

Since the Fall of 2016, women in the United States and elsewhere have appropriated the phrase ‘nasty woman.’ Feminist artists and scholars have long known that white women and women of colour who are perceived as transgressing socio-spatial boundaries and norms have been labeled as ‘excessive,’ ‘grotesque,’ ‘monstrous’, and ‘nasty.’ Feminist artists employing textiles are deliberately engaging with a traditionally denigrated medium, and many of these artists are using textiles to represent ostensibly ‘excessive’ women. To name only two examples, Israel-born artist Orly Cogan portrays young white women consuming cupcakes and cocaine, while Brooklyn-based artist Erin M. Riley weaves tapestries depicting alcohol consumption, bloody tampons and her own tattooed body. Textiles, which have often been associated with the decorative, the superficial, and the excessive, are, as Rozsika Parker (2010), among others, has taught us, powerful, symbolically-loaded materials that befit radical, feminist art production. Rather than reading these works as simple celebrations of ‘excessive’ women, the following brief discussion will engage with some of the risks that these artists are taking with their chosen materials and subject matter.

I do not however, want to focus only on risk and so-called ‘excess.’ I also want to talk about anger, and more specifically, feminist anger. In Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, women’s rights have been violently removed. They cannot legally read – even store signs have had the words removed – and the handmaids have been turned into breeding machines. The handmaids are easily identifiable by their red cloaks and white headdresses, which make it difficult to see and communicate with other women. In

the novel, textiles are used to categorise and control. Atwood's book, which has recently been turned into a television show, has been on the best-seller list since November 2016. I finished it for the first time a few days before starting to write this text. At times, I had to put the book down I felt so enraged. As critics have pointed out, this is the show that we – angry feminists – need right now. Textile artist Hannah Hill calls attention to this feminist anger in her 'Arthur's fist' work of 2016, which is stitched with the words: 'When you remember that historically, embroidery hasn't been taken seriously as a medium because it's "women's work."'”

Textiles, of course, have not only been used to control women and teach them obedience. Lisa Tickner, in *The Spectacle of Women: Images of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14* (1988), shows the important role that banners played for the suffrage movement. In her chapter 'Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches: Writing a Craftivist History' (2011), Robertson discusses the use of textiles by second-wave feminists in the 1970s and 1980s as part of political actions, such as the Women's Peace Camp antinuclear protest, which took place close to the Greenham Common Royal Air Force Base. As Robertson remarks, "the very feminine qualities that were used to dismiss textiles as art forms were ironically reversed to demonstrate the peaceful nature of the protests versus the brutality of (masculine) police oppression and the wider politics that had brought the threat of nuclear war (Robertson, 2011, p.185).”

In Betsy Greer's essay on craftivism, she writes: "It was about using what you can to express your feelings outward in a visual manner without yelling or placard waving. It

was about paying attention and not letting your anger consume you, it was about channeling that anger in a productive and even loving way (Greer, 2011, p.183).” But some of us would argue that anger has a purpose, and now is one of those moments in history when women’s anger shouldn’t be hidden or suppressed or channeled into an object simply as a way of getting rid of that anger. I would argue that the pussy hats worn by many at the Women’s March in early 2017 were angry objects, speaking of anger that wasn’t hidden away in the home but made public. While there are important criticisms that have been made about both the march and the pussy hats, for instance the way that the pink of the hats signified a certain kind of whiteness that pointed up the whiteness of the march itself, the hats, as craft objects, are an example of craft being used politically.

The 2017 marches remind us of both first-wave and second-wave feminism, both rightly critiqued in hindsight for their focus on straight white women’s needs and objectives. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that first-wave feminists – suffragettes – were punished discursively in the press, represented as hysterical and masculine, for taking up space with their bodies and (angry) voices (Betterton, 1996). And we all know the stereotypical image of the second-wave feminist: ugly and angry. So it is a risk to identify as a feminist even in 2017.

According to Mary Russo, the ‘female grotesque’ is a term that can be applied to any woman who exceeds a norm: “I would point out that the grotesque in each case is only recognizable in relation to a norm and that exceeding the norm involves serious risk (Russo, 1995, p,10).” To be a feminist, then, is to be excessive. Considering the history of

craft materials, including textiles, helps illuminate why some feminist artists have employed fibre to deal with subjects related to ‘excess.’ Janis Jefferies (2008, p.46) has observed:

The taste for the decorative was pathologised as feminine, as embellishment, as style, as frivolous, as excessive and was therefore constantly repressed within the rhetorical devices of Modernism. Detail and fabric were viewed as decorative extras and excluded from the rigid confines of the regularly ordered space in the pictorial plane. Once released, detail and pattern become excessively magnified and erupted, even exceeding the borders which once tried to contain them.

In a similar vein, Janice Helland and Bridget Elliott (2002, p.5) have written:

The gendered conflation of textiles – particularly embroidery – with the feminine suggest that somewhere within the softness of fabric and the intricacy of stitching lies an inherent relationship that cannot be signified or secured: it is always ‘excess’ and therefore external to more easily and rigorously defined concepts. Excess is elusive, defies categorization and thus, according to psychoanalytic theorists like Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva, occupies the margins, but, particularly following Kristeva, it is precisely in this marginal space that disruption ferments, always ready to dislodge the symbolic order and its dominant discourses.

More recently, artists such as Orly Cogan and Erin M. Riley – whom we could call third wave feminist artists – have employed textiles to represent or allude to so-called ‘nasty women’: women who exceed gendered norms, consume addictive substances, and take up space with their bodies, despite the risks, despite the consequences.

Israel-born, New York-based Cogan employs vintage domestic textiles and stitches onto them representations of young white women, often naked, consuming cupcakes and cocaine. In *Bittersweet Obsession* (2008), Cogan depicts several disparate women: two crouch in the foreground holding cupcakes, while a central female figure looks out at the viewer as she is about to cut into a large cake. In the upper left and right corners, two women lay on their stomachs wearing t-shirts and jeans, and snort cocaine. In conflating

two substances – one licit and one illicit – in a single pictorial space, Cogan points out the ways that the consuming woman has been framed as grotesque. While in comparison with cocaine, cupcakes may seem benign and acceptably feminine, Rosemary Betterton (1996) reminds us, if we needed reminding, that baked goods have long been gendered as feminine in relation to the threatening, grotesque, abject female body.

Although not all of Cogan's works depict women consuming cupcakes and cocaine, as in her 2006 work *Mirror, Mirror*, I have focused on these particular works in my scholarship because of my interest in the visual culture of addiction (although drug use is not necessarily indicative of addiction), and particularly the ways that the female addict and alcoholic have been framed discursively – through medical literature, fiction and visual art – as morally monstrous and threatening to the social body. The female addict/drug user is only one possible 'type' that fits Russo's theoretical framework of the 'female grotesque.' Cogan's work is subversive in this regard; she does not represent her women as physically 'grotesque' or with visible 'signs' of addiction on the body, which is atypical for depictions of female drug users in western visual culture (Skelly, 2014).

In hand-woven tapestries such as the ironically titled *Fun* (2011) and *Alone* (2011), Erin M. Riley shows the darker side of consumption, which Cogan's *Bittersweet Obsession* alludes to in its title but does not represent visually. These artists are not simply celebrating 'excess.' Rather, they are making visible the open secret that women consume 'excessively,' for pleasure. They push against proscriptions not only related to women's behaviour, but also those rules and hierarchies that are part of the discipline of art history,

such as the 'art/craft hierarchy.' Like Cogan, Riley represents young white women who have consumed an addictive substance, whether for pleasure or escape or both is unclear. Nonetheless, both her choice of subject matter and material is risky. Tapestries, although historically valued as religious material culture, have rarely been considered the stuff of canonical art history, and her depictions of intoxicated women – taken from mobile-phone imagery – are related to popular culture and social media, not the traditional subject matter associated with history painting. With that said, representations of female drinkers are fairly common in modernist paintings by male artists, but not, significantly, in paintings by female modernists such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt (Pollock, 2010).

These contemporary feminist works are defined as political partly because of their materials. The choice of textiles is political not *in spite* of the historical denigration of craft materials, but because of it. Rozsika Parker called attention to this political potential in the title of her influential book *The Subversive Stitch* (1984). Further to this, misogyny, racism and homophobia that had previously been (somewhat) hidden, has become increasingly visible over the last year. A veil has been lifted, and it's an ugly revelation. By representing women who have been, and still *are*, deemed grotesque, transgressive, scary, obscene, *nasty*, for being visible, for taking up public space, for existing, feminist artists are producing political work no matter what their stated intentions are. This point is not limited, of course, to representations of consuming women. It is the responsibility of the feminist art historian, I would argue, to not simply celebrate these works because they employ craft materials, but to theorize them, unpack them, challenge them, break

them down, and in doing so, make them more visible than they otherwise would be. The internet has certainly made feminist textile art more visible and accessible, but there is still a need for more feminist publications and exhibitions.

Works like those by Cogan and Riley will never be in the canon according to the vast majority of art historians. It is therefore the responsibility of feminist art historians to write about these works, publish about these works and talk about these works. This past year I taught an introduction to contemporary art class in which we discussed Cogan, Nava Lubelski, Faith Ringgold, Ghada Amer, Allyson Mitchell, Tracey Emin, Shary Boyle and Mickalene Thomas, among other artists working with textiles and other craft materials. From what I can tell, students *want* to learn about artworks other than Pollock's ejaculatory drips and other 'seminal' works. White women artists, women artists of colour, and queer artists have all traditionally been marginalized in the discipline of art history. So too, have artworks made with craft materials. The canon is a weapon that erases and obliterates. Ok, then. Game on. Textiles cover rock.

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