2016-05-01

Paradise Lost

Peggy Janeane Hughes  
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd
Part of the Art Practice Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Hughes, Peggy Janeane, "Paradise Lost" (2016). All Theses and Dissertations. 5953.  
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/5953

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Paradise Lost

Peggy Janeane Hughes

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

Master of Fine Arts

Bryon K. Draper, Chair
Brian D. Christensen
Fidalis D. Buehler

Department of Art
Brigham Young University
May 2016

Copyright © 2016 Peggy Janeane Hughes
All Rights Reserved
ABSTRACT

Paradise Lost

Peggy Janeane Hughes
Department of Art, BYU
Master of Fine Art

The worldwide gap between rich and poor is widening. Status seeking and status keeping are fueled by the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods. These bright shiny objects are staples in a restricted economy in which only the wealthy participate. The notion of gaining riches for the purpose of helping the poor is fading.

Materialism, luxury and riches have been the subject of religious and secular inquiry. In this quest, wealth has been condemned and applauded. Prestige-obsessed consumers are becoming blind to worsening social conditions.

Keywords: conspicuous consumption, religion, wealth inequality
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people helped make Paradise Lost a success. I would like to thank my committee, Bryon Draper, Brian Christensen and Fidalis Buehler for technical assistance, invaluable advice and encouragement. I am grateful to Jason Lanegan for his insights and help with my final show. The help from his staff is greatly appreciated. Sharon Heelis was gracious in helping me navigate college and university requirements. My photographer, Michelle Doying did a great job, as did my videographer, Jason Flake. My models, Shelby Hughes, Morgan Trest, Brianna Jordan and Victoria Evans kindly volunteered their time. Finally, I would like to thank my husband for his patience and counsel.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTEXT</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMAGES</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

While in London last summer, I viewed the Victoria and Albert Museum’s exhibition “What is Luxury?” At the same time, the V&A was featuring an immensely popular exhibit called “Savage Beauty,” which showcased the luxurious clothing of Great Britain’s premier fashion designer, the late Alexander McQueen. Fittingly, the V&A is located in one of London’s wealthiest enclaves.

“Luxury” can be defined in many different ways, as the show attests. For the V&A curators, luxury could be “time;” “innovation “and “space” as well as what is commonly thought of as luxury: “opulence,” “craftsmanship,” “access,” and “exclusivity.” In other words, the stuff only the rich can afford. Purveyors of luxury goods employ skillful branding, strategic placement and celebrity endorsements to persuade the upper middle class that they deserve the same things. The prestige-driven middle class aspire to be in the game and the rest of society has to be content with knock-offs, hoping that people will not recognize that their Prada bags and Hermes ties are fakes.

It was serendipitous that these shows were taking place during my visit, since I had already determined my MFA would address conspicuous consumption, materialism and luxury. Wealth or the quest for wealth and the desire for prestige being the common denominators. These topics have both troubled me and fascinated me.

I was raised to be conscious and responsive to the needs of others, while at the same time I enjoyed the fine things of life. The two conditions are not necessarily incompatible, but often they are. It was a dilemma for me for many years and reached the tipping point when I lived in New York City. I was constantly feeling out of place unless I was wearing the accessories and clothes and inhabiting the restaurants and social functions which my friends enjoyed. A couple
of experiences at Tiffany’s changed my perspective: On my birthday, my husband gave me a velvet bag containing Tiffany coins, some gold colored to denote $100 each and some silver colored for $50 each. Quite pleased with myself, I proudly handed the lovely pouch to the Tiffany sales clerk to exchange the coins for jewelry. The clerk emptied the pouch on the counter, glanced at the coins and superciliously slid the coins back to me. “Perhaps madam, you should go upstairs to our silver department,” he sniffed. A couple of months later, I was at Tiffany’s, shopping for my anniversary present, when I overheard a conversation between a young teenage girl and her parents. She was haughtily rejecting every piece of gorgeous jewelry her parents entreated her to choose. I asked myself, “What am I doing here?” and left.

Since a well-made piece of jewelry and a good handbag can be substituted for a Tiffany and a Prada, a practical person would want to save thousands of dollars and buy the lesser brand, but only one choice conveys “status.” In recent times, absurdly rich hedge fund managers, Russian oligarchs and a new class of Chinese buyers began upsetting the old money’s claim on status and a global luxury fever took hold.

Sometimes the acquisitiveness devolves into a jaded ennui. Barbara Kruger and the high-end London department store, Selfridges, teamed up in 2007 to cleverly disguise the usual “shop ‘til you drop” experience as a serious reflection on consumerism. Kruger’s slogans for the January 2007 Selfridge’s sale screamed in Futura Bold, “Buy me, I’ll change your life;” “You want it, you buy it, you forget it;” “It’s you. It’s new. It’s everything. It’s nothing” and “I shop, therefore I am,” (which you can buy as a tote bag.) In the cathedral of consumption which is Selfridges, these slogans amounted to nothing more than beacons for customers to find their way through the bulging aisles. One may detect a religious analogy here. Most world religions have something to say about riches. In some writings, riches are condemned while in others, riches are
a demonstration of godly favor. The Hindus have a goddess of wealth, “Lakshmi,” whose image is widely found in homes and shops. One of the underpinnings of pilgrim and Protestant belief was a strong work ethic for the purpose of gaining riches and ostensibly, helping the poor. On the other hand, in the Old Testament, Proverbs contains several warnings about riches, such as, “The rich man’s wealth is his strong city and as an high wall in his own conceit.” (Proverbs chapter 18, verse 11, KJV.) Likewise, in the New Testament, “For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul…..” (Matthew, chapter 16, verse 26, KJV,) or “For the love of money is the root of all evil…..” (1Timothy, chapter 6, verse 10, KJV.) As in the Old and New Testaments, the Quran speaks of riches. In some verses, wealth is seen as given from God and, in other sections, materialism is seen as the cause of many social ills.

Over the centuries, riches, materialism and luxury have been the subjects of critical inspection, not just by religious thinkers, but by philosophers, sociologists, political scientists and economists. Their views are discussed in the next section.

CONTEXT

We live in a world where the gap between rich and poor has increased to the point that the wealthiest 10% of U.S. households own 76 % of all the wealth in America.¹ Income and wealth inequality in the U.S. has skyrocketed. Once, wealthy individuals felt a moral and civic

duty to use their assets to help those less fortunate. The widening gap suggests that generally speaking, this is no longer the case.

Catering to the wealthy is serious business. There exists an organization called, “The Luxury Marketing Council,” The Council’s target audience is customers with a minimum of $1 million in liquid assets. The magazine, Manhattan Modern Luxury, appeals to the same demographic.

Especially now, wealth needs a showcase. Thorstein Veblen wrote in The Theory of the Leisure Class, “In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men, it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence.” Veblen originated the phrase “conspicuous consumption” to describe this condition. Conspicuous consumption is a prominent subject in my art.

Jean Baudrillard wrote of advertising and branding creating a “language of consumption.” Marx speaks of “commodity fetishism,” “use value” and “symbolic value. “He was contemptuous of symbolic capital, which could be described as today’s luxury goods. Theodor Adorno wrote about class culture and Guy Debord described consumer culture and class alienation in his book, Society of the Spectacle. Debord wrote of a society where “being” is downgraded to “having” and “having” is downgraded to appearances. Conceptually, this scenario fits well with my interests.

I am aware of a few artists whose work addresses the same issues as mine. Marilyn Minter’s “Satiated” (2003) depicts a woman’s mouth grasping a string of pearls. Audrey Flack’s

---

vanitas paintings from the 1970’s combine typical items found in Old World vanitas art, such as fruit, flowers and burned-out candles with modern jewelry and other luxury goods. Daniel Arsham has cast 1980’s casio keyboards in both concrete and volcanic ash. Jeremy Deller addressed income inequality in his painting, “We Sit Starving Amidst our Gold ” (2013,) which shows William Morris standing Poseidon-like in the Venice lagoon, heaving Russian billionaire, Roman Abramovich’s behemoth yacht out of the water. (Abramovich had berthed his mega-yacht in the lagoon, blocking the Venetian’s view.) The Mexican artist, Abraham Cruzvillegas, confronts materialism by using cast-offs from hastily constructed squatter settlements in Mexico City to make precarious sculptures. In 2010, the Swiss artist, Thomas Hirschhorn, dumped 14 truckloads of empty soda cans in the Belgium museum, Dhondt-Dhaenens. Mannequins stood knee-high to chest-deep, trapped in the midst of the cans. Attendees struggled to make their way through the heaps. Hirschhorn emphasized consumerism with the exhibition “Too too – Much, much.”

WORKS

I have made jewelry for many years and have sold several pieces at up-scale shops in Park City, UT and Jackson, WY and to private clients. But what I have found most satisfying is giving away my jewelry to friends and family. I have made an effort to find stones and materials which fit their personalities and delight in seeing them wear my creations. I am not a good businesswoman.

One day, while working on a piece, I contemplated its form. It occurred to me that it was actually a miniature sculpture. This experience led me to pursue an MFA. I decided my body of work would be large-scale jewelry. I wanted to use typical jewelry making techniques but make
the pieces so oversized that they would be impossible to wear. The jewelry would act as signifiers of excess.

I was aware the concept could create misinterpretations. For instance, the size and number of the jewelry pieces is not meant to valorize jewelry/luxury goods, but to indicate their over-emphasis. Also, I did not want viewers to feel I was condemning them if they owned expensive items.

It was important to me that my art pieces looked like blown-up versions of actual jewelry, so I used my knowledge and experience in jewelry design and fabrication to make the pieces. As part of the fabrication, I used stainless steel, mild steel, brass, aluminum, copper and bronze. It was exacting work to get the metals to fit the other components. Some new skills had to be learned. For one of the copper bracelets, I learned metal etching. A great deal of time was spent researching and experimenting with different types of metal patinas. I made a silicone mold for the tops of the teardrop pearls and cast several in bronze for a necklace and earrings. I also worked with glass, clay and concrete. Sometimes the glass was not easy to work with because, after making molds, the glass had to be slumped, which made it difficult to precisely cut the correct shapes. After much practice and broken pieces, I was successful. The clay did not present any serious difficulties, aside from making many molds and finding too often the glaze I used did not come out as I had expected. Often components had to be sand blasted and glazed again. Sometimes I found that my usual way of securing bezels over gems would not work when applied to large scale work. This required a different technique or atypical -shaped bezels.

For the concrete ring, a car tire was used as a mold. It was a two- person job to pour the concrete, making sure there would be no weak spots. It was also a two- person job to get the hardened concrete out of the tire.
In fabricating my designs, traditional methods, such as soldering, proved to be difficult because, in almost in every instance, the entire piece of metal has to be thoroughly heated before solder melts. Since I was using large pieces of metal, it was very easy to apply too much heat and melt the metal before the solder flowed. Sometimes pieces would come apart because one section would loosen when I tried to solder it to another section.

When a couple of my pieces required equipment that B66 did not have, or a process needed the precision cutting of water or laser jet, I had the Precision Machining Lab at BYU do the work. This was true of the steel “gem” atop the concrete ring. For one of the pendants, several aluminum rings had to be attached. B66 does not have the equipment to weld aluminum but PML does, so I used them. The gold-colored rings pendant had to be anodized by an outside company because neither B66 nor the PML have the means to anodize. I bought online the red, diamond and pink glass “gems.”

In a few instances, I used found-objects as part of the components. The “gem” on the copper ring is the top of a perfume bottle. The tops of the chandelier earrings were found in the garbage outside a store, rusty and bent. After reshaping, removing the rust and cleaning them, I applied gold leaf. The rust came through after the first and second attempts until finally I had a tutorial on gold leafing at BYU’s MOA and bought different types of sealant and gold leaf. It was necessary to sand blast and start over each time, until I used the right materials.

I believed the jewelry needed to be worn to adequately convey the jewelry’s burden. I recruited my daughter-in-law, her sister, her friend and my niece to wear the jewelry. I located a nearby country club for the venue because the location would connote luxury. A video was made of the women in front of the clubhouse, struggling to walk and appear as if they were runway models. By googling “runway music,” the right sounds were added to the video. The video ran
continuously during my final show in BYU’s B. F. Larsen gallery of the Harris Fine Arts Center. I next had to determine how the jewelry would be displayed in the space. I had originally planned on hanging the pieces on walls of chain link fence, but a better solution was to hang the jewelry off rusty tow chain. The chain hung 13 feet from the floor, encrusted with the jewelry. Once the chain touched the ground, it snaked along the floor, wrapping around more jewelry until it all culminated at the concrete and steel ring. My challenge was to present the jewelry, not as individual pieces to be admired, but as one work which spoke to the effect of chaining oneself to luxury. To further that image, the jewelry was not strung out separately on the floor, but bunched together as if being dragged. All- in- all, the work was a sometimes frustrating but always rewarding experience.

CONCLUSION

I think the individual jewelry pieces in my final show tie together in concept and context, whether it be the decorative pink glass pendant or the concrete ring. Rather than focusing on a single item, attention is drawn to the work as a whole and meaning is attached and questioned. The jewelry is inanimate but not impersonal when viewed in this way. The video was a powerful component of the show.

Some have suggested that the most effective way for me to focus attention on the negatives of possessing luxury goods would be to take my own real jewelry pieces and smash them to bits. The problem with this position is it assumes, wrongly, that I am blatantly opposed to any suggestion of material wealth. Rather, my work is meant to scrutinize conspicuous consumption. My goal is to create a dialogue about over-indulgence and personal and social priorities.


Georgetown University Faculty, “Introduction to the Economics of Art and the Art Market,” Art, Economics, the Art Market, http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/visualarts/ArtMarket/ArtMarketEconomics.html


IMAGES

MFA Final Show - April 26-May 13, 2016
Harris Fine Arts Center
Brigham Young University

Paradise Lost
Peggy Hughes
Video Stills