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“Do We Hate Our Women?” Zoë Buckman Explores Feminism, Sexism, and Misogyny through Vintage Lingerie

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WHAT DOES a woman’s lingerie say about her? It says a lot about her intimate self, something that nothing else belonging to her can ever tell. And if you look harder, it also exposes the degree of sexism that prevailed at a time when a particular style of lingerie was in vogue — because it is not just about what women want to wear, but also about how the men of the age want to see their women as.

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 her path-breaking work in vintage lingerie, titled “Every Curve,” that will be on view in an exhibition at Papillion Art, Los Angeles in March.

What makes “Every Curve” thought-provoking is the superimposition of embroidered text on lingerie, which is from the songs of iconic rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie, the deceased Hip Hop stars whose songs Buckman grew up listening to in East London. Growing up, she realized that there was an internal disconnect between the conditioning provided by her feminist household and some of the messaging in the music that she could hum all the time. Three years in the works, “Every Curve” uses text ranging from violent and misogynist to positive, sympathetic and even pro-choice.

What led you to choose lingerie as the core material for your installation series, “Every Curve”?

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

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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 the medium of embroidery to superimpose text on lingerie. You have given the medium a new life...

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.

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Has the juxtaposition of “the very male text with something typically feminine,” as you stated on an earlier occasion, helped people become aware of misogynist references around us, which women often take as a part of life?

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 housewife, 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 consider 1950s as the most repressive in modern era. Why so?

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 powder-coated 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 opens at Papillion Art, 4336 Degan Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90008, on March 12 and runs through April 30