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Zoë Buckman's "Every Curve" at Papillion Art, Los Angeles
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Zoë Buckman with her 'Every Curve' installation. The exhibition is on view at Papillion Art, Los Angeles
(Jessica Malafouris)

British artist Zoë Buckman, who has been fascinated with the idea of femininity for a long time, explores the complex relationships between feminism, sexism and misogyny through a body of work called "Every Curve" that takes vintage lingerie as its medium, and that is on view in an exhibition at Papillion Art, Los Angeles, through April 30.

Buckman embroiders texts onto the lingerie from the songs of iconic rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, whom she grew up listening to in East London.

Back then, she realized that there was a profound disconnect between the conditioning provided by her feminist household and some of the messaging in the music she knew so well. Three years in the making, “Every Curve” uses language ranging from violent and misogynist to positive and even pro-choice. The New York-based artist spoke about “Every Curve” with BLOUIN ARTINFO.

What led you to choose lingerie as the main medium for the series?

I always wanted this body of work to be immersive, tactile, sensual. I didn’t want the work to be mounted on the wall, but rather I wanted to evoke the female form in a space in which the viewer is forced to roam. Individually, much of the pieces appear fragile (but they’re less fragile than one would imagine, believe me) and as a group I imagined the installation evocative of some kind of army of left behind undergarments: that there would be a power in the sheer volume of the pieces. The fact that I’m using intimates obviously speaks to ideas of sex and intimacy, closeness, and the forbidden, but they also speak to ideas of how women felt about themselves in the different decades, how they saw themselves sexually, and how men viewed them.

How do you source this lingerie?

I source the garments in thrift stores and vintage fairs, and I get a bunch on etsy and ebay. I think there’s a richness to the weathered and stained garments — the unmistakable blood stain or tear where the fabric has been stressed. You can’t help but think about who she was, what her story is. As the work has grown, my friends and family have started to donate their heirloom pieces, which is really moving.

It’s interesting that you have chosen embroidery to superimpose the text.

This work is really nostalgic for me. When I started, I thought a lot about who I was when I was first listening to rap music. I was a truanting, weed-smoking, East London pre-teen who would show up to textiles and art classes stoned. I would get really into the embroidery projects the teacher would set and would zone out at the back of the class, headphones on, sewing words into denim. I thought of that girl when I thought about the music, but what I found when I started working on "Every Curve" was that it was possibly the most isolating, intimate, close way I've ever worked.

It differs greatly from my practices involving glass, metal, and neon. The act of sewing evokes not only the history of women, our toil, our "women's work", but also ceremony, death, memorial... and because I've been using the language of these two deceased men it's been an aptly commemorative discipline.

Has the juxtaposition of "the very male text with something typically feminine," as you put it on an earlier occasion, helped people become more aware of misogynist references around us, which we often take for granted?

I think it's impossible not to walk through the installation, reading the words, without thinking about the everyday sexism and misogyny that is so prevalent in our culture... most of which has been so normalized we hardly notice it, it's just a part of the fabric of our lives (pun intended). I always hoped to persuade viewers to examine not only this, but also the polarizing ideals we offer women: the ho or the house wife, the Madonna or the whore. But it's also been my intention to show the highly intelligent, sensitive, pro-women messages found in the lyrics used, as well as the humor and sheer literary skills within this modern poetry.

You focus a lot on the culture of the 1950s.

The 1950s America was an abundantly sexist era: definitely the most chauvinistic and backwards in terms of gender equality in our modern history. WW-II gave women the space to rise-up and fill certain male roles that had been left vacant whilst the men were away fighting, so after the war there was a great need from the men in power to reclaim their positions and force women back into more subservient roles. I actually see this post-war decade as a massive conspiracy. Advertising played a huge part in brainwashing women to accept a more domesticated existence, while the emphasis on them spending money on new household appliances and beauty/fashion products boosted the economy and distracted them from their previous goals. The lingerie of this time forced women into a new silhouette: one of pointy breasts and cinched wastes. This was when the bullet-bra and spandex corset became the norm.

Aesthetically, I find this period incredibly rich, though. I'm drawn to the neon and shiny powdercoated metal surfaces that adorned many diners and restaurants. I also love the color palette of that time too: muted pastels and then pops of vibrant hues like cherry red or tango orange. That's why I've used both neon and powder-coated metal in my show. I wanted to create lingerie out of these materials, so I chose the most ridiculously repressive underwear garment of all: the chastity belt, and have produced two sculptural representations of it to be hung in the rooms adjacent to the main installation at Papillion.

The exhibition runs at Papillion Art, 4336 Degnan Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90008, through April 30