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NASTY GALAXY

How Artist Zoë Buckman Reconciled Her Love for Hip Hop and Feminism

By Sophie Pawlowski

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If you don't know, now you know.

Stepping into *Every Curve*, artist Zoë Buckman's visually rich art show featuring vintage lingerie hand-embroidered with hip hop lyrics and chastity belt sculptures suspended from the ceiling is nothing short of a sensory experience. The New York-based Buckman discovered her love for hip hop music while growing up in East London in the '90s, but it wasn't until years later, after she noticed a disconnect between its largely misogynistic lyrics and her feminist upbringing, that she made it the focal point of her work. This intimate art installation is the artist's second solo exhibit, on display at PAPHILLION ART, a small gallery in Leimert Park, near Downtown L.A. We spoke to Buckman about swiping Tupac and Biggie lyrics for her work, and the different ways in which women are portrayed and discussed in rap culture. News flash: it's far from black and white.

How did growing up in East London inform your love of hip hop?

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East London in the 90's was awash with different urban sounds, all of which I got really into at different stages of my adolescence. Garage, Drum and Bass, Jungle, Grime—those were all very London sounds. And there was British hip hop too. But unless I was at a club with my fake ID, it was really just American hip hop, and in particular, Tupac and Biggie, that I would listen to late at night on repeat. American hip hop during that time couldn't be matched in terms of lyrical content, and during those impressionable years, I think it's lyrics that people really connect to the most.



Did you always know you wanted to be an artist?

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a bunch of different things. A lorry driver, policewoman, firefighter. Fine art wasn't really a big part of my world, but I was realizing that I loved to be creative, and as I grew older, it manifested into an artistic practice.

Who and what do you draw inspiration from?

I find the work ethic, integrity, and loyalty of my husband [actor David Schwimmer] incredibly inspiring. I'm also lucky that I'm surrounded by some of the strongest, most badass and talented women alive. For my work though, the things that tend to inspire me nowadays are things that make me angry or that I want to challenge.

Every Curve explores the dichotomy and the relationship between hip hop lyrics and feminism. Why was it important to include both positive and negative lyrics in your work?

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It was really important to me that the work gave a voice to the different messaging about women found within the lyrics. It would have been unfair and inauthentic to only use the misogynistic content for the purpose of proving a point. This work, for me, is complex because the lyrical content is so diverse in its views about the female sex and I wanted to celebrate the positive messaging as well as highlight the violent and sexist.

How do you reconcile your love of hip hop music with your feminist viewpoint?

We shouldn't be shunning or unfairly blaming a small group of people for the sexual inequalities in our society, or for expressing a viewpoint that the world has told them they possess. But we also can't just keep ignoring what is being put out in the world for the next generation of young women. And so dance to the music, rap along to it, use your voice and make it your own, but above all, talk about it and make a noise.



Why did you choose to focus on Tupac and Notorious B.I.G. specifically?

It was important to me that the work remained personal to my experience. For me, Biggie and Tupac's music was so impactful at that formative age that their language and poetry became part of my inner dialogue. So I wanted to just use their lyrics as a nod to who I was back then and whose words were part of my consciousness.

How did you acquire all the lingerie and what is the significance of it spanning different decades?

I collected the lingerie from thrift stores, eBay, and Etsy. I only used pieces from the 1900's to the 1960's. I wanted the garments to be vintage because I wanted to take the contemporary language and marry it to the changing attitudes towards women throughout modern history. Bringing this historical

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element into the work, I feel, gives the installation a greater context. We can really look at our own era and contemplate where we fall in the lineage of female empowerment, and what we want to change moving forward. Also, I'm fascinated by the different material qualities of the garments and how in stark contrast they are to each other. For example, the pieces from the '20s and '30s were floaty and liberating, in celebration of a woman's body. In the '50, the garments were completely restrictive and oppressive. This is when, after the war, women were being encouraged back into more domesticated roles and the fashion at the time played a huge part in making women feel trapped.

The lingerie pieces in your show hang from the ceiling throughout the room. Why was it important for you to display it in this way?

I don't like putting the female form behind glass or on a wall, further objectifying it as much as art does. I wanted these pieces to evoke the female form in real space, and have the freedom to move and sway. I wanted the viewer to feel like they were walking amongst some kind of army of past women and be confronted by their resilience and strength.

Is there one piece in particular that you really resonate with?

There's a piece called The Definition of Feminine that I find really resonant. It's simple and the lyrics are really powerful. It's embroidered on a 1930s slip. I chose a strong and bright blue thread and embroidered the words, "You showed me the definition of feminine, the difference between a pack of bitches and black women."

Every Curve is on display at PAPILLION ART through April 30. Photos by Billy Farrell. Zoe Buckman is repped by Bethanie Brady Artist Management.