"An Exercise in Domesticity"

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Introduction

The installation *an exercise in domesticity* began with some sculptures I was creating that I referred to as Venus figures. I have been interested in the idea of body image for a number of years, looking at and questioning how people view their own bodies and others, as well as how contemporary culture helps to form or create these views. Within this, there are many different avenues to explore such as sexuality, ideal beauty, ownership, and control. These ideas have surfaced in my work in a variety of ways over the years. With the Venus figures I was first interested in exploring the restrictions placed upon the body by fashion and the media, and later expanded this to include ideas about sexuality and reproduction.

More recently I have become intrigued by the various ways science and nature interact and have an impact on the human body, both mentally and physically, as well as on the surrounding environment. Within this there is a lot of gray area and a lot of unknowns. Science can help with creating perfect, smooth skin on both apples and people. This is no longer natural, but not necessarily bad either. Nobody wants their food to be insect-ridden. And yet, most people have at one time eaten a perfect looking tomato that has no taste. Still these tasteless tomatoes seem to be winning out, as any trip to the supermarket will most likely confirm. The preference for “natural” is perhaps fading, or at least our ideas of what constitutes natural are no longer clear. And does it matter anyway? An August 2005 article in *Vogue* magazine discussed how it has recently become acceptable in major metropolises for woman to go out with the scars and bruises from their Botox and plastic surgery still clearly visible. What this suggests is perhaps
that the preference for the natural is fading and that one no longer needs to feel ashamed of one’s quest for superficial beauty.

Tying these ideas and questions together is the human need or desire for control. In my installation there are elements of the organic and inorganic, and of the controllable and uncontrollable. There is a kind of abstract narrative built up with the ideas and concerns mentioned above as the foundation. Some aspects or concerns are much more apparent than others, and yet what is important is that the viewer questions the interaction between the various objects and is encouraged to come up with varying and/or multiple interpretations.
"an exercise in domesticity"

The installation consists of three main elements: the nests, the cart, and the hanging glass jars. (plate 1, plate 2) Along with these three elements are the feathers on the gallery floor and the feathers and waxed yarn on the very top of the back wall. While each element can be viewed and understood at some level separately, it is only when viewing the installation in its entirety that the underlying narrative takes full form. This narrative is not meant to be read or seen as a complete story. It has no exact end or beginning, but it is instead more circular or cyclical in nature. There is also no one correct way in which to view the installation, but is instead meant to have fragmented, multiple views. As such, the narrative that this installation puts forth is purposefully left open so that the viewer is encouraged to figure out and question the relationship and interaction between each of the various elements. The main ideas that these elements are intended to bring forth involve the interaction between nature and science with respect to reproduction, fertility, body image and sexuality.

When first entering the gallery the viewer encounters the ramp with the feather nests on his/her right. (plate 3) The first of seven nests is the highest and rests on a flat surface. From there on the ramp slopes downward towards the center of the gallery space, with the feather nests fairly evenly spaced out to the very end of the ramp. (plate 4) Each nest rests on top of a long rubber sheet, which is intended to look like a conveyor belt. This, along with the slope, evokes the idea of possible (though momentarily stalled) movement. What each nest contains varies from nothing but fatty, sticky residue to coupled Venus forms and waxy, shiny egg-like forms. (plate 5, plate 6) Above each nest
are more egg and Venus forms hanging from black, chunky, waxed cords (plate 7). The reason for their hanging is to further suggest the cycle of movement, as well as cycles within nature. There is also the implication that the hanging forms will eventually drop into the nests when the time is right or when ripe. Furthermore, the hanging is meant to express tension and suggest the ideas of waiting, longing, and expectation. That the forms are suspended and bound also gives them a sense of vulnerability, with no choice or control.

The Venus figures came about from my interest in body image and contemporary culture's ideas about beauty and the striving for perfection. The so-called Venus figure has been around for thousands of years, with one of the most well-known being the Venus of Willendorf (c. 24,000-22,000 BC). These small Paleolithic statues represented the female form often in a very fleshy, rotund manner, with exaggerated breasts, hips, belly, and buttocks. There are different theories on what these Venus figures represent, but the most popular of these speculates that the figure is pregnant and represents some kind of fertility object. Within this are more speculations on whether the figurines are meant to represent a real woman or a goddess. Later representations of Venus, from the Greek sculpture the Venus de Milo (2nd cent. BC) to Botticelli's painting The Birth of Venus, usually depict an idealized woman who is not pregnant, and who represents the goddess of love, beauty, and fertility. Many contemporary artists have also continued to create Venus figures in a variety of styles and media. Some of these latter Venus figures have instant recognition as a female form, like those of earlier Venus renditions, but other contemporary Venus figures are more abstract and/or simplified. These less obvious Venus figures still suggest the female form in some way but also leave the possibility for
further or alternate interpretations. The contemporary artist Louise Bourgeois has created numerous sculptures that could fall under the category of Venus figures. For example, in the sculpture *Harmless Woman* (plate 8) she has reduced the “body of a limbless woman to her belly, breasts and neck” (Storr p.72) and in *Femme Pieu* (plate 9) she has reduced the female form even farther, “archetypal in appearance and the closest to primitive fetishes such as the ancient *Venus of Willendorf.*” (Storr p.73) This latter sculpture is very abstract and yet still clearly refers to the female form in parts, and as such, comments on the partitioning of the female body, especially in terms of sexuality.

For my installation I created two different Venus forms: one wasp-like form with an hourglass shape (plate 6) and the other form with a thick middle, more fleshy and bulbous (plate 10). While not obvious, both figures suggest a female form in combination with a kind of wasp-like insect, but they differ slightly in the ways that they suggest fertility and sexuality. The forms were first sculpted out of clay, with a plaster mold being taken of each. Wax was then melted and poured into the plaster molds, allowed to cool, and then released. This allowed for the creation of multiples of each form, most of which are hollow, with varying degrees of wax thickness. Each Venus figure was then treated or handled a little differently. Some are obviously pregnant with egg-like forms protruding from their bellies. Other forms have been given flaws like protruding veins or a c-section scar (plate 11). Many have sharp, stinger tails that suggest a kind of protection or defense. One pair in a nest wears matching rubber corsets to keep their hourglass forms in check, while another pair waits to mate with matching holes to protruding valves. Overall, each Venus figure is meant to deal slightly differently with various aspects related to the ideas of beauty, sexuality, and fertility.
Along with the Venus figures are pale, egg-like forms found hanging above and in the feather nests (plate 7, plate 5). This form was also first sculpted out of clay and from which a plaster mold was made. Wax was then poured in and out of the plaster mold in order to create a hollow form. After the wax cooled, melted lard was poured into the hollow form, which then had to be chilled before it could be released from the mold. I created this form with the idea of suggesting both egg and fruit, symbolizing fertility and fecundity. At the tip of each egg is a sharp, silver stinger which contrasts with the fragility of their waxy exteriors and their soft, sticky insides, which in some instances is exposed and leaking out. This exposure is meant to suggest the fine line between ripe and overripe, as well as being a connection to the eggs, fat, and jars in the cart. And like the jars, eggs can also be seen as a type of container.

I filled the eggs with lard because I wanted to bring in questions about contemporary society’s obsession with the body and its connection with fat, with changing attitudes on beauty and health. Fat also added a sense of chance or lack of control, with its melting and solidifying. The idea of control, or lack of control, is important here in questioning the human desire or need for it, and especially in how that relates to control of the body. Every month there are new articles published in newspapers and magazines discussing how obesity is becoming an epidemic, not only in the United States but also in countries in Europe and South America. What is to be done about this epidemic is still in debate, but many suggest that a change in lifestyle is needed. Exactly what this change entails or how it is to be brought about is still unclear.

The nests in which the Venus forms and eggs rest in were created out of feathers in order to add a slightly humorous twist to the nests that birds usually build. Human
beings often use feathers to sleep on or as insulation, hinting at the ideas of dreams, flight, or escape. These types of associations give the Venus figures both animal and human tendencies with the use of feathers as mini, temporary homes, as a place to rest, reproduce, and incubate. The idea of the nest as a home and a place for creating a family brings up a domestic aspect, but the fact that the nests are lined up, heading down a ramp brings up questions about the purpose of this nesting. Along with this, the nests look beautiful, fluffy, and safe, but on closer inspection they are filled with sticky, slimy substances, and some of the egg forms are splitting open and leaking, as if becoming overripe. This suggests reproduction and disintegration at the same time, adding an element of vulnerability that questions the safe domestic environment. To domesticate is to tame, a kind of controlling or manipulating that could further suggest an alternative reading of the nests in terms of entrapment.

The ambiguities brought forth from such contrasting readings as those discussed above speak to the larger picture of the complicated and often unclear relationship between science and nature, especially when it comes to issues that deal with or affect the body. What I am referring to here are such topics as plastic surgery, genetically modified foods, and childbirth. A recent article in *The New York Times Magazine* (Skloot) discussed the use of tissue and blood samples being used in research without the original owners of those samples knowing that these discarded bits of their bodies are being used. This sounds negative, as if one does not have control or ownership over one’s own body, and yet without these samples and the research they enable there would be no vaccines for polio, smallpox, or measles. This issue of control over one’s body can be found in the many choices offered by contemporary society today, for example the choice between
natural childbirth and a cesarean section, or between diet and exercise versus pills and plastic surgery.

While the Venus forms suggest these ideas and questions about body image, the cart with its stainless steel surface and its incubating eggs, introduces the notion of scientific interaction. The cart consists of two main sections: the upper section contains the egg-forms set in cast black rubber, while the lower section contains multiple glass jars set in a pile of soft, melting lard (plate 12). Some of the eggs are set firmly within the rubber. Other eggs are starting to crack open, leaking fluid, and releasing from their rubber nests. One egg is completely missing, leaving behind its imprint in the rubber as well as a small pool of fat (plate 13). The cracked eggs and the missing egg are meant to imply that the eggs placement is not permanent, but part of an ongoing process, that there is some purpose to their nesting on the cart. The cart becomes an intermediate zone where something happens. This something can be seen in terms of hatching, like eggs, or rotting, like fruit, implying some type of farming project. Or perhaps it may be read more in terms of such processes as freezing human eggs for later implantation through in-vitro-like fertilization. Whatever the reading, the ideas of fertility, reproduction, and control remain apparent.

Below the egg-forms is a group of jars lit by a cold blue light (plate 14). This light gives the bottles an odd feel, with their contents clearly highlighted. The light further suggests the scientific aspect of observation. The jars originally came from a chemistry laboratory and so their original use was for some unknown scientific purpose. Jars in general are a familiar, everyday item, used to contain something and usually suggest some kind of purpose, such as testing or storage. Here the jars are filled with wax, fat,
and oil and together they look like strange tissue samples (plate 15). They also contain the same materials out of which the eggs are made. This leads to an obvious connection but still leaves questions as to what is being extracted from the eggs and for what purpose.

The cart itself was originally used for serving food, referencing the domestic, but it has been altered slightly so that this connection remains but is no longer as obvious. Still there are some aspects to the cart that hint at the idea of the egg-forms being served up. Also the cart implies movement (plate 16), and yet, like the feather nests, it rests on a sheet of shiny black rubber. This suggests that the cart has a specific place. Some of the lard that the glass jars sit in has melted and dripped onto this rubber sheet, pooling around the wheels. Fat is used here as a connection between the jars and the contents found in the egg forms. The fat also works like the rubber and the feathers in that it serves to contain the jars, while at the same time it is soft, melting, and unpredictable. It supplies the contrast to the control implied by the jars and ties in with the ideas discussed earlier in relation to fat and the body.

To the right of the cart, hanging from a steel stake on three large white hooks are hundreds of small glass jars (plate 17). Like those on the lower part of the cart they are filled with wax, oil, and fat (plate 18). I am interested here in displaying fluids in a beautiful manner. This is a kind of beauty that is constructed, man-made, and purposefully done in order to appeal to the aesthetic senses, in order to attract. It may involve natural elements or materials but it is not wholly a "natural" beauty. Fluids in nature are often seen as beautiful, be it the sap oozing from a tree or juice dripping from a piece of fruit. In contrast, fluids from the body are most often hidden and discarded as
quickly as possible, be it blood, urine or semen. In this case then beauty relies on context and situation, and is thus itself somewhat fluid.

I am also interested in how fluids, both natural and man-made, often imply a sense of uncontrollability. In the installation the hanging jars display, control, and contain the fluid. They hang as a group, organic in shape, like a cluster of seeds or a narrow bunch of grapes, approximately six and a half feet long. Each bottle hangs from its own strand of wool yarn. There is a sense of control on a singular level, but as a group there is a kind of spontaneity as the jars pile up upon each other. In contrast to the overlapping jars, the strands of wool yarn at the top are kept separate and untangled. The majority of these strands are in shades of pale blue, though some strands are also white. These colors are similar to the colors of the wax and fat and tie the two elements together. The combination of the jars with the wool yarn is also meant to tie together the domestic with the scientific, while questioning their relationship. Yarn as a material is associated with the domestic crafts of knitting and weaving. The meticulous way in which the strands were hung suggests labor and the work of the hand.

Below the hanging bottles on the ground is a half circle of black rubber, similar to the rubber found under the cart and the nests (plate 19). Dripping down from the jars onto the wall and the rubber is more lard. It is splattered; staining the wall and pooling on the rubber, suggesting that the jars cannot completely contain or control the fluids. And yet the placement of the rubber suggests that this is a known factor, that perhaps some leakage is to be expected. This aspect is once again referring to the ideas of control and lack of control, with respect to nature, science, and the body. Tied in with this is the
question of how much we, as a society, should expect to control our surroundings, as well as ourselves.

Besides these three main elements there are also feathers scattered on the floor throughout the installation (plate 20). While placed in specific areas they are an uncontrollable element whose placement can be affected by wind and the viewer's movement throughout the space. There are also more feathers, along with strands of the waxy cord, found along the top edge of the back wall (plate 21). This element, while subtle, ties the installation spatially together in its use of the gallery's architecture and at the same time suggests an action happening outside the sight line of the viewer. Sporadically, over time, an occasional feather will float down from above. It is possible to read this overhead element in terms of roosting, which would then be a part of the whole narrative below, or in terms of suggesting escape, which could then make the narrative below seem darker or undesirable.

Throughout the installation I intentionally played with contrasts between the natural and the manmade, the organic and the inorganic. The feather nests, the Venus forms, the eggs, and the wax encrusted cord all feel very organic, while the rubber sheets, the cart, and the small glass jars are obviously manmade. These contrasts are meant to once again raise questions about the relationship between nature and science, as well as ideas about the human need to control.

For some time now, and recently increasingly so, beauty and science have also been interacting closely. By beauty I mean beauty as an industry, the superficial kind of beauty found in advertisements, films, and magazines. Today the names of face creams and body polishes sound more and more scientific (StriVectin-SD, Hylexin, Resolution
D-Contraxol) and their containers often have the names of doctors on them. The containers themselves sometimes look more reminiscent of the jars, vials, and tubes found in a laboratory than a department store. In this way science helps in both developing and marketing these products. Science is also used in the development of new plastic surgery techniques, as well as new non-surgical techniques such as the injectable dermal fillers that are currently increasing in popularity. These latter non-surgical techniques involve adding rather than subtracting, using such fillers as human fat and collagen (including a new form of collagen that is derived from “the cells of infant foreskins”). Grafting live fat is also part of this adding rather than subtracting trend in facial augmentation. While injectable dermal fillers are becoming increasingly popular, the idea of facial augmentation through injection has been around since the early 1900s when paraffin and petroleum jelly were the preferred fillers.

Such interests and concerns as those mentioned above not only helped to construct the underlying concepts in the exhibition, but also had an influence on some of the media with which I chose to work. Wax played an important role throughout the installation. It was used to coat the yarn that was coiled around cables and suspended the eggs and Venus forms. These forms were also made out of wax. I chose wax because of its soft, malleable qualities that are reminiscent of skin or flesh. It has been used for hundreds of years to replicate the human form both in an artistic (wax museums) and a scientific (anatomical waxes) way. Even though anatomical waxes are no longer made and wax museums are fading in popularity, many contemporary artists continue to work in wax today. “The frequent use of wax in contemporary art also keeps the material alive today, despite its long-standing evocation with death. The wax art of Barbier, Coyne, and
Paddock all represent or at least suggest human figures, thereby pointing to wax’s intimate connections with the human body.” (Bloom, p. 259) I also chose to work with wax because of what may be seen as some of its flaws or drawbacks, like its tendency to melt or droop or scar easily. The wax forms in this installation were made out of a combination of different waxes with various colors, surfaces, and melting points so that, like human flesh or the flesh from fruit, some forms would change easier or faster than others. With this is an implied sense of vulnerability, as well as a lack of control. Wax also has interesting contrary associations and is “unsettling because it at once simulates cadavers and living human bodies, at once evokes death and life.” (Bloom, p.265)

With these concepts and the underlying narrative in mind, it is important to consider the installation as a whole in terms of the space and the viewer. When viewing from the outside (plate 1) one sees a strong diagonal line created by the ramp on which the nests sit. Above this, vertical lines are created by the waxy cords and hanging Venus figures and egg forms. This visually activates the viewer’s eye from the outside of the gallery. The nests and hanging forms are fairly readable from the outside, but what is in the nests and the details of the cart and the hanging jars is less clear. This works to draw the viewer into the gallery space. When first walking into the gallery the viewer is drawn to the ramp because of proximity. There is also a very tactile quality to the white feathers, the shiny rubber, and waxy forms that can be quite alluring. This set up, with the ramp near the door and slanting down was purposefully installed in this space in this way in order to draw in and engage the viewer. It is also important for the ramp and the nests to jut out into the center of the gallery in order to activate the entire space and to suggest a flow and a connection with the other elements in the exhibition. I left the space fairly
open so that this flow would not be inhibited, that the importance of each element was emphasized, and so that the implied narrative was read as something to be exposed, not hidden. If the space were more closed off, the viewer’s movement would be inhibited and the installation’s implied activities would feel isolated and secretive. The exhibition’s main concepts of reproduction, fertility, body image and sexuality are part of everyday reality in contemporary society, discussed in articles and displayed in advertisements. Thus, with this in mind, it seems only fitting that the overall installation should be viewed in such an open manner.
Conclusion

An exercise in domesticity was an installation that created a visual narrative dealing with and questioning various aspects surrounding the ideas of body image, fertility, sexuality, and reproduction. Within this were also ideas and questions concerning the interaction between science and nature, especially in relation to artificial beauty and the human desire for control. With the installation's seemingly odd interaction between insect-like Venus figures, lard-filled eggs, and a serving cart the viewer was encouraged to develop varying and/or multiple interpretations of what exactly the implied action was and the possible consequences. The various contrasts, both aesthetic and conceptual, found throughout the exhibition were meant to reflect the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the ideas mentioned above. More often than not there are no clear answers, no obvious right and wrong, when dealing with many of the issues involving science, nature, and the body. In a society with so many layers of obsessions and drives it is sometimes not only the answers that become difficult to find but also the important questions.
Plate 5
Plate 8
Plate 14
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