Cosmetic

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Cosmetic

Alyse-Ambriel Hanna

MFA Visual Arts Thesis Exhibition Written Analysis
Cosmetic investigates the intersection of the cosmetic industry and the oppression of women and non-human animals. This collection of interdisciplinary installations combines jewelry traditions, photography, audio, and other media to examine the contemporary functions of makeup within Western industrialized society to interpret various beauty standards that mainstream media and cosmetic corporations have established. In this work, I explore the impact of the patriarchy on societal expectations of the female form, examine how the cosmetic industry exploits non-human animals, and provide a platform for women to share their personal experiences with cosmetics and beauty standards. According to Webster's Dictionary, cosmetics are defined as “1: of, relating to, or making for beauty, especially of the complexion: beautifying. 2: done or made for the sake of appearance: such as a: correcting defects, especially of the face.”¹ The term “cosmetic,” as traced by the Oxford English Dictionary, originates from the Greek word kosmetikos, meaning “skilled in ordering or arranging,” and was later used to refer to “the art of dress and ornamentation.” This reflects the view that the human body is a pliable entity that can be “rearranged” if desired.² The sale of cosmetics relies on the notion that the human body is naturally imperfect and necessitates correction. These imperfections are socially constructed fabrications and continue to be created and exploited for monetary gain at the expense of the consumer.³ In this exhibition, I question Western beauty ideals, expose the disguised materials used in cosmetics today, and subvert the underhanded marketing strategies implemented to increase revenue.

Over the past one hundred years, cosmetics and their popularity have evolved in Western societies. A clear point of transformation began in the early 20th century with the invention of Technicolor film that could capture and recreate set colors on film where the industry was

previously limited to black-and-white rendering. However, this form of filming came with a compromise. The lights on set that were necessary for filming were incredibly bright and hot, which exposed the caked-on, unnatural look of the grease paint makeup utilized at the time, and after a short time on set, the cast's makeup melted off in high-intensity heat. This issue raised a need for new makeup that appeared more natural and could withstand the temperatures on set. To meet this new demand, three cosmetic giants, Max Factor, Elizabeth Arden, and the Westmore brothers (Ernest and Buddy), began competing to create the next Hollywood makeup standard. At this time, innovations in cosmetics and pharmaceuticals led to the passing of the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938, which mandated animal testing for cosmetic products sold in the United States of America.

Innovations were not only seen in the creation of makeup but also in how it was popularized. As Elizabeth Arden’s product Screen and Stage Make-Up was debuting, advertisements stated, “Every star…every movie fan…every woman who ever dreamed to possess glamour, may share in the discovery.” While male and female cast members both used this new makeup, public advertisements for these cosmetic products only targeted females. As makeup is showcased in Technicolor, a further push for women to meet an idealized beauty standard became more prevalent. In the 1940s, Ernest and Buddy Westmore published their Beauty, Glamour, and Personality. This book outlines how women should look, dress, and behave, how they should do their nails, skincare routine, cosmetic application, and so on. Written by two wealthy men, this book is one example of literature created to press women into conforming to societal standards created by

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patriarchal dominance. Advertising and literature that developed alongside this changed the way the makeup industry perpetuated gender-based expectations that tie back to the control of female bodies.

In the Western world, the 1960s and 1970s were filled with social transformation, notably giving rise to the Feminist Art Movement. At this time, Second-Wave feminism began to emerge, and literature such as *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan spread awareness of sexist expectations of women within the domestic and social spheres, including the presumption that women are to have a specific outward appearance to attract a mate.\(^{10}\) While Second-Wave Feminism was underway, Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, two artists involved with this movement, joined forces to create a Feminist Art Program taught through the California Institute of the Arts.\(^ {11}\) During the 1971/72 academic school year, the two feminist artists led a group of over 20 female students to take on a multi-disciplinary installation, *Womanhouse*, which transformed an entire house.\(^ {12}\) Through sculpture, performance, and installation, *Womanhouse*, included artworks expressing domestic and social aspects of female expectation and oppression. Camille Grey’s *Lipstick Bathroom* (fig.1) was one of the many installations. It was a bathroom covered in scattered cosmetic products, creating commentary about the daily pressures on women to wear makeup to achieve societal beauty standards. This feminist work is one example of women pushing back against the expectations to wear daily makeup and present in a specific way to appease others.\(^ {13}\)

The demand for women to meet beauty standards has been a conversation that, though old, persists into the twenty-first century. However, the images now promoted in the media, setting a standard for young females, are not raw photographs of women with their makeup on. The Western

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\(^{13}\) Grey, Camille. Lipstick Bathroom, 1972, installation in *Womanhouse*, Hollywood, CA.
world has grown familiar with the digital alteration of pictures and videos that create false representations of people. In the photography of my work, I aim to subvert these prevalent misrepresentations by critically mimicking the portrayal of women in cosmetic advertisements. These images have been subject to the Adobe Photoshop blurring, healing, and cloning functions. While creating these photographs, I am exploiting the expectations of female representation in beauty as propagated by Western media by positioning myself and volunteer participants in over-sexualized, vulnerable, or uncomfortable positions (fig. 2). This photography is showcased in commercial poster stands and displayed throughout the mock-retail exhibition. Many contemporary artists, including Cindy Sherman, have utilized this photography strategy. Sherman’s artwork created commentary on the portrayal of females in the media. In Sherman’s contemporary photo collages, such as, *Untitled #654*, (fig. 3), she manipulates self-portraits of her fabricated alter ego, offering a commentary on the depiction of the female form and identity. Laura Mulvey, who discusses the work of Cindy Sherman, observes, “Sherman performs femininity as an appearance, in which the insistent sexualization of woman is integrated into style and respectability. Because Sherman uses cosmetics literally as a mask, she makes visible the feminine as masquerade.”¹⁴ My work expands on Sherman’s artistic strategies by investigating the fabrication of female representation in media and how this presentation is established through the male gaze.

Beauty standards are the accustomed cultural expectations of generalized perceived attractiveness based on outward appearance; they are typically formed around facial structure, complexion, hair color, height, weight, skin complexion, or eye color. While the cosmetic industry creates propaganda intended to create insecurities within people, they are also promoting visual conformity among females. While true uniformity is not obtainable, my work *Push, Pull, Prod* (fig. 4) is a series of three wearable pieces intended to be worn as a futile attempt to assist the wearer in

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achieving the prescribed look promoted in Westernized beauty standards. Pull is a small nose piece that hooks into the wearer’s nostrils. With the hooks of this utensil, the wearer must pull their nose up and back to secure the piece by pinching it onto the bridge of the nose. This piece is intended to make the wearer’s nose appear straighter and more petite while giving the end of the nose an upward turn. Push functions to keep the wearer’s facial cheeks pressed up high while creating a dramatic contour of the lower cheek. To apply this piece, the wearer must wrap the device around the back of their head, adjust the front hairline piece in place, and secure the front hooks into the creases of both sides of their mouth. As the wearer places the hooks into their mouth, this will create an inevitable forced smile on their face and push their skin to create a strong crease line across both sides of the face. Prod is a piece that addresses the Western beauty standard of having lifted eyebrows and large eyes. This piece wraps above the head, with the securing wire resting at the nape of the neck. A wire crosses the forehead, holding two wires hooked into the arches of the eyebrow and pulled upwards, creating the appearance of an eyebrow lift. All three pieces in this series can be worn together simultaneously to assist the wearer in achieving Western society's white, Euro-centric beauty standards. The result is an involuntary facial expression painfully forced into an unmovable position that appears artificial.

Tangential to this body of work is the work of Orlan, the French multi-media artist who has put her body under the knife of plastic surgeons for performative art. In Orlan’s work titled The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan (fig. 5), she had nine different plastic surgeries that are influenced by famous historical Western representations of the female form, such as Botticelli’s The Birth of Venus (chin) and da Vinci’s Mona Lisa (forehead).15 Orlan has not taken the stance that cosmetic surgery is negative but instead views her work as a reclamation of the male gaze.16 The male representations of the female form have placed many pressures on female bodies. The relationship

between females and their bodies, and specifically their faces, has been impacted by male dominance and objectification. According to the historian and theorist of the body, Sharrona Pearl, the face is strongly linked to a person’s identity. This can make the discourse surrounding cosmetic surgery complex and more complicated than either “good” or “bad.” The mental health that surrounds a person and their need to conform to societal norms can be of greater risk to them than the physiological manipulation; however, in contrast, Pearl states,

A similar case can be made for extreme plastic surgery; in addition to the physical hazards of such interventions, they serve only to perpetuate the broad societal valorization of beauty and bodily essentialization…Rather than seeking to change the system, such practices honor it. 17

With my work, *Pull, Push, Prod*, I am interested in how manipulating the body to meet Western beauty standards is not only a painful experience, but when someone subscribes to these societal beauty expectations, it strengthens the oppressive systems placed on the female form.

In relation to identity and outward appearance, makeup is created and utilized primarily for two functions: concealment and emphasis. The objective of concealment makeup is to hide or minimize any features arbitrarily deemed undesirable. These physical attributes in Western society include acne, wrinkles, dark spots, and scarring, to name a few. Some examples of makeup with concealment functions include primer, foundation, concealer, and facial powder. Alternatively, emphasis makeup intends to draw attention to specific areas of the face, such as the eyelids, lips, cheeks, eyebrows, or eyelashes. Within the category of emphasis, color is a prominent tool used to draw the eye of the viewer to a certain facial feature, specifically to appear more sexually attractive. Both emphasis and concealment makeup have historically utilized animal ingredients, exploiting and consuming these non-human animal bodies. According to Nancy Etcoff, author of *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty*, “blush on the cheeks and red on the lips are sexual signals

mimicking youth, nulliparity [not having given birth]... and the vigor of health.” 18 The correlation between the application of colored makeup mimicking sex signals demonstrates how makeup makes the wearer more visually sexually accessible. Hence, while consuming cosmetics that use non-human animal products, a person makes themselves visually consumable for others.

*Makeup Screens* (fig. 6) explores the intersection of emphasis and concealment cosmetics while exposing contradictions within the function of cosmetics. By placing physical screens on a wearer’s face intended to draw attention to a specific body part, the screens simultaneously conceal parts of what it is meant to emphasize, thus making it impossible to view that body part fully. *Makeup Screens* are a series of wearable objects that sit at the intersection of cosmetics and jewelry, both falling under the category of adornment. A fundamental purpose of makeup ultimately is to display an outward appearance in relation to what is perceived as desirable. This is tangential to the function of jewelry as an art form that publicly communicates a desired personal signification. According to the historian Linda Sandino, “jewellery is a cultural symbol that stands for the private body as well as the social one, its personal links even more profoundly intimate than clothing, while its symbolism extends into the drama of public display.” 19 The objects that humans adorn themselves with are utilized to outwardly establish an aspect of self they find significant. Lauren Kalman directly references how wearable art is a public display of identification in her series, *Icons of the Flesh* (fig. 7), where she challenges the idea of human body parts becoming over-sexualized identity signifiers through a series of wearable “badges, collars, and buttons.” 20 This conversation of over-sexualization of the body and identity is relevant to my work, as the function of makeup can often operate as a personal modality of identity while also making oneself visually available.

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The *Makeup Screens* are created in three categories: eyeshadow, lipstick, and blush. Within each category are three different shapes, each made in a large, medium, and small size. Each piece is displayed on an individual shelf, creating the illusion of choice, though very few designs and sizes are available for the vast number of different face shapes and proportions. The shapes of the *Makeup Screens* that are utilized are based on the face shapes established by Ernest and Buddy Westmore in *Beauty, Glamour, and Personality*, a book that—discussed above—can only be interpreted as sexist and aimed at socially dominating and oppressing women. The *Makeup Screens* are activated by a person wearing them. When worn, the person is directly affected in their mobility; they cannot speak, smile, move their head, or have dramatic facial expressions due to the way the pieces connect to the face. As they are worn, light that projects through the colored lens will transfer color onto the wearer’s face but can only be seen at certain angles. Each *Makeup Screen* has a set of color lenses that can be interchanged to adjust the projected color, mimicking tactics used in marketing, offering a consumer the option to have interchangeable pieces is a commodification tool commonly seen in cosmetic products.

These objects of adornment also raise the question of whether the *Makeup Screens* add the desired pigment or if their presence emphasizes the natural lack of color. A similar question has been raised in jewelry discourse. Marjan Unger and Suzanne Van Leeuwen propose:

> Does that beauty reside purely in the jewel itself, or in the way the jewel accentuates the body? Which raises the question of whether a jewel can highlight an attractive quality of an individual. If one attributes these powers to jewelry, one must perforce admit that it can also emphasize a lack of such qualities.

The same inquiry can be posed for the *Makeup Screens*, substituting the word screen for jewel, asking if wearing makeup is a moment of acknowledging a lack of qualities in oneself that conform to Western beauty standards.

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The pressures placed on women to meet societal beauty standards are oppressive, parallel to how non-human animals are being oppressed and exploited to create cosmetic products. In the United States, cosmetic products contain numerous animal ingredients, and when companies itemize the ingredients, they list the animal ingredients under unassuming names. Cosmetic products containing animal-derived ingredients are called zooceuticals and consist of three animal origin categories: insects, land animals, and marine animals. All three categories are extensively used in cosmetics in Western society and include animals such as bees, beetles, snails, bovine, chicken, emu, various fish, shellfish, and seals, to name a few. The animals that are killed and used for their bodies are typically raised in factory farms, which is where hundreds to thousands of animals are caged in small living quarters to produce fat, oils, color, or iridescence, which are harvested from the animals either while they live or after being slaughtered. Sue Coe is an animal-rights activist artist who creates artworks inspired by the horrors of factory farming, animal testing, animal enslavement, and the political climate in the United States. On the cover of her book *Cruel: Bearing Witness to Animal Exploitation* (fig. 8), she features a distressed goat with its horns cut off, bleeding out into the money bag of an older white male aristocrat, while a baby goat is getting its throat sliced in the background. Coe’s work addresses animal rights issues in a stark, blunt, honest, and shocking way. Her work is a cornerstone for animal rights activist artists and continues to be influential to my work.

In contrast to Coe’s grim and emotional approach to discussing the cruelty of using non-human animals in cosmetic products, *Lipstick Bar* (fig. 9) approaches the issues of exploiting non-human animals to create zooceuticals by utilizing absurdity and dark satire. In the cosmetic

industry, animal products are key ingredients used in creating perfume, face lotion, nail polish, eye cream, foundation, eyeshadow, blush, bronzer, eyeliner, mascara, lipstick, and so on. *Lipstick Bar* is a multimedia installation that transforms the space into a pseudo-cosmetic retail display, where the viewer is confronted with lipsticks that display animal ingredients. Each of the animal ingredients is presented on sculptural representations of the animal from which the product is derived; thus, the animal holds its own body or bodily product. The sculptural animal stands are large for the lipsticks they present to the viewer. They are painted to match the color of the walls, emphasizing their forms while reducing the sculptural animal stands to innocuous fixtures in the retail space. The lipsticks are not clearly labeled, and the viewer must play an internal guessing game to determine the animal product they are looking at. This ambiguity mirrors the same uncertainty a consumer experiences when ingredients are not clearly labeled or presented on the ingredient lists under inconspicuous names. The devices utilized in this work are similar to those of Ruth Cuthand and her work *Don’t Breathe, Don’t Drink* (fig.10). Cuthand’s work displays bacteria and parasites that are present in the water across First Nations in Canada; she beads oversized bacteria forms and encases them in resin inside drinking vessels. *Lipstick Bar* mirrors this device by outwardly displaying that which is typically not seen within lipsticks, just as Cuthand is displaying that which is unseen within the water. Cuthand’s vessels are all displayed on top of a blue tarp that has the imagery of magnified black mold on it, while *Lipstick Bar* is demarcated under a large awning secured to the wall, which mimics retail displays. The typical function of the awning stems from a need to protect an area from outdoor elements. An awning in an interior space becomes cosmetic. There is no rain, hail, or beaming sunlight that a viewer needs protection from indoors, but instead, it is an inessential object that serves to be entirely aesthetic, similar to the function of the zooceutical products it presents.

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The pressure to use cosmetic products and adhere to societal beauty standards is a deeply personal experience that differs for each individual. *Cosmetic Conversations* (fig. 11) is a dialogic participatory installation that embraces a multitude of female perspectives. It is a piece that encourages women to speak out about their experiences with beauty, makeup, and the pressures they face to meet these externally imposed standards. Social practice art, also known as socially engaged art, is a practice that involves members of a social group or a community taking an active role in the creation of a work, often time with the desired outcome of the piece creating or promoting a physical or psychological change or awareness. In the realm of social practice, dialogic polyphony emphasizes the diverse perspectives of people within a chosen demographic, with the artwork emerging through dialogue. When discussing polyphone dialogical art, John Hammersley and Rachelle Knowles state,

> The emphasis on openness to learning from plural perspectives without reducing insights that emerge from plural exchange to a singular agreed outcomes or definitions is central to the work’s importance for many of its participants.²⁸

The emphasis on celebrating various perspectives without diminishing the responses to fit a specific narrative is an imperative aspect of this work. The complicated relationship between women and the beauty industry in Western societies is correlated to promoted images in media, self-image, personal experiences, cultural norms, and social expectations. Each person has a distinct viewpoint that is valid and critical to grasping this complex issue. In *Cosmetic Conversations*, participants responded to open-ended questions about their relationship with makeup and the cosmetic industry, resulting in an hour-and-a-half audio piece. The responses are from 15 different women, ages 17 to 70, from various locations throughout the United States of America. This piece is influenced by the video

piece *Question Bridge: Black Males* (fig. 12), a collaboration between Chris Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, Bayeté Ross Smith, and Kamal Sinclair. In their video, they interview 150 black men from various cities to create a continuous conversation about their personal experiences. Both social practice pieces value the voices of marginalized groups and honor the diversity of the responses, not creating a leading narrative but an equitable platform for personal accounts to be heard.

*Cosmetic* investigates how the beauty and cosmetic industries affect women and non-human animals. These explorations expose the pressure and expectations placed on female bodies while delving into how this industry exploits non-human animals used to create zooceuticals. Through various interdisciplinary installations, I challenge Western beauty standards, expose how women’s bodies are represented in media, dissect the aesthetic function of makeup, uncover animal ingredients used in creating cosmetic products, and create a platform for women to share their personal accounts with makeup and society-promoted beauty ideals. These installations work together to reveal the complexity of cosmetics and how a multi-billion dollar industry can impact lives in both invasive and intimate ways. By strategically employing marketing and retail merchandising strategies, I critically examine the selling tactics that are weaponized against women to create body insecurity. To combat this, I subvert the promoted beauty standards by creating wearable devices that ostensibly comply with these societal standards, yet they are intentionally impractical, conveying discomfort and artificiality. Through investigating various facets of cosmetics and beauty, I hold a mirror up to this industry that glorifies superficial aesthetics for financial profit, all while subjugating women and non-human animals.

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(figure 1) Camille Grey, *Lipstick Bathroom*, installation, 1972

(figure 2) Alyse-Ambriel Hanna, Photograph in *Cosmetic*, photo credit: Teri Harrison, 2024
(figure 3), Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #654*, Gelatin silver print and chromogenic color print, 2023

(figure 4) Alyse-Ambriel Hanna, *Push, Pull, Prod*, sterling silver, 2024
(figure 5) Orlan, *Omniprésence*, Photo from 7th surgery in the series *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, 1993

(figure 6) Alyse-Ambriel Hanna, *Makeup Screens*, Copper, photo light gels, powder coat, found objects, 2023-2024
(figure 7) Lauren Kalman, *Icons of the Flesh*, Copper, brass, powder coat, 2018

(figure 8), Sue Coe, *Cruel: Bearing Witness to Animal Exploitation*, 2012
(figure 9) Alyse-Ambril Hanna, *Lipstick Bar*: Hoof, bone, cochineal beetles, fish scales, fish skin, honey, beeswax, snail mucin replacement, polylite PLA, acrylic, paint, aluminum, found objects, 2024
(figure 10) Ruth Cuthand. *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink*, 2016. 112 vessels, glass beads, resin, tarpaulin tablecloth, MDF panels, installed dimensions variable.

(figure 11) Alyse-Ambril Hanna, *Cosmetic Conversations*, Audio, Duration 1:28:18, 2024
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