VOYEURISM AND FETISHISM

Veronica De Anda, B.F.A.

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APPROVED:

Robert Jessup, Major Professor
Richard Davis, Minor Professor
Susan Cheal, Committee Member
D. Jack Davis, Dean of the School of Visual Arts
C. Neal Tate, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

This problem in lieu of thesis concerns voyeurism and fetishism and how they relate to art. It addresses voyeurism from both sides of the gaze. It describes a body of work that was created to explore the relationship between the voyeur and the fetish object and the viewer and the art object.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I have depicted myself as an object. The work featured in my exhibition stems from life experiences and personal feelings regarding my self-image; specifically certain pathologies such as voyeurism and fetishism. According to Webster’s dictionary, pathology is essentially something abnormal; the structural and functional deviation from propriety that characterizes a particular disease.

Webster further describes a voyeur as generally one who habitually seeks sexual stimulation by visual means. Griselda Pollock discussed the male gaze of the flâneur/artist in her book entitled Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art.¹ The act of voyeurism in public settings was popular from about the late 1880s to the early 1900s. Nowadays, however, being a voyeur seems almost, and in some cases criminal. As of April 2002, Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana introduced a new bill that makes “video voyeurism” a federal crime. Under the bill, secretly videotaping a person in intimate situations without their consent would become a federal crime. A woman in Louisiana who discovered she was being secretly taped inspired the bill. The crime of “video voyeurism” is punishable by up to three years in prison in case of adult victims, and up to ten years in prison when a child is involved.²


Men who partook in the “pastime” of voyeurism during the turn of the century, mainly in Paris, France, were labeled as “flâneurs.”¹ The details which Pollock discussed, such as the social ramifications, where the voyeurism took place (in public or private), and whether or not the woman was aware that she was being watched are what intrigues me.

Author Janet Wolf argued that the female equivalent of the masculine figure, which would idiomatically be known as a “flâneuse”, does not and could not exist.² What I understand from this is that it is not in women’s nature to be voyeuristic. On the other hand, not all women are so passive and do partake in people watching. There is, however, a difference to the extent at which casual voyeurism goes beyond that and becomes a psychological/sexual need. Therefore, not only because I am a female, but also because historically the female is the fetish object for the male gaze, I depict young girls as fetishes in most of my work.

Often the subject of the voyeuristic gaze is a fetish. By Webster’s definition, a fetish is often a body part or an object of irrational, obsessive devotion whose real or fantasized presence is psychologically necessary for sexual gratification to the extent that it may interfere with complete sexual expression. Fetishism is the pathological displacement of erotic interests that finds satisfaction in a fetish. To evoke this sensation, I isolate small-scale images of body parts to a sense of vulnerability and cause the viewer to focus on the object depicted.


2. As quoted in Pollock, 71.
Through my art I explore both what it is like to be the fetish object in some work, and in others I remove myself from that role. On one hand this is achieved by depicting myself as an objectified person. For example, in *Untitled (5 girls)*, I painted images of parts of myself dressed in a schoolgirl uniform on small (5" x 7"), untreated wood panels. I focus on certain body parts such as knees and feet, which convey the idea of objectification in a visual sense, reducing a person to a part or an object. I also remove myself from that role by creating paintings that are similar to icons, with an origin from popular culture than of the personal realm. These paintings, for example, *Achromatic #1*, first of all, are on a larger scale (4 \( \frac{1}{2} \) x 2 \( \frac{1}{2} \)); the images of myself are manipulated on a computer and also manually, to reduce them to stark black white, and gray images with a black outline separating the tones. These poster-like works, which reference advertising, remove the individuality of the “schoolgirl.” In this format I essentially become a consumer of the fetish. The images depicted are larger and more powerful, as opposed to the previously depicted, vulnerable images which feature the unsuspecting subject of the voyeuristic gaze.

Although my ideas originate from personal feelings/experiences, the visual art objects I create become palpable, physical items. Creating art objects is a way of creating fetish objects in and of themselves. The aspect most artworks and fetishes share is the “look-but-don’t-touch” rule.
CHAPTER 2
Conceptual Process

The body of work created addressed the pathologies of voyeurism and fetishism. The relationship between the two and how they related in artistic terms was explored. The goal was to become more insightful about either end of the gaze: the relationship between voyeur/viewer and fetish/object. I challenged myself to focus on these issues by creating several concise series of works. The work within each series is tightly connected, while the body of work as a whole is intermittently connected. This method allowed me to fully carry through and develop my ideas. During this process I utilized different media, which took form in both two- and three-dimensional formats. The following questions were addressed.

1. How can my personal/intimate ideas be more universal?
2. How can I exploit fetishisms and what purpose does doing so serve?
3. How can my fetishistic artwork cause the viewer to become a voluntary/involuntary voyeur?

One way in which I aimed for my work to become more universal was to make some of the images more commonly typical to everyday life. One piece entitled Band-Aid, is a small (3” x 2 1/2” x 2 1/2”) cast bronze sculpture of clumsy, awkward schoolgirl legs including a short skirt, socks (one slouched), Mary Jane shoes, and a miniature adhesive bandage affixed to one knee. In this and similar sculptures, the girls were left anonymous (without heads) and without ethnicity due to their natural bronze color. My Chess Set, includes the king and queen as girls depicted from the waist down. The bishop is a young girl from the waist up, however, the head is covered with a
dunce cap. Depicting them this way reduces the figures to anatomical features that do not refer to any specific female. The chess set itself is also a widely recognizable image that can be found in a wide range of settings.

As opposed to the earlier schoolgirl paintings, in my most recent paintings, I even go so far as to remove the clothing, the schoolgirl uniforms, which is a socio-economic indicator. The two oil on canvas/linen polyptychs entitled Parts and Toes, Arm, Hip, Legs, feature tightly cropped body shots, some views more easily recognizable than others. The viewer has no choice but to look at the flesh since that is all that is presented. The audience is able to immediately recognize and relate to human flesh. The intense hues of orange, red, and yellow additionally caused the flesh to be somewhat surreal and non-racially specific. These paintings are also gender neutral, making them more universal.

In some cases, I chose to represent my personal feelings dealing with voyeurism and fetishism so that people can relate to them more easily. For some people, my work is nostalgic; for example, the work Band-Aid. This piece, which has a sense of childhood playfulness, with a rebellious, carefree quality, evokes a sense of innocence and past experiences. The addition of a tiny adhesive bandage to this sculpture as well as a piece of chewing gum added to the bronze sculpture Bubble Gum, which consists of five miniature bronze legs (similar to Band-Aid) on five bronze kneeling benches, seen from the rear, ironically seems to detract from the edginess of voyeurism. Presenting difficult issues in a tongue-in-cheek fashion makes them more palatable and broadens the viewing audience. I noticed that the addition of these small features adds charm and an endearing effect.
I exploit the notion of fetishism by putting it into the context of the everyday. Although some viewers do not see the underlying voyeuristic qualities of my Chess Set, they recognize and appreciate it as something familiar. They take it at face value; as a charming, well-crafted piece of work that they could potentially interact with. This was ironic in that artwork is typically not supposed to be handled by the audience. Since the Chess Set is displayed covered by a vitrine, this furthers the idea that some fetishes seem to be kept as desires just out of reach. This notion has a large part to do with its intrigue. It is also a way of revealing the fetish, by place an object out of reach of the viewer.

Exploiting fetishism is also, for me, a way of mocking it; removing its power while at the same time using its power to my advantage. Placing my artworks which reference a perverse subject such as fetishism in a public gallery setting also aids in removing fetishism from the world of taboo. In a public setting, my work and the issues dealt with in them somehow seem more acceptable and accepted as a part of human nature.

In the case of four wall pieces I recently created, entitled Plaid A, Plaid B, Plaid C, and Plaid D, I make a more obvious connection between my artwork and fetishes. These works deal with the notion that for a voyeur, “plaid equals schoolgirl” and vice versa. Each piece is 12” x 8” x 2” and is basically a rectangle of plaid pattern with a small recessed silhouette of a schoolgirl in the middle. For a voyeur, the plaid pattern is a trigger for school uniforms and schoolgirls. Since the void silhouette area of plaid is lined up with the rest of the surrounding plaid pattern, from some angles, the silhouette is not immediately apparent. The hidden image forces the viewer to
intensify their gaze. In essence, the schoolgirl is absent, but without her, the connection to the fetishistic trigger of plaid is meaningless. In other words, if there was only plaid, the audience may not immediately understand the schoolgirl connection, and without the plaid the fetishistic connection is not apparent.

By placing fetishistic objects in a public setting such as an art gallery in which people expect and are expected to at least take a few moments to look at the artwork on display, they are automatically voyeurs of the fetishes/images I put on display. The majority of my work is small-scaled, which forces the viewer to come into close proximity to the art object. Some people may not realize what they are looking at until they are a few feet from it. My goal is to place the viewer in a position in which they do not realize what they are looking at until they find themselves in a compromising situation and must come to terms with it. For example, in *Untitled (5 girls)*, paintings of the sections of schoolgirl bodies were only a few inches in size, so from a distance they may appear to only be non-descript areas of paint on a panel.
CHAPTER 3

Conclusion

I create artwork that is not specific or bound to a certain ethnic or economic group and, in some cases, is even gender ambiguous, with the goal of achieving a universal nature in my work. Repeated use of the fetishistic taboo causes it to become more common and is no longer edgy. In dealing with a certain subject matter over and over, it becomes commonplace. In other words, the more often people are exposed to something, say violence on television, the less shocking it becomes. It is more easily accepted as a natural, human characteristic. Even though all viewers may not directly relate to such a characteristic, they may perhaps see the connection between a viewer and artwork. They may then understand how an artwork can become an object of desire simply by the pleasure one experiences by looking at the subject portrayed in the artwork. I have reached an understanding that artwork and fetishes, in general, share certain aspects. One connection between artworks and fetishes is displaced value. By this I mean the phenomenon of placing value upon an object, for example a painting or a high-heeled shoe, which is separate from monetary value. The viewer, somewhat arbitrarily, places a value upon an object, which in some cases it is a sentimental value in other cases its presence is psychologically necessary for gratification. Doing so makes the object a fetish. Artwork and other fetish objects both also share the unwritten and sometimes self-imposed “look-but-don’t-touch” rule. Thus, in essence, the viewer becomes the voyeur and the art object becomes the fetish.
Figure 9

Figure 10