

H A P P Y   G I R L S   A R E  
T H E   P R E T T I E S T



M a d i s o n   M a n n i n g

"Is it your duty as a female in the punk community to have a specific political agenda when making art? I sure wish I was a dude, then—I could make party songs and not have to worry about all the people I was letting down." / Bree McKenna

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I make work about pop culture that I'm familiar with, that I like, that I'm confused by, that I want to understand more fully. I make large-scale abstract paintings and collages, occasionally sculptures and videos, with glitter, feathers and high-key colors to lull my viewer in a beautiful fever dream; the same tactic used by the reality television shows, Instagram posts, and presentation of anything that is made for the masses to "like".

My work is dishonest as it presents itself as not being "too political" or "too personal", but it's both at the same time while also being #relatable (and like, actually relatable because of how I integrate the viewer's physical body). Often by focusing on celebrities written off as "unimportant" of attention or "undeserving" of fame, my work becomes approachable because of the distance it pretends to provide between the viewer and the content. My work is a lie that tells the truth.

In reality, my work critically examines images and icons constantly circulated in popular culture. Focusing in with queer-feminist critiques, I make campy work reflecting the unquestioned-yet-shared negative attitudes externalized towards celebrities and, in return, the resulting manifestations of those attitudes deeply internalized towards ourselves.

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By applying the Bakhtinian theory of the grotesque, as it relates to fashion, we understand the body is always in an act of becoming; it is continually built and created. When this theory is applied to a body performing through fashion, the act of continually being created / creating becomes an especially important tool for negotiating gendered norms and any subsequent deviations.

By applying our memories from middle school, absolutely no one cares about the theoretical explanation as to why your body is kind of lumpy in your Abercrombie shirt the does *not* look cool on you but *did* look cool on Laguna Beach. All middle school bullies care about is letting you know you look lumpy, they do not care about your continual becoming or whatever.

When theoretically grotesque, most specifically female and non-binary, bodies <sup>1</sup>, are met with non-constructively critical language, we are left with a bold realization of our reality: The language used to describe women / non-binary individuals, their bodies and the adornment on their bodies is a reflection of the societal hate and distrust of women.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the phrase 'female or non-binary bodies' with the intention of including any body that identifies or presents anything other than a normative, idealized feminine body. I chose to use the phrase 'female or non-binary' as an inclusive attempt to not leave any identity out of a single list, not to reduce the spectrum of gender to simply female, non-binary, or male.

In 2016, \*\*\*\*\* became the President of the United States because the 24-hour news cycle circulated commentary dissecting Hillary Clinton's frumpy scrunchies for over two years. Anger, hatred and resentment towards Hillary grew in the hearts of (*way too*) many throughout the campaign as a result of relentless hate speech directed at her.

Blindly and negatively commenting on a woman's appearance, as grotesquely in the act of becoming or shifting as that body may be in that moment, registers with young people.

I remember all the dinners my Mom skipped as I was growing up and I remember there was often Entertainment Tonight on the TV playing as we ate. Often muted after my Mom or Dad groaned about how trashy Paris Hilton's latest headline was, I remember seeing the visuals of rail thin celebrities flashing around the screen as I watched my Mom eat half a salad. There was no discussion or explanation of anyone's actions, just cues and codes I was left to piece together.

All of that matters because America's current President subtweeted North Korea's dictator with a factually incorrect threat + a thinly veiled metaphor about the size of his penis on January 2. Pairing theory with reality, over the top as it may seem, is important because the events of that last sentence are now historical fact because some American's could not get over Hillary Clinton's pantsuits.

The application of language is important.

Judith Butler herself said in *Bodies That Matter*, "everything is only and always language." (page 6)

The application of language used to talk about women, their bodies and the adornment on their bodies is important.

The application of language bares heavy consequences each and every time, whether that be through spoken, written words or images.

The application of language is always important. Language brings women up and it tears them down. Language sways global politics. Language gives young girls in their pink bedrooms complexes about their gender identity.

However, constantly bearing all of this in mind to the point of debilitation in a T\*\*\*p America forced me to realize that sincerity will never be enough. Political and personal in theory and concept, my work proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is "too much".

I have never felt so scared to walk around as a gay woman as I have since it's been made clear by our government that protection is not guaranteed for women, those in the LGBTQIA+ community, any person of color. Ceasing to consume the news is irresponsible but consuming the news is heartbreaking.

Through my work, channel, scramble, rearrange all that is so real, so hateful, so scary while remembering anything I can that makes me simply happy. I see a vision of the

world in terms of style - but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the “off”, of things-being-what-they-are-not.

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From the time I was born to age seven, I lived in a bedroom that had a window sill with a big cushion seat. I listened to the Backstreet Boys there and made new clothes for my Barbie dolls (the regular ones, my life size Barbie was perfect as was with her blue princess dress.) (Fig. 1) My room was light pink, with some yellow and greens. I had white wicker furniture and a large white mirror. There were a lot of white frills on the trims of my bedding. Above my bed was a framed poster, it wasn't very tall but it was quite long, that read “Sugar and spice and everything nice, that's what little girls are made of.” I learned what it meant to be gendered ‘girl’ really early.

When we sold that house, I remember my mom showing the would be-owner my bedroom and he was ecstatic. “This room will be perfect for my wife; she wanted a walk in shoe closet.”

I was so offended- why would you turn this perfectly curated mid-90's girl room into a shoe closet? But at the same time, I wanted to meet this woman and see all of her shoes, as she just inspired one of my first When I Grow Up goals.\* Since then, I've had an internal conflict between the reality I lived in and the fantasy I desired.

Our next house was much larger. Rather than being down the hall from my parent's room, I was upstairs and on the opposite wing of the house. My bedroom was tucked away, behind the game room which held the entrance to the walk-in attic and the doors to a balcony. My only memories of sleeping in this room were waiting until I heard my parents click on the TV downstairs in the living room and tiptoeing to the couch by the backstair case, above the living room. This way I could hear the TV and my parents talking, and I didn't feel so alone or so scared of things that only lurked in my tucked away hot pink bedroom. This pink was brighter, which really pushed ‘gendered girl’ to a girl about to go through puberty.

My parents didn't raise me to be a feminist, they raised me to be a girl. They raised me with gendered cues, colors, and attitudes that together reenforced the need to be “ladylike”. I lived for more than a decade in two pink rooms, but I was never comfortable in those rooms. I had too many questions, but they weren't ladylike to ask so I was left to piece them together alone, confused as to why I was always scared but I just didn't know the work ‘anxious’. It's not ladylike to talk about your feelings too much, which means it's not ladylike to talk about mental illness. It's not ladylike rock the boat, which means it's not acceptable to talk about feminism. It's for sure not ladylike to have crushes on other ladies.

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\* I did, in fact, achieve this goal when I was 22. My first house in Las Cruces had two bedrooms, but I was living alone, so my second bedroom was my walk in closet. It was just as fun as I thought it would be when I was seven.

I never understood why so many ladylike-ladies watched channels like E! News or shows like The Bachelor. To me, it seemed unladylike to watch other woman acting unladylike. I thought I didn't understand what it meant to be ladylike, but I really just didn't understand position switching. Taste tends to develop very unevenly. It's rare that the same person has good visual taste *and* good taste in people *and* good taste in ideas. You can be ladylike while enjoying trashy TV. But, you can also become unladylike by how you talk about the people on that trashy TV.

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One time I hung a vintage floral couch sideways on a wall, tightly in a corner because I couldn't stop thinking about how annoying it was that there were so many memes comparing pregnant Kim Kardashian in her 2013 Met Ball Givenchy dress to a couch. (Fig 4.) (Fig. 5) Around the couch, with brick wallpaper + tape and cardboard on the inside, I created look-a-like three-dimensional bricks coming off of the brick wall they were taped on. (Fig. 6) I mean, if florals on a pregnant woman make her a couch, wallpaper on brick makes the wallpaper bricks, right? I cut a flower pot at an off angle and put that under the couch. I laid under the couch on the floor for a picture. Every day I was asked by strangers if they could sit on the couch. "I mean, I guess! It'll probably topple over but you can try it", I'd answer every time.

I hung the couch on the wall. I talked about that meme annoying me, but I couldn't really place why but I knew it did. Since I couldn't articulate my annoyance, the piece became about, like, me having an unstable relationship with my parents because I was too horrified to come out to them and they had an idealized suburban home so putting a couch sideways on the wall, and of course welding the structures to support the couch, became about my home life. So because I'm a woman (Double Down because I'm a gay woman, whoa!) who just uttered the word home in relation to art, the piece became about domesticity and because I'm making art as a gay woman who has <sup>3</sup> an unstable relationship with her parents who is making work about domesticity because she said the word home the work must be subversive! But that really wasn't it at all.

This piece was an attempt to do something extraordinary, but extraordinary in the sense, often, of being special, glamorous. As said in *Notes on Camp*,

"What is extravagant in an inconsistent or an unpassionate way is not Camp. Neither can anything be Camp that does not seem to spring from an irrepressible, a virtually uncontrolled sensibility. Without passion, one gets pseudo-Camp - what is merely decorative, safe, in a word, chic."

Despite not having the words at the time of construction, I knew that I *had* to get *that exact* couch sideways on the wall. It was a passionate need that I could not repress. At the expense of content, I never repressed my passion and affinity for clothes, furniture,

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<sup>3</sup> Actually, had\* because I came out to my parents and it was very chill and now our relationship is pretty solid. Hi Mom Dad!

that ultimately resulted in decorative art that emphasized texture and sensuous surfaces.

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I talk about Kim Kardashian because most anyone with Western Internet access knows who she is. She is rumored to be the most photographed woman in the world currently, and while I can't ever seem to find concrete evidence of that it does seem like a believable rumor, huh?

Kim Kardashian wasn't the specific celebrity on Entertainment Tonight while I ate dinner with my parents. Kim Kardashian isn't running for president. But she is an inescapable force. She doesn't have a day in November when it will all be over, one way or another. She can't escape to the woods (Fig. 2) because her spotlight is never ending. She is the celebrity on living room televisions and phone screens that no one can ignore.

She is the collective misrecognition we have all agreed upon, even though so many question why she + anyone associated with her family is famous in the first place. As written in *The Field of Cultural Production*, collective misrecognition is the theoretical way to Kim K is who we, the collective society, has decided to love to hate.

Ultimately, we occupy an incredibly vast field of position, another theory pulled from Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production*, switching with the language we use to talk about Kim Kardashian. It's possible to question why she is famous while still constantly consuming all of the media she puts out.

When I see picture after picture of Kim Kardashian with a tee shirt, jeans and a Barbie waist I understand that I'm allowed to look ~casual and effortless~ if I've put in lots of effort. I understand from Instagram ads that I can buy waist trainers and stick on push up bras to help me achieve a flawless body. The ads remind me not to worry, *you woke queen*, these aren't the corsets or body modification devices you learned about in Intro to Gender Studies or from Tumblr, these are the cool, hip kinds that are painless- I mean, if they weren't painless would all of the Kardashians and everyone they know wear them? No! *Link in bio*.

I know from all my years in gender studies, on Tumblr and just generally being an intelligent woman that I shouldn't want a waist trainer or even a waist that looks like it's a by-product of a waist trainer.<sup>4</sup> I know I shouldn't feel like I need to factor eyelash extensions into my budget. But I'm also a woman who grew up in a time without an internet that was filled with open discussions of feminism or body positivity or mental health awareness, so I was severely anorexic with most of my friends (Fig. 3) and lived for a decade with untreated depression and anxiety. The anorexia, depression and anxiety all fueled each other because I could never quite get that thigh gap right.

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<sup>4</sup> I know all of these things, but midway through writing that paragraph I looked up waist trainers and Kylie Jenner's biotin gummie vitamins and put both (and Kardashian-approved FitTea) in my Amazon cart. Just to think about.

But then I think about how many memes there were of Kim Kardashian's pregnant body compared to couches, whales and trolls and I think, *well.*

*God,  
Should I just get that FitTea?*

No one would ever make a viral meme of their pregnant mother and a whale in a who-wore-it-best-showdown. And that is why I'm obsessed with memes comparing Kim Kardashian's pregnant body to whales, couches and trolls- because we would never talk about our mothers, sisters, friends the way we talk about this stranger<sup>5</sup>

I'm obsessed with memes comparing Kim Kardashian's pregnant body to whales, couches and trolls because if a little girl can understand she's being taught gender from the color of her room, anyone can understand that maybe if they put themselves out there, people would only care about their scrunchies.

And all of that is just from a gender point of view.

The queer + drag politics of Kim Kardashian, costuming, make-up and hyper-femininity are an entirely different thing that I act out while making the work.

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When I make work, I blast pop music so I can sing at the top of my lungs and dance around my studio. I've found that it's incredibly hard to predict, let alone sketch, how glitter and feathers will behave so rather than attempt to guess only for everything to probably change, I create a mood that allows my body to move freely with my materials.

When I'm making in the studio, I live in my affinity for beautiful materials. The answer to any question is always *more is more*. I remember that sincerity is never enough, but perhaps 500 puff paint polka dots will be.

I want my viewer's body to be enveloped by my work so for that to happen I must envelop my own body in the work.

My work cross-dresses in a Freudian slip.

My work is a tender feeling.

My work is Robert Rauschenberg in drag.

I love Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons (Fig. 7, 8, 9) for this very bodily reason; she makes designs that intentionally show and exaggerate the actual form of a body. She doesn't concern herself with synched waists or idealized waif figures, she boldly highlights lumps, clumps and grotesque bumps of the body as it is. This, of course,

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results in comically non-gendered clothing, again forcing anyone looking at Kawakubo's work consider their own body - not just the idealized body. Kawakubo's inclusive designs are precisely why I don't consider my own work feminine; we all have bodies and large things always make us feel small and when you feel small you feel your body. I want viewers to feel, remember, and be in their physical body to better empathize with other bodies.

Occasionally I make video work because I want to show an action by performing it on my own body. Video is not a routine fixture of my practice because it is incredibly tasking, mentally and physically, on my body. However, in my video work I can really set the stage (like, literally, because I design + build all my own sets and compose the soundtracks) for the world the specific performed action lives in. It's always close, but not our reality- think Black Mirror, but less in the vein of oh-no-the-Internet-is-scary and more in the style of Yayoi Kusama. Kusama's polka dots are not simply signifiers of mental illness, but, for me, they are also deeply soothing with repetition one could get lost in. (Fig. 10) I can make Infinity Rooms in video loops. I can cut my fingernails off super violently or choke myself out with pearls in the middle of a very real life panic attack forever with my iPhone and a loop button. (Fig. 11 & 12) I get stuck in those hyper-specific moments of intense feeling, rarely actually executed in action, but with a video I can lull anyone into my daydream-nightmare Infinity Moment so we can all feel our bodies and lose our minds together.

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I don't know when I'll feel safe again walking down the street. I don't think I ever will. Anyone can freely comment on Kim Kardashian's Instagram posts with criticism about how horribly she's raising her children while also criticizing and speculating over her body and the presentation of it.

It seems men are freely allowed to sexually harass, assault, and rape women without much consequence. I've had professors harass me, a 'friend' assault me, and an alleged rapist get put in charge of running the country while screaming about inequality, screaming for help into what seems to be a void.

The language used to talk about women tells there is still not respect women or their bodies. Actions against women's well-being and safety show the hateful disrespect.

Yet, every day I wake up with a need to get into my studio to work. Using my hands keeps me sane. Locking myself in a room with Carly Rae Jepsen and beautiful, plastic materials reminds me that there is good around me, in the world. Sewing, detailing, painting, dancing, singing, performing You Are An Artist drag every day allows me to create larger than life lies that tell the truth to any body who also wants to dethrone the serious while reveling in it. If the truth sets one free, my work sets one free while spinning them out the door covered in glitter.

# IMAGES

FIG. 1



FIG. 2



**Margot Gerster**  
2 hrs · 📍

I've been feeling so heartbroken since yesterday's election and decided what better way to relax than take my girls hiking. So I decided to take them to one of favorite places in Chappaqua. We were the only ones there and it was so beautiful and relaxing. As we were leaving, I heard a bit of rustling coming towards me and as I stepped into the clearing there she was, Hillary Clinton and Bill with t... See More

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**Eliza Matheson** Robin, Julie, Kate, Emily, Emily, Kate, Carla ❤️❤️❤️  
Like Reply · Just now

**Zanthe Taylor** OK this is the first thing that has made me smile in two days. Thank you so much.  
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**Stephanie Santiso** ❤️❤️ thank you  
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FIG. 3



Anorexic high school Madison at 113 pounds.

FIG 4.



Kim K 2013 Met Ball Couch. Vintage couch, wallpaper, cardboard, tape, light, saddle stand. 2017.

FIG. 5



FIG. 6



Kim K 2013 Met Ball Couch. Detail. Vintage couch, wallpaper, cardboard, tape, light, saddle stand. 2017.

FIG. 7, 8, 9



Rei Kuwakubo, Comme des Garçons 1997 Spring Ready-to-Wear. Dress Meets Body, Body Meets Dress.

FIG 10.



Yayoi Kusama. Phalli's Field. 1965.

FIG. 11



At Home Manicure. Video. 2015.

FIG. 12



Getting Ready Before The Party Starts. 2016. Video.

FIG. 13



Rose (Gold) Tint My Palette. Felt, house paint, acrylic, high gloss clear coat, synthetic feathers, party streamers. 6 x 5 feet. 2017.

## ANNOTATED BIB

### **1. Granata, Francesca. *Experimental Fashion: Performance Art, Carnival and the Grotesque Body*. I.B.Tauris, 2017.**

To understand the grotesque is to understand bodily change. I use Granata's *Experimental Fashion* and *Fashioning the Grotesque Body* in the same way, so see below.

### **2. Granata, Francesca. "Fashioning the Grotesque Body". *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*.**

The body has always been the heaviest theme in my work while also being the hardest to talk about openly. My own parents don't know about my eating disorder, which always seems to come up in discussion about my use of the body because no one accepts another answer, but more importantly, I'm horrible at lying. Applying theories of the body continually becoming and being created resonated so loudly with my work, as my work always seems to be in progress until it's not. I always seem to be in progress. The theoretical understanding that the continual becoming is naturally human so quickly extended to my bodily work.

### **3. Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge. 1993.**

Applying feminist theory to my work was difficult as there is so much to choose from yet so much that isn't applicable. Butler's *Bodies That Matter* explained gender performativity that clicked so obviously with my work, in a way that her *Gender Trouble* could not. How Butler explains language + the teaching of gender performance granted me that theoretical background I needed to pair paragraphs about my childhood bedroom paint colors in relation to my current bodies of work. *Bodies That Matter*, most importantly, provided me with theoretical understanding of gender performance as a whole, not simple gender performance in relation to women. While I identify as a femme woman, I feel it's important to overtly state in the writing about my work that I am not simply talking to / about cis women. Everyone performs their gender, every moment. I aim to keep my work open to anyone who is willing to engage with it, but in particular women and those in the LGBTQIA+ community as those are both minority communities in which I contribute to.

### **4. Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Columbia University Press. 1993.**

Theoretically discussing Kim Kardashian's influence in an academic paper seemed, even to me, impossible while I was making this work. I knew that I was using Kim K, her influence, our interactions with her as a way to talk about much larger topics but there is no way to Google 'art theory about Kim Kardashian'. I have never had so much fun reading heavy theory as I had reading Bourdieu. My copy of *The Field of Cultural Production* looks like my personal journal, full of scrawled "yes!!!!!" and underlined sections. Kim K is the collective misrecognition we have all agreed upon. She is not the first and she will absolutely not be the last celebrity the masses hate to love and love to hate, but currently she is the most logical connection to Bourdieu.

**5. Sontag, Susan. *Notes on Camp*. *Partisan Review*, 31:4, Fall 1964, pp 515-30.**

I could not have written my thesis paper or understood my thesis work without *Notes on Camp*. A few months after my candidacy, one of my colleagues looked me in the eye during my critique and exclaimed, "Can you just come out already so you can finally talk about how GAY your work is because this IS SO FUCKING GAY." That moment was personally shocking and profound, as one of my best friends for five years publicly called for my exiting of the closet, but more severely, I had to accept that my work was, to quote, "so fucking gay". Camp doesn't HAVE to be gay but... camp is "so fucking gay". The pure love I've always had for certain materials cannot be taught. No one can be trained into truly, deeply loving furniture that looks like it should be in some idealized grandmother's home. No one can be taught to hope to live in the house from Beetlejuice one day- white, angular exterior with a dark, silver glitter entry way and filled with bizarro sculptures. *Notes on Camp* was a Bible or self help book of sorts for me, both personally and artistically. Without this writing, I wouldn't have a theoretically backed thesis.

**6. Core, Phillip. *Camp: The Lie That Tells The Truth*, London: Plexus: New York: Delilah, 1984**

My work is a lie that tells the truth. As with *Notes on Camp*, I would be without a thesis, without a way to coherently talk about my work without this writing. The years of struggling to expand on the statement "I like this because it's beautiful\*" have finally ended. That is not to say that expansion will simply be "...because it's campy!", rather I understand the mechanics of what it means to be told my work is "Robert Rauschenberg in drag". I understand what it means to talk about my work as Rauschenberg in drag.