

# *Some Girls You've Never Seen Before*

Master of Fine Arts Thesis  
Painting and Drawing at SUNY New Paltz

By Julia Arvay  
May 2019



Installed view: *Some Girls You've Never Seen Before*

L-R: *Ginger, Crystal, Sophia, Tiffany, Angel.*

In my MFA Thesis Show entitled, “Some Girls You’ve Never Seen Before,” I am exploring the perception of class and gender through materiality. I am intrigued by how society’s associations with a material can alter the viewer’s perception of an object. I use the historically masculinized canvas to create abstract portraits of women by adorning them with materials, colors, and design motifs that embody feminine and lowbrow stereotypes. I have situated the paintings in environments with matching wallpaper and ottomans, to further emphasize the presence of excess in consumer culture.

For *Some Girls You’ve Never Seen Before* I created five paintings, each adorned with feminine accessories including chain, pearls, feathers, tassels, gold leaf, beads, etc. I chose all faux/ low brow materials in order to both convey the illusion of wealth and status, and to raise questions about art and culture. Since



Ginger, 2019.

paintings are regarded as an elite fine art form, I used traditionally sized and stretched canvases in order to keep them closely associated to the history of painting. I painted either geometric forms or patterns or abstract designs beneath my adornments. I adorned over these tightly crafted paintings, in an act of defiance towards the male dominated history of Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism. I chose feminine hues of pinks, purples, and teals that are visually stimulating and eye catching. Most of the adornments I use (eg: gold, glitter, jewels, chains, beads, etc) all have a reflective quality. I chose my palette to visually compete with these elements, so that the viewer is unable to focus on one point of the piece for too long. The digital prints or “wallpapers” surrounding each piece were made to enhance each painting’s size and presence and act as an extension of the painting. The digital, flat imagery contains continual or

complementary imagery. Every other painting is accompanied by a matching floor piece, three in total. The three combined components are meant to engage the viewer in a visually and tactilely stimulating environment, while exhibiting a sense of excess, both through the patterns and colors, and the number of objects.

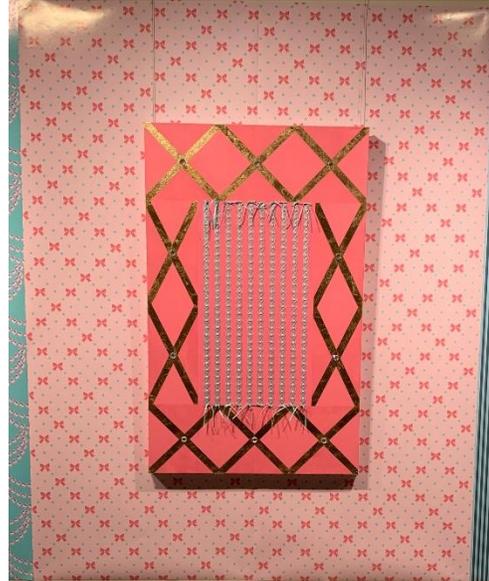
Decoration has long been a means of displaying beauty and status cross-culturally and consistently. What people consider to be beautiful is largely impacted by society and cultural norms and our need for acceptance. In her text, “Survival of the Prettiest,” Nancy Etcoff suggests our attraction to beauty is determined by our biological need to reproduce. Historically, only the wealthy

possessed something as simple as a chair with a back, while the poor only owned stools. As the non-wealthy began to accumulate more indicators of higher class, the rich had to embellish their clothes and homes in order to continue to distinguish themselves. Eventually, more costly materials and bigger extravagances came to indicate wealth and higher social stature. Just as people embellish their homes, they also embellish their appearance with beauty products and fashion. The same hierarchies that apply to home décor, also apply to fashion and makeup products.

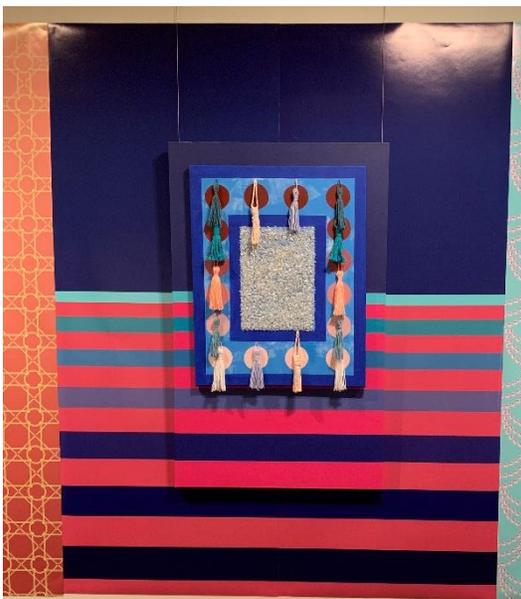
While today it's easy to gauge someone's wealth by their home size or a designer label, various material imitations have been created to simulate the luxe. Materiality is a big focus in my work because it really does convey an object's worth. I am fascinated by how any group of people can all have the same perception of the worth of a material or the same cultural associations. Taste comes in to play when discussing materiality, worth, and cultural associations. Taste is a complex experience that is influenced by culture, class, economic status, home background, and level of education. The fact that no one can succinctly explain the phenomenon of taste is the reason I am fascinated by the instances in which numerous groups of people share the

same taste. As someone surrounded by the educated, white, middle-class, I believe my perception of taste is an echo chamber. For example, I consider hot pink and zebra stripes low-brow and tacky and I associate it with sexuality, and in turn strippers or prostitutes. While many people in my social class or field of study would likely agree with this assessment, there are certainly people who are attracted to this specific combination. I use materiality in my work to investigate the validity of these stereotypes through viewer feedback of cultural and material associations.

In developing my work, I spend time researching trends for beauty, home décor, make up, fashion, elite culture, fine



Tiffany, 2019.



Crystal, 2019.

art, craft, pastries, and most other forms of design. I spend time in craft stores meticulously selecting my materials to most closely resemble my vision for each of my pieces. I perform stereotypically feminine processes (e.g.: sewing, weaving, felting, decorating, etc.) in the making of each of these works that are often labor intensive and meticulous in order to fully authenticate my conceptual ideas with my studio practice. I see each of these paintings as a portrait of a woman, and I first determine the personality and then choose embellishments that embody that stereotype. For example, I imagine *Sophia* as a southern burlesque dancer; as a woman who would be revealing and playful, and wears pearl beads and feathers. From there, I elaborate until the piece feels like it can convey the idea of excessive decoration, while remaining elegant. I have the aesthetic of a fine artist and I want that aesthetic or taste to be conveyed. I don't intend my work to be kitsch, but I instead try to walk the line of love-hate in the same way women are pressured by society's beauty standards. My hope is that the viewer considers the excess present in every element of our lives.



Since, I am only part of the middle class, the only way I can discover the trends of the other social classes is by the media. In watching “Keeping up with the Kardashians” and following couture and red carpets such as the Met Gala, I have observed that the richer people are, the more demands they face to appear rich. In their tv show, *The Kardashians* detail every aspect of their lives, which mostly pertains to beauty and fashion. The show has been on the air for 10 years, and you can clearly track the evolution of their wealth by their clothes, their makeup, and their homes. A few seasons in, they could no longer just wear whatever they wanted or look however they wanted, because they remain relevant by being idolized and therefore are obligated to keep impressing their fans. Every day they get a glam squad to do their hair, makeup, and nails for hours. They employ designers to shop for them and dress them. Every outfit they wear is designer head to toe. I realized that this is not really a choice for them. It isn't just their job, it's their lives and their entire world. They literally need all the millions that they make just to fuel their lifestyle. Every person that they associate with lives in the same world, and just like my middle-class world, it's an echo chamber.

The accumulation of material objects in order to display status is a primary focus in my work. In his book, *American Mania*, psychologist Peter Whybrow investigates the biological and social influences on consumer culture. According

to Whybrow, America is the society in the world most driven by consumer culture. He explains that “to want” is a basic human instinct, initially intended for food and self-betterment, yet as technology and social interaction developed, so did the “wants.” Fundamental American cultural drives have always been based on material gain, leading Americans to equate material success to personal satisfaction. According to Whybrow this human cultural condition causes Americans to abandon self-preservation in lieu of social competition to be the happiest, or to have the most “stuff.” Not only do physical acquisitions signify social status by their aesthetic and material characteristics, but the amount of material items also indicates happiness.



Angel, 2019.

Being an artist can be a position of power and I am interested in the status and influence the title of fine artist holds. I have an antagonistic personality, and I strive to provoke humorous controversy with my work. In much of my work I am constantly fighting my own training and pushing back against my learned definition of fine art. I always wonder how many “non fine-art” materials I can use or how little painting I can do before someone will challenge my decisions. For me, this practice of pushing the boundaries of what is considered a “painting” ties my studio practice with my conceptual queries regarding status and excess. I am perplexed by society’s obsession with material objects, yet I have chosen a field of work in which my success is completely dependent upon society’s

obsession with status and material objects.

The fine artist is considered the highest of the design hierarchies. I have been classically trained as a fine artist, which means I have a talented eye for composition, palette, and style, but I would not claim to be an interior designer or a fashion designer. I am perplexed by the idea that a fine artist can design something better than a person who studied design. Annually for the past three years, Dior has employed several successful fine artists to design a new line of *Lady* bags. In 2018, they selected 11 female artists, each to closely emulate their personal aesthetic onto a Dior



Traditional Dior *Lady* bag in Black Lambskin



Lady Bag designed by artist Mickalene Thomas, 2018.

*Lady bag.* The Dior *Lady* bag is known as “one of the most iconic handbags ever” since it was originally designed in 1995 during the gap year between Gianfranco Ferré and John Galliano's tenures, and also because it was carried by Princess Diana (Peoples 1). The redesigned bags debuted at Art Basel Miami in December 2018. These bags are already Dior, they already sell for up to \$5,000, why do they need a fine

artist? Alas, the fine artist designed purses begin at \$5,000, and they are only available in limited quantities. Although I am obsessed with the idea of combining fine art and fashion, Dior did not release these bags for people like me. This is a perfect example of how capitalist consumer culture thrives. With these bags, Dior created a mega status symbol for the elite social class by combining their luxury brand with the prestige of fine art.

My work also strives to challenge the hierarchies present in the history of fine art. Historically, painting is the most appreciated art form and most famous painters are male. I am constantly plagued by the question “Do women artists still need this?” In a world where women are objectified, making less money than men, and having their reproductive rights challenged, I believe women are still fighting for their equality. There are many contemporary women artists making work about gender inequality in the arts. Sarah Cain's work parallels my own and reinforces some of these ideas. She combines Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism with feminine elements. Although she currently makes site specific works that react to the feelings or the visuals she interacts with at the site, her choices of materials, motifs, and colors always embody a feminine language. Her work is very colorful and playful, and often includes decoration and adornment. In *Self Portrait*, we see a canvas adorned as a female body would be, in a lacy V-neck “top”, layered with a long crystal “necklace”. The unadorned yellow half circle in the top center of the painting mimics skin, while the bright stripes and fabric of the remaining canvas indicate an article of clothing. The composition of the lace, beads, and crystal mimic contemporary designs of women's fashion. Cain often incorporates decorative symbols with her abstract painting imagery to include women artists in the history of abstract painting.



Sarah Cain, *Self-Portrait*, 2018.

With women artists being excluded from the histories of painting, they have created their own, undercelebrated, histories of craft. I see the woman (versus the artist) in me, participating in this history through my studio practice.

As Lucy Lippard explained in her 1973 essay, "Household Images in Art," previously women artists had avoided "'Female techniques' like sewing, weaving, knitting, ceramics, even the use of pastel colors (pink!) and delicate lines—all natural elements of artmaking," for fear of being labeled "feminine artists." (Brooklyn Museum, 1)

I take pleasure in the "domestic" acts of sewing, laboring, and meticulously caring for my paintings, knowing this act pays homage to the many underrepresented women artists. It is not important to me that my viewers understand this, because the work's processes are not transparent, as its primary pursuit is manufactured perfection. The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum has an entire permanent exhibition dedicated to "Women's Work." Its centerpiece is Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party," accompanied by works of Miriam Schapiro and other feminist artists from the 1970's Pattern and Decoration movement. I am inspired by these women and I take pride in producing work that participates in this history.

The goal of my work will always be to encourage critical thinking. I intend the work to challenge our societal hierarchies of gender, art, and class. I dream of the day when society realizes that materialistic items do not amount to power, wealth, or happiness. I intend my work to act as a small contribution to that dream.

## Works Cited

Brooklyn Museum.

[https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/womens\\_work](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/womens_work). Accessed May 12, 2019.

Cain, Sarah. "Words". [www.sarahcainstudio.com](http://www.sarahcainstudio.com). Accessed May 5, 2019.

Etcoff, Nancy. *Survival of the Prettiest*. First Anchor Books, 2000.

Gere, Charlotte. *Artistic Circles*. V&A Publishing, 2010.

Jones, Lloyd. *Taste Today*. Pergamon Press, 1991.

Motz, Marilyn Ferris and Pat Browne, eds. *Making the American Home*. Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988.

Whybrow, Peter C. *American Mania: When More is Not Enough*. W.W. Norton & Co., 2005.

Peoples, Landon. "These Dior Bags are Literal Works of Art." *Refinery 29*, December 6, 2018. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/12/218702/dior-lady-art-bags>.