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# The Feminine Ideal

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THE FEMININE IDEAL

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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## Chapter 1: The History of High Heels

While footwear was originally meant to protect the feet and enable the wearer to span larger distances and rough materials, today shoes are often seen as a fashion statement and a sex symbol for women. In his book, *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things*, Marcel Danesi examines how high heels have moved away from the original purpose of shoes and now “seem to contravene this function. They are uncomfortable and awkward to wear, yet millions of women wear them” (Danesi 13). They have moved from practicality to a sign of femininity, sexuality, and power.

The most extreme fashion of altering footwear occurred in China until the end of the Mandarin regime in 1911 (Thesander 25). Young girls feet were bound from the age of six in order to reduce them to “about one third of [their] natural size” (Thesander 25). This binding “reduced women’s freedom of movement and marked their unsuitability for work, but in return the women were seen to have high status”(Thesander 25). This Chinese practice shares some similar qualities with the American standard of high heels. Although the American tradition is a far cry away from the extremity of foot binding, the restrictions on movement follow the same guidelines. High heels cause pain and discomfort and therefore cannot be worn for an extended period of time. Like women with bound feet in China, women in America are prized when wearing heels. They are marked as sexy and desirable.

High-heeled shoes were first documented in the Western world around the late sixteenth-century. The fashion became popular for men by King Louis XIV of France “who apparently wore them to increase his modest height” (Danesi 13). However by the “mid-nineteenth century, heeled shoes, low-cut, laced or buttoned to the ankle, became the fashion craze for females” (Danesi 13). Over time the fashion of heels transformed depending on the current dress fashion. When modesty dictated that women’s ankles be covered, heelless boots above the ankle became the fashion. Similarly as dress style changed around 1870 to bustle dresses, heels returned to complement them” (Shephard 19). When skirts shortened to reveal the toe and vamp – the portion at the top of the ankle – shoes became embellished with beading, fine fabrics, buttons and other frills. The finery of such embellished shoes continued to establish shoes as a signifier of class, a dynamic

of footwear that has continued to play a role in modern day. As Shephard examines, “this costume item has served throughout history as a powerful indicator of class, gender, identity, profession, military rank, affluence, position, or lack thereof”(Shephard 18). Wearing heels within the business world brings women closer in height to men, making them feel more equal and powerful. In a social setting heels are a necessity for certain attire and communicate a wide range of signs, from sexuality to affluence.

High heels have remained an expected and “natural” form of female footwear across Europe and the United States. The high heel gained renewed enthusiasm in the United States after the Second World War, when “shoemaking, like car design and electronics, has its share of important technological and material advances”(West 45). The “exuberance and luxury of the period” was reflected within the fashion of the time. In 1953 Roger Vivier, a prominent designer, invented the stiletto, also known at the time as the *aiguille* or needle heel. These “thin, high heels reinforced with steel” became “the most popular women’s shoe[s] of the 1950s” (West 45). The stiletto took the high heel to an extreme that had not been realized until the use of steel made it possible. Until this point, the most common woman’s dress shoe was a pump with a larger, block heel or Louis heel. In her book *In step with fashion: 200 years of shoe style*, Norma Shephard asserts that “The stiletto or needle heel affixed a slim pump with pointed toe, and work with seamless nylons stockings, created the ideal foundation for the full skirted, narrow-waisted dressed that rested ten to twelve inches from the floor”(Shephard 72). Clothing and shoe fashion went hand in hand. This relationship remains true today.

## Chapter 2: High Heels and Their Role in the Feminine Ideal

In *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things*, Danesi addresses how high heels have become fully associated with women:

In North American it is perceived as ‘natural’ for women to wear high heels and put on lipstick, but ‘unnatural’ for men to do so. In reality, the classification of a clothing item or cosmetic technique in terms of gender is a matter of historically based convention, not of naturalness or lack thereof (19)



Our society reiterates women in heels as normal in a wide variety of ways, from media, fashion, and everyday encounters. Girls are taught from a very young age that desirable women, such as princesses in fairy tales, wear high heels. Danesi explains that, “American society still defines the ‘normal’ through the primary signifying order; those living apart from this order will typically face risks, such as being subjected to various forms of ridicule, censure, and even ostracism”(Danesi 16). Despite their impracticality, high heels are seen as a normal part of female fashion. While casual wear for women does not necessitate the wearing of heels, to dress up or go to work heels are not only considered ‘normal’ they are essentially *required* to be perceived as desirable. These standards cause women all over the country and many parts of the world, to force their feet into tight and uncomfortable shoes that will inevitably hurt them in order to be perceived as feminine or sexy.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, high heels have skyrocketed in height. Sizes of heels have climbed to peaks of four, five, and even six inches. Heel height is directly related to sexiness. “High heels force the body to tilt, thus emphasizing the buttocks and breasts: they highlight the female’s sexuality” (Denesi 13). A higher heel is then perceived as increasing the woman’s sexuality. Heels establish a standard on which to rate sexuality. Wearing a heel is seen as “normal”. Therefore a woman wearing a heel is viewed as sexier than a woman not wearing a heel. The importance of heels in women’s lives has “helped to cast women in the role of aesthetic objects” (Thesander 8) ruled by body alteration as a means to become the “ideal female”. In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir argued in her book, *The Second Sex*, against the prevailing idea that Femininity was a biological characteristic of women. She examined how women were expected to behave and dress themselves in a specific way in order to portray the appropriate idea of the feminine. When they did so, this was considered as following their natural tendency towards femininity, however when women do not behave in the correct way they are seen as unnatural. Simone de Beauvoir argues that if “this concept is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: [women] are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine” (De Beauvoir 253) *The Second Sex* breaks down the idea of biological reasons for why

women are believed to act in a certain way and shows how this idea an Ideal Feminine is socially constructed.

### Chapter 3: The Fetish and the Obsession

Even today, sixty years later, this idea of an “ideal feminine” still prevails as something biological. Femininity is seen as natural and yet, women look to body alteration in their attempts to reach this ideal. Marianne Thesander in her book *The Feminine Ideal*, notes that “however much the human body is altered and adapted to the ideal, it will never be perfect: only mannequins made of wax or glass fibre have ‘perfect’ bodies”(Thesander 15). The unattainable aspect of the feminine ideal reinforces the high heel as a fetish. Marcel Danesi, author of the book *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things* rightly stresses, “High heels are *fetishes*” (13). The curvy design of the shoe takes the foot, and covers it in a luxurious material, making even the knobby feet seem luxurious in turn. They have become an icon for sensuality. Maureen Turim in her essay, *High Angles on Shoes: Cinema, Gender, and Footwear* examines the cinematic use of high heels. She notes the many close ups of women’s feet in high heels and how “with its impracticality, its sensual curves and pointed form, is used in films to signify the modern woman molded into an icon, into the iconicity of sexual objects”(81). This object has moved from an icon of sensuality to a fetish. The curves of the arch and the heel echo the curves of the body. Women and men both fetishize the high heel. “High heels as a sexual prop...[have] prevailed up to the present time”(Danesi 13). This prevalence of the fetish can be seen within the sexual world, in fetish heels and fetishes surrounding the wearing of heels. For example Turim notes, “Spike heels have come to signify a female power in dominatrix pornography”(81). The ubiquity of the fetish is evident in the commercial world as well through the prosperity of the high heel industry and the “natural” association between women and the obsessive collecting of heels.

The high heel has become a standard for women, however it is not treated in the same vein as men’s dress shoes, despite their link as formal footwear. Individual men do not, on average, desire to amass a different dress shoe for every occasion, in a variety of colors ranging from black and brown to cobalt blue and sea foam green. In her essay *The*

*Shoe in Art, the Shoe as Art*, Janice West examines the individual's obsession with shoes and their desire to collect them. She states that the "obsessive interest in shoes is their visibility to the wearer. Without a mirror we can only have a restricted view of our body...So it is not surprising that shoes are such a source of visual and sensual pleasure and that this fascination remains when they are taken off"(West 52). West examines the tendency of the individual towards owning and wearing many different shoes, in general terms applied to the *individual's* fascination with his or her own footwear. However, the stark differences between men and women's way of acting out this "fascination" remains untouched. The average man and woman, do possess in some fashion or another an obsession with shoes. The majority of this fixation is directed however upon women's shoes. Men and women both look upon female footwear, heels in particular, as a source of enthrallment and fascination.

The obsessive tendency focused towards high heels has been examined by several authors through psychoanalysis due to its classification as a fetish. In her essay, *Self-Fashioning, Gender Display, and Sexy Girl Shoes: What's at Stake-Female Fetishism or Narcissism?* Lorraine Gamman interprets the act of fetishizing and obsessing over high heels in a differing way than the standard Lacanian analysis. She states:

spending money on objects that men often fetishize, like high-heeled shoes, could be construed as part of the masquerade that involves women in reinforcement of what Lacan has described as the phallic term (that is engaged with through entry into the Symbolic). Yet there is another reading that could be made of shoe shopping, which doesn't fix it to a link with penis envy and which relates to notions about 'loss' (of the mother's body and/or ego ideal) rather than 'lack' (of a penis). Here ideas about loss...are linked in theory with primary memories of the mother's body, and the deep mourning for this intimate closeness to the mother which we lose as we grow up. (11)

Rather than investigating the obsession of shoes through penis envy, Gamman centers this female obsession through the loss of the mother. This examination presents the shoe as a tool with which to fill the void of the lost closeness.

This general obsessive tendency is explored in the art world, through pieces such as Andy Warhol's *Raid the Icebox with Andy Warhol* at The Rhode Island School of Design where he chose to display the school's collection of shoes in the case in which they were stored. West remarks that "By using or choosing to display the collection in the

gallery as closely as possible to the way in which it was stored –hidden from public view –Warhol shed particular light on the nature of collecting”(47). Warhol chose to display the shoes as a collection, to be absorbed as a whole rather than each piece. By doing so, he emphasizes more the act of collecting than the styles and artistic qualities of each individual shoe, while at the same time “he insisted on having each pair of shoes fully cataloged, giving them the kind of provenance and importance that the museum...usually reserved for painting and other fine art, rather than mass-produced objects”(West 46). By requesting both the original display and the detailed cataloging, Warhol’s piece speaks to an obsession with collecting shoes due to both the appeal of each individual shoe as well as the “ownership of so many similar objects at once” (West 47). In effect the piece represents an obsession with each pair as well as the act of collecting.

#### Chapter 4: Enhancing the Female Form

The high heel is heralded as a tool that enhances the female form by contorting the body to a more ideal shape. In high heels the lifted heel tilts the body forward, forcing the wearer to compensate by pushing the chest out and the behind back in order to realign the center of gravity. This almost “S” like shape that the body must perform accentuates the erotic zones of the woman’s body, as well as lengthens the leg and tightens the calf. In addition to the effect on posture, “A feminine shoe imposes a new problem of grace and self consciousness on what otherwise would be a simple act of locomotion, and in this artful handicap lies its subjugation and supposed charm”(Brownmiller 145). The length at which women go in order to be feminine becomes a part of the desire. The precariousness of the high heel causes a teetering gait that “not only resembles the ‘willow walk,’ the ‘golden lotus limp,’ or the ‘lotus gait,’ but mimics some small ballet steps that fetishize the foot and emphasize its vulnerability”(Reaves 257). Putting the body in an extreme state for the sake of beauty, as well as art in the case of ballet, increases its value.

Physically, the aim of high heels is to alter the female body into something considered *more* ideal and *more* natural than the body without heels. While writing on the

restrictive ways in which women alter their bodies in the attempt to achieve an ideal, Marianne Thesander observes:

Femininity is not concrete and dependent on biology, but is the product of culture. In order to be accepted as a 'woman' it is not enough to have a woman's body or to be feminine: you have to first meet the social demands of femininity. Such demands are discriminatory and restrictive, partly because they unilaterally attempt to make women fit physically and behaviorally into those feminine ideals that are still being voiced. (8)

The pursuit of the ideal is not a trail that will eventually lead to in the fountain of youth. Instead it is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, always out of reach and unattainable (even after purchasing an entire drugstore full of cosmetics and a closet full of Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choos). Shoes can only make out feet *look* smaller, but despite this obvious unachievable desire, this continues to be one of the main selling points of heels.

Susan Brownmiller observes in her book *Femininity* that "the unifying factors may be pared down to these: the shoe must make the foot look smaller, it must be light and flimsy in construction, it must incorporate some stylish hindrance that no man in his right mind would put up with. None of this is accidental"(Brownmiller 144). This can be seen in the most extreme of cases: the Lotus and the pointe shoe. In the modern day, the point shoe is closest to the foot-altering practice of foot binding practiced in China. Ballerinas pointed feet, shod in luxurious pink silk, when coupled with light pink tights is used to mask the foot, making it seem as if the leg continues to the floor. Gerri Reaves, in her essay *The Slip in the Ballet Slipper: Illusion and the Naked Foot* gives evidence of how dancers "apply pancake makeup to their pointe shoes, as they do to their faces, to ensure that they continue the line of the body and create the illusion that shoes are flesh"(252). Within this illusion is the desire for the foot to be miniscule, even non-existent.

On average, the majority of women do not wear pointe shoes. They remain a specialized form of footwear for female ballet dancers only. It is exceptionally rare for men to perform on pointe. The history of restrictive footwear dominates the female realm. Today "point shoe's fashion equivalents are, naturally, the bound foot and the foot in high heels. All three fulfill the criteria for a sexy shoe, the pointed phallic toe"(Reaves

256). This desired elongation of the leg forces many women to “endured the cramped toes, damaged floors, and twisted ankles that often resulted from their wear”(Shephard 72). In the name of a belief that an elongated silhouette and small shoes create a more desirable female body, many women cause themselves great agony by cramming their toes in the restrictive toe box of high heels.

Although the blisters and strain inflicted on the high-heeled foot seem a far cry away from that of Chinese foot binding, the cultural incentive remains quite similar. Chinese women “underwent this unspeakably brutal procedure to create the invaluable asset, the lotus foot, which would endow a woman with beauty, and therefore status and a marriage of material security”(Reaves 254). The measure of their personal wealth greatly increased as their mobility decreased. Today, the modern woman feels compelled to don a pair of heels for any occasion of formality. Rarely is it disputed that heels are appropriate; rather it becomes a question of whether other styles could be worn. To deviate from this extremely normalized performance is exceptionally unusual. This standard of pain for the sake of idealized beauty shows that, “even if the female body has today been liberated from tight and confining corsetry, it has been by no means been liberated from idealization and alteration to conform with contemporary perceptions” (Thesander 15). This is not to say that woman cannot not wear heels if they so desire, just as they can wear make-up and a bra too. More it is a call for acceptance of the deviant. Women should not feel that there is no satisfactory alternative to wearing heels to work or out to a party. There comes a time when after hearing countless stories of blistered, aching feet and cries of “I hate being a girl” that one must question why this standard of pain is so widely accepted. It is one thing to have odd fashions that when you think about them make no sense, like the tie for example. Why does a strip of shiny fabric hanging from the neck emblemize formal wear? Like jewelry and sequins, it is a method of adornment that seems as ridiculous as the mating dance of the bird of paradise. Gramman notes:

Obsessive concern with physical appearance by women has become a cultural fixation that is troubling, but the practice of grooming itself is neither natural nor unnatural. Every culture uses adornment, and time spent grooming to attract a lover, or just for the pleasure of it, is not necessarily a waste of time or ‘oppressive.’(108)

While high heels share some the decorative qualities of other adornment, they have one quality that sets them apart and draws them into question: pain. In this way, the high heel and the ballet slipper share a common bond. Reaves statement that, “the slipper as a paradoxical signifier unifies pain, restrained beauty, and control, and it clothes in glossy satin the wounded feet that make ballet beautiful” can easily be applied to the high heel (255). The pain involved elevates the high heel from a mere ornamentation to a sadomasochist object.

Feminist artists and writers such as Naomi Wolf have examined the ways in which women must perform to certain expectations in order to fit into the patriarchal world of the modern day. She critically examines how the images produced by the media industry affect women’s perceptions of themselves and their behavior. For example, Author Lorraine Gamman notes that during this time many,

second-wave feminists, complained about women being forced, by social and mass media representations controlled by men, to see themselves in fragments through male eyes –often as a good pair of tits, lips, or legs. Indeed, many subsequent feminists have argued that fashion and cosmetics are part of a male conspiracy to oppressively regulate the internalization of ‘femininity’ and thus keep women in their place (95)

Of these later feminists was Naomi Wolf, author of the 1991 book *The Beauty Myth*, who argued that there was a “violent backlash against feminism that [used] images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement”(Wolf 10). In her preface, added a year after the book was published due to some negative reception of her argument, she clarified that she does not object to all images of beauty instead it is that “they proliferate at the expense of most other images and stories of female heroines, role models, villains, eccentrics, buffoons, visionaries, sex goddesses, and pranksters”(2). It is these images of woman, which have created an increasingly strong association between women and high heels. Icons such as Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex in the City* have taught young women that successful and classy women wear stilettos everyday, all day as they walk up and down the streets of New York. The answer is not that characters like Carrie Bradshaw should never wear heels; it is that high heels should not be the only option. Naomi wolf offers insight into how decisions on beauty can be examined in her statement, “the enemy is not lipstick, but guilt itself; that we deserve lipstick, if we want

it, *and* free speech; we deserve to be sexual *and* serious –or whatever we please; we are entitled to wear cowboy boots to our own revolution”(2). Woman can be feminists and still wear make-up and high heels, if they *want* it and do not feel *obligated* to fit within the caste of the feminine ideal. Understanding the meaning behind those actions is crucial. As Danesi notes, “Semiotics ultimately allows us to filter the implicit meanings and images that swarm and flow through us every day, immunizing us against becoming passive victims of a situation. By understanding the images, the situation is changed and we become active interpreters of signs” (21) The ability to interpret the signs around you, such as high heels, the meaning they imbue and the reasons behind them, give the individual the power to be an aware and active individual, able to take part in improving equality.

## Chapter 5: The High Heel in Art

Andy Warhol’s career walked a long path of shoes, beginning with his illustrations of shoes for commercial art and continuing to his 1980 painting *Diamond Dust Shoes*. In 1955, Warhol produced a portfolio of seventeen shoe drawings, titled *A la Recherche du shoe perdue*. Each hand drawn illustration includes a quote or saying in which the subject has been replaced with “shoe”. For example, “Uncle Sam wants Shoe!” and “Shoe bright, shoe light, first shoe I’ve seen tonight”. The quotes underneath each illustration convey Warhol’s feelings towards high heels as an object of fantasy. In this and most of his other pieces, the shoes are not shown in pairs, “without any reference to the body”(West 45). According to West, “bodies seem irrelevant to Warhol’s purpose...Warhol’s shoes are always shoes of fantasy”(45). Here they are used only as objects. The use of shoes in Warhol’s work references the obsession with shoes that both men and women feel, whether it is driven by their role in fashion or sex.





Andy Warhol, A la Recherche du shoe perdue, 1955

Dine's pieces, while mainly concerned with men's shoes, show the connection between shoes and their wearer. In his pieces, the shoes "are not symbolic or metaphorical but are the artist's" and are "so impressed with the artist's body, that they become an extension of the subject rather than mere object"(West 49). Their artistic representation of the wearer, the artist, more broadly reflects the social function of shoes as a marker of the individual. As John Harvey remarks in his text *Men in Black*, "Dress exists in a realm between flags and art. As art, dress is also performance art, for playing both safe and dangerous games. The clothed person is the persona we perform"(18). Modern day clothing functions as a display, showing and an individual's sex, class, job, and age. Dine is attuned to the function of clothing in this way. For example, in his 1961 painting *Shoe*, the brown and white spectator shoes carry with them a message tied to their time, the 1920s to 1930s, where they "told the world that the wearer either enjoyed the luxury of non engaging in manual work, or if he was a manual worker, he at least has the luxury of leisure in which to parade in these shoes"(West 49) In another piece, *My Tuxedo Makes an Impression*, he paired a black suit with a pair of men's Derby dress shoes, that according to Janice West, are not the correct formal shoes for the outfit. He

should have paired the suit with Oxfords. West sees this seemingly small variation, as a markedly large error. She writes, “Evening dress is one of the most formal ways one can clothe the body, a uniform for occasions at which one may be judged by one’s apparel; a wrong detail can be disastrous and may affect the wearer’s standing in the eyes of observers”(50). Dine’s work stresses how dress functions as a powerful marker of identity.



Jim Dine, Shoe, 1961

Meret Oppenheim, a surrealist artist, similarly examined how shoes were connected to identity in her 1936 piece, *Ma Gourvernante, My Nurse, Mein Kindermädchen*. Her sculpture featured a pair of women’s white heels laid upside-down on a platter, bound with string, and adorned with the paper frills usually used on lamb cutlets placed around each heel. Within the context of surrealist art and Freudian Psychoanalysis, Oppenheim’s piece examines the relationship of the high heel as a fetish. She draws a distinct line between meat and the pair of white heels. This connection ties her work to concepts of female restriction within society, bound by their duty to be a proper woman, marry, and please her husband. The association with meat also brings with it a notion of violence within the female’s role in society. This violence may revolve

around the painful acts of conformity, such as the high heels. Or the piece may be commenting on violence in marriages and the feelings of being unable to resist or leave. Oppenheim's ability to create an intense dialogue between marriage, sexuality, and violence all with the simple use of a pair of heels shows how the high heel can signify varying, important aspects of female life.



Meret Oppenheim, *Ma Gouvernante, My Nurse, Mein Kindermädchen*, 1936

While Jim Dine's work with men's shoes, reflects their social role as a representation of the wearer's identity, Milroy examines the relationship between shoes and women in particular. Her images and installations depict women's shoes in pairs, "making it easier for the viewer to connect with the shoes in her paintings" (West 51). As a pair, the viewer associates the shoes with the body, whereas the single shoe separated this distinction and makes the shoe into an object. West astutely remarks, "shoes can be the site of ideological battles" (51). Women's shoes, especially high heels, have become a source of intellectual controversy. As she states, some feminists often see high heels as a subject of hostility "because they feel that such shoes indicate subservience and sexual stereotyping by men" (West 51). Her pieces do not directly reference such a feminist attitude, but rather examine the unique female relationship with shoes. For example, her 1965 painting *Shoes* depicting sixteen shoes in a four-by-four grid like pattern, "are

components in many different costumes all denoting variations on the feminine and showing the instability of constructed femininity”(West 53). Each shoe belongs to a different and specific “costume”, be it the businesswoman, the ballerina or the beach girl. As West examines, “The seemingly endless variations of fashionable dress as represented by the shoes that Milroy paints express disguise but fail to disguise the anxiety within, an anxiety within, an anxiety based on what it is to be a woman”(53). Her work references the role that footwear plays in our portrayal of ourselves. It examines the notion that the clothing we don fits within a constructed category of appropriateness. For every occasion, there is a different shoe. While some of these socially constructed classifications, such as the situation that dictates a pump rather than a sandal seem simple, they create a complex set of anxieties and questions about femininity.



Lisa Milroy, Shoes, 1985



Lisa Milroy, Shoes, 1985

Artist Beth Bachenheimer collaborated with other young artists in the Feminist Art Program led by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro at the California Institute of the Arts on the installation and performance piece *Womanhouse*. The 1972 piece contained a selection of spaces and rooms completed by one or a couple students. Beth Bachenheimer's piece featured a closet full of shoes, which Temma Balducci examines in her article *Revisiting Womanhouse*. She notes that the display of shoes "reinforced the associations of the female with makeup, beauty, and self-display for the pleasure of a male partner. The extravagant number of shoes in the closet (excessive in an early-1970s, pre-Carrie Bradshaw context)...underscored women's sometimes frantic attempts to meet societal expectations to be beautiful and fashionable"(19). In this analysis, Balducci focuses on several important aspects of the performance of femininity. First, the intense feeling of a need to become the standard of beauty through the accumulation of products and fashions considered feminine, such as high heels. At the same time there is the overwhelming quality of the sheer number of shoes displayed, which harkens to a shoe fanaticism as well as fetishism across the nation. In this case, as Balducci notes, it is exaggerated past the norm and ventures into the unreal, the Carrie Bradshaw context of a



shoe addict, conflagrating and exaggerating the act helps to portray the intense emotional pull of the social demand to fit within an ideal. Balducci goes on to hint at the role of the fetish and sex within the piece. She writes, “the parodic exaggeration...expose[s] the construction of the housewife as an object of display who must continually change her costume and mask for her husband’s pleasure”(19). The woman is expected to continually alter her appearance in hopes of fulfilling the fetish.



Beth Bachenheimer, Womanhouse: Shoe Closet, 1972

Contemporary artists, such as Sylvie Fleury, Willie Cole and Rachel Lachowicz similarly use the high heel as a symbol of fetishization, sex, and femininity. In *Contemporary*, Francesca Gavin examines how Fleury “works with objects that embody sexuality, idolatry and obsession to underline our fixations”. Her Pieces include a wide variety of works that utilize symbols of femininity, such as make-up, fashion, and

shopping. In several of her pieces, most notably her *Alaia Shoes*, a pair of high heels cast in bronze and her 1993 video in two parts, *Here Comes Santa* and *Bells*. Her pieces show her interest in the heel as an object surrounded by meaning, from fetishization to sex and power. Gavin asserts that, “In pieces like her bronze Alaia Shoes (2003) there’s more love than hate of the object. She plays with fashion’s fetishisation of touch, shapes and labels, aware of its cryptic meanings and nuances” (Gavin). By casting the Alaia Shoes, Fleury shows how they are exalted in society both as objects and as tools in a performance of identity.



Sylvie Fleury, *Alaia Shoes*, 2003

In some of Willie Cole’s pieces, he arranges and shapes used high heels into large circular sculptures. These pieces, *Heart of Gold* and *Pretty in Pink*, resemble large dahlias, with each shoe making up one of the petals in the concentric formation. “Though it would seem Cole perpetuates the clichéd equation of flowers and female beauty, these giant blossoms are only gorgeous from a distance” and the titles of the pieces seem too cliché to be without a more serious intention (Nichols 150). While far away the formation of shoes seems clean and beautiful, “A closer inspection reveals a decidedly low-end

selection...that are invariably stretched out, worn down and scuffed up”(Nichols). The work presents a façade of beauty, not unlike the high heel itself, which draws the eye as an object and bestows upon the wearer a series of signs deemed valuable and desirable in our society. In addition, the scuffed up and worn out heels show the roughness of wearing them, how they are thin and flimsy with a small heel that wears quickly. The work “broadly underscore[s] the laborious performance that is femininity.”(Nichols 150) The abundance of similar heels within the work emphasizes the scope of this performance; it’s almost all encompassing nature within women’s lives.

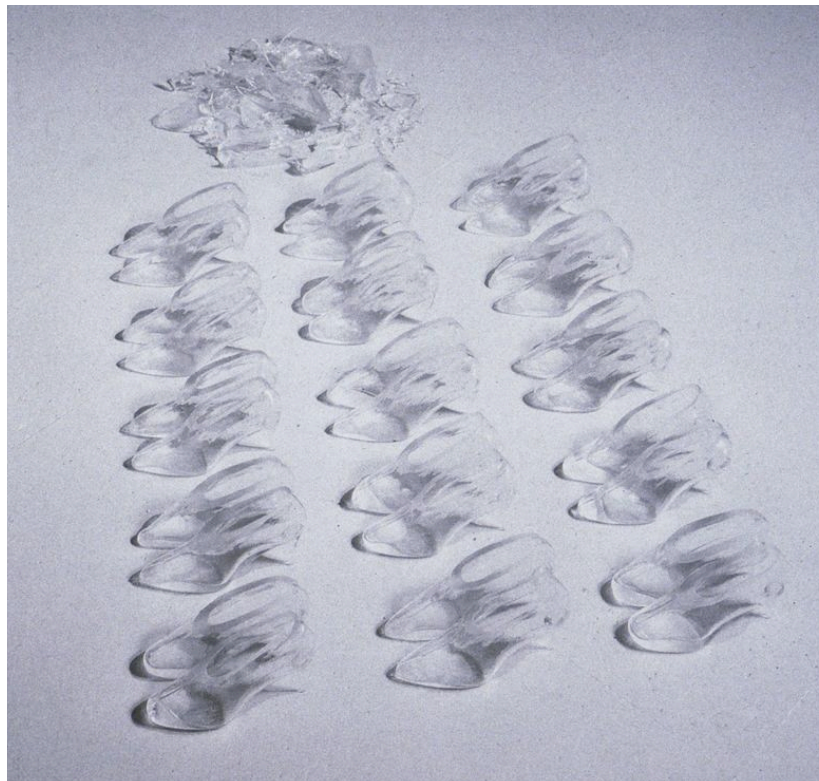


Willie Cole, *Pretty in Pink*, 2005-2006

Similarly, Rachel Lachowicz’ piece, *Broken Glass* uses a formation of fifteen pairs of glass slippers in three rows of five with a pile of shards from ten broken slippers. This piece references the glass slipper in story of Cinderella and how the story remains an influential social symbol in young girl and women’s lives today. Lynn Zelevansky writes in *Women’s Art Journal*, “With its Cinderella reference, *Broken Glass* both conjures up and satirizes (to the point of crushing!) traditional feminine aspirations” (68). The piece addresses the desirability of having small feet; small enough to fit into the tiny glass



slipper's Cinderella wore to the ball. Cinderella represents the ideal feminine, one that possesses this valuable trait, while the women of the town who mutilate their feet in an attempt to "fit" into the shoe are the masses of women trying to conform to a standard of beauty through self-alteration. Originally Lachowicz planned on breaking all of the shoes and displaying them in a pile, however in shipment to one of her shows, several of the shoes broke in transport. Despite her intentions, she felt a loss when the shoes broke because of her attachment to them as objects. She then decided to display them in their entirety alongside the broken ones. Lachowicz piece serves to show the dilemma many women, she included, feel towards high heels. On the one hand there is a dislike for them, as they are cause for discomfort and pain, while on the other there is a strong affection towards them as beautiful objects. This duality exists within my own work as well.



Rachel Lachowicz, Broken Glass, 1993

## Chapter 6: My Project - Fall Semester

My project was spurred from similar thoughts as those of Naomi Wolf and Rachel Lachowicz. I was interested in the how women feel compelled to alter their bodies in pursuit of a beauty that seemed unattainable, fictitious. The project began with a desire to communicate my feelings towards femininity as well as investigate the social reasons for body-alteration in pursuit of an ideal shape. In particular, my fascination lay in the performance of wearing high heels. Being surrounded by mostly women for the past four years gave me a base of experiences from which to pull inspiration. The behavior of my peers fascinated me. I became especially attuned to their behavior towards high heels. As we grew older, I noticed an increase in wearing heels. It seemed to correlate to the desire to be recognized as an adult woman, both for respect as well as admiration. There was something troubling in the expectations of conformity and the way in which as I grew older, those expectations seemed to also grew in strength. It seemed that to really be a woman, you had to put on fancy, painful shoes whenever you needed to look professional or dressed up. It seemed that the extremity was growing, not decreasing as woman gained a more equal footing in our society. Heel height has skyrocketed. A standard one to two-inch heel has been kicked aside by the steel stiletto of a four-inch heel.

My project is meant to highlight the impracticality of high heels as footwear by creating a series of five almost shoe size forms that have been altered in some way as to draw attention to the way in which high heels are used to become someone sexier through elevation and contortion that is considered a normal behavior of a feminine woman. I chose to utilize the classic pump with a stiletto heel as the base of my alterations for its association as a timeless standard of beauty. Each shoe was made of a material, which created a tension within the viewer as to the stability of the structure under weight. My hope was to create a series of shoes that were desirable and yet unattainable due to their structure and by doing so, draw attention to the characteristics of high heels that make them an impractical form of footwear. I began my project with three basic building materials: Styrofoam, cardboard and wire. The Styrofoam shoe became a towering pump over 12 inches high. Here, I wanted to emphasize the fetishization of the shoe and the correlation between heel height and a woman's desirability. Focusing on the point shoe as

a mode of elongating the leg by creating a seamless line from hip to toe, I created a cardboard heel in which the toe box of the heel pointed almost vertical. Corrugated cardboard gave the shoe a visually interesting texture and pattern as well as a sense of lightness that would prevent an individual from wearing the heels. My third shoe was built out of wire in the form of a low, but extremely narrow pump. Here, the story of Cinderella inspired me, much as Rachel Lachowicz was in her piece, *Broken Glass*. Wire mesh served my purpose both functionally, through the molding of the form, as well as formally through the material's characteristics as a delicate, flimsy, and beautiful material, which is similar to the qualities of traditional heels. From this point I began to consider materials that were associated more with femininity. I chose to cover the Styrofoam shoe with dried rose petals because of their classic association with femininity, beauty, and seduction. Their addition also added to the wonder and desirability of the form. For the subsequent forms, I chose to use strings of pearl-like beads and sewing pins. The former, for their obvious connotations of class, sophistication, and beauty and the latter for their connection both to "traditionally" female modes of craft as well as the historical relationship to the needle, from which the stiletto was originally named the *aiguille* or needle heel. By using the pins, I hoped to create a sense of pain at the hands of beauty and body-alteration, in addition to the desirability and unassailability that I was using for the other shoes in my series. I found that the factor of pain played an important role in my personal formation of ideas surrounding the performance of femininity. While I feel that painful and body-damaging heels are outrageous, I must agree with Naomi Wolf; woman should be able to wear heels and make up if they want, but it shouldn't be necessary. Shoes that cause intense pressure to the ball of the foot, pinch the toes, and misalign our bodies resulting in problems in the feet, knees, and back seem like they should not be considered the standard footwear for woman.



Lena Miller, *The Feminine Ideal*, 2009

#### Chapter 7: My Project - Spring Semester

After fall semester, my interest in further pursuing the pain and discomfort associated with high heels increased. The pin shoe elicited a response of both desire and threat. I felt that this reaction reflected the societal feeling towards the high heel as a fetishized object of power. Viewers connected to the pin shoe as a source of potential pain and yet also found it desirable. This connects to the current trend in fashion towards more extreme heels as a symbol of status. In today's fashion world, have escalated in height, increasing their aura of impossibility. This flux has in turn contributed to the current emphasis of sexual display in defining femininity. In this way, the high heel then has become an even greater signifier of power and sexuality. Today it appears that the degree of impossibility of the heel directly increases the desirability of the wearer. The pin shoe exemplified two seemingly contradictory emotions –pain and desire. In reality,

however, these two traits are seamlessly linked. Our culture has taught women, especially younger generations, to covet the harmful; not in a directly, of course, by indirectly through body alteration that while painful, is highly desirable and therefore seems worth the cost.

In my spring semester project, I hoped to directly focus on this pain that is often believed to be a necessary price to pay in order to be viewed as a wanted individual. In order to accomplish this, I decided to continue to make shoes out of possibly dangerous or harmful materials. My materials were to reflect the different kinds of pain one might experience while wearing heels, such as pinching, rubbing, aching, burning, and cutting. From there I connected material to sensation. My goal was to continue to elicit a response of imaginable fear. After much thought and deliberation, I decided on sandpaper, matches, broken glass, and razor blades in addition to pins. Some sensations, such as pinching and aching did not have an obvious material counterpart and thus were left out. The sandpaper spoke to the rubbing and irritation caused by heels. While the subtler of my materials, the sandpaper presented the possibility of being slowly rubbed raw, much in the way high heels do cause a steady building of pain and injury. The matches conveyed the burning sensation often felt as the skin is rubbed and blisters form. Broken glass and razor blades both spoke to the feeling of having something cutting or digging into one's foot, such as a strap or edge of a heel. I chose to include shoes made out of both a glass and razorblades for several reasons. Despite their obvious similarity as sharp materials, they differ in their appearance. One is clear while the other is metallic. Additionally, razor blades are considerably sharper than broken glass, making them the most dangerous of the five materials used. Having a range of danger added visual interest as well as pushed the viewer towards the message of pain as a "necessary" sacrifice for displaying femininity.

Once the pieces were underway, the project began to take shape as an installation than individual pieces. I found myself interested in taking my idea of almost fantastical extreme high heels to a realistic setting in which these shoes were the latest trend. From there I worked to exhibit the shoes within a scene where an individual has been recently "trying on" the shoes. Although the individual pieces still had specific importance, together in this setting, my message became more powerful. I wanted the viewers to

mentally place themselves in the space. In order to create a realistic setting, I included a foot-measuring device used commonly in shoe stores, as well shoe boxes painted red. I wanted to employ red for its symbolism of desire and sexuality. Ironically, red also functions as a symbol of blood and pain, further connecting to my pieces. In the space, red shoeboxes sat piled surrounding two chairs, while a foot-measuring device, often used in stores, lay on the ground by one of the chairs. While one chair remained empty to symbolize the absence of the individual, the other stood laden with another stack of boxes, slightly disheveled to appear as if they had been discarded aside. Four shoes – the pin, glass, match, and razor blade, were displayed on a table, both inviting and forbidding. Three other shoes, the pairs to the glass and pin were situated in open boxes on the ground, waiting to be tried on, while the sandpaper pair were set askew on the floor and on top of a shoebox, as if slipped off moments before. All of these details aided me in questioning the high heel as an object of fetish, power, femininity, and sexuality by drawing attention to its connection to the body. The installation highlighted this connection by creating a fictitious environment in which the viewers imagine themselves trying on the shoes and the symbolism that the heels are imbued with in our culture.

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