

SAN DIEGO ART INSTITUTE

SKINNED NOTES ON "WOMEN'S WORK: MASCULINITY AND GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY FIBER ART"

1

Skin is phenomenal. It protects us from the world and has the amazing ability to heal itself. We can modify our skin, or enhance our skin with clothing or tattoos, creating the perfect artifice to project onto or hide from the world around us. For many of the artists in the show, the skin we're born into is ever-evolving and changing. Skin is the catalyst for many of the issues discussed in "Women's Work", as the artists collectively subvert ideal representations of femininity and masculinity.

There are several "skins" in this show that I wish viewers to think about. Caroline Wells Chandler refers to his garments as "skins", as they are created specifically for his body. They simultaneously are inviting and suffocating, becoming costumes where he can transform into the identity of that character. Alternatively, Sheena Rae Dowling's installation "Skin" uses the material of pantyhose to address this false layer of "skin" that women are forced to wear to hide their true selves, while Katya Usvitsky's collective work is comprised of forms that resemble biological and anatomical figures. Finally, Jacob Rhodes' "Candy Skin" series serves as artifacts of a fictitious subculture of skinheads, urging viewers to consider prescribed codes of masculinity.

But honestly, this show is about real life--real people and how they deal with the skin they're in whether they're cis or trans. You can change, hide, or disguise yourself. But we're all the same.

2

From the earliest I can remember, I've embraced androgyny as a way of life and have always had a very clear sense of what I wanted to look like. I simply could not understand why I couldn't have tattoos as a child. I spent much of my time in frustration, drawing on myself and altering my skin to the best of my ability--all to my father's chagrin who told me I was "desecrating my body". Why couldn't I look like all of my idols and transcend the ordinary? I wanted to be punk rock and tough, using my skin as an armor shielding me from the world. I wanted to be untouchable and as powerful as any man.

3

We all wear a uniform.

4

My father taught me only one thing: "how to hang with the big dogs". He showed me the country from eighteen wheels, two, and everything in-between. He told me not to take shit from anyone. He told me to ask questions and undermine authority. He told me to be strong and independent. He told me how to be a man.

5

My mother once said that it all went downhill once women started wearing pants and pumping their own gas. She said that only ugly women wore makeup and perfume. She said marry a rich man. She taught me how to cook and clean and take care of someone and make them love you forever. Nothing lasts forever. She died never knowing her own worth in this world.

6

Soft and cuddly; hard and edgy.

7

A few weeks ago an artist asked if I felt it was my duty as a curator to put women artists into exhibitions. Honestly, I had never thought about gender as it relates to the shows that I put on. However, I do feel that as a female and a feminist it is partially my role to help shift the balance and ensure more women are included in gallery and museum exhibitions...not because of their gender but simply just because their work is equal to their male counterparts.

Many of the works in this show subvert the traditional association of women with textiles in the domestic sphere. Several artists employ gender feminism and the repetitive tasks associated with "women's work" to create these fiber art textiles and installations, such as sewing, weaving, and traditional forms not typically regarded as "high art". In "Women's Work", the artists are elevating lowbrow and craft materials to a high art context. The exhibition questions whether we should comply with traditional gender codes, conventions, and stereotypes.

"Women's Work" wavers from the overly feminine or sexualized--such as in Blanka Amezkua's embroideries--to the overly masculine, like Jacob Rhodes and Rose Eken's work about punk rock and metal culture--to everything in between. We see aggression, love, war and sexuality mingled together, as it all typically is.

Many of the male artists in this show attempt to reverse gender signifiers, such as Robert Dupree as he tests out sex roles and identity through a series of cross-dressing performances. By dressing in drag, Dupree imitates the imitative structure, revealing gender itself as an imitation.

I hope to portray gender as fluid, culturally conditioned and artificially confined, exposing the irrationality of gender overall. Moreover, I aim to position this show within the rich history of feminist and fiber art created in Southern California.

- GINGER SHULICK PORCELLA