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By Kate Dwyer

A Bright Neon Uterus Fights for Attention on the Sunset Strip

In Los Angeles, a 9-foot uterus capped with boxing glove ovaries rotates on a three-story pole outside The Standard hotel.



Champ by Zoe Buckman (2018, photo by Veli-Matti Hoikka courtesy Art Production Fund)

As you drive down Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, provocative signage competes for your attention. Between hotel advertisements, billboards splashed with scantily-clad models, and flashing neon marquees, it can be difficult to focus on the road. But passersby only need a split second to consider the latest addition to the Sunset Strip: a 9-foot uterus capped with boxing glove ovaries, rotating atop a three-story pole outside The Standard hotel.

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The year-long art installation, titled *Champ*, is the first public art installation by British feminist artist Zoe Buckman, presented by the nonprofit Art Production Fund and supported by the clothing company Alice + Olivia. Its message of female empowerment is certainly loud, which makes sense given the din of visuals along the Strip, and the lack of time viewers get to spend with it as they pass by.

The piece is best viewed from a fair distance, at night, when the neon blazes through the darkness. During the day, the white metal and fiberglass run the risk of blending into the exterior of The Standard, or being obscured by the totemic cypress trees surrounding it. Though it's on the corner of Sunset and Sweetzer Avenue, I missed it completely when approaching on Sweetzer during the day. Get too close and it's difficult to snap a photo — though I'm sure LA's voracious Instagram community will find the best angle soon enough.



Zoe Buckman, Champ (2018, photo by Spencer Lowell, courtesy The Standard and Art Production Fund)

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Buckman, who has also worked with textiles, installed the first iteration of *Champ* in 2015 at Garis & Hahn in New York, two years before our society's current reckoning with sexual misconduct. Originally, Buckman intended to comment on female objectification in film, advertising, and modeling — hence the neon lights on a boulevard known for hard-partying and casual sex. But *Champ* takes on greater significance in the wake of #MeToo and its sister movement in Hollywood, "Time's Up." Thanks to its prominent location, some entertainment executives will be forced to consider it every day for the next year, as they drive to and from the office — a delicious irony in a city where Harvey Weinstein once thrived.

Fashioned from white neon tubing, the piece has a medical quality, and clearly departs from the gallery version, which is fuschia. "Initially we spoke about [the installation] being the pink version of this piece," Buckman told *Hyperallergic*. But the closer she got to production, the more she reconsidered the color. "I don't want to give people the opportunity to write this off as a 'lady's' piece of art. This isn't just speaking to 'ladies' issues.' Women's issues are family issues, they are society-wide issues, they are nationwide issues."



Zoe Buckman, Champ (2018, photo courtesy of the author for Hyperallergic)

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Buckman wants to draw men into the conversation, but since the beginning of her *Champ* series, she said, the piece has resonated mostly with women. She has sold a number of limited-edition embroidered uterus artworks, mostly to women. Only one male collector had purchased the smaller version at the time of her installation's unveiling.

The subjective nature of public art means there's no obvious metric to measure the installation's impact. Buckman hopes it will "move the public, start discussions, raise consciousness, or challenge the status quo in some way." To ensure that *Champ* amounts to more than Instagram bait, the Art Production Fund and the Standard will co-host a series of free public programs centered around the idea of the female body. The first is a panel on political art in the public realm, scheduled for April.

Buckman said it took several months for the team to find additional backing for the piece; many of the Fund's past corporate partners seemed hesitant to endorse a giant neon uterus. "We had a big fashion brand who said, 'There's no way we could put a vagina on the Sunset Strip.' But it's not a vagina!" Buckman explained. It's an organ system, she said. "If it was a neon lung, would it be okay? If it was a neon heart, would that be okay?"



Georgia O'Keefe, "Red Canna" (1919, via Wikimedia)

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That said, even if *Champ* depicted nothing more than a vagina, it wouldn't be particularly subversive by the art world's standards. Depictions of female genitalia are part of a longstanding tradition in feminist art, dating back to icons like Judy Chicago, Niki de Saint Phalle — in 1966, she famously invited viewers to enter a sculptural environment through a large-scale vagina — and Georgia O'Keeffe, whose florals continue to be embraced by feminists despite her own denouncement of their sexual reading.

Even though Buckman doesn't see *Champ* as radical, art depicting the female reproductive system still carries radical associations, which it may shake as the mainstream slowly starts to adopt it. Designer Rachel Antonoff has been manufacturing uterus-themed tops since 2015, and for months, her sweaters would sell out within seconds of restocking. Christopher Kane's Spring 2014 collection referenced anatomical drawings of female flowers; two of these pieces appeared in *Manus x Machina* at the Met's Costume Institute in 2016.

These days, mass-produced feminist goods also trickle into department stores, mall brands, and outlets. Buckman argued that brands that tout progressivism have a responsibility to put their money where their mouth is. "There are a lot of brands out there that promote these feminist ideas right now, in lines of t-shirts or in their mission statement, and they're apparently excited about collaborating. And then when they get sent the deck, and see what *Champ* is, it's a hard no."

For all of the careful planning that went into the installation, the piece is also complemented by elements beyond Buckman's control. Directly across the street, for example, a billboard features a group of well-endowed bikini models frolicking in a water park. Perhaps the tone of these advertisements will adjust, over the coming year, in response to their new neighbor.) There's nothing subtle, or even shocking, about *Champ*. But unlike other feminist art in the #MeToo era, which viewers must seek out in galleries, its placement on a thoroughfare makes it impossible to ignore. Much like the reckoning with sexual misconduct it comments on.

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Champ is on view at the corner of Sunset and Sweetzer Avenue in Los Angeles until 2019.