

A MANY SPLENDORED THING
An Exhibition of Paintings

by

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A Many Splendored Thing

“No one is simply a painter anymore; they are also all archaeologists, psychologists, theatrical producers of this or that recollection or theory.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power.

“My overall objective was to try- visually- to find a female language and a feminine space.”

Jenny Saville

A Many Splendored Thing represents a prolonged period of studio production and research focused on creating a bridge between my fascination and passion for both painting and textiles. Initially, the two mediums seemed to have too many differences to ever come together on common ground. Until the last few decades painting has had a history in the West that was dominated in every aspect by privileged white men. The production (not distribution) of textiles on the other hand, was typically a female centred arena. As a “third-wave” feminist artist I saw it as a challenge to confront past and recent history of each medium and have them come together.

The subjects of these paintings are three fold and contain issues relating to fabric, self-portraiture (or non-self-portrait-portraits) and landscape. All three of these elements have always played varying roles in my work and these paintings mark a turning point in their relationship to one another. As subject matter for my paintings, the fabrics that I

choose to paint vary in texture, weight and colour, and create a puzzle-piece effect on the surface of the painting. The textures and patterns are emphasized: block prints, embroideries, weaves and brocades, and range from silky, sheer, coarse to furry. These varying fabrics are swaddled around a female figure that is not weighed down by the fabrics but hovers above a landscape. Each individual piece represents a history of labour, culture, class, race and gender that come together in an amalgamation of experience.



Splendor in Orange & Blue, Oil on Canvas, 153 x 132cm, 2007

My interest in fabric was piqued about a decade ago as I backpacked through Asia. I absorbed information and formed impressions of fabric and its integration and manifestation in each diverse society through which I travelled. All this left me wondering about the role that textiles play in North America. Upon returning to the West I began learning how to make traditional quilts. Starting with the basics, I quickly found that I preferred working by hand rather than by machine. Doing so meant that the work of creating each quilt multiplied tenfold but being “handmade” was somehow significant to me. This sense of the ‘handmade’ is also one of the attractions that the medium of painting holds for me.

I was aware that feminist artists such as Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago had forced fibre arts out of the marginal categorization of “craft” during the “Pattern and Decoration” movement of the mid-1970s. My reason for branching into textiles was to broaden the visual vocabulary with which I could express myself and to tap into a medium that was dominated by women. I also confess to guilty pleasures, as the exotic textiles and embroideries in Asia had had an intoxicating effect on my senses and I wished to recreate the experience.

Just over a year ago I began exploring with fibre concepts that gave birth to the work in my thesis. The work was significant as the process began by creating a physical manifestation of a profound and sacred core and masking it in a superfluous exterior. At the heart of these soft sculptures is a small sac containing “miracle” earth, as it is said to have regenerative powers, from a holy site that I visited in New Mexico. Specifically, the exteriors of the towers became, for me, manifestations of the standards and desires set in place by outdated patriarchal attitudes. I chose pastiche pastel colours of soft velvets, embroidered silks and ruffles and sewed them together in a kind of sagging tower. There is no mistaking the phallic nature of the work of course, given their semi-erect status.



Yellow Satin Tower, fibre & multimedia, 36 x 20 x 43 cm, 2005

Pink Velvet Tower, fibre & multimedia, 2005

The towers continued to grow in height as I moved from one to the next, a metaphor for my own growth process beyond set borders. Eventually their colour shifted to deep shades of scarlet and undulated upwards to reach my own height. My attention shifted away from the structures separate parts and instead, I began to conceive of it as a whole. Driven by the desire to see the towers in the way that I saw them in my imagination, I shifted gears and began translating them into paintings. Set in strange, surreal environments the towers were transformed into bizarre iconographic structures. The towers dwarf their environment and like the pyramids, the viewer is left to wonder who made them, and why?

It is at this point that the periphery of the image started to take on more importance in my paintings, and would eventually lead to their playing a greater part in my thesis work. Representing nature holds great nostalgia for me. Much of my youth was spent in the countryside. I was awe struck many a time by the great things that I've seen both here and abroad, and some of my fondest memories come from painting en plein air.



Splendor in White, oil on canvas, 203 x 142cm, 2007

The landscapes in my paintings represent psychological spaces. Like dreamscapes each is an extension of a mood or tone. They represent a tenuous safety just as dreams do. The absence of human interruption on the environment is intended to contribute to the sense of it being a sacred space. At times even an imagined place can hold a trace of danger, as is the case in Splendor in White, whereas the environment in Splendor Nesting in Red becomes an active agent of protection.



Splendor Nesting in Red, oil on canvas, 144cm X 168cm

The wrapped figure is central on the picture plane and dominates the environment. In each painting the figure floats in the surroundings. She is buoyant, a fact reflected in the billowing layer upon layer of fabric that envelop her. Contrary to our understanding of gravity, she floats, thereby encouraging the viewer to question that which they take for granted. If you have ever experienced an earthquake then you would be aware of the unsettling feeling that follows. It is the feeling that comes when vulnerability is revealed in something previously believed to be impermeable. If such a fundamental belief as the ground beneath your feet is open for change then what else is possible?

Although her irregular state in the environment makes her somewhat removed, there is also a sense of her connectedness to the space. The figure floats in nature where seasons rule; life is fragile, fierce and beautiful, and humans are only a part of the whole. There is possibility and changeability. There is the finite and infinite.

In this work the figure itself, though often indistinguishable, is always a self-portrait. My body has consistently played a central role in my work. There are two main reasons for this development. The first derives very specifically from my experience of family. For thirty years my father endured illness that attacked both his body and mind. His physical strength and agility had always been integral to his sense of self. A sense of betrayal developed into anger, and eventually he became completely disassociated from his body. Beyond being quietly aware of how it ailed him, his way of living with his illness was to be oblivious to the body that held him. This, coupled with his outdated patriarchal ideals, had a huge impact on the developing awareness of my body.

The second reason for my fascination with the body derived from the first. I sought out the role that the body has played in art, developed an understanding of the *gaze* and found it an engaging and cathartic exploration. The self-portrait has always been a powerful tool of subversion. Re-appropriating our common past and dismantling it may also be the key towards a whole new range of possibilities.

Women artists have made great strides in exposing the imbalance of the representation of the female nude in Western art as constructed by men for the predominant male gaze. Feminists of the 1960s and 1970s made the personal political, which set the groundwork for my paintings. Artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Joan Semmel and Hannah Wilke took possession of their bodies, and its presentation and forged a new way to look at the female nude. Theirs was an interruption of the standard of authority, a rupture in the structure of power and meaning, a violent break from an outdated fallacy and an opening towards a whole new range of possibilities. They represented a growing belief that “how women lived in their bodies, how they could talk about their bodies, and how their libidinal drives were understood, were issues inseparable from broader questions of access to power within society as a whole.” (The Nude in Contemporary Art, Pp 81)

The use of my own body in my artistic production is a testimonial to my existence and thereby my engagement in the dialogue of identity in post-modern culture. Self-portraits occupy simultaneously the roles of *self* and *other*. I intend for my work to act as a representative of community and to reflect the larger issues of identity that toil beneath the surface of a culture still unilaterally dominated by white, heterosexual men. Self-portraiture is a strategy of self-investigation that transforms gender into a performance and is an intersection between the body and the ideal. My objective is to create narratives that evade demeaning stereotypes and the obvious route of self-portraits as an escape, and engage in a questioning/discussion. As such my portraits grow beyond the boundaries of self and as such I will refer to the figure in a more encompassing term throughout this paper.

The gaze of my central subject is either obscured by fabric or intensely engaged in looking at the action of her hands. In general, she is oblivious to you. But as the artist I am not. I am well aware of the predominant patriarchal gaze. It is a decisive choice to impose myself on the viewer and feign indifference. Looking back at the viewer provides an invitation to dialogue, with all except the direct gaze of *Splendor in Purple*, the viewer is left to question their own response to the figure as they are deprived of her looking back.

“Self-engrossed, I celebrate and analyze and stare, making myself the central subject of a universal biography of woman’s body within the masculine tradition of the active eye, and decisive hand.” (Patrou, Pp. 99)



Splendor in Purple, Oil on canvas, 203 x 142xm, 2007

Throughout the series I have been very selective as to when to hide and when to expose skin. This is not an issue of modesty; instead it is about making conscious decisions about what I would like to reveal and what I choose to keep hidden. The only consistently exposed part of the body is the feet. However much fabric enwraps the body, the feet symbolize the possibility of mobility. Unlike Greek and Roman ancient statues where the lower body was predominantly truncated by fabric, she has retained the possibility of movement.

That the figures are each actionary in their own way is also important. Not only does she float, she is engaged. The face may be masked but that it does not affect the figure perceiving the viewer. It only serves to obstruct a bare reading of what might be revealed in her gaze. Besides, the selective exposure of skin has the ability to relate what eyes do not. My arms and hands in Splendor in White and Splendor Nesting in Red are completely hidden. Neither is intended to denote constriction, rather their hands are in

reserve until needed. With the other paintings the hands are all actively engaged at relaying coded messages or a spirit at play.



Splendor in Cherry & Lime, oil on canvas, 203cm X 142cm

In each painting the figure has an unmistakable element of the divine or of being goddess-like. This stems from a self-embraced recognition of inner strengths upon emerging from the demeaning marginalization imposed by patriarchy. It was general research that brought me to this understanding and its eventual manifestation of self-portraits swaddled in cloth.

In *Why Look at Animals*, John Berger writes of the evolving relationship between humans and animals based on the impact of a move towards an increasingly urban environment, shifting philosophies and our growing dependence on technology and industry. Initially animal and humankind had a symbiotic relationship, whereby humans had acceptance and respect for animals. Today, however, animals are most commonly

seen in cages and as a commodity. I relate much of what Berger states in this article to the marginalization of women in society.

The second thing that comes to mind in relation to animals is the pages of sketches and notes that I have gathered in the Egyptian section of museums throughout my travels. I am especially drawn to animals, the symbols they imbue and the diverse proliferation of representation. Two aspects of Egyptian mummification in particular fascinate me: the intricate ritual way the bodies are wrapped in cloth and the symbolic separation of key organs into vessels (called Canopic Jars) with lids in the shapes animals that were buried in tombs together with the sarcophagus of the deceased.



Images found on www.google.com

Departing from the nude, I painted a series of animals nestled in multiple layers of fabric that filled the environment. I did not conceive of them as mummified but I hoped that they left the viewer wondering whether they were sleeping or dead. As with the water/skin in *Cat's Cradle*, the animals were also wrapped/swaddled and the ritual made manifest in selection of monotone fabric particular to each.

The womb-like nest of the fabric made the transition to my self-portraits. Until this series I had preferred the nude to clothed self-portraits, partly because clothing seemed to mask too much of the vulnerability that I wished to expose. The clothing was

superfluous. I also felt clothing too literal and specific to class and culture. In these paintings the fabric is an extension of the figure. It flows from it as much as around it. The multiple layers of fabric are not restrictive but light and billowing. Were each space one where rules such as gravity applied, so much fabric should weigh down the figure. I conceive each piece of cloth as a representative of experience, however, and experience that has been transformed into an empowering and enriching force.

Scale and colour are integral elements to my painting. Like the swaddled animals that came before, the figure is generally life-size giving a more imposing presence. Up close the viewer can get lost in a landscape of lusciously painted patterns and colour. I hope that the viewer can gain some inkling of the pleasure that I felt as the artist in painting it.

The size of each canvas creates a kind of theatrical stage. There is an unreality to the spaces where the wrapped figure is situated. In the foreground textures, colours and patterning are meticulously handled creating volume and movement.

Colour is an active agent in that it contributes to creating the mood of each piece. Some paintings are more subdued and pensive while others are playful and exultant. Colour is an important piece of the whole painting process that allows me to succumb to flights of fancy. Dormant passions wait in Splendor Nesting in Red while passions are made ripe by the colour in Splendor in Orange and Blue.



Splendor in Pink, oil on canvas, 158cm X 173cm

A Many Splendored Thing comes from a song and movie made in 1955. The story was that of a Caucasian man far away from his home in the West who falls in love with an Asian woman. Their beautiful and special love for one another is scarred by prejudices of the time. My paintings are intended to seduce the viewer, much as love does, but once this is achieved the climax is defused by a tension evoked by the dreamscape. Volume and texture are characteristics of the way in which I have meticulously painted the figure and fabric. The dreamscapes, however, do not necessarily have the same faithfulness to the properties inherent in depicting environment with paint. I am far more concerned with mood and the creation of pattern and texture, than I am with depth and reproduction of a landscape, as the eye would perceive it. It is in this contradiction that the subtle tension comes into play.

The quote at the beginning of this paper by Jenny Saville speaks of trying to find “a female language and feminine space”. While Saville does so by painting fleshy bodies on a monumental scale and by emphasizing imperfections and transgressions I have taken

a different approach towards achieving a similar end. Instead I explore ideas of self and space with the sensual handling of varied textures and celebratory colours. I wrap the nude in a cross-cultural everyday material that carries with it a dense history of women's labour and social codes, and situate the figures in their own psychic spaces. I have brought my two passions: painting and textiles, together to bring forth a celebration of life. How "splendid".

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