

SOCIETAL MEDIA

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Art has the ability to be a catalyst for change. The one universal language, the beginning of art making marks the beginning of humanity as a separate force from the animal world. I strive to create work that is thought provoking, moving, and starts conversations. The power of art is the ability to spark ideas in individuals; artwork lives on in the minds of the people who see it, it becomes a volatile force. I am a mixed media artist interested in the social power of hand-me-down, objects, imagery, and archetypes. My art aims at exploring the underlying messages imbued in contemporary visual culture with a focus in the symbology of Americana.

The gender roles prescribed by society are given to us at an early age; we play pretend marriage, house, and having children. We are being groomed for marriage, babies, and settling down, as means of social control. Despite one's gender identity, or non-identity, these pressures permeate our culture. Interests are not inextricably linked to biological sex. In the media, empowered translates to stuck up; traditional binary dictates traits for a man that are unattractive on a women and vice versa. Mainstream media delineates activities for boys with tools, machinery, and war. For little girls, there is mini-kitchen sets and realistic baby dolls. My work seeks to excavate the root of the Patriarchal values, particularly the masks it has worn in the twentieth century onward. As a young woman I grapple with societal expectations, trying to align personal and career goals with societal prescriptions of marriage and child bearing. My work explores the dichotomy of women's role as viewed by society, persistently and almost exclusively, as either/both a sex icon or/and a mother figure. I call into question the perversion of the female naked body by society that has created the obsession/demonization of sex; the obsession with virginity and purity and the perversion and sexualization of it. America has historically played into the duality, creating a value system based on the achievement of two opposing ladders. As a society we have made large steps towards a more equal future, the expectation now includes a women's career, but after career still comes a husband and a family. Traditional values of women cooking, cleaning, and raising children are not eradicated, but merely designated to the second-shift. This piece is meant to pose a hypothetical question: are highly important personal events in one's lifetime, such as marriage and family, a choice or a prescription by society? My body of work directs attention to the issue that many think is

solved and gives new voice to a silenced argument in the modern era. In this thesis I will be discussing my installation entitled *Societal Media*, dealing with expectations of domesticity and the home.

I am inspired by artists like Joseph Cornell and the artist's use of cultural imagery with everyday objects. Cornell uses inspiration from the penny arcades, creating kinetic funhouse shadow boxes of found objects and relics from mainstream media. He created the shadow boxes as portraits of famous characters and movie stars, transmitting their spirit in symbolic icons. "Mixing reproductions of old masters, old-fashioned clay pipes...with recently purchased dime store trinkets...the artist's process[...] brings together past and present, confusing strict chronological sequence, creating a form of historical fiction..."¹ Cornell's work had its basis in surrealism, with a reverence for a budding popular culture born from the cinema. Through the juxtaposition of objects, the objects transform importance in context of vignette.² The historical amazement of pop cultural icons seen in Cornell's work has engulfed present media and I fear there may be no escape to the pervasiveness of our visual culture.

Pop art's exploration of celebrity and print culture serves as fertile ground to further discuss the media's role in everyday lives. In the same vein as capitalist realism movement based out of Germany in the 1960's and 70', my work utilizes advertising media, calling into question the promotion of middle class values. I think in the twenty-first century it is critical to remember the past in order to not repeat it, we are far too focused on the present and future being a separation from the past when the reality is that the present is born out of the past. Robert Rauschenberg's combines use objects, painting, and collage. Rauschenberg utilizes advertising with found objects and painting to express the symbolic weight of mass media. Media's presence in our lives has only increased. In my work, I utilize a maximalist sensibility that originates from neo-expressionist artists and a contemporary saturation in digital culture.

Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz are a huge inspiration for the concept and materiality of my recent work. In *Useful Art #5: The Western Hotel*, the slice of American life in the motel chair is a portrait, using specific objects arranged in a still life evoking a specific character in society but speaking

¹ Jodi Hauptman, *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 41.

² Jodi Hauptman, *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 36.

to a larger reality. This model of the tableau is made effective by "...first, the drawing together of significant, even contradictory, elements, and thereby the complete filling out of [a] 'point of view'; and second, the simultaneous particularization and generalization of the moment."³ The Kienholz's collective body of work consists of installational tableaux, mixing found objects and constructions based in conceptual art origins. Through the format of the tableau "...the [audience] is not in either world, but rather moves between them...situation within situation, world within world- there is a vacillation between the [tableau] as a microcosm and the situation of the [audience] as a microcosm".⁴ Through the familiarity of the objects and scene presented, the audience is able to feel a nostalgic déjà vu for a false personal memory of a cultural stereotype. *Useful Art #5: The Western Hotel* relies on the connection and meaning made between the elements within the tableau to create a "... depiction and representation of the physical world...a mutuality of procedures by which the community maintains the fiction of linguistic representations".⁵ Elements included in my own work are chosen for symbolic value, for the purpose of communicating using a greater cultural language of objects and images. Like the Kienholz, I desire to illustrate political and philosophical rhetoric in society using the items produced from the corrupt system.

Danh Vo's ready-mades are focused on the objects significance, the combination of objects telling a story reflective of changing shifts in culture and family, like in *Oma Totem* from 2009.⁶ Many artists have utilized byproducts of consumerism, the objects in assemblage works transforming into icons; we as humans live "...in a world not of things but of symbols"⁷. Vo's work could also be categorized as a cultural tableaux. The artist utilizes family heirlooms to document historical events, recombining the objects to convey their symbolic importance. My personal collage and found object work is rooted in a sociological exploration, like an archeological dig through visual history, discovering previous

³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Duke University Press, 1993) 48.

⁴ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Duke University Press, 1993) 45. In this passage the author refers to tableau in writing, and the original words in the parentheticals were "text" and "reader".

⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Duke University Press, 1993) 45.

⁶ Orit Gat, "The Weight of History in Danh Vo's Readymades," *Apollo Magazine*, (May 10, 2018), <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/the-weight-of-history-in-danh-vos-readymades/>

⁷ Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, "The Tree of Knowledge," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 274.

ideologies' physical manifestations. It was important to me that all the materials used were free to me, either inherited or discarded, illustrating the inheritance of normative culture and the volume of post-production waste. The assemblage works and tableaux of artists like Vo:

...offers a type of contextual closure which would be inappropriate to genres rooted in context of their utterance; the tableau effectively speaks to the distance between the context at hand and the narrated context; it is possible only through representation, since it offers a complete closure of a text framed off from the ongoing reality that surrounds it.⁸

These works get to be both a work of fiction and a product of reality. The assemblage form benefits from the aesthetics of our reality while being free to create new connection and critiqued by its own rules. The basis of my style is rooted in art history, I desire to continue the conversation into the twenty first century. I am creating an assemblage piece in part to comment on consumerism, the tableau of the kitchen is a familiar stage to discuss cultural ideas of have and have not and is symbolic of success tied to monetary possessions such as nice a house.

Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* is a foundation in art history, one that the framework of subsequent artworks like mine structurally depend on. My work draws on similar visuality and symbolism as another one of Chicago's works, the collaborative *Womanhouse* installation from 1972, specifically the *Nurturant Kitchen*.⁹ Liza Lou's *Kitchen*, from 1991-1996, demonstrates labor and craft through the encrusting of a kitchen in beads. Not only is the imagery similar to my own, the sentiment resonates, of validation and honor given to traditionally subordinate positions within societal strata.¹⁰ My body of work explores the subject matter of the kitchen and women's place at the table within society in order to continue the conversation started by feminist foremothers. I am attempting to chart the systematic oppression of the other in a patriarchal capitalist society. Like many people, I look at the American political stage and wonder how we got here. The United States like to identify as a progressive leaders of a free world, when the reality is the opposite. The current administration is an excellent example of all the ways we need to strive for improvement. Despite great advances in medicine and civil law, this current

⁸ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Duke University Press, 1993) 48.

⁹ Sarah Weiss, "The Godmother," *T Magazine*, February 18, 2018, pp. 198-205

¹⁰ "Kitchen Liza Lou," Kitchen | Whitney Museum of American Art (Whitney Museum of American Art), accessed March 11, 2020, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/34855>)

COVID-19 global pandemic is an excellent example of how those already at a disadvantage in society are the most likely to face detrimental impacts and whom have the least amount of resources available to confront these issues. Systematic sexism, racism, classism, religious prejudice, and/or a combination of these factors threaten the livelihoods of individuals in our society. As artists, we have the ability to create new perspectives through challenging boundaries in society. The term avant-garde comes from the French phrase for those at the front lines marching into battle.

We are an almost-progressive society, but our pseudo-intellectual shallowness blinds us from the baggage we have yet to unpack. These issues are not historical bygones, they are evidence of violent prejudice that still exists, the denial of which only furthers the oppression. Making room for new and progressive art and theory requires a confrontation of present values that cling to the past, I focus on Americana and print advertisements to demand more inclusive and thought-provoking images in the future and self-reflection by the viewer. The visual lexicon of our society in the digital age is vast, but lacks in depth. Finding meaning in this world requires a vehement pursuit. In order to irradiate these oppressive ideologies we must acknowledge it, through naming and calling out of these volatile symbols we can reclaim power over them.¹¹ This thesis work explore the issues in our cultural blind spots by mapping out these icons of subjugation and social control as women are shown in limited roles in the media; as the phrase goes ‘you can’t be what you can’t see’. The issue lies in the same type of images being reiterated and repeated without realization of why or the effects. The Patriarchy produces the normative standards by which capitalist advertisements market to and continue to propagate:

The modern media of mass communication, newspapers, radio, television, and so on, are able to establish this psychological constraint almost without interruption in time, reaching all individuals in space with maximum efficiency. If a slogan, however insipid, is repeated a sufficient number of times and is emotionally coupled with the promise of a reward or the menace of punishment, it is nearly unavoidable that the human animal establishes the conditioned reaction as desired. [...] The result is mass-man—abolishment of individual discrimination and decision, and its replacement by universal conditioned reactions.¹²

¹¹ Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, "The Tree of Knowledge," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 275.

¹² Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, "The Tree of Knowledge," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 278.

We continue to inundate ourselves with media, and the volume has only increased in recent years with the growth of social media. In the stream of images it is hard to tell how one relates to another, and if that connection matters. I opt for a maximalist aesthetic in order to convey the oversaturation of visual culture. From a larger composition, removed from the rushing current, the vastness shrinks into typified iterations.

I focus on cultural stereotypes, selecting imagery that strings together a map of Americana. This body of work is installational, taking on the form of a life sized tableau of a kitchen. The layout is similar to a home, presented in my backyard against the backdrop of my garages sloping roof. The installation is human scale and familiar, the audience at once feels included and alienated by the chaos of the imagery and commonplace kitchen furniture. Domestic imagery has become emblematic of the house wife and the American Dream. An image becomes a symbol when it not only represents itself but suggests something greater than itself: "image is the explicit reminder of a specific thing, the symbol the exploitation of the image to suggest something different...", and an emblem is a conventional symbol with wide acceptance and visibility.¹³ The American Dream is an idyllic fairytale told to us as children to keep us working to benefit the dominant power structure, and is unobtainable for the majority of the population. Americana is pervasive, western culture permeates the global consciousness, emblematic of our cultural imperialist control. Passively we all are socialized to cultural norms through media. How to look, act, and be successful are inherited cultural traits: "...symbolism and language are defined as being transmitted by learning and tradition".¹⁴ Using the symbolism of the American flag's stars and stripes patterning in combination with suburban images in this work is symbolic of the link between patriotism and material wealth. Like societal values, initially the viewer accepts the images, but is jarred awake by the unexpected juxtapositions to the routine pathways. We may not be critical of these images on their own, but amassed they show a clear pattern and a lingering inclination towards tradition. We see smiling happy faces and are seduced into thinking a good life comes from objects in advertisements.

¹³ John E. Buchard, "The City as Symbol," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 236-237.

¹⁴ Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, "The Tree of Knowledge," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 274.

The pieces within my installation have the decorative patterning of wallpaper, infused with the cultural norms repeated throughout society. The multiplicity of birds, flowers and fruits are reminiscent of still life and memento mori paintings. The rot and decay reminds the viewer of their own mortality. In my work, women's eyes and lips protrude from the center of flowers, interwoven with images of consumption. The wallpaper's delicate patterning may seem demure and harmless but the swirling, floral motifs represent the hidden ways we are socialized within society. The insidious wallpaper spreads like mold, presenting as harmless, camouflaged by the seduction:

The modern methods of propaganda, from the advertisement of a toothpaste to that of political programs and systems, do not appeal to the rationality in man but rather force upon him certain ways of behavior, by means of continuous repetition of stimuli coupled with emotional rewards or punishments. This method is essentially the same as that applied to Pavlovian dogs when they were drilled to respond to a meaningless stimulus with reactions prescribed by the experimenter.¹⁵ Advertisements are not ornamental, they are weaponized tools of propaganda and social control. Symbols are born out of real events and feelings, and continue to perpetuate these feelings into the future, "...the consequences of the images will be the images of the consequences..."¹⁶ The images in this work make up our reality, becoming tokens of shared experience.¹⁷ Assemblage holds a mirror to the audience, the collaged surface treatment demonstrating the inherited tropes of the past make up the framework underlying the society we stand in.

My work plays on the role of woman as a home maker and sex symbol, as the producer of life and symbol of abundance, not to critique woman but to show the issue of representation. I explore the intersection of consumption and femininity in advertising media, and the limited roles women are given. Imagery of luxury cars and steak dinners and vacation homes are paired with smiling bodacious bodies, using sex to sell product shows a conflation of personhood and object. These advertisements show archetypes being repeated and rebranded. Images of women's faces, eyes, lips, and bodies are used in combination with consumable objects in this work to illustrate how I feel I am perceived as a woman by

¹⁵ Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, "The Tree of Knowledge," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 278.

¹⁶ Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, "The Tree of Knowledge," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 276. Author is referencing Heinrich Hertz's expression.

¹⁷ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Duke University Press, 1993) 45.

society. Our worth is often reduced to physical appearances. I am attempting to draw attention to the covert patriarchal oppression in what is expected of women; marriage, children, and a mortgage as judge, jailer and cell. The societal expectations become tied to self-worth. The surrealist reverse animism used in my work implies the link between possessions and worth within western culture. Utilizing imagery that represents perfection within our culture draws attention to the polarity of gender norms, like in images of Charles Atlas and *Playboy* pin-ups. Repetition of the exact same advertisements, and similar types of characters within the advertisements underscores my work like a chorus in a song. The repetitive drumbeat of these advertisements drowns out independent thought in society. Our universe of symbols determines the course of history, our images carry with them cultural themes.¹⁸ I collected mass amounts of ads for televisions and home appliances designed to complete the vision of the American Dream. The surfaces in my installation feature imagery of food and drinks. I focus on fruit and alcohol in particular to remind the viewer of the sickly-sweet numbing effects of consumption. Our consumer culture is represented in capitalist icons in my work such as factories, cars, credit cards, and shopping carts. The insatiable desire for more is grotesque. Americana is typified by images of babies, weddings, and houses with moms inside mom cooking dinner surrounded by white picket fences where dad is mowing the lawn. The use of photographic imagery does not just express one individual experience, but typifies "...a well-defined set of generic conventions. It is not simply that the family album records an individual's rites of passage; it does so in such a conventionalized way that all family albums are alike".¹⁹ This results in the nostalgic feeling despite no familiarity to the imagery on the part of the audience. The images are symbolic of the larger framework they came from, like individuals in a society.

In the wider scope, the grander narrative comes into focus: the individual people and events amass to the greater political and societal changes. We all contribute to the greater narrative. The physical process of collage, as well as the aesthetic chaos of the larger composition is reliant on the surprising

¹⁸ Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, "The Tree of Knowledge," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 277.

¹⁹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Duke University Press, 1993) 49.

connection and addition of smaller elements. The works are an act of curation, allowing me to express the way the world presents itself to me, through the bombardment of messages, notifications, headlines and 24 hour access to a never ending stream of imagery on the internet. I seek a certain kind of realism in my work that depicts the clutter of our cultural psyche through the process of juxtaposition of advertisements.

When looking at this installation and society at large, in the chaos, there are rhythms of truth; once heard the patterns are echoed everywhere. The capitalist advertisements are buying into and selling cultural ideologies with products; the images underscore the Patriarchal values, creating complacent individuals through propaganda. There is an echo chamber in modern media, the images lulling us into an unconscious confirmation bias. In patriarchy and capitalism, women are equated with objects, the existence of the object contingent on the function within its role. My work serves as a presentation of weaponized imagery. It is a document, a presentation of selected artifacts representing how I see the world. The past is present in the present, the cultural momentum leads to the current moment. The current moment is made up of a composite of history, an independent present moment separate from the past is non-existent. Nostalgia is used as an aesthetic tool is to remind the viewer of the familiar while simultaneously drawing the conclusion that problems of today are rooted in the past. The objects become symbols when placed together in an artwork, a record of a history of thought. I am using representational objects and images, “such ‘still shots’ say, before the family car or the Christmas tree, are always profoundly ideological, for they eternalize a moment or instance of the typical in the same way that a proverb or emblem captions a moment as an illustration of the moral working of the universe”.²⁰

The troupes of women depicted in my work are sourced from each decade from the 1950’s to present. My sources include my grandmother’s wallpaper, *National Geographic*, *Playboy* (Woman of U.S. Government Edition, November 1980), *Vogue*, *Architecture Digest*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Alle Kvinners Blad* (circa pre-1960’s Norwegian ‘Every Woman’s Magazine’), and local contemporary publications such as *Westword* and *Birdy*. These print mediums are physically represent a survey of

²⁰ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Duke University Press, 1993) 49.

dominant society's visual culture spanning the last 70 years. The gender roles portrayed in media is a dissemination of normative values; these archetypes of women have been passed down for millennia now, stemming from religious origins. The Patriarchal society delegates 'women's work' to be of the home and of family, secondary in power and control to 'men's work'. The purpose of these archetypes is for control. The strong binary narrative in advertisements stems from "[t]he man who is fighting within himself all the qualities he and his culture define as feminine will fight these same qualities in the external world, especially if his culture values maleness more than femaleness, as is often the case."²¹ The implicit hierarchy within culture has not been leveled; racism, sexism, and economic discrimination still plague our supposedly civilized society. In the Patriarchy, female attributes such as emotion and tenderness are circulated as weaknesses. Men are taught to "...be afraid of these in himself and fight them and try to be the opposite. And he will tend to fight them in the external world too by rejecting them, by regulating them to women entirely, etc."²² This structure effects gender, sexuality and race. Oppression of the Other within society is as old as history itself, but we must continue to improve. Often historical depictions of society are seen as separate from modern day, removed from the present moment. History is valuable when we learn not to repeat it, and a non-romantic and critical view is important in order to move forward.

In this work, I show the visual history of degradation, confinement, and control of women's outward appearance and rights through dissection, layering, scrubbing and recombining images of women from found print sources. The detournement highlights the façade in the images, often pointing to the imperfection in unoriginality. The images, revealed to be empty copies, are representative of the flaws in our societal norms. I utilize acrylic medium image transfers in much of my collage, a process that involves the tedious rubbing away of paper pulp resulting in only the ink being left behind. This process is conceptually working through irradiating these images. The marks left behind by advertisements have

²¹ Abraham H. Maslow, "Isomorphic Interrelationships Between Knower and Known," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 138.

²² Abraham H. Maslow, "Isomorphic Interrelationships Between Knower and Known," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 138.

lasting effects, the layers of imagery not hiding the previous but rather a summation of the additional images. The repetition of imagery within my work reflects the reality of repeated advertisements, the rhythm of which goes unnoticed over time. The objects and images I use in my artwork are commonplace, with an overload of familiarity creating a false cultural *déjà vu*.

Collage and assemblage has an inherent resourcefulness, much like American values. The principle of it is not planned, rather working with what is available. The nature of assemblage work is the sum of parts; cultural values can be read in the physical objects left behind. Collected from products of society, the works are familiar, inherited relics of consumption and waste. The waste produced from our insatiable hunger for new and better items has already greatly impacted the world for future generations. My work serves to call out the harmfulness of capitalism and consumption in the media. The use of ready-made objects in my work is to draw attention to the physicality of mass-production and the literal waste produced from consumerism. The factory objects contrast with the handwork in the surface treatment and two-homemade paper mâché heads, the juxtaposition of clearly machine made objects and intentional hand work highlights the schism between reality and material culture. I used discarded objects to ground the work in a physical consumerist reality, such as an old oven, a kitchen table, set of 4 chairs, windowpanes, silverware, faux fruit, and broken pieces of mirror. The familiar reality of the objects and images brings the artwork from the theoretical realm into the tangible every day: "An image is an imitation, a representation, or the similitude of anything or person, made perceptible to the senses. [...] By extension the image also exists in a mental representation, the revival or imitation of sensible experience, the reproduction of such an experience in the memory or imagination."²³ Objects, rather than representations in drawing and painting, contain the believability of photographic imagery and our collective familiarity. The undeniability of the physical artifacts aids in my conceptual argument of the present day experience. The repeated media in my work is demonstrative of repetitive patterns of history.

²³ John E. Buchard, "The City as Symbol," in *Sign, Image, Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 236.

We should all see ourselves as part of the larger scheme like any one individual element in the artwork is part of the whole. Each part played serves the overarching message. As members of a Democracy we should have the opportunity contribute to the greater narrative, yet this image is not representative of the beautiful variety of experiences that exist. This work is a statement more than a call to action, to attempt to open the eyes and the mind to larger forces at play in the banality of the everyday. I do not pretend to have the solution to this issue, merely knowing it is my job to communicate that we must strive for better. The goal of the artwork is to bring an introspective awareness, a present mindfulness in their own beingness as it relates to the social ecosystem. With this work I hope to inspire viewers to think more critically about the society they live in and their personal involvement with its outcome. Like the hand-me down furniture, we as a society inherit cultural norms and heirlooms. I am critiquing the society we live in out of hope that future generations can inherit better. The present moment in particular seems to be a parting from the past, as a major historical event, there will be a before and after. These significant changes in how we think about food and the home will impact on how we live, consume, and interact in the world in the future.

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