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HYPERALLERGIC

Feminist Sculptures That Don't Pull Punches

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Zoe Buckman takes issue with the voice of command, teasing out how patriarchal authority permeates our ideas of femininity and the ways we deal with women's bodies.



Installation view of Zoe Buckman's *Imprison Her Soft Hand* with "She dwells with beauty" (2016, right), chain, gloves, wedding dress, 36 x 24 x 19 in, and "Ode On" (2016, left) wedding dress, boxing gloves, chain, 41 x 16 x 17 in (all images by Anthony Alvarez and courtesy Project for Empty Space)

NEWARK — Of the five odes John Keats wrote in 1819, the English Romantic poet uses the imperative voice in only one: his "Ode to

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Melancholy.” In it, he instructs the reader directly what measures to take to stave off despair and thoughts of death. He counsels the (presumed male) reader, that in the case his “mistress some rich anger shows, / Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave.” Zoe Buckman is having none of this. With her exhibition at Project for Empty Space, *Imprison Her Soft Hand*, whose title quotes Keats’s poem, she takes issue with that commanding voice, teasing out how patriarchal authority insidiously permeates our ideas of femininity and the ways we practically deal with women’s bodies. In the gallery, Buckman has placed a pile of gynecological instruments painted white on a pedestal; stood a 19th-century, vintage, cast iron gynecological chair, “The Oxford,” in a corner; hung a neon rendering of a chastity belt; and suspended from chains piles of boxing gloves, decorated as if for a warrior’s wedding party.



Installation view of Zoe Buckman’s *Imprison Her Soft Hand* at Project for Empty Space

Buckman’s work intimates the ways in which bodies become subject to dictatorial direction in our social practices. Medical science is structured to have doctors probe patients, instruct them

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to do this or that to maintain or regain good health. In boxing, the rules of the sport direct one combatant to beat another until they can no longer defend themselves. We are similarly instructed by the rules of marriage to behave in ways we are told will preserve the union — one of those key rules being, more often than not, sexual monogamy. But the fatherly, prescriptive, and in some cases religious voice that articulates these imperatives limits us. This has serious implications for *female* bodies when there is no space of dialogue, only acquiescence or refusal.



Zoe Buckman "Head Gear" (2017), speculums, dimensions variable

Buckman wants something other than these meager options. She shows this with the boxing gloves covered in lace and satin, in intricate beadwork, in flowery filigree, in ribbons and bows. They get at ideas about the feminine — how it is a complex blend of that “soft hand” weaponized when curled into a fist, when imprisoned inside a glove, in those instances when a woman *has* to fight. (Buckman herself has been boxing for years.) The combined

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allusions to marriage and pugilism are insightful because the donning of boxing gloves presumes collaboration and relationship — both fighters and lovers submit to the rules of the game, and even in getting suited up a boxer needs help to don the gloves and take them off. While they are on, she can do nothing for herself but punch and get out of harm's way.

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Zoe Buckman, "Let Her Rave" (2017), neon, wedding veils,
50 x 24 x 10 in

Buckman gets at something else about marriage that's also deeply crucial to its continued success as a social institution: it's supposed to be mutually beneficial, a pooling of resources, an idyllic romantic entanglement in which we discover more about the other as we also discover ourselves. We can forget the nitty gritty

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though: we get to those insights precisely by opening the other person up, and at times we do this without meaning to.



Zoe Buckman, "Neon Chastity" (2015), neon, 18 x 16 x 9 in

Imprison Her Soft Hand continues at Project for Empty Space (2 Gateway Center Gallery, Newark, New Jersey) through April 1.