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Fight like a Girl

By Ondine Jean-Baptise

2018

FIGHT LIKE A GIRL.

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After learning that Zoe Buckman immortalized her placenta after giving birth, I immediately learned two things: one, Buckman is intent on using her experience as a woman in the world to serve as inspiration for her art. Two, she is not afraid to push the bounds of convention to elicit a strong reaction. It's no secret that our society tends to organize thought into binaries: soft/hard, weak/strong, girl/boy. Softness is seen as the antithesis of strength, fragility does not go with masculinity, and vulnerability is countered by power. Similarly, strength and femininity are often posed as complete opposites. Women, however, know that this view is far from reality – and Zoe Buckman is here to reveal the truth. By highlighting how much more nuanced femininity can be, Buckman's work forces us to be conscious of the gendered notions we use to understand each other and ourselves.

As a longtime hip-hop fan *and* feminist, Zoe Buckman found it hard to quell the uneasiness she felt advocating for women's equality in one breath, and reciting the lyrics (often times misogynistic) from some of her favorite musicians in the next. To confront these conflicting notions, Buckman created a collection of pieces titled "Every Curve." In this collection, she took articles of vintage lingerie and embroidered rap lyrics onto them from Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur, displaying their views of women.

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Zoe Buckman at Every Curve Exhibition, 2016

When looking at the corsets and girdles, the pieces directly convey ideas of restraint, patriarchal rule, and how demands of extreme femininity women place on themselves can be just as constraining as the toxic demands of masculinity men face. In this collection, Buckman intelligently uses the juxtaposition of intense femininity and softness against harsh examples of masculinity to draw out the tensions between how we treat women in the public and the private spheres.

Creating tension through juxtaposition is a key theme of her work, and this is most clear in her recent collection, “Let Her Rave”. The collection contains a cluster of boxing gloves hanging together from one apparatus. What makes these boxing gloves so spectacular however is that they are covered in silk, diamonds, and taffeta – all materials taken directly from wedding gowns. The title “Let Her Rave” comes from a line in John Keats’ “Ode on Melancholy”: “Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows / Imprison her soft hand, and let her rave.”

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The line struck a nerve with Buckman, who found the idea of women needing permission (from a man, no less) to be emotional incredibly frustrating. The gloves however, seem to say those words without trouble. A perfect balance of strength, durability, and daintiness, the gloves accurately portray those characteristics demanded of women, then and now.



Head Gear, Mostly It's Just Uncomfortable, 2017

Approaching the one-year anniversary of the Women's March, art as protest or rather, art as catalyst for change is a concept that has been an effective strategy to counter some of the harmful American ideologies that still persist today. Kristen Visbal's bronze sculpture "Fearless Girl", purposefully erected to counter the uber-masculine charging bull sculpture, immediately comes to mind. Her intent behind creating "Fearless Girl" was to champion gender diversity in the workplace; and it is no coincidence that the sculpture is located on Wall Street, where hyper-masculine aggression is welcomed and encouraged. Another recent art installation that comes

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to mind is Ai Weiwei's steel sculpture "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors", which brings attention to the global migration crisis and problematizes the hateful rhetoric surrounding immigration. Art is an accessible means where controversial topics can be conveyed in a way that often needs no words.



She Dwells With Beauty, *Let Her Rave*, 2016

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In Buckman's case, she has been producing thought-provoking work before our 45th president came into office, and certainly has no plans on slowing down now. She battled imposter syndrome and never really called herself an artist until she became a mother and started to create art that really challenged the status quo. "Present Life", the body of work that features the preservation of her placenta, was inspired by her experience giving birth and ruminating over life and death. From there, she continued to create works such as "Every Curve" and "Let Her Rave". And while the chaotic state of American politics of late was not the catalyst that caused Buckman to make this kind of work, its eye-opening effect *has* presented her with more opportunities to present it. Her work, subversive as it is beautiful, aims to spark conversation by highlighting the tensions that we all, regardless of which gender we ascribe to, know and have felt.

Zoe Buckman