



Frances Goodman

Rapaciously Yours

FEBRUARY 27 - APRIL 16, 2015

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Frances Goodman Nails her Colors to the Mast

BY TAMI KATZ-FREIMAN

The neon work *Spit/Swallow Red-Blue* (2016), which appears on the invitation to this exhibition, features the profile of a woman whose wide-open mouth seems to be alternately swallowing or spitting out an object resembling flaccid genitals, a fluidly outlined pistol, or an illegible text. This state of suspension between reception and emission, swallowing and vomiting, may serve as a point of departure for discussing Frances Goodman's work in a post-feminist context. This image seems to address, in a highly condensed manner, just about every possible theme – self-portraiture, seduction, subversion, humor, violence, nature and culture, the beauty industry, consumerism, and above all the question of what belongs to the female body and what is rejected and excluded from it, as well as the thin line between desire and disgust.

In this work, Goodman attempts to unravel the familiar ties between the terms woman-food-body-flesh-matter-sex-language, and to take control over anything that is likely to penetrate the female body. Her feminine, humor-filled version of Bruce Nauman's neon works thus represents a Sisyphean, auto-erotic act unfolding in the space between play and ritual, and simultaneously conveying experiences of restlessness, repulsion, seduction, and suppression. In her own words, "I feel the work ruminates on what kind of woman

one wants to be – one that expresses herself or swallows her word."

Rapaciously Yours attests to Goodman's choice to engage in self-expression, a process she undertakes while intelligently and sensitively negotiating a charged and complex field of meanings and ambivalent stances concerning the definition of female identity in the 21st century. Goodman's oeuvre is politically poised to challenge and subvert conventional beliefs about femininity. At first glance, she seems to be celebrating the narcissistic female urge to consume products embodying a promise of eternal youth and beauty. At the same time, however, her works cast a critical and sarcastic gaze at this dimension of "empowering femininity," scoring a kind of own goal. By using attributes that are clearly identified with stereotypes of femininity, such as acrylic nails, false eyelashes, bridal gowns, pearls and jewelry, she subverts conventions of beauty and raises questions concerning the institution of marriage, while also examining the ways in which the beauty, cosmetics, and fashion industries promote obsessive and neurotic behavior among women.

In the following essay, I will attempt to anchor Goodman's works around three different axes: the affinity between market forces and romanticism, Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, and the subversive neo-craft model of art-making.

I

The central piece in the show, which is located in the back room, is the immersive multimedia installation *The Dream* (2010–2016), which is composed of dozens of used organza, satin and tulle wedding dresses. This wealth of expensive materials in fifty shades of white, which are gathered and held together at the center, now seem to festively erupt upwards, their folds unfurling like giant sails or a gigantic wedding canopy. Transforming the entire exhibition space into a sort of sculpted temple, this work captures the fetishistic quality of the wedding ceremony as a monumental form reminiscent of a nuclear mushroom cloud.

The texts embroidered onto the dresses and the accompanying audio recordings are taken from interviews with single South African women, who divulge anxieties about the collapse of their true desires in reality and reveal how their socially and culturally constructed fantasy of a wedding celebration is transformed into a nightmare. Sentences like “I’ve been told that if you can’t live with a man you need therapy”; “If you’re not in a couple, where do you fit really?”; or “My mother thinks that if you are married you are putting yourself in a jail cell. You’re confining yourself” reveal the massive conspiracy embodied by the promise of marriage and the accompanying tangle of

expectations, anticipation, social pressures, anxiety, and oppression that this promise may involve.

Much has been written about the affinity between romantic emotions, culture, and the economy. The sociologist Eva Illouz’s essay on this subject centers on the appropriation of romanticism by the culture and leisure industry as a wide-ranging marketing strategy.¹ Her study concludes that both the powerful advertising industry and the Hollywood dream industry have enabled consumer capitalism to enhance, and even reinvent, the cultural ideal of romantic love, transforming it into the central axis of consumer culture. According to this argument, the longing for utopia at the heart of romantic love has come to replace religious experience. In the postmodern age, which is characterized by the blurring of boundaries between culture and consumerism, the sad state of romantic love reflects contemporary values: “Take love and sex out of our culture, and the economy collapses, wiping out in a second the fashion-cosmetics industry, the leisure industry, the tourist industry, the cosmetic-surgery industry, the entertainment industry, the pornography and sex industry, the sex-marriage-intimacy advice-therapy industry... Love is the invisible oil that endlessly fuels the engines of the consumer market.”

¹ Eva Illouz, “Why We Don’t Celebrate Friendship With the Same Fervor as Love?” *Haaretz*, February 13, 2016, <<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/.premium-1.702731>>. See also: Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

Indeed, as surprising as this may seem, the wedding ceremony is still one of the most basic and significant values in Western culture. Even in 2016, despite the far-reaching changes in the conception of the nuclear family and the impact of the struggle for women’s liberation, this ceremony continues to represent fantasies about the culmination of happiness among young women and girls worldwide. A wedding gown thus remains a coveted romantic image symbolizing the formalization of a love relationship. Goodman does not explore the reasons for our ardent desire to commit ourselves to another person. Instead, she elegantly employs sarcasm to represent the coveted moment as an empty vision or a shattered dream. The recorded testimonies, which reveal both the longing for a knight on a white horse and the disillusionment with this fairytale image, seem to be absorbed into the soft fabrics, suffusing their transparent layers. By underscoring the excess that characterizes the dresses, these testimonies reveal them to be nothing but an illusion of happiness, an ephemeral stage set for a production centered on cheap romanticism.

Moreover, the creation of an installation composed of fabrics creates a tangled, highly expressive and mysterious environment; fabrics are also related to the intimacy of the body,

and clothes are often perceived as an intimate and socially constructed envelope designed to surround it. Here, however, the empty bridal gowns are imbued with a special significance: Each empty dress conceals the memory of the present-absent body that once occupied it – the traces of its scent, touch, and the secret passions it experienced. In this context it is impossible not to recall the dress collection created by Annette Messenger (*The History of Dresses, 1990–1991*), who exhibited long rows of showcases containing different models of silk, cotton, gauze and muslin dresses – remnants of a lost female culture, an inventory or timeworn storehouse of fashion as it has evolved over time. Goodman’s piece combines over forty wedding dresses. Yet unlike Messenger, who functioned as an archivist, she destroyed her ready-mades and manipulated them by tying them together and adding the subversive texts, creating an exaggerated canopy that violates the authentic and nostalgic dimension of the dresses and renders it grotesque.

II

Three large, colorful sculptures emerge like aliens out of the gallery walls. The first, *Medusa* (2013–2014), looks like a cluster of raised animal tails. The second, *Violaceous* (2015), is an amorphous form reminiscent of swollen vaginal lips. The third work, *Lick It* (2015), resembles an

outstretched pink tongue that has grown to giant proportions. These three works all relate to body parts that are considered private or inferior and their surfaces are all covered with surprising details that are revealed only when observed up close. Engaging in a laborious manual process that requires endless discipline and patience, Goodman has skillfully glued thousands of acrylic nails one beside another, creating a dense and colorful expanse whose lined depressions and curved surfaces resemble reptilian scales. This layer of nails creates a deceptive wall of beauty that is actually prickly and hard. The decorative compositions, which are patterned with designs taken from fake nail catalogues, are revealed to be a form of camouflage or hollow ornamentation: a representation of a-sexual femininity that is sweet, glamorous, and pleasing to the eye.

Goodman conscripts the seductive power of kitsch to act as a smoke screen that positions the viewer at a removal from reality. Her concern with the superficial representation of female beauty, and with processes of reproduction and ornamentation that border on the grotesque, raises questions concerning the historical representation of women over the centuries as a form of pleasing ornamentation, while stimulating the pleasure of ownership like

objects in a safe, and provoking a combination of aesthetic and erotic satisfaction.

The use of nails to cover body parts associated with sexuality may be related to Julia Kristeva's theoretical discussion of the "abject" (1980) - a key term in feminist theory. This term refers to the body as a metaphor of the liminal threshold between interior and exterior, a symbolic system governed by a regime of prohibitions that create a sort of hierarchical order: pure and impure, normal and abject, accepted and rejected, included and excluded. Bodily fluids, excretions, and dirt are perceived as a disruption of the existing order, threatening to dissolve the reassuring separation between the tremulous flesh and the surrounding skin. This process of ordering, excluding, and compartmentalization, this effort to police and preserve existing categories, is what we call "culture."² According to Kristeva, fingernails belong to that same twilight zone between interior and exterior that also includes the hair, tongue, and teeth - whose seductive powers are conditioned by their organic connection to the body. For the moment that hair falls out and is gathered into the sink, or that fingernails are removed from the body, they are transformed from desired object into the abject.

² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

In this case, however, the use of acrylic fingernails - a popular consumer product, a cosmetic prosthetic that blurs the boundaries of the body and presents an illusory substitute for the "natural," the seemingly innocent ornamental pattern appears as a parable for the web of affinities between flesh, body, nature, culture, ornamentation, beautification, seduction and consumerism. In this context, one may also consider the previous body of works preceding the fingernail sculptures, which was titled *Vajazzling Series* (2012). In this series, Goodman bound crystals to female genitals as a subversive gesture of self-objectification, a gesture that may be read as an act of containment that gathers up the abject, the rejected, the excluded, the perverse and the pornographic.

III

Handicrafts such as decorating and gluing on artificial fingernails, embroidering bridal gowns, using sequins and beads, and affixing pearls and rhinestones to car seats - are strongly related to obsessive, painstaking forms of manual labor characterized by an experience of visual overload or too-muchness. In this context, Goodman's work is part of a corpus of feminist art-making that builds on handicraft traditions as the basis for a critical discourse. The neo-craft trend, which has become increasingly prominent on the

contemporary art scene in recent years, is a direct result of historical developments that originated in the radical feminist discourse of the 1970s, when women artists took on traditional forms of female handicrafts in an attempt to redefine "female essentialism."³ Artists such as Harmony Hammond, Faith Wilding, Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro began giving expression to skills that had thus far been considered inferior by male artists, and branded as "overly feminine."

Later on, in the 1980s and 1990s, artists such as Ann Hamilton, Rosemarie Trockel, and Annette Messager honed their feminine forms of expression and took a further step in the direction of labor-intensive, highly detailed works by using materials identified with female territories. Goodman thus joins a respectable lineage of women artists who brought elements previously relegated to the inferior margins of kitsch and decoration center stage. Her art, which is created out of a sense of empowerment, liberation, pleasure and subversion, without barricades or war banners, elevates what was once relegated to the world of women as folklore or a bourgeois pastime, and endows it with new meaning and content.

Due to the demanding, monotonous, detail-oriented, and endless repetition involved in the making of decorative handicrafts, such forms have

³ For an in-depth discussion of essentialism and the use of handicrafts, see also: Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, "Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts," in *Old Mistress: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

also been related to the term “obsession,” defined in the dictionary as “persistent and disturbing preoccupation,”⁴ a kind of closed circle. The obsessive dimension of Goodman’s work involves the process of gluing, covering and filling the surfaces of the nail sculptures, so that not a single empty space remains. This phenomenon is known in art history as *horror vacui* (fear of empty space), and is also related to Outsider art, which is characterized by a deep affection for small details. The feminist critic Naomi Schor has written about society’s negative treatment of details and embellishments as excessive, decadent and tiresome forms of expression – or, in other words, as “women’s matters.”⁵ This outlook is also given expression in art theory and practice by the (male) perception of small details as the inversion of all that is ideal, sublime, classical, or modernist.

Nevertheless, Goodman’s works cannot be suspected of attempting to satisfy the eye or provide their maker with a pleasurable art-making process. The beauty of these works, their stunning ornamental qualities, and the wealth of fabrics, embroidery, pearls, and glitter are merely the hook on which the bait hangs. They mesmerize the viewer’s eye, intoxicate him with feelings of pleasure, and then surprise him with subversive themes and harsh, biting messages. Her discontent with the beauty industry

that objectifies women, her political view of the institution of marriage, and her sarcastic take on obeying social norms are carefully camouflaged within the rich interweaves that make up her art.

Her works thus reflect current post-feminist trends, which combine militant political radicalism with sensual pleasure, emotional expression, and humor. In this sense, they may be located on the spectrum between the combative, sarcastic approach of artists such as Natalie Djurberg, Sarah Lucas, and Tracey Emin, and the poetic, confessional, anthropological approach of artists such as Sophie Calle. Yet there is also a neo-pop quality to works such as the giant nail in *Lick My Lollipop* (2016), which are reminiscent of Claes Oldenburg’s humor-infused sculptures. Whether she creates a monumental nail, a sculpture coated with acrylic nails, or a leather car seat, most of the sculptures focus on the surface, on the representational façade of the object, and on a dialectic language that combines baroque and pop resonances with minimalist restraint. Goodman produces objects resembling empty shells, envelopes, or peels that cover nothing. In an ironic paraphrase of Barbara Kruger’s subversive statement “We decorate your life,” she shines the limelight on the ornamental process itself – on the decoration of an ornamental façade as an efficient means of camouflaging subjects that are still difficult to swallow.

Translated by Talya Halkin

⁴ For further discussion of the affinities between obsession, decoration, and seductive beauty, see the text accompanying the exhibition *OverCraft*, which I curated in 2003 at the University of Haifa Art Gallery: <http://www.katzfreiman.com/exhibitions/over-craft-obsession-decoration-and-biting-beauty/>

⁵ Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 4, 15.

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February 2016

Tami Katz-Freiman is an art historian, curator and critic, based in Miami, Florida, where she works as an independent curator of contemporary art. From 2005-2010 she was the Chief Curator of the HMA (Haifa Museum of Art) in Israel. She started her curatorial practice in 1992 and over the years she has curated numerous group and solo exhibitions in prominent museums in Israel and the US, where she lived and worked also between 1994 and 1999. In the years 2008-2010 she was teaching Feminism and Contemporary Art at the Department of Art History at the Tel Aviv University and Curatorial Studies at the International Curatorial Program of the Kalisher School of Art and Technology in Tel Aviv. In addition to essays for catalogues and books published in conjunction with the exhibitions she has curated, Katz-Freiman has written numerous articles, essays, and reviews addressing various issues in contemporary art. In 2012 she curated two major exhibitions: Critical Mass: Contemporary Art from India for the new wing of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and UNNATURAL for the Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach. She is a board member of AIRIE and a member of IKT and AICA/USA, the International Association of Art Critics.