original, delicate netting, it remains pristine and perfect, unworn and untangled, a symbol for ideal femininity.

The female body—often dichotomously represented as either sexualized or de-sexed, soiled or pure—is referenced in *dollhouse* through the qualities of pinkness,²² fleshiness, softness, roundness, and openness, as well as cheapness and value, morality and immorality. Subtly yonic forms, particularly ovals edged in lace, are repeated in several works, including *vanity*, *good intentions*, *come*, and *cherry on top*. In this last piece, two rubber banana slices (originally part of a squeaky dog toy) gently curve around and caress a tiny red cherry (a piece from the children’s board game, Hi Ho! Cherry-O). Phallic forms are visible in works such as *my little phony* and *hotdogs or legs*. Additionally, doorstoppers, vents, knobs, switches, and dials can be understood as childish innuendo.

While *dollhouse* reflects sexist ambivalence (i.e., both subjectively positive and negative sexist attitudes and beliefs), *American Reflexxx* is an experimental film that unapologetically demonstrates the hostility and antagonism generated by women and their bodies. In this collaborative documentary by Alli Coates, performer Signe Pierce dresses in a tight, stripper-esque dress and heels with her face obscured by a reflective mask. The film focuses on Pierce as she walks down a busy Oceanside street in Myrtle Beach, while Coates follows with her camera, recording the reactions of passers-by as a crowd begins to form. Members of the crowd harass Pierce, throw trash and drinks at her, attempt to trip her, and eventually push her to the ground. The character, according to Pierce, is inspired by “the hyper-sexualized ‘ideal girls’ you

²¹ Mary’s hood is made from a single plastic grape, its base cut off.

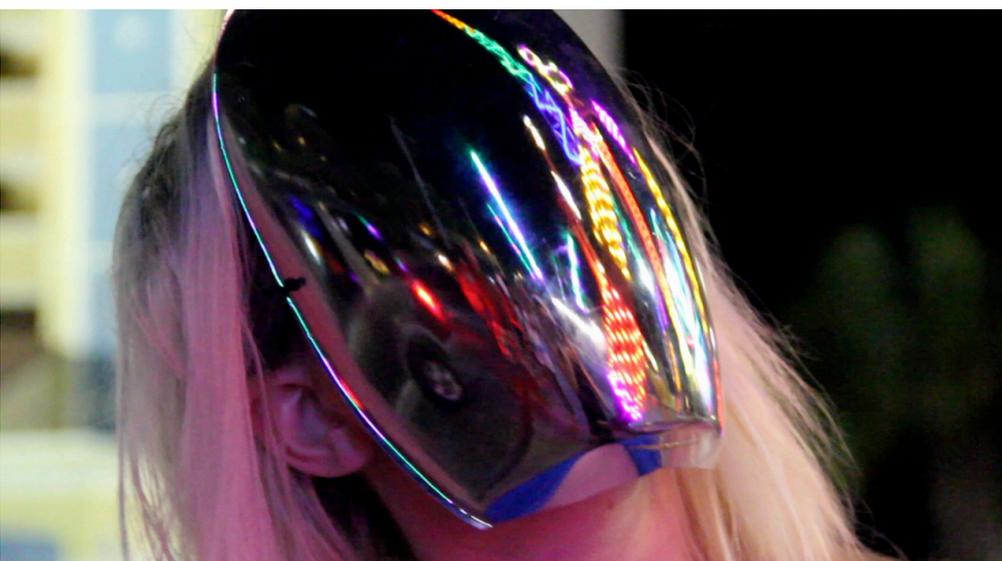
²² In many cultures, pink is associated with youth, fertility, procreation, and sexual attraction, while “pink parts” and “showing pink” are euphemistic references to female genitalia (Nemitz 44). In Europe, street names like “Rose Lane,” “Rose Corner,” “Rose Valley,” and “Rose Garden” once indicated places of prostitution (45), and in Japan, the pink industry is another name for the sex industry (70).

see on TV, online [and] in porn: blonde, sexy, and silent without any signified sense of purpose or identity, other than the inherent condition of being observed” (“Coates and Pierce Talk *American Reflexx*”). This single case study is indicative of the contradictory sexist attitudes expressed by society at large; transplanted from the screen to the sidewalk, this kind of woman is elevated to star status in film, but spit upon and scorned in real life.

In *Fresh Lipstick*, Linda Scott challenges the notion that “a woman, by becoming something ‘looked at,’ is reduced to an object and thus rendered powerless” (233). But *American Reflexx* shows this phenomenon in action: Pierce’s hidden face can be understood as a symbolic gesture pointing to the dehumanizing nature of being reduced to a purely sexual thing. John Berger wrote in *Ways of Seeing*, “Women watch themselves being looked at” (47). Through her mirrored mask, Pierce watches the crowd watch themselves. Her face reflects back to the onlookers their combined desire and derision—made to lust after themselves, to scorn themselves, they’re given a rare opportunity to observe their own voyeurism (recall Barbara Kruger’s 1981 *Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face*). Berger also wrote, “You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure” (51). How often do we condemn woman for doing what we oblige her to do, for being what we encourage her to be?



AMERICAN
REFLEXXX



(fig. 24, 25, 26) Alli Coates (director) and Signe Pierce (performer). *American Reflexx*. 2015.

CONCLUSION

dollhouse is both inspired by and reflective of contemporary attitudes toward women and the social construct of femininity. My own attitude toward normative femininity can be described as something of a love-hate relationship—I love peach glitter and pink pompoms and giant bows made from fuzzy faux fur (constituting what most would consider a “feminine aesthetic”) but wholeheartedly reject the notion that this love is any consequence of my anatomy. I call for a new definition of femininity: one free from derision, one that doesn’t inscribe femininity onto women—if femininity is determined to be good, it’s got to be good for everyone. For example, I value empathy and selflessness and patience (qualities most would personify as female) but contest the assumption that they are more naturally or suitably expressed by women. I believe that these things I love are worth celebrating for their inherent (rather than contingent) value—pink’s place is not (only) the nursery, nor is the capacity to care for others best cultivated in girls. *dollhouse* restores value to that which society has traditionally disparaged and asks visitors to confront double standards and begin the work of deconstructing their deeply-ingrained implicit biases.

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