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Aesthetic Labor

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My work is about the disconnection women can experience to their bodies by complying with standards of beauty and acceptability that are imposed upon them in western culture. These standards are determined by the dominant culture and problematize bodies that don't satisfy these standards. This failure to satisfy these standards is then remedied by modifications to the body. These modifications come in the form of consumer products that require time as well as money to execute. The work needed to present an acceptable appearance is what editors Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff refer to as aesthetic labor.¹ In this paper I will identify the ways in which these ideas are understood historically, how they have been theorized, and how they function today. I will also address how the components in my work lead the viewer to these ideas about disconnection through painting and video.

Historically beauty has had a complicated relationship in feminism. There is an ongoing debate around when aesthetic labor is being done for personal pleasure verses oppression.² Personally, I believe it is possible for women, or anyone really, to receive pleasure from aesthetic labor. It is not my objective to pass judgment on women who choose to participate in modifying their appearance. What I am interested in is what happens when women choose not to. When women choose not to comply with the standards socially set for their appearance, it is seen as an act of transgression.³ The boundary that is crossed in this transgression is based on a superficial convention that has nothing to do with the natural appearance of a woman, but is instead more of a "fictional construction."⁴

The way we see women represented today in popular culture is a historical continuation that can be traced back to the idea of the nude. In European oil painting the female nude is an iconic subject. The nude differs from the state of being naked in that to be naked is simply to be without clothes, whereas the nude is about an aesthetic convention. This convention is structured

on a perfected idea of a woman's body based on youth, whiteness and a heteronormative idea of attractiveness. The nude has nothing to do with personhood. Instead she has a greater relationship to a constructed object than to herself.⁵ For example, Albrecht Dürer "believed that the ideal nude ought to be constructed by taking the face of one body, the breasts of another, the legs of a third, the shoulders of a fourth, the hands of a fifth—and so on."⁶ The appearance of a female body epitomizing a convention is the priority with the idea of the nude. She is there for the spectator. She implies awareness of being seen to the spectator who is presumed male, giving a sexualized undertone to the image.⁷

While historical stylizations of the nude differ from today's standards of the ideal female body, the pressure for women to achieve it remains the same. The treatment women receive in society continues to be influenced by their appearance. Women who don't comply with the conventional appearance are seen as transgressors.⁸ Thus, women are forced to think of their bodies as an object operating in society producing an image *before* they can think of the subjectivity of themselves, leading to a disconnection between self and body. Though similar to the Cartesian idea of mind, body, and spirit separated, I divert by thinking of the body and self as intersubjective variables that are influenced by external socially constructed ideas.⁹

In my series of paintings where I depict pink doll-like figures (*The Pink Ladies*)¹⁰ I create female bodies that are absolutely subject to the viewers gaze with no sense of self whatsoever. The function of the nude in my work is to align the female body as close as possible to the same social ideas that restrict it. The spectator is presumed to be a heterosexual male, and the bodies are sexualized. But these nudes deviate from convention in that their bodies are not idealized in a visual sense, but more in a psychological one. They are re-conventionalized to critique the functional purpose *of* the convention. Their hyper sexualized nipples and genitalia

overstate the role of a nude operating as an object. But the figures are not entirely passive. Eye contact from the figures proclaim their consciousness to being surveyed by the viewer. The viewer becomes mindful of their own role as the spectator. But the eye contact extends past acknowledgment towards an assertive stare. Not only are these figures aware that they're being surveyed, but they're also privy as to *why*. Their poses are complicit, and all that remains to their bodies are the ways in which they're objectified. Teeth attempt a smile that is really a grimace, suggesting the threat of castration. While the mouth is eroticized by the lips that encircle the teeth, the teeth remind the spectator to enter at their own risk, for the fantasy ends at the mouth where agency manages to reassert itself.

In the video titled *Define Beauty: 365 Days of Makeup*,¹² artists and filmmakers Lernert and Sander apply a years worth of makeup to a model in one sitting. Though the “daily” makeup used is of modest amount—a quick spray of foundation from an airbrush, a dusting of eyeshadow, and a sweep of lipgloss—the final result is monstrous. Lernert and Sander connect beauty with the grotesque, and point to the external-ness of the makeup. Created during the rise of Youtube makeup tutorials in 2011, the video is a part of a topic series on NOWNESS that questions our relationship with desirability. While the face of the chosen model is already of convention, their individuality is further removed with every passing of makeup applied.¹³

What I have given the viewer to see in my *Pink Ladies* series is the representation of popular culture liberated from the conventional lens of beauty. These representations are violent as it's a violent act to objectify one's body. Socially it can be difficult to recognize this violence as it's ingrained in our popular culture and normalized by its familiarity. The repetition of my false women desensitizes the viewer to this violence. The individuality of the women is also lost through multiplication. Just as the beauty of the European painted nude is about convention, the

convention is a repetitious system that removes individuality. Convention is not about the individual, but sameness, and so is the beauty it suggests. The essence of aesthetic labor is repetition which preserves the contemporary convention. This brings me to the use of pattern in my work.

I use pattern to make the act of aesthetic labor visible. The patterns function in a way that references the work that females are expected to take on in their presentation to the world while simultaneously being the thing that objectifies. In my piece titled *The Couch*,¹⁴ pattern overwhelms the space surrounding the torso of a topless female. The excessiveness of the pattern confuses how her contorted body is negotiated within the picture plane, as it is warped to fit within the pattern's framework. The framework of the pattern itself is filled with sectionalized motifs comprised of circles, squares, and fleur-de-lis. But each motif lacks the capacity to be an exact replica of its surrounding design. While each motif is an attempt to be like the one next to it, it can only be a copy based on the framework of the previously one constructed, leaving some to be more successful than others. The strategy of this representation is based on reciprocally responding to the motif that is next to it.

An artist that works with the idea of restriction that also informs my practice is Kate Gilmore. I'm influenced by her approach to structures of power. Gilmore uses video to address gendered ideas about "strength, authority and control in our social arena."¹⁵ In the piece titled *Standing Here*,¹⁶ Gilmore attempts to free herself from a sheetrock boxed enclosure. A camera positioned above her head records her punching and kicking her way out of the containment. Wearing a polka dot dress and heels, Gilmore kicks and punches a ladder-like system into the walls that tightly surround her. From there, she climbs the makeshift ladder and reaches for the camera above to turn it off. Her work addresses female identity and the task of breaking out of

restrictive social structures.¹⁷

In my piece titled *The Palette*,¹⁸ the body is omitted and only the objectifying process of aesthetic labor remains. The pattern structure is formed around one ideal “keystone” motif. All that is repeated is an attempt to achieve the standard set by this keystone. The pattern becomes distorted as it moves further away from the standard established by the keystone. At the outermost edge of the picture plane the distortion grows until it no longer resembles the original standard. This visual distortion is emblematic of the unattainability of the standard that a rigorous beauty routine promises to deliver. Lack of attainment of the standard is singled out as failure in compliance to convention.

The color palette points to the privilege that is given to caucasian appearance. Darker is expected to operate within the context of whiteness. The framework of the pattern dictates where dark is to be placed and how much will be visible. Though the boldness of dark against lightness appears to have a dominant presence, that indirectly conceals its lack of prevalence.

The painting in its entirety optically strains the vision of the viewer. The challenge of experiencing the painting visually references the distortion from using a privileged lens to address the racist structures that underline aesthetic labor. The whiteness that’s imbricated in the standards of beauty quietly coerce people of color to see their bodies as more problematic. The social pressure to modify their bodies necessitates an even more expensive aesthetic labor routine compared to someone of caucasian appearance.¹⁹

Another way that I use pattern is in video, with repetitious motions, driving the meaning of my subjects further. In my piece titled *Body Talk*,²⁰ a portrait is cropped just below the eyes, revealing the mouth that recursively feeds on a chocolate bar. A paintbrush saturated in clear oil sweeps across the bridge of the nose and under the eyes in between bites of chocolate. Oil drips

down the face leaving a glossy finish. While this action repeats itself, an anthem in the background is played. This audio is an unsung chorus performed in a feminine robotic voice. Literally she states the ways in which she knows her body not to be hers—even in death. She speaks of her body as a threat to who she is personally. The chorus is repeated along with the activity of the subjects.

As I previously mentioned, the cropping of the portrait makes only what is directly below the eyes of the face visible. The portrait is dehumanized and personhood is restricted. The potential for eye contact with the viewer is rendered impossible. The image that is created is not a portrait of a person, but a face to an assumed body. The self seems to exist externally in the voice describing the body. Despite the mechanical sound of the voice, consciousness and independence from the body is exhibited by the speech. While the audible voice plays, it does not come from the mouth of the portrait. Instead the mouth consumes, compulsively eating a feminized food. The chocolate is cliché and nourishes the precluded body to the mouth.

Oil slathered across the face fetishizes the skin's surface and emphasizes its purpose for visual consumption by the viewer. The act of application references the making up of a face for spectacle. The oiling dissolves the individuality of the face further, aligning it closer with objectness. The glossed surface brings a sense of novelty with each passing of the brush. At the same instant the viewer sees the visual elements of pleasure, they're thwarted by the intrusive declarations of the audio. Experiencing the video evokes the pleasure of looking, but the verbal dialogue calls out one for doing so. Together the animated subjects and chorus become a compliant body with a disconnected conscious self.

French philosopher Hélène Cixous believed that women needed to write themselves in order to reclaim their bodies that have been “confiscated” from them by larger society. Through

writing women could find the words that would then turn into speech and allow them to reclaim their bodies. This act of writing Cixous believed reconnected the body back to the self and killed what she called the “dead figure” that is society’s oppressed woman.²¹ In Cixous’s article, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, she writes, “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time...Write your self. Your body must be heard...We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing.”²²

In my work, I am thinking of the body as an object that superficially represents the subject of oneself to society. We think of ourselves and our bodies within a context of socially constructed ideas. Disconnection can extend past gender into those that experience race, class, and disability in marginalized ways—reducing one to think of themselves in *objectified* ways. How one sees themselves represented in popular culture influences the way that they will interpret their self. To clarify, I draw upon the ideas of Merleau-Ponty:

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is never simply an object, but “a grouping of lived-through meanings.”...The body Merleau-Ponty is suggesting, is our point of interface with the world but it is not simply a container or surface; because of the sense organs, “bodily existence is never self-sufficient”...Our body both makes us subjects and makes us objects for others. “Saying that I have a body is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I try to be seen as a subject”...²³

Aging is the crux of the beauty industrial complex. A woman who has lost her ability to look youthful has also lost her ability to maintain value. It is a problem that only the beauty industrial complex has a solution to. This solution comes in the form of consumer products with time depleting beauty routines. Some products can even be customized by submitting DNA to a manufacturer. Other products come in the form of beauty apps that implement self monitoring technology. This expands what Alison Winch called the “girlfriend gaze”—which she defined as the policing of looks and behaviors amongst women and girls. Image sharing on social media also extends the girlfriend gaze, advancing it into a form of surveillance, with algorithms

foregrounding the visibility of acceptable bodies for one to compare and critique accordingly. At this point the evolution of the girlfriend gaze mimics the same kind of disciplinary control described by Michel Foucault. Self monitoring technology also progresses the “clinical gaze,” which is where women are taught how to identify what is “wrong” with them through new technologies. These new technologies in turn broaden the girlfriend gaze outwards towards beauty markets by collecting digital data that is then used to market even more consumer products to correct other transgressions, and create new ones.²⁴ Aesthetic labor is a continuous process, and “is always unfinished and in the state of becoming.”²⁵

Another way aesthetic labor can lead to disconnection is best conceptualized by Karl Marx’s theory of alienation. In Marxism, alienation is understood as the “separation between a self and other that properly belong together...More precisely, it understands alienation as consisting in the problematic separation of a subject and object that properly belong together.”²⁶ Marx saw alienation as inherent to capitalism because the laborer was no longer able to see themselves in their work. While Marx saw the primary reason of alienation being that capitalism divided labor into specialized monotonous tasks that prevented the laborer from seeing themselves in the final product produced, I focus not on the monotony of tasks, but on how alienation occurs when the laborer is *also* the product.²⁷ “In the hypervisible landscape of popular culture the body is recognized as the object of women’s labour: it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy.”²⁸ For Marx, objectification was the loss of the object. “In capitalist society, that which is produced, the objectification of labour, is lost to the producer...the act of producing it is the same act in which it becomes the property of another.”²⁹ That which is produced is not owned by the laborer, and thus the laborer has no control. The societal pressure for women to participate in aesthetic labor

can render her body as no longer existing for herself. Thus, she is not seeing herself in the final product produced, but is instead seeing herself as an object that functions in society. Her body has become the objectified.

Vanessa Beecroft³⁰ uses objectification in her work to point to the pressures of body image. Influenced by her own eating disorder struggle, Beecroft lines up nearly nude women in a grid-like fashion. They are ordered to not speak, nor look at the viewer, and to stand until they must sit down. One cannot judge the effectiveness of Beecroft's approach by a photo of her works alone. Viewers who experienced her work express discomfort as the "object" confronts them as the objectifier. This is a similar strategy that I employ in my work.³¹

I believe that because the female body exists within a social structure *of* objectification, that it is impossible for her to exist within that same structure and *not* be objectified. If the female body is present, objectification is happening—no matter how unwarranted it is. By considering this perspective, objectification can be used as a tool that critiques the very structure that has created it.

As I stated earlier, it's not my intent to pass judgment on women who choose to participate in aesthetic labor. Instead I'm interested in what happens when women choose not to. When women don't comply with the standards of appearance set by the dominant culture, they are labeled as transgressors. This persuades choice, removes individuality, and limits agency in bodily representation. The pressure to participate in aesthetic labor then results in a commitment to an expensive, time consuming beauty routine that ultimately leads to a restriction of the participation of women in society. The sum of the time value and money compounds to years spent committed to an unnatural appearance. Despite the absurdity of some beauty regimes—glued objects to follicles and lines drawn across the face—it is used as a way of socially

negotiating treatment. This unique regulation on women's appearance makes aesthetic labor a predominantly gendered issue that continues to be relevant.

¹ Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff, eds. *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2017). Accessed March 2, 2020. ProQuest

² Ibid, p. 5-7.

³ Ibid, p. 27.

⁴ Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), p. 182.

⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing: A Book* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1977), p. 45-64.

⁶ Ibid, p. 62

⁷ ibid, p. 45-64.

⁸ Elias, Gill, and Scharff, *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*.

⁹ Robert S Nelson, and Richard Shiff, eds. 2003. *Critical Terms for Art History* Second ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p 254.

¹⁰ Figure 1, Lisa Roggenbuck, *The False Woman*, oil on canvas, Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University, 2019.

¹¹ Figure 2, Lisa Roggenbuck, *Hyper Violence*, oil on canvas, Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University, 2019.

¹² Figure 3, Lernert and Sander, *Define Beauty: 365 Days of Makeup*, video, NOWNESS.com, 2011.

<https://www.nowness.com/series/define-beauty/365-days-of-makeup-lernert-sander-hannelore-knuts>

¹³ "Define Beauty: 365 Days of Makeup," NOWNESS, Last modified October 17, 2020, Accessed March 3, 2020. <https://www.nowness.com/series/define-beauty/365-days-of-makeup-lernert-sander-hannelore-knuts>

¹⁴ Figure 4, Lisa Roggenbuck, *The Couch*, oil on canvas, Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University, 2019.

¹⁵ Dan Mills, "Kate Gilmore: In your way," *Bates: Museum of Art*, 2017 Accessed March 3, 2020. <https://www.bates.edu/museum/exhibitions/kate-gilmore-in-your-way/>

¹⁶ Figure 5, Kate Gilmore, *Standing Here*, video/installation, Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York, 2010.

¹⁷ Amanda Kaci Macdonald, "A New Millennium: Kate Gilmore," *ART/ARTH 475: Contemporary Women Artists*, Nov. 8, 2015, Accessed March 3, 2020.

<https://sites.psu.edu/contemporarywomenartists/2015/11/08/a-new-millennium-kate-gilmore/>

¹⁸ Figure 6, Lisa Roggenbuck, *The Palette*, oil on canvas, Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University, 2020.

¹⁹ Elias, Gill, and Scharff, *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, p. 10-13.

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- ²⁰ Figure 7, Lisa Roggenbuck, *Body Talk*, video, Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University, 2019.
- ²¹ Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): p. 875-893, Accessed March 3, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/3173239.
- ²² *Ibid*, p. 880.
- ²³ Nelson and Shiff, *Critical Terms for Art History*, P. 260.
- ²⁴ Elias, Gill, and Scharff, *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, p. 12-16.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 38.
- ²⁶ David Leopold, "Alienation," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2018 Edition, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Accessed Feb. 29, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/alienation/>
- ²⁷ Asher Horowitz, "AS/POLS 2900.6A Perspective on Politics: Marx's Theory of Alienation," *Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies*, March 1, 2011, Accessed March 2, 2020. http://www.yorku.ca/horowitz/courses/lectures/35_marx_alienation.html
- ²⁸ Elias, Gill, and Scharff, *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, p. 25.
- ²⁹ Horowitz, "AS/POLS 2900.6A Perspective on Politics: Marx's Theory of Alienation."
- ³⁰ Figure 8, Vanessa Beecroft, *VB 6*, performance, Exhibited at: The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago (Chicago, Illinois, United States) 1996.
- ³¹ Vanessa Beecroft, *The Art Star and the Sudanese Twins*, video, directed by Pietra Brettkelly, Toronto: Indiepix Films, 2009.

Fig. 1



Roggenbuck, Lisa. 2019. *The False Woman*. Oil on canvas. Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University.

Fig. 2



Roggenbuck, Lisa. 2019. *Hyper Violence*. Oil on canvas. Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University.

Fig. 3



Lernert and Sander. 2011. *Define Beauty: 365 Days of Makeup*. Video. NOWNESS.com. <https://www.nowness.com/series/define-beauty/365-days-of-makeup-lernert-sander-hannelore-knuts>

Fig. 4



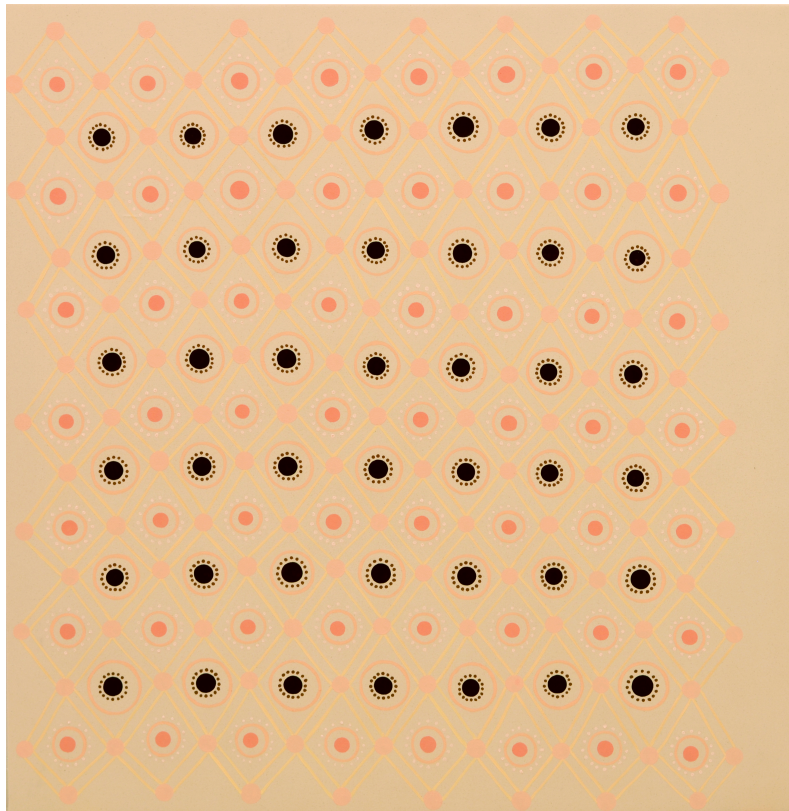
Roggenbuck, Lisa. 2019. *The Couch*. Oil on canvas. Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University.

Fig. 5



Gilmore, Kate. 2010. *Standing Here*. Video/Installation. Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York.

Fig. 6



Roggenbuck, Lisa. 2020. *The Palette*. Oil paint on canvas. Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University.

Fig. 7



Roggenbuck, Lisa. 2019. *Body Talk*. Video. Thesis Exhibition, Boise State University.

Fig. 8



Beecroft, Vanessa. 1996. *VB 6*. Performance. Exhibited at: The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago (Chicago, Illinois, United States).

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