Fabricating Womanhood

Emily Fox
Brigham Young University - Provo

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Fabricating Womanhood

Emily Fox

A selected project submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Peter Everett
Gary Barton
Fidalis Buehler

Department of Visual Arts
Brigham Young University
August 2010

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ABSTRACT

Fabricating Womanhood

Emily Fox

Department of Visual Arts

Master of Fine Arts

The exhibit, Fabricating Womanhood, was an attempt to explore the construction of gender and identity. While the artwork addressed well researched and documented feminist themes the artwork also stemmed from personal experiences and my coming-of-age process. The resulting installation included video, prints, painting, ceramics and found objects arranged in a set-like house construction of life-size proportions.

Keywords: Art, Gender, Identity
Brigham Young University

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Emily Fox

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Images

1. (Detail) *Digest of Hygiene for Mother and Daughter*, etching
2. *Pretty is as Pretty Does*, etching
3. *Fifth Grade School Picture*
4. *Sixth Grade School Picture*
5. *Don’t tell Gertrude*, etching
6. *Wary*, etching
7. Still from *Ballet I*
8. Still from *Ballet II*
9. Disney figurines
10. Goose-riding Santa Figurine
11. Vintage Birds
12. Santa Mugs
13. Still from *Miss Emily*
14. Monotype, *Beauty Queen*
15. Monotype, *Beauty Queen 2*
16. Advertisement from 1950’s
17. Still from *Swim Video*
18. Portrait one
19. (Heidi Klum)
20. Portrait
22. *Mother and Child*, James John Hill (1811-1882)
23. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
24. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
25. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
26. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
27. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
28. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
29. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
30. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
31. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
32. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
33. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
34. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
35. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
36. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
37. Fabricating Womanhood Exhibit
Given the self-directed nature of graduate school coursework as opposed to classroom assignments from undergraduate days which focused on monochromatic color palettes, contour drawings of chairs amassed in a gigantic heap, or the inevitable self portrait assignment, when I began graduate school I found myself drawing what I have always drawn. If my family read this they would be surprised that I’m not talking about drawing horses. While I spent a large amount of my adolescence making pastel renditions of palominos and mare-with-foal pasture scenes, my elementary school days were filled with drawings of girls in dresses. In college you get to call this “feminist art.” Following my intuition and natural tendencies for image making, my MFA studies began with etchings of little girls and their mothers, charcoal portraits of women from the past, and videos of myself performing on stage. I thought I was adding to the dialogue already begun with the major feminist artists from the feminist movement in the 1970s: Cindy Sherman talking about the voyeuristic and cliché manner women have been portrayed in film, Eleanor Anton using her body as a tool to debate diets, dance rigors, and archetypal female characters, and Judy Chicago with her collaborative Womanhouse project, exploring domesticity and feminine spaces. A month has gone by since my installation, Fabricating Womanhood, was exhibited and in my post-exhibit analysis I realize that the installation is more about me than about feminist dialogue. Perhaps a more fitting name for it would be Fabricating Emily.

While the exhibit grew out of personal experiences many people related to it as it hit upon some common nerve that we share as humans. Multiple times people that I didn’t know approached me, hugged me, and told me how the exhibit spoke to them. The girl who works in the print lab told me she called her sister on the phone and raved to her
about it. I was standing in line at Lowes one day and the customer behind me thanked me
for making the exhibit. While people are polite and have the tendency to lie and
congratulate when it seems appropriate, I don’t think this was the case from the response
I got from total strangers.

**From the Comment Book**

meaningful
makes me happy
brilliant
I could have gotten lost (I am so glad they didn’t)
beautiful
haunting
amazing (in reference to some eyes I drew)
amazing (again)
fantastic
bold
special
awesome
amazed (from my mom)
amazing (from Jason Metcalf)
never cease to amaze (from my sister)
scary
lovely
honest
haunting (again)
interesting
lovely (again)
fantastic (again)
great
amazing (this time from my sister-in-law)
credible
amazing (from a girl I don’t know named Chrissy)
totally inspiring
spectacular
powerful-moving-beautiful
cool
profound
fascinating
quirky
eccentric
too clever
amazing (again, anonymous)
Love/Hate

The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanely sensitive. To them... a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and failure is death.

Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create -- so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, their very breath is cut off...

They must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency they are not really alive unless they are creating (Good Reads).

Pearl Buck
US novelist in China (1892 - 1973)

When I first read this quote I thought it was a little mushy and romantic, that art making is about “feelings” (said tenderly, with violins humming in background). That the function of an artist is to feel deeply, see things that other people don’t see; when they sigh, all of nature sighs with them. Artists are those pathetic sad and depressed people who are bogged down in their miserable emotional ways lamenting the falling of leaves.

After having read Buck’s statement multiple times, I realize I relate to it more than I care to let on. How I feel about Buck’s statement--that I am drawn to it on one hand and feel like it rings true in my experience, but on the other hand I resist its typecasting of the artist as a creative and tortured soul--mirrors how I feel about womanhood: I relate to many aspects of “womanhood” as defined by media and cultural stereotypes, and yet feel an urge to disassociate myself from those ideologies about femininity.

The Videos as a Self-Portrait

I had just finished showing one of my professors, Joe Ostraff, the Beauty Series.

Those are the videos where I am a dancer, swimmer, singer, and beauty pageant
contestant (see attached DVD). Joe was asking me about why I make the videos. I was fumbling for an answer--reciting a rote statement about women and their depiction in the media and probably citing Cindy Sherman. Joe stopped me and said, “Well, you are actually really good at doing all those things in the videos.” And he went on to tell me how if I tried out for the Cougarettes, I probably wouldn’t make the dance team, even though I’ve got “the moves.” He also said I’m technically a really good swimmer, but I didn’t really fit the body type for swimming videos. He thought it was commendable and a “who gives a rip” type of statement, like “I’m going to do what I want to, even if people pull me off the stage, or I didn’t make the dance team.” It was true what he said. It was the first time I had thought of the videos as a self-portrait and them having more to do with me than with women in general. And that made me start crying, because those are words I’ve wanted to hear my whole life long- that I’m good at ballet, or swimming: activities where in my mind “you are required to be really pretty.” And then I got embarrassed and left really fast.
Coming of Age Experiences: The Etchings

The mothers are instructing their daughters in love and concern, possibly talking about what is going to happen to the daughter’s body—how she is going to mature, and how she must take responsibility for how she is perceived by men. The etchings depict a process of going from innocence to knowledge and accountability. The young girls are learning how to behave towards others.

*Men are impressed by softness, curves and bounce. They like a wind-blown look.*

*If a parent can make a child realize how sweet are the fruits [of abstinence], later in life, of good, clean living in youth, half of the battle will be won. With some natures it is necessary to resort to the psychology of fear in order to bring home this truth, with others simply appealing to their sense of honor and pride is sufficient.*
- *The Digest of Hygiene for Mother and Daughter, 1947*

*Keep your mouth clean and your breath sweet. Brush the teeth at least twice a day—nothing is more repellant than a bad odor from the mouth. If you have it persistently you should consult a physician.*
- *The Digest of Hygiene for Mother and Daughter, 1947*
Poise and self confidence are available to any woman. Discover who you really are and where you are going. Develop your own convictions. Have the courage to live by your standards. Enjoy your unique spot in the world.
-The Total Woman, Marabel Morgan, 1973

The etchings hearken to my own adolescent experiences- how traumatic it was for me to begin my period, how embarrassing everything was, feeling really ugly, and how in the sixth grade I was treated like a big kid and got in trouble for doing things that I would have done the last year in fifth grade, like put a “kick me” sign on my teacher’s back.

Fifth grade: ok
Sixth grade: not ok

For a “good kid,” it was unusual and embarrassing for me to be disciplined so noticeably. I was a really confident, outspoken, and funny girl. I learned some key lessons in middle school about proper behavior and how to interact with boys. Some of my girlfriends stopped eating lunch and playing sports at recess. I tried it too, but was too hungry and energetic to keep it up.

I remember being in the mall when I was twelve years old and realizing that every single woman has a period every single month. It was unfathomable for me, it was gross, painful, disgusting, and seemed truly unfair those women had to do that, and that I, at the
young and tender age of twelve had to go through that too. Biology was out to get me and there was nothing I could do about it. In a house with four sisters, my mother, and my father, a gynecologist, I felt alone in my adolescent struggles regarding my body- we didn’t talk about those things.

The Media

Headlines from a Teen Magazine (October 1965):

Exactly How to Attract a Boy
True Teen Story- I’m too shy to love you
True Teen Story- I won’t let this kiss be our last
Quiz- Can you make him choose you- not her?
The Beatles Beauty Contest
Emotions that hurt and how to handle them: David McCallum Exclusive

Headlines from a Woman’s Magazine (1969):

The Answers to Your Sewing Questions
Special Recipes for Macaroni, Eggs, Chicken, and Desserts
Should Your Child be a Scientist?
Headlines from a Woman’s Magazine (2007):

Sexy at Any Size, Pro Tips for Looking Gorgeous  
Health Shortcuts, 22 Live-Better Tricks  
Save Big Money While You Spend  
Turkey Feast Without the Fuss! Easy Recipes  
Win Expensive Jewelry, Trips and More!  
Ashley Judd, How her Painful Breakdown Deepened her Faith

Headlines from a Teen Magazine (2010):

Summer Festival Guide: What to wear, Who to see, How to be  
200+ So Sexy Style Ideas  
Sex Makeovers, Performance- Enhancing Advice.  
Designer Collaboration Issue  
Your-Putting-On-Makeup-Face (and other things that men find really hot)  
Free Body Mag. Look better instantly

Well-Known Fact:

The media has a negative influence on how men and women view themselves. The media has also become more aggressive through time in an attempt to make people buy more products. In the beauty/health industry this is done by making people feel insecure about their looks and insisting that a certain product will enhance their appearance and confidence in social situations. While some adults may be experienced enough to discern the media’s manipulations, teenagers often fall prey to the erroneous thinking presented by media.

Let me take you through some of my late teen and early twenties journal entries to give you insight into my teenage mind:

School has started. I don’t like school. I am not myself. I used to be worry free about how I looked and such. I don’t like the way I am. I am more shy≈ I don’t like the “new” me. I like the “old” me better.  
-Sept. 22, 1996
I ran two miles today at school, then two more at practice. My legs are tired. I’ve just got to quit eating fatty foods and then I’ll lose weight.

-March 3, 1998

Today after school I talked to Tyler. I know why I’m so reserved with him, it’s because I’m scared once he finds out who I really am, once he learns how silly and stupid I can be, he won’t like me.

-March 5, 1999

Something is wrong with me, here’s a sure sign, my room is very very messy, every night I pile up under my covers and all the clothes on top of them, it hasn’t even bothered me. My room is so cluttered and I don’t even care. Also, I don’t do my homework anymore. I find no reward for doing it, so I don’t. Last week I was doing so good at coming home from school and being content to do my homework, now I just don’t. I’m losing my motivation for living and wasting my time away. I started out this week really well on my diet, but I ruined it tonight.

-Nov. 4, 1999

I’m tired of being fat. I’m not fat and happy. I have a whole lot to be happy about, but being fat isn’t one of them. Okay, so I’m not that fat, just a little.

-Nov. 7 1999

I felt awful for straying off my diet, it was horrible. It’s like I have built up so much pressure in my head of stuff not to eat, that when I deviate from the law, I go way overboard, giving up all hope.

-Nov. 25 1999

I feel disgusted right now. I am disgusted with myself, with my fatness, gluttony, laziness, irresponsibility, etc. I am frustrated at how hard dieting is. I thought I was stronger than I apparently am. If I would just do as my logic tells me, I could be content in knowing I’m doing what I should.

-Jan. 24, 2000

Ha! Ten pounds in two months. Okay, I was doing good, but then I go mess up and ruin all my dieting. I hate the word diet. I hate saying, “I’m on a diet.” I hate my habits of self-destruction that have nothing to do with hunger, it’s like let’s just see how bad I can be. I also decided it’s more like 7-8 pounds in two months. I don’t really think I could stay at 130, but I suppose I could try. I should go running. I should quit thinking about this diet, I’m obsessed.

-Feb13, 2000

I feel like not going to school tomorrow and seeing if I can spend the whole day lying in bed moping. I feel like either hurriedly purging myself of this “sin,” this burden of slavishness, or giving in to the pits of despair and bring more suffering, when what I must do, what I will do, is face up to it, like a good soldier. I will
suffer my own consequences. I hate this. It’s good for me though. If anyone thinks 17 or 18 is a fun age, they’ve got another thing coming.

- March 13, 2000

I didn’t eat on Tuesday until dinner.

- March 19, 2000

First, I must take care of myself, and love myself, then I will have the capacity to care for someone else. I will hold to my diet, because I love myself and want to be the best me.

- March 21, 2000

I fasted for strength to overcome this silly eating disorder. As I prayed this morning for strength to overcome my eating trouble the idea came to me that, yes, the Lord can help me get over this, but I have to help myself, it will be hard. But I’ve just got to do it. I’m writing this after I just ate some brownies. I had been resisting them, but then went to go cover them up, started to pick at them, and then I just ate them.

- March 26, 2000

Here is a list about me: (dislikes)

Lazy, gluttonous, my thighs and belly: I look prego, out of control, fat (or at least fatter than I used to be), moody and grouchy, awkward, undependable, irresponsible, retarded when it comes to Tyler, unable to show him how I really feel, rude, unthoughtful, self-centered, not good with people skills, ungrateful, don’t care about school work, don’t help myself out of problems, envious, jealous, needy, weak, not coordinated for sports- can’t throw, run fast, or jump, I don’t like it when I eat so much food for no reason at all. I want to throw up. I want to puke. I just want to cry it off, but I can’t cry, I hardly ever cry.

- March 27, 2000

I ate a ton of cookies and cookie dough tonight, so tomorrow I must repent by burning it off cross country skiing and eating healthy tomorrow.

- Jan. 13, 2001

Ballet

Ballet was a big deal to me when I was younger. For five years, twice a week I went to ballet classes. The dress code for ballet was very rigid. I could easily dress myself for class in black leotard and pink tights, but my mom always had to do my hair. I could tell she kind of hated it--having to discipline my wispy fly-aways and orchestrate the
arrangement of a million bobby pins. I was twelve when my teacher decided I was skilled
enough to go en pointe:

Dancers must have sufficient strength in the feet, ankle, leg, knee, and abdomen, as well as strong technical skills, before beginning pointe work. This work can take anywhere from six months to more than three years. Students usually must be at least twelve years of age before going en pointe. This is because bones and growth plates in the feet are not yet fully hardened and developed prior to this age, and they can be injured very badly by pointe work, even if the student is otherwise strong and skillful. Attempting to dance en pointe before the feet and toes are fully grown can cause career-ending damage that will prevent dancing en pointe for a lifetime (Wikipedia).

After my final ballet performance as a bottle in Alice in Wonderland my ballet career ended. I thought I was too fat, short, and stout to ever make it very far as a ballerina. I told my mom and ballet teacher that I was “too busy” to continue, but what did my teacher expect, casting me as a “bottle?”

Part of me wishes I were a ballerina. They are so lovely. Pretty. That is why I made the Ballet 1 and II videos (see attached DVD). Ballet 1 shows me sewing a ballet costume in my apartment; then I put the costume on, apply make-up, put my hair in a bun, and lace my shoes. Ballet II begins: I waltz onto a large stage in my moment to shine as the prima ballerina. When people laugh while viewing this video, I think they are laughing at Kyle, the basketball player pretending to be a male ballet dancer. Kyle wore Rachel Van Wagoner’s black jumpsuit and I arranged his hair pulling it into a ponytail: gobs of gel keeping it slicked. Before I went to film Ballet II with the camera man Rachel called to warn me and give me a pep talk. She told me that I was a really great artist and not to let the boys intimidate me or make me feel stupid. They were her friends, she knew them well, and could foresee them mocking me as I acted my part in the video.
The Kitsch Element

My mom taught me the word *kitsch* when I was a child. She learned the word in 1974 as a freshman in her college art foundations class. As many children are, I was fascinated by small cheap things from the kitsch category: little tiny glass animals, porcelain dolls, baskets with bows and flowers in them, horse figurines, tea sets the size of my thumb. My mom is an antiques dealer and her booth is full of kitsch, but it is the “right kind” of kitsch. She taught me the rule: kitsch is cool, but only if it is vintage.

When kitsch is old, it is more of a relic, and laden with nostalgic meaning. Rusty, chipped, broken, and aged items are all acceptable. Displaying these kinds of items shows that you are fashionable and above the Walmart population of people who like things plasticky and new. For example:

Un-Cool Kitsch
As you can see, there isn’t a great deal of difference between the cool and un-cool items, it is a matter of age. All of the items pictured were mass produced and relatively inexpensive to purchase when they were being sold in stores. So why is one more valued than another?

Alex Kuczinski, in a 2006 New York Times article, wrote about this question and its relation to the vintage-inspired women’s clothing and home furnishings store Anthropologie:

On a philosophical level, there is something about Anthropologie that is well intentioned but makes me profoundly depressed. The old bicycles, the old-fashioned Marvis toothpaste, the etched-glass candleholders, the calico pajama sets, the teacups and saucers — all are the trappings of a grandparent's or a parent's home.

But the 30-something generation that shops at Anthropologie, among the first to be widely defined as children of divorce, no longer has access to those homes, which have long since been dispersed. There is no longevity in their parents' houses. The romantically weathered chests of drawers and stacks of pristinely aged National Geographic magazines were all put into storage, sold or dispersed among the various interested parties.

This is where Anthropologie steps in: It helps the shopper create the illusion of household continuity by allowing her to reimagine a place where Grandma might leave out her pre-fluoride tooth powder, to simulate a life in which Mom and Dad still live together in a house with European teacups and flocked bedspreads. In a world of Anthropologie furnishings and clothing, the consumers can reclaim lost childhoods, lost marriages, lost virginities. The store's
philosophy takes the colloquial and sad world of regrets and realities and wraps it up in a swath of vintage calico, tied with a satin bow (Kuczinski).

The “moral decay” that Kuczinski alludes to may be part of the reason why many artists, including myself, are interested in exploring nostalgic themes and ideas. She also hints why vintage kitsch is valued over new kitsch: Vintage items are associated with the values, morals, and philosophies of the time period in which they were created.

While it is acceptable to have a hierarchy of value placed on objects based on aesthetics, it is entirely unacceptable to treat people like that. Treating people based on appearances: how they talk, their profession, if they wear skinny jeans or not, is not okay, yet we do it all the time, even to ourselves.

To quote the Radiohead song, Just:

you do it to yourself, you do
and that’s what really hurts
you do it to yourself, just you
you and no-one else
you do it to yourself
you do it to yourself (Sing365.com).

My mom expressed this sentiment in an e-mail to the family dated Nov. 24, 2003. She comes from Idaho and went to visit my dad’s family in Mississippi. She felt like a cheap imitation of a Southerner:

Many things had changed, but many things were just the same. That awkward discomfort of not being a real Southerner came back, only vaguely bothersome at this point and not totally debilitating as in years past. I just can’t TALK that much. I don’t look like a Southern belle. I can’t seem to get my make-up and clothes to come together in that totally put-together way. Some of the relatives said I looked good, but I know they mean it in a you-look-good-in-a-middle-aged-craftsperson-from-Idaho sort of way. I had melted hot glue stuck to my black pants from sessions in the craft room and a white cotton blouse with a stain on it from where I’d melted a portion of the nylon tag to a corner of the collar: I felt a
disadvantage from the outset. Not a good way to put your best foot forward. Even when it’s a size 11.

While I was not there on the trip to Mississippi, I doubt that my extended family treated my mother poorly, I think it was mostly in her head.

In job interview articles they are always telling you to present your best self, highlight your strengths; avoid presenting negative information about yourself. By putting my own body and persona in the roles of a beauty queen, swim star, or ballerina, I seem to set myself up to look bad, to appear out of place. This could be interpreted as an act of self-loathing, but more importantly I am interested in questioning the hierarchy. By placing myself in a situation that I wouldn’t normally be in, I help the viewer see the activity that is transpiring with new eyes.

**The Miss Emily Video**

When I was younger I loved to watch beauty pageants with my sisters. I loved seeing all the pageant contestants arrayed together on the stage like a sisterhood of
beautiful Barbie dolls. I enacted beauty pageants with my own dolls and learned to sew by making elaborate gowns and costumes of doll proportions. As I grew up I became disenchanted with beauty pageants and rather than feel apathetic or indifferent about them, I hated them. This is probably due to a natural tendency to hate things of which you secretly want to be a part.

Beauty pageants began as an innocent and wholesome activity, but as time went on they became more elaborate. In an article describing the history of children’s beauty pageants the authors state:

Pageants have changed over the years, with children going further and further to look more attractive, one veteran organizer said. "Competitions 25 years ago really only required a party dress and a satin hair bow," says Eleanor Vonduyke, a former Denver-based pageant director who was in the business for 20 years. But these days, it is not unusual to see children with highlighted or bleached hair. Some young contestants wear false eyelashes or "flippers," which are false teeth used to cap missing front teeth. (Schultz and Pleshette).
The Swim Video

Esther Williams was a Hollywood movie star from the 1940s and 50s. She was five feet, ten inches tall. In her youth she was a swimming champion. Wikipedia says she set several national and regional swimming records before she turned twenty. She couldn’t go to the 1940 Olympics because of World War II, so she joined “Billy Rays Aquacade,” and MGM found her there. She wasn’t a great actress, but she looked so good in a swimsuit and swam with such grace that they put her in a lot of movies where the plots revolved around swimming and swimwear. I watched one movie where she was a swimsuit designer with a horde of young women in swimsuits calling each other “doll” and “dear.” Her movies seem like a way to legitimize a voyeuristic viewpoint of women’s bodies on television.

P.S. I don’t know anything about synchronized swimming. I used my background in ballet and water polo to imitate Esther’s stellar swim moves. I think it looks really corny, but that is what I was going for.

My sister Erin manned the camera the day we filmed the Swim Video. We went to the Raintree apartments in Provo to utilize their swimming pool. I swam pirouettes trying
to look graceful and not make a lot of waves while Erin filmed and a maintenance man tinkered around the pool yard.

Highlight of the video-making process:

Swimming among floating cupcakes and ice cream bars and then eating them: a Willy Wonka-like dream come true.

Lowpoint of the video-making process:

The maintenance man following us to the car when we were finished and upon finding out we were not residents, saying sternly and emphatically, "You are NOT welcome back!"

I felt gross sexualizing myself on the video screen: water, women, and desserts have sexual connotations. I was turning myself into an object of desire in the swimming pool—maybe viewers just laugh at the sweets and the girl swimming around them, not sensing the deeper implications about objectification of the body.

It might be a good time to mention as well, that I am NOT comfortable with seeing myself in my swimsuit on camera. In one sense, I feel very self-conscious, and in another sense I think to myself, “Who cares? Almost every woman I know complains about her body, so I am no different than anybody else.” After I made these videos I spent days feeling depressed and thinking to myself, “That’s what I look like!? No one will EVER find me sexy.” It is incredible how a bad camera angle has the ability to deflate the ego, and leave you feeling terrible. It reminds me of my roommate, who, after watching a video of herself student teaching, decided that she would “never wear those khaki pants again.”

After your bath tonight, stand before the mirror and look at your body carefully. Say to that girl in the mirror, “I accept me as I am, bulges, hang-ups and all.” It may not be as easy as it sounds, but it’s so important. Face each weakness, and
realistically accept the fact that it exists. You’re only human. You, as well as everybody else, have your limitations, so welcome aboard. Don’t be too hard on yourself; don’t put yourself down.
-The Total Woman, Marabel Morgan, 1973

Consistently in the videos I exploit my identity as a way to access tragedy. Under the humor, costumes, and acting, is a tragic version of myself—perhaps the teenage me who wants to feel okay. The art making process is cathartic for me. In communicating the sadness, embarrassment, and humor of my experiences the outcome is healing and growth.

**The Scary/Funny Charcoal Portraits**

These portraits are drawn from old photographs. I distort the features, mess with the lighting and tweak the proportions to make scary and ugly looking people. I especially like messing with the teeth. Teeth are terrifying and terrific.

All of the portraits I create, whether with charcoal, inks, or clay seem to end up looking stern while at the same time a little comical. The collection of ceramic heads I made currently reside on the top of my bookshelf in my bedroom. The little sisterhood of characters comfort me with their resolute faces indicating lives of struggle. Their faces
show conflict with the lumps and wrinkles. They are brightly painted, still wearing lipstick, adorning themselves with flowers, getting dressed in the morning, preparing meals for their loved ones, sharing lives with old crusty husbands. They are like mothers to me: they keep going.

My sisters who are mothers tell stories where fecal matter, urine, blood, and snot are involved. In an e-mail from my pregnant sister involving her four year old son, Finn, she writes:

One morning this week as I was feeding the kids breakfast, I got really queasy, as I tend to first thing in the morning, and I started throwing up in the kitchen sink. Poor Finn saw me and he started getting queasy too. So as he was also losing his breakfast, I held him up into the sink and we were upchucking buddies. I felt bad for him. He's always had a sensitive gag reflex and I think my puking just got to him.

- Sarah, March 3, 2010

Recently my little niece came to visit and pooped on the floor because we didn’t put a diaper on her immediately after she took a bath- it totally grossed me out. Also gross is when babies start peeing while you’re putting a diaper on them. I used to teach swimming lessons and had progressed as far as being able to wipe snot off of children’s faces with my bare hands. Being a mother is not for the flimsy or faint-hearted. In the history of painting, many women have been portrayed as caricatures- swooning, emotional and with angelic demeanors, I try to draw my women as real people.

A Young Girl, Beouguereau  Mother and Child, Hill
Why the 1950s time period?

There are various reasons why the 1950s interest me. My mother was born in 1955, her name is Debra and her mother’s name is Sharon. Debra was a very popular baby name in 1955 (Top 5 Names Over the Last 100 Years). When I was a kid I watched the same movies that my mom watched when she was young, which included all the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals. I loved all the dancing and singing pretty girls.

Because the 1950s weren’t that long ago: the papers, magazines, movies and media from that period are still accessible to the common thrift store forager (as opposed to much rarer Victorian papers), the ideas, philosophies, and styles from that era are still circulating in our American culture. While newer currents of thinking have taken the place of older ways, people from that era are still living and have a presence in contemporary society.

The 1950s were also when feminism began to take off. The reactionary 1970s feminism was a response to the rigid gender constructions of the 1950s--much feminist writing and artwork reference that time period. It was a pivotal turning point; the unraveling of the traditional American woman. Examining women’s fashion through time correlates with the ideological changes of the era. In the fifties, dresses were still commonly worn, but pants were introduced as every day attire and short boyish haircuts were popular. Through the sixties and seventies, women’s clothing started looking more and more similar to men’s clothing until the horrific nineties, when women looked so much like men in baggy cargo pants, thermal shirts, and leather work boots, that the current fashion seems to have backlashed into hyper-feminine clothing styles: think Lady Gaga, or lingerie worn as outerwear.
The house in my exhibit references the 1950s with its furnishings, wall papers, lamps, curtains, and retro portraits on the wall, as well as the costumes, music, and picture quality of the videos (see attached images). The 1950s have been caricatured enough in popular culture that the viewer who walks into the house has a general idea about the values, expectations, and philosophies of that time period. In my reinterpretation of vintage pictures, foods, and television programs, I hoped to show some similarities and differences from then and now: what traditions do we value and hold dear? How have some time-honored traditions been ridiculed? For myself, how do I navigate this arena as a traditional LDS woman, and as a contemporary woman? How do I fit? What should I reasonably expect for my life? These were my questions. That other women found the art relevant was apparent by the strangers who approached me in the weeks following the exhibit, articulating the questions I had had myself, and telling me so.

**On Recipes**

I was shocked to see “Emily’s Sweet Potato Casserole” written down in my roommate’s recipe book. First off, I’m not old enough to have my own sweet potato casserole recipe. Secondly, that recipe belongs to my Great Aunt Ann Sudduth, born in 1928, near Dowdville, Mississippi. Growing up, there was a picture of Ann as a small girl with her mother, Doella (everyone called her Sweet Mama) hanging on our living room wall. Everyone said I looked like Ann when I was younger: same eyes, square jaw and dimples. We are the most alike visually of all my relatives, except for my Dad’s cousin, Paul Beaver, who in 1976 looked exactly like I did in 1988. Paul and I are almost twins, a decade apart.
Names for recipes change through time. My roommate got the recipe from me, and so it bears my name. I feel unsettled about her putting my name on it as if I am taking ownership of foods and ingredient combinations with ancestral origins. When did Ann get to put her name on the recipe? Was it her mother’s recipe before that? Recipes are a way to chronicle a woman’s genealogy, they root her to time and place; they record her name.

Hidden throughout the exhibit were jars of candy, reminiscent of the common childhood experience of visiting old people. While the adults are conversing and talking about health and weather patterns, the children are looking around the room for the candy jar. Candy seen through a glass jar makes even old-melted-together-in-a-blob candy look special. In the exhibit on the buffet was a cake plate that held homemade cookies and treats. Food is a currency. While it communicates love, it is also a way for women to exert power. Feeding other people, instead of being the one fed is an indicator of hierarchy--as well as a manifestation of love, caring, and concern.

How the House was Made: A Love/Unloved Story March 1, 2010

My friend, Levi Jackson, constructed the panels that made up the walls of the house. He rudely laughed at me when I wanted him to help me transport materials from the store to his studio. I told him I would have to get my ex-boyfriend to help me. Levi didn’t care if I had to use an ex-boyfriend for his truck. Whatever it takes for art, right? Rob, the ex-boyfriend, went with me to Lowes to buy the masonite and 1x1’s. Levi didn’t want me to help him build the panels, preferring to build them by himself in his studio at night, rocking out to Ghostface Killah. His shoe prints remained on the walls until the
house was put in gallery 303 and Emily Melander rubbed them off with a paper towel from the women’s restroom. After Levi constructed the panels, my home teacher Adam helped me put them together in my new studio, located in an old grocery store converted to BYU storage called the B-67. Adam and I talked about his anxiety and how his mind works. Levi has mental health troubles, my youngest brother was psychotic last summer, Rob is an alcoholic. Sometimes I have an eating disorder.

On Halloween day, Rob’s mom, Diane, called me on the phone, saying she was concerned about Rob. The last time I talked to her was on Easter, six months before—we seem to only talk on pagan holidays. We were sitting on her daughter’s couch in Spanish Fork, Utah. She was eating Boston Baked Beans, her favorite, and gave me one to try because I’d never had one before: nutty and sugary. I knew Rob had gotten kicked out of his apartment for smoking weed, and that he got a DUI or something so he couldn’t drive anymore. I was flattered she called, and that she felt I was a good influence on her son, but it killed me when she told me that she felt that Rob should never have broken up with me, that the love of a good woman can be powerful. I kept my differing opinion to myself, knowing that continuing to date him would have just drowned me. I told her I cared about Rob and would try to be his friend. He has a lot of experience in construction, so the day she called, we got the right tools and spent 8 hours attaching the panels of the walls together. When he saw me carry all those panels, he told me I was really strong for a girl.

My old band, Schmaltzy, broke up when Rhett, the songwriter, moved to California. Being the only remaining members of the band, Brian who played guitar, and I became a new band, jokingly referring to ourselves as a “folk duet.” Brian and I moved
his drum set into the studio, next to the “house.” He taught me his songs. I learned to sing harmony parts with his melodies. After band practice outside of the house, we would go inside the house to relax and unwind. He would lay on the floor, he is like that. He will lay on anyone’s floor, even after just meeting them. He also has a lot of navy colored sweaters, including the navy sweater with white dots he had worn for two years without washing isn’t that gross? We washed it in the kitchen sink at my apartment. Many times after band practice Brian would help me rearrange the furniture and the pictures. He would tell me how he was interpreting the “exhibit.”

Brian’s grandmother is Helen B. Andelin. She died last summer. She wrote the book “Fascinating Womanhood” in 1963. I bought my copy used, in its 23rd printing. In ballpoint pen on the inside cover it says, “Jeanette Holman, 1973.” Underneath that, Brian signed my copy with this: “My grandma wrote this book. Emily, you are truly a fascinating woman. – Brian Andelin.”

In high school, my little sister, Lauren, and I used to read my copy of the book together, sardined on my twin bed. We laughed about how it says women should become “domestic goddesses” and also wear childlike clothes to be perceived as young and helpless to their husbands, or something like that. The name of my MFA exhibit eventually came to be called “Fabricating Womanhood” a spin-off of the name “Fascinating Womanhood.” I think I made Brian feel defensive when we’d talk about the book. He told me his Grandma was a really sweet lady, and that he thought she might have been a little naïve, but her intentions were good. Marriages had been rescued with that book. I tried not to pick at his grandma personally, but honestly that book infuriates me a little. I think I know why--parts of it are true, for example, men really do want
women who make them feel competent, “manly,” like a hero, I can understand that. But pretending you don’t know how to do stuff and asking men for help so that they feel needed seems manipulative to me.

Brian and I spent a lot of time after band practice in the house, talking about the house and ourselves, our histories. I remember one Sunday night after practicing, I was sad about something that I can’t remember now. Brian listened to me for a long time. He is good at listening and then rephrasing back to you what you just said. He rubbed my back for a long time while I talked.

Brian is the guy in the music video, where we sing “All I have to do is Dream,” originally performed by the Everly Brothers (see attached DVD). The song was written by Felice and Boudleaux Bryant. The song was the number one single on all Billboard charts, June 2, 1958. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame listed it in their “500 songs that shaped rock and roll.” I learned the song from the oldies station on the radio when I was in high school. Brian suggested we learn the song because he thought it might be a good fit for us. We went to my JKB studio on a Sunday night and ran through the song a couple times. It was so fun, our friendship was new, we were singing about the possibility of love, and it felt real to say the words, “when I want you in my arms/ when I want you and all your charms/ whenever I want you, all I have to do is dream.” We could only dream, because we hadn’t acknowledged our feelings for each other. I tried to smile a lot at Brian in the music video to look like we were in love, but he didn’t smile very much and gave a rather dry performance because by the time we made the video our relationship was on its way out, but maybe that’s why the video works--we weren’t really acting.
The rest of the story is fuzzy, somehow we weren’t dating, but we were still playing music together. Band practice wasn’t fun anymore. After practice we didn’t enjoy our usual sitting in the house and talking routine.

The exhibit went up. My three tallest friends, Rachel Van Wagoner, Emily Melander and Brian helped me disassemble the house for it to be moved into Gallery 303. I took a photograph of the three of them where they looked like models. My family home evening group helped me move all the walls, furniture and artwork into the gallery. Joe Ostraff and my 680 class helped me assemble the walls. A guy named Scott, whom I went on a blind date with, came by and helped me tack the vinyl letters of my artist statement on the gallery walls. The house was standing: panels pieced together with bolts, nuts, and washers.

My parents and all six of my siblings came to Provo for the opening reception. My sisters served Costco cake and soda with fruit juice out of a punch bowl. I flitted around, starting conversations with people and leaving them abruptly when other people came over to congratulate and praise me. I felt weird with all the attention focused on me. My sister Erin kept calling me “the bride.” Brian came and stayed the whole time, conversing with my parents, making them laugh. He joined my family for Indian food after the reception.

Some young women from a local ward came to see my exhibit for a mutual activity. We talked about expectations and pressures young women feel and how the art that I make as an adult deals with coming to terms with those teenage feelings. One twelve year-old kept interrupting me and saying how she felt totally confident with herself. She was kind of chubby and wore jeans and a cowboy belt buckle. I didn’t really
think her confidence would last. “Wait until high school,” is what I thought, “then you will realize you are a nerd.”

After the young women left, Brian came over to gallery 303 to visit me. We sat in the house on the gallery floor. We talked about our stupid relationship, for the twenty millionth time. It seemed like we were always talking about our relationship. I had been feeling so angry, I told myself things like, “he can’t just have my friendship, and flirt with me here and there a little, and then get jealous about other guys, and expect me to stick around, right where he wants me, without dating me.” So I told him that. In the words of Rachel Van Wagoner, “You have to buy the whole cow.” In the beginning of the conversation he said he couldn’t date me. I said “I can’t play music with you, it is too hard.” Then somehow, through the course of the conversation Brian decided he wanted to try dating.

The day came to take down the exhibit. Scott, from the blind date, arrived with his two man camera crew and filmed me wrapping ceramic figurines and candy dishes in newspaper. I took the paintings off the walls. I folded up the drapes. They interviewed me and asked me questions about the exhibit and about art for a video podcast they were making. At one point I said, “Everything is a construction, it’s all a lie. The media and art, and anything that gets depicted, is all a lie.” I hope that they don’t include that in the podcast. I will sound crazy.

**How the House Came Down**

After filming with Scott, I continued packing up “the house.” Scott and Brian helped me load the panels into the back of my parent’s truck. We contemplated whether
we should keep the panels or toss them. Exhilarated by the thought of liberating ourselves from the unwieldy, cumbersome walls, Brian and I drove to the Restore, hoping that the panels weren’t a total waste of natural resources; that they could at least be reused by pubescent boys to make skate board ramps. The Restore didn’t want the panels so we drove north to the dump. We pulled the truck into a large and breezy warehouse where there was a giant pile of garbage. The thin masonite walls, with their cheery floral wallpaper, became cracked and punctured as they crashed into the heap of garbage. I stood outside of the truck and watched as Brian threw the house panels into the pile of trash--it was a one person job, really.

Two days later Brian and I split for good. He had lasted one week and one day in our newly defined “exclusive dating relationship.” Four of those days I was in Chicago at the College Art Association Conference. He wasn’t very happy dating me, I guess. I came home late from a party the day after we fell apart, my purple guitar strap, silver capo, and thirty dollars we had earned from singing at that crummy Pirate Island restaurant in Orem, were sitting on my bed, placed there by my roommate, Chelsea. Why couldn’t he have given them to me himself?

**Why I Built the House in the First Place**

I wanted my final exhibit to be a house because it seemed like the appropriate space to display my work. The house functioned as a metaphor for many things in my life: my messy brain full of questions and contradictions, a relationship that was built then destroyed, a prop to help explain the narrative aspects of my work, a vehicle to help me steer the viewer into the questions and contemplations I was sensing. While the
outside of the house, isolated in the dark gallery space looked plain and unadorned; the interior space had the trappings of pleasantries, gay colors, comfortable chairs, pillows, welcoming candy dishes, a genealogy of portraits on the wall, but underneath the comedy, laughing, frilly bows, and pink ruched roses there was a questioning- with a sometimes bitter, cynical, and tragic tone to it.

Making the house was a way for me to explore identity and find catharsis. It was an open-ended exploration of ideas, a way to help me sort out the messages of the media, my parents, and my faith. In all its idealism and glory, the home is the stage for many important events. It’s where women perform their greatest roles as mothers and homemakers--they have impact and power there. The home is both a cage where monotony and conflict exist as well as a realm where women flourish and prosper, and it is where I learned my first lessons.
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23

24
Fabricating Womanhood

Do you like kitten figurines? How do your home accessories define who you are? How do your pastimes play into the construction of your identity? I use myself, my interests, and my talents as a means to explore the construction of identity and gender in this installation. There are some socially constructed aspects of “womanhood” that I love, cherish, and identify with; there are also other aspects -- expectations and traditions -- that I don’t. This creates some conflict in my life, and probably yours too.

- Emily Fox

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