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REAL LIFE, INVENTED SELVES:
AN ANALYSIS OF ONLINE SELF-PORTRAITURE

by
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The Internet and the MySpace Self-Portrait

The Internet has been a mystifying and nebulous concept since its birth in the early 90s (Kelly). Just two years ago in an infamous public address, former Senator Ted Stevens attempted to explain the internet to the masses, calling it a series of tubes. (Doctorow). This statement was followed by a flurry of blog postings, YouTube videos and general mockery from the computer savvy communities, thus confirming the fact that most people, besides the geeks, still don’t fully comprehend what the Internet is. At its inception, PHDs, scientists and professors of anthropology alike hailed the Internet as a potential “gaia of cultures,” and an opportunity for global communication and the exchange of ideas (Harcourt 22). Currently, it would be hard to say that the Internet is only being used for such lofty pedagogical purposes, but true to those scholarly dreams, people around the globe are exchanging ideas, more specifically videos, on YouTube, the world’s third most visited website (“Global Top”). After a number of search engines, the fifth and seventh most visited sites in the world are Facebook and MySpace (“Global Top”). These top sites require no qualifications, impressive resumes, or background checks. A working email address, username and password are all anyone needs to be published on the Internet. YouTube, Facebook and MySpace all exist solely for the same purpose—to host content posted by users for others to peruse. If one were to judge our current historical moment based on our websites of choice, it would be fair to say we are self-obsessed. We exist in a culture defined by its desire and ability to look at itself online.

Some of the best evidence of this acute self-awareness resides on MySpace and can be found with little to no effort. Arguably, the artifact that best encapsulates this phenomenon is the quintessential MySpace self-portrait. It is best defined as a photographic self-portrait taken by the subject, without the help of a timer, or any other means besides the subject’s own body. As evidenced by the uncomfortable poses, awkward foreshortening and sometimes creative use of mirrors, this mode of photography is certainly not naturally intended by the engineering of most digital cameras, hence the generally amateurish results of said photographic style. But what they lack in tact, they make up for in the amount of psychological information they provide about the subject. These photographs are invaluable in that they are self-portraits entirely mediated by the subject/photographer, making the result exactly a vision of the artist. Clothing choices, framing
techniques, and facial expressions are decided on as the photographer works out the options alone, not for a secondary photographer, but for themselves. Through the MySpace self-portrait, one gets a literal view of a person’s self image because it is an image taken of the self, by the self. Clearly these photographs are meant to be seen by others, as reflected by the shirtless young woman in Figure 2, but the viewer online is secondary to the original self-awareness present during the photographing. In a strange, slightly problematic way, the gaze is subverted, because in the original moment, the photograph was originally created with the self in mind.

The appearance of this kind of photography is linked to the rise of Web 2.0 (among other things), a concept created by web developers to explain the next generation of the Internet (Boutin). In his article on YouTube and MySpace, Paul Boutin claims that the essential defining characteristic of Web 2.0 is its focus on user generated content. The most successful websites of the Web 2.0 era are those that easily allow users to post their own content, like YouTube, with its simple interface and instructions for uploading videos. Boutin attributes MySpace’s success to its “puppylike accessibility,” and its infinitely customizable, multi-purpose personal profiles, to which it is easy to upload one’s favorite songs, pictures, and videos. In keeping with its “anyone can do it” mantra, MySpace itself is a seemingly novice-designed website, beckoning users to try it out with their non-intimidating style (Boutin). Thus people begin to integrate the non-intimidating and easy to use website into their personal lives. As Boutin writes, “the easier it gets to use, the less geeky the Net becomes, and the more it starts to look like real life.”

Though “real life” is a risky term to describe the behavior of online contributors, because it deems the idealizations users post online as real. The MySpace self-portraits are far from candid, and arguably “real” in a different sense of the word. With a tilt of the head, a change of angles, or a little makeup, these portraits can be manipulated to look more like an ideal self than what most would consider a real self. A disproportionately large amount of MySpace self-portraits are taken by women, in which case the traits that are generally emphasized or idealized are breasts, eyes, or buttocks. These portraits present a certain view of women which is then commodified online and consumed by other users, and in some cases, fetishized. The proliferation of these images, which at first appear to have a certain degree of agency embedded in their production, also proliferates similar standards of beauty and sexuality that are valued by
mainstream media. The agency of the photographer is diminished when it becomes clear that the photograph was taken specifically for other viewers and was informed by a certain ideology.

The Camgirls Series

My project, Camgirls (Fig. 7), is situated amidst the conflicting arguments that can be made about the nature of the MySpace portrait. In my work, I seek to expose the oppressively homogenous view of women presented by the self-documentation posted by women on MySpace. Through parody and multiplicity, I critique the MySpace portraitists’ predilection for exaggerating their feminine “assets,” hence two of the titles, \( T \) (Fig. 8) and \( A \) (Fig. 9), which refer to the colloquial abbreviation for a woman’s “tits and ass.” Where there once were two exposed breasts, on \( T \) there are now 46, taking what some might consider a sexy or beautiful thing and making it grotesque. \( T \) is literally dripping with sarcasm, and breasts, completely saturated with sexuality to the point that it is grotesque, or comedic. \( T \) as well as the other images in the Camgirls series are self-replicating in a way. Each of the elements, be them eyes, breasts or buttocks, are fragments from examples of self-conscious photography online, which in turn are rebuilt to form larger, self-conscious images. I used this process to create the Camgirls in order to reference how the number of MySpace self-portraits in existence has contributed to keeping the trend alive. The self-portraitists feed off of one and other, one leading by example, the other following. The Camgirls series is based around the idea of holding the MySpace self-portraitist physically and ethically accountable for their idealized images of self they pollute the internet with. Generally, these images are centered around the idea of more—more cleavage, a rounder derrière, or bigger doe eyes. In my project, I explore what a woman might actually look like if she were as “sexy” as she portrays herself online, what she might look like if she were so much “more.”

The image of the multi-breasted woman, while maybe not an immediately recognizable, historical symbol, dates back to mid second century BCE. Artemis of Ephesus adorned with 20 or more breasts, is goddess of ancient Ephesus, a city which was located where Turkey is now (LiDonnici 390). In her essay, Li Donnici writes that throughout Artemis of Ephesus’s enduring presence in Ephesian, and later Greco-Roman culture, she has undergone numerous analyses and
interpretations by both people of ancient times and contemporary scholars (393). Despite all of
the theories, it is generally agreed upon that Artemis of Ephesus functioned as “the protection
and sustenance of the city of Ephesus and the people in it” and was worshipped by cults at the
time (LiDonnici 394). Some have tried to claim that the breasts on older images of Artemis, used
to be folds of clothes and have been misinterpreted over the years (LiDonnici 391). Another
contemporary scholar believes that the forms are not breasts, but the scrotal sacks of sacrificial
bulls, thus masculinizing the image (393). Significantly, Artemis of Ephesus, with her abundance
of breasts was not considered a symbol of fertility, or sexuality (LiDonnici 409). She was
recognized as being “an important focal point of Ephesian self-understanding” (LiDonnici 396).

Like the ancient Artemis of Ephesus, T is not meant to arouse, and it certainly not meant to
imply fertility. Rather, its aim is to expose the MySpace self portrait as a form of fetishization of
the feminine. In a way, I hope that it leads to a better sense of the significance of the practice,
and as Artemis of Ephesus did for the Ephesians, maybe even a better understanding of the self
cultivated via social networking websites. But, akin to how Artemis’ analytically provocative
form has been twisted to fulfill theories which elevate the patriarchal, T runs the risk of
misinterpretation and misuse. In the current moment, when bare breasts are generally considered
provocative or sexual, T needs to draw on historical and art historical precedents to ground it in
the demonstrative and not the erotic.

Another essential element that grounds both T and Artemis of Ephesus in strictly non-
sexual territory is their clothing. Rather than bare arms, or complete nudity, both figures are fully
clothed, except for their multiple breasts. According to LiDonnici’s research, Artemis of
Ephesus’s adornment and apparel changed to reflect the culture worshipping her, which means
that her corporal form is not necessarily fetishized on a level above that of the mortals. She is
enrobed with the same, mundane details citizens of Ephesus (and the subsequent Greek and
Roman cultures) were familiar with (LiDonnici 396). Similarly, part of what prevents T and the
other monster women from occupying a more eroticized space is that they each offer up evidence
of everyday, commonplace behavior. What makes T more human, and less pornographic are her
long sleeved sweatshirt and her band-aid. Rather than presenting the monsters as the same kind
of airbrushed, erotic perfection that one often sees in mainstream media, each model’s personal
details are kept intact and exist as proof of their agency over the viewer’s gaze. Even if one’s pose reflects control and individuality, if an editor photoshops all uniqueness out of a model’s body, no longer does she exist as a real person, but as an idealized body, a mere substrate for the sexual.

In her sculpture, particularly Blind Man’s Buff, Louise Bourgeois has come up with a very effective strategy for avoiding the erotic when exploring the human form—ambiguity. According to Bourgeois, “All my work is suggestive; it is not explicit. Explicit things are not interesting because they are too cut and dried and without mystery” (“Blind Man’s”). In Blind Man’s Buff, as well as other Bourgeois works, the power of suggestion very effectively utilize—it is unclear what exactly the bulbous, sack-like forms could be. Bourgeois does provide clues, such as the title, Blind Man’s Buff which refers to a children’s game in which a blindfolded “blind man” has to seek out others by using other senses (“Blind Man’s”). The statue itself seems to be playing its own games with the viewer, in a kind of psychoanalytical Rorschach test, asking the viewer “what do these look like to you?” The forms, so deliberately defined, trick the viewer into making snap assumptions about what they must represent, and in the end, reflect more on the viewer’s state of mind than on the artist. Though, with the relatively human scale of the work paired with the bodily references in the title, the sculpture seems to imply that the nubs are derivative of the human form.

While Bourgeois would probably consider T to be highly explicit in comparison to her deliberately vague yet evocative work, A utilizes more subtlety because of its source material—female buttocks. Leaving the particular body part out of what would be named A in the series of three, is a choice directly inspired by Bourgeois use of the ambiguous. Rather than depicting the erotic, thong-clad buttocks so commonly presented on the internet, A is composed of halves and wholes of nude buttocks, with no clothing to contextualize or give scale to the body part. Granted, with a little inspection, one might guess what Google search provided the forms used to create A, but in the time since Blind Man’s Buff the mainstream has upped the ante in terms of what is explicit and what is mundane, and the hope is that A is not entirely immediately recognizable.
Another tactic that Bourgeois uses to prevent her pieces from being overly sexualized is humor. In the case of Blind Man’s Buff, the playfulness of the piece is provided by the title. Camgirls utilizes humor as an underlying concept to ground the forms in the strictly critical realm. Each of the women are portrayed in exaggerated, and oblivious poses of narcissism, in rare, behind-the-scenes views of the making of a MySpace self-portrait. In reality, it is unlikely that one would run across a picture of a woman taking her own picture online, thus, there is a degree of comical, unrealistic removal between the viewer and the woman. Much of the humor of each piece is attributed to this separation, and how it emphasizes the awkwardness of this form of self portraiture. In addition, the concept of a person having 138 eyes or 46 breasts is in itself ludicrous. The aim of the Camgirls series is to get people to laugh at themselves, to recognize their own behavior in that of the monsters, and to think critically about how quotidian such blatant displays of self-consciousness have become.

In form, each of the monsters are constructed by the repetition of many smaller, feminine forms, which once complete, nearly entirely obscure the original female form. Thus the sum of their individual parts becomes more important than the original, individual woman. The construction of each of the monsters, with their layered body parts masking the core, female body, draw upon some traditions in feminist performance art, specifically Betsy Damon’s 7,000 Year Old Woman. Upon first glance, Damon’s flour-sack adorned body is echoed in the monsters, particularly T and A with their almost bloated overall shape, as if they were laden with significance, or in the case of the Camgirls, social commentary. Gloria Orenstein writes that Damon’s piece is less critical, and more healing, each punctured sack of colored flour reflecting how we can infuse history with herstory, and transform the contemporary woman’s self (84). In a sense, Camgirls is a depiction of what might happen if women don’t reclaim history, or their sense of self, and the mainstream continues to define them. Both works deal with the development of women’s self, but where Damon’s work is empowering, Camgirls is more chastising, through its hypothetical exploration of a worst-case scenario.


Camgirls and Interactivity

Bringing the element of interactivity into a 2D work upsets the viewer-art piece dichotomy. No longer are the art and the viewer separate entities, but many theorists argue that the art takes place when an interaction occurs (Mercedes 71). As J. Dawn Mercedes explains in her essay on feminist theory and digital art, the art, by being interactive invites the viewer to become more than an observer, and thus, invites a collaboration of viewer and artwork (71). The art becomes determined by an individual viewer’s personal experience, for the reaction any one particular viewer will have is determined by their individual life experiences and world views (Mercedes 71). In this sense, art becomes more personal, more individual as it becomes interactive. Traditional art appreciation has always been an intimate experience, but when an interactive work responds to each viewer individually, the intimacy, and personal nature of the experience increases.

By Mercedes definition, if interactive art exists in a space between the literal art object and the viewer, it would challenging to measure its success in any literal way. Thus, critics and viewers alike must strive to value a work based on a new scale beyond technical skill, or what is visible to the naked eye. Mercedes writes, aesthetic value becomes determined by a work’s “context, content, meaning, and relationships” it presents and evokes (Mercedes 69). Camgirls seeks to engage the special relationship with the viewer through the use of motion detection and light. Seeing as Camgirls discusses a phenomenon that wouldn’t exist without an awareness of viewers, it is extremely important for the viewer to contribute to, or fill a role in the piece. The interactive element of the piece attempts to reflect how a MySpace self-portrait, though a solo act between camera and photographer, is an act done for the purpose of being seen. The photographer is practicing the ultimate control over how they will appear in the photograph, and thus, how they will appear to others. Thus, a portrait in this capacity would not exist, were it a solely private act. It would not exist if it wasn’t for the influence of outside viewers online. Camgirls attempts to meet these new standards by which one can judge interactive art, and entices the viewer to enter into a relationship with the piece, even if it is only a momentary one.

Thus armed with a new rubric with which to judge art, specifically one that is not based off of the fetishistic reverence of the holy art object, as Mercedes explains, one can develop a
new paradigm with more opportunities for equality (69). There is no art object with inherent ideology and value situated above the viewer. There is no highly indoctrinated canon of male art and viewpoints about digital or interactive art. Lynn Hershman Leeson agrees that with non-traditional art forms, there is also no history of, or predisposition toward voyeurism in the sense that there is with other art traditions such as painting (279). This break from art historical tradition, in theory provides an opportunity for the viewer to interact with the art, and vise versa, thus creating a new dynamic, with a built-in sense of equality. Multi-media, interactive and computer based art doesn’t necessarily carry with it the same heavy undertones that a traditional portrait in oil paintings can run the risk of referencing. Abandoning traditional viewer-art dynamics could also mean abandoning hundreds of years of art tradition, times when wealthy men, as described in Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” could literally pull a curtain and decide who gets to see their painted portraits of lovers, and when. This highly controlled male gaze can be effectively avoided with interactivity. As Mercedes explains, in technological terms there is a “mutual/reciprocal relationship between a user and the computer hardware and software” (Mercedes 71). The viewer and the computer are mutually dependent in the reception and production of input and output. Though unlike computers, interactive art is not a machine that exists to do human bidding. The exchange is not necessarily so clean and symbiotic, though arguably, forcing an interaction via technology helps to close the distance between a voyeur and art, and can be used in an effort to prevent a gaze of ownership over the imagery depicted.

Another important result of an active, participating viewer is brought up in Lev Manovich’s essay on the database, which claims that interactivity calls into question the standard, dominant linear form of narrative (417). Meaning, based on the viewers choices, the outcome presented by the art will change (Manovich 417). Ideally, in viewing Camgirls no two experiences will be the same, and when no viewer is present, the art will merely be inactive. Mercedes claims that this destruction of the linear narrative interactivity provides also presents an opportunity to challenge what might be a distinctly male interpretation of the world (71). Assuming that the linear narrative is the masculine narrative, rather than presenting a set trajectory to the viewer, interactive art taps into the database concept that Manovich describes as fundamentally inherent to computing and its development, thus producing a non-linear narrative
art piece (Manovich 417). Importantly, this means that not only is the art making itself useful in a way to the viewer, it always turns the traditional viewer into a user, an important element of the art process with agency. The element of agency may be precisely what makes a non-linear narrative a from that battle traditional patriarchal power. An active piece of art and an active viewer mean that no one is subordinate, in the viewer-art relationship.

Interactivity clearly emphasizes the importance of interaction over a technical barrier, but the way in which the self is defined in terms of technology is also worthy of study. Generally in terms of technology or via the internet, the literal location of the body is different than that of the self (Stone 92). This disconnect was exemplified early on when people first began using the telephone. A certain unease arose when people gradually made the realization that they were speaking to another person though the telephone rather than speaking to the phone itself—when they realized that technology mediated and transferred their interaction (Stone 96). The internet also allows for the creation and existence of multiple selves that can be attributed to the same body, a “personae within cyberspace in its many forms and attendant technologies of communication” (Stone 86). This allowance for multiple selves brings up an abundance of questions regarding the interactions the selves have with others courtesy of technology. Do they develop distinct personalities? Does technology invite certain behavior? Can any sort of closeness occur through technologically mediated relationships and interactions occur when the literal is not available (Stone 86)? It seems evident that people who find themselves utilizing technology for interaction crave the kind of connection made available by the internet, so much so that some one of the earliest purposes of the internet was to exchange messages. Some early companies even discovered that users were willing to pay to connect to others online. Thus a question is posed—what is it about technologically mediated interaction that makes it different from the face to face, and why do we like it so much?

For one, mediated interaction that utilizes technology involves bandwidth, as Stone explains, a specified amount of information exchanged over a unit of time (93). In narrow bandwidth exchanges, information is compressed to narrow bandwidth, and transmitted to another user, to decompresses the information. One example of a narrow bandwidth exchange is phone sex, in which verbal information about a situational encounter (a compression in itself) is
transmitted via telephone and distorted during delivery. Then, the person on the other end receives the information, and decompresses it, filling the gaps with idealized or assumed information (Stone 94). This might explain why some are so drawn to communication through technology—it is inherently incomplete, due to the fracture of the self and the body, and due to the distortion during transmission, and it requires a certain amount of imagination. If one desires, certain details that don’t actually exist can be made up. But this also means that there is a greater chance for misunderstanding.

**Camgirls and the Camgirls Series**

The phenomena that inspired the title for my Camgirls series is also a kind of technologically mediated exchange, though it is more one-sided than phone sex, and more akin to the act of MySpace self-portraiture. Actual camgirls started appearing online as early as 2000, and websites hosting twenty-four hour a day videos of people, though noticeably more often women, carrying out daily tasks became immensely popular among a largely male audience (Knight 25). As Brooke A. Knight writes in her essay on camgirls, these women offer up their private lives as a sort of publicly accessible twenty-first century version of a hybrid documentary, self-portrait, performance piece (Knight 21). Whether or not these hybrids are to be considered art is another discussion entirely, but examples of women utilizing technology to explore an identity, or to reclaim their agency are found throughout art history. One of the more famous examples of gaining agency via technology is Cindy Sherman, who turned the camera on herself in order to explore the female stereotypes presented in film. Interestingly, as Knight notes, these early camgirls have been called feminists by some scholars, like art historian Marsha Meskimmon, who likens camgirls to Mary Cassatt in terms of their exposure of the domestic realm (23). This comparison is highly problematic because it overlooks the camgirls’ periodic exhibitionist behavior, and the way they develop a new kind of erotic, highly personal product to offer up to predominantly male audience. That’s not to say that feminists can’t be erotic, or exhibitionists, but Cassatt wasn’t known for feminist displays of sexuality. On the most basic level, Cassatt showed women in their confined spaces and the domestic. This was groundbreaking because it proved that women’s daily lives were worthy of painting in a serious
way, rather than just for the flâneur’s enjoyment as dancers or prostitutes. If camgirls chose to present themselves to their viewers in a way that excluded the pornographic view of women that is already well accounted for online, they could provide an alternative, feminist view of women that would be harder to misinterpret.

Jennifer Ringley, the original camgirl of 1996, practiced a high degree of control over her image that is largely not present in the work of current camgirls (Lipkin 107). This was, in part, due to her use of digital still photography, but mostly because of her discretion. Her website, www.jennicam.org was meant to house documentation of her daily life, in a more narrative fashion, rather than an exhibition. Occasionally, nude photographs appeared on her website, but according to Jonathan Lipkin, author of Photography Reborn, “viewers were attracted to the intimacy of the site, by her comfort in front of the camera, and by the reassuring banality of her everyday life,” not the fleeting nude stills (107). Due to her precise editing, control and agency, Ringley successfully constructed a compelling narrative about her own life, without resorting to objectification. What separates Ringley from the MySpace self-portraitists is her goal to present her life exactly as it is, not as she wishes it was.

Though it toes the line between pornography and documentary, Natacha Merritt’s digital diary of sexual encounters is an example of how one can practice agency when self-documenting the erotic. As Lipkin notes, the camera Merritt uses has a swiveling viewfinder that allows her to immediately see what the camera sees, and rather than posing for a machine, or an imagined audience, she poses for herself (108). Merritt can control the composition of the image down to the last detail, thus making each image produced a finely crafted piece of art, not a chance flash of sexuality. Merritt achieves liberation through the freedom of posting her art images online, without the hassle of traditional book publishing (108). Where Merritt is liberated, the MySpace self-portraitists are trapped. Where Merritt proclaims art, the MySpace crowd proclaims real, and are left to contemplate the gap between their digital idealizations and actual, physical selves.

Limitations in Freedom

The beauty of the Internet for many seeking social interactions is the relative anonymity all users start with. One enters the online world with little but an IP address, and is handed a rare
opportunity to start from scratch. One essentially becomes an autobiographical author, editing out the undesirable details, and replacing them with embellishments or creative fabrications. Online, the concept of lying is relatively impossible to define. The difference between online predators who deceive to lecherous ends, and those who find comfort in the freedom to explore other identities, is motive. This creates a kind of gray area in which people are free to post whatever kind of information and photos they see fit, regardless of many social expectations. Bearing this in mind, one might expect the Internet to be the kind of utopia its creators hoped it would become. Unfortunately, during my research it became evident that many use the Internet to spread the same kind of idealized identities. The party animal, the model, the player: these are the personas that users seem to gravitate towards. Rather than creating one’s own, unique fictitious avatar, people seem more inclined to confirm what mainstream media preaches, thus fueling its power. But, it may not be too late for the Internet to become a tool of defiance. Like video did for many feminist artists at its invention, the internet still has the potential to be a medium in which people can practice agency, and think critically about their identities. As new, free Wi-Fi hotspots crop up by the day and boost Internet accessibility, one can only hope that more online contributors will start to consider the staggering number of people who can access their information everyday. We may start reevaluate that system of values we pretend to hold dear, and let go of its limiting fantasy forms. But until then, we are left with the Camgirls.

Reevaluating the Camgirls: From Criticism to Activism

While the internet may be a gathering place for examples of idealized and objectified women, there is a secret weapon for battling homogeneousness that the Camgirls series overlooks. I turned to Bourgeois and Damon for formal inspiration, and to Merrit for conceptual grounding, and analyzed each artist’s work as if it could be separated from the woman that created it. I neglected to consider the relationship between the work, the body that produced said work, and their relationship with the individual viewer. Via a performance, artists like Damon can reach viewers with their cause very directly, and if successful, can incite change or profoundly present different viewpoints through this one-to-one interaction.
After realizing my prior fragmentation of the artist-artwork-viewer dynamic, I shifted my focus from women’s self-presentation online, to a more narrow and personal topic—the representation of female artists in the mainstream gallery and museum system. According to the Guerilla Girls, in 2008 the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA contained work by 30 artists, 97% of them white, and 87% of them male (“Dearest Eli”). During my first visit to BCAM on a school sponsored field-trip, I couldn’t help but notice the lack of work by artists besides white men, and immediately felt like I did not belong in the museum space, as a viewer, or a young, female art student.

In Gentlewoman Artist (Fig. 11), I aim to address the uneasiness I experienced at BCAM (and other prominent Los Angeles museums) and explore the dynamic between artists, artwork and viewers in such a space. Through the construction and use of an ungainly, multi-breasted dress, I aim to welcome viewers by breaking the barrier between artwork, artist, and viewer, yet simultaneously alienate them through the power given to the wearer of the garment. The wearer has the upper hand because of the general reverence viewers have for art-objects in the museum space, and by putting on the garment, the wearer is raised nearer to the level of art object. In a way, I see the dress as a possible response to the question, “Why aren’t there more famous women artists?” The parody answer I provide is that women artists (myself included) must be perceived as fundamentally different from male artists. They must been seen as mutant, overly emotional monsters not to be included in the pristine museum and gallery spaces. Thus, I have created an outfit that makes the wearer into a kind of extreme, undeniably female pariah. Rather than address such an issue as important as sexism in the art world with a very intimidating, difficult-to-relate-to piece, I opted to use humor to draw the viewer in, even if only on the basest of levels.

While constructing the knit and crocheted breasts for what would become the dress, I was struck by how strongly strangers reacted to the forms. It seemed that almost universally, people were drawn to fondle the breasts, attempt to relate to them via comparison to their own breasts, apply a non-existent deeper meaning to them, or at the very least, laugh uncomfortably. The power that each of the breasts had on their own surprised me, and I knew I had to take advantage of their approachable nature. Part of what might make the breasts so inviting is the visibly tactile
appearance knit and crochet yarn has. Conventionally employed to create usable items such as
sweaters or blankets, knit and crochet items are meant to be touched, worn, or interacted with.
Unlike traditional sculpture materials that rely on illusion to create a sense of softness or
fleshiness, such as stone in the fountain of Diana of Ephesus or marble in Bourgeois’ Blind
Man’s Buff, yarn by definition looks and feels soft. With the help of polyester stuffing, I was
able to control the firmness and the shape of each breast, adding to the individuality I hoped to
achieve with each form. To avoid idealizing or simply caricaturing the human breast in yarn, I
opted to knit each piece without the use of a strict pattern, and embraced mistakes as I created
them. Rather than invent an arbitrary standard for what a needle-art breast should look like (a
commentary on mainstream standards of beauty), I opted for the irregular every time in hopes of
yielding realistic results with the ability to sag, swing or protrude like actual human breasts.

Knitting and crocheting are techniques historically considered to be “women’s work,”
and not necessarily a fine art, in a way paralleling the lack of mainstream acceptance by women
artists. The galleries or museums that choose to underrepresent women artists, would likely argue
against non-traditional fine-art materials. Working within the constraints of these highly
gendered techniques provides ample opportunity to subvert preconceived notions about what can
be knit, and who can knit it. Another advantage to the material is that it is meant to be functional
and durable, which makes it perfectly poised to be made into wearable art.

Formally, Gentlewoman Artist directly evolved from T, the breast-covered figure I
created for the Camgirls series, but where T is about literal excess, Gentlewoman Artist focuses
on the many meanings that multiple breasts could imply, and is meant to be somewhat open-
ended. It could be a celebration of the functionality of the female body, and what it stands for,
like the statues of Diana of Ephesus. It could be a superwoman, endowed with limitless assets to
pursue whatever she wants with the power of 37 women. At the same time, it could be a
ridiculously impracticable imagining, fixated on one female body part, summarizing an entire
gender with one symbol. It could be a back-breaking burden. While there is a heavy message at
the heart of my garment, through the use of yarn and the unexpected, I hope to imbue the
delivery with levity, and allow for a certain degree of viewer interpretation.
The feminist performance art group, The Waitresses, used a multi-breasted Diana costume in their work to inform customers at their restaurant about underpaid, overworked, and often sexually harassed waitresses in the restaurant industry (Broude 187, Fig. 12). The Waitresses’ contemporary example of what Diana might look like, and how exhausted might feel, highlights the impracticality of the assumption that women are above all, nurturers. Expecting women and waitresses alike to perform the same, nurturing role, means objectifying them as if they were a walking udder, an image that the Diana costume in Ready to Order clearly evokes.

Inspired by The Waitresses, in Gentlewoman Artist, I too hope to communicate the sense of exhaustion that comes along with the fight to be a respected female artist. While the breasts are presented inert, their existence and function in nature also implies the possibility that every knit breast could be needed to “produce” at the same time, which would require a staggering amount of effort and resources.

Through the process of creating the Camgirls series and Gentlewoman Artist, I have discovered that if I am to join the next generation of female artists, I will do so as activist, not a critic. While one could sit back and produce work condemning the current state of sexism and lack of gender equality in the United States, highly critical work runs the risk of spooking perfectly reasonable people away from feminism. Maybe one of the reasons why the Guerilla Girls have been so successful and enduring throughout the years is their ability to deliver their research with a healthy dose of humor. If inspiring change through art means wearing a gorilla mask, or an itchy wool dress in summer, I’m in. It’s worth it.
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