

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Alfred University

***"Les Objets"***

***The Objectifying Relationship Between the Woman and her Clothing***

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The French philosopher and feminist writer, Simone de Beauvoir, stated in her treatise The Second Sex that a woman “knows that when she is looked at she is not considered apart from her appearance: she is judged, respected, desired, by and through her [dress].” The book, written over fifty years ago, highlights the inequalities between sexes, and the treatment of women throughout history. It is startling that this statement is as relevant in 2014 as it was in 1949. After realizing that the status of objectified women has remained relatively static for half a century, I was curious to delve into the ways women were objectified hundreds of years ago. With an understanding of female objectification, and a love for France and French culture, I turned to the 18<sup>th</sup> century French aristocratic court of Marie Antoinette, the Queen of Fashion. The beautiful clothing and aesthetic captured my imagination, but I wanted to take a look at it all through a critical feminist lens. In reaction to the seemingly obvious objectifying nature of these garments, I created a series of three large-scale wearable sculptures reminiscent of the clothing worn in the high French court during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Through the objectifying design of the sculptures, as well as the interaction between the performer and the piece she is wearing, viewers will observe how women were objectified in these garments, and how they are still objectified today.

Martha Nussbaum, a contemporary philosopher interested in feminism, identified the seven features involved in treating a person as an object. Amongst the seven are the ideas of inertness: “the treatment of a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity”, fungibility: “the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects”, and ownership: “the treatment of a person as something that is

owned by another (can be bought or sold)” (Nussbaum 257). These three features are specifically relevant to the visual narrative of my work, visually objectifying women by turning them into inanimate objects. Through the manipulation of the metal and the design of the sculptures, the dresses do not simply resemble objects, things that are owned and interchangeable, but the pieces also force the performers into varying levels of functionality and mobility, demonstrating the idea of inertness. The sculptures are taking the idea of objectification to such a literal extreme that the humanity of the women is removed and replaced with a restriction in mobility and an assigned function. The form forces the ideas of inertness, fungibility, and ownership onto the performer wearing the sculpture, and her interaction with the piece underlines the objectifying nature of these designs.

The first of the three sculptures is a pannier taking the form of a table. The construction of the piece allows for the performer to have full mobility, and she will be walking around the gallery during the exhibition opening. The welded steel pannier is securely resting on her hips with the aid of a wide fabric belt fastened along the inside of the metal structure. There is a wooden tabletop affixed to each side of the pannier, extending about two feet in either direction from her body. On the table there are a few partially filled teacups and a bowl filled with food of some kind, demonstrating their function as well as the function of the table. The liquid inside the teacups will move with the movement of her body, creating a direct link between the human behavior and functionality of the sculpture. My intention is to provide the garment with a function other than simply changing the silhouette of the performer. The sculpture places enormous emphasis on the performer’s hips,

creating a direct dialogue between the function of the table and its relationship to her body. The tabletop drastically changes her feminine form, simultaneously assigning a function to her natural form, and emphasizing her femininity. Viewers will be able to interact with the piece by taking a cookie or piece of cheese from her extended hip, emphasizing her body and removing any indication of humanity besides the serving nature of the table. She is wearing a large felted wig, decorated with silverware. The wigs are fairly heavy and relatively uncomfortable to wear, and require a significant degree of focus to keep them balanced. The sculpture forces the performer to walk with a great awareness of her surroundings because of the dramatic change in her body shape, and the size of the wig forces her to walk upright and look forward to keep the wig balanced on her head.

The second sculpture is shaped like a set of shelves. The piece rests at the performer's hips and extends about one foot in either direction. Unlike the table pannier, this structure is not entirely supported by the performer. The welded frame sits on wheels and the bulk of the structure is about one foot off of the ground, hitting the performer mid-calf. Considering functionality as a factor in deciding the form of the sculptures, a bookshelf seemed to walk the line of function and decoration. The shelves, which wrap around front and sides of the frame, will be full of books, once again showing the function of the object, but also visually creating the skirt of the dress. This gives the illusion of a mid-length dress, contrasting with the short length of the first piece. The performer will also be walking slowly and deliberately around the gallery space during the opening, hopefully providing a little encouragement for viewer interaction. The books on the shelves create a weight

that limits the mobility of the performer inside of the sculpture. She can roll the work around the space, using her body to guide the piece, but once again there is a different awareness needed because of the change in silhouette. She is wearing a wig as well, decorated with pages of books and ribbon, furthering the limits placed on her mobility because of the extra care required to keep the wig from falling off.

The third piece is a pannier shaped like an oversized birdcage. The cage not only visually relates to the form of a crinoline skirt or pannier, but women were physically caged within these restrictive garments. The sculpture is about five feet tall by five feet wide. The performer is suspended inside the cage on a small wooden perch, positioning the top half of her body outside of the top of the cage, like an oversized hoop skirt. Just like with the other pieces, the sculpture sits at the performer's hips, as a true pannier would. This sculpture is quite different from the preceding two, however, because the performer's feet are not on the ground at all. The welded frame sits directly on the ground, completely cutting off the possibility of mobility. The performer is either completely dependent on the people around her, or totally separate. Unlike the other two sculptures, the function of the form she is wearing is only decorative. Not only is she greatly limited in terms of mobility, but she does not have anything to offer the viewer except in terms of ornamentation. The functionality of this piece remains closer to reality. Large panniers and over-the-top dresses didn't allow for the women inside to do much besides look beautiful. The clothing was designed to fit into the sedentary society of the aristocratic high courts. The rich clothing of 18th century France is often recognized by the "dilated hips... corseted waist... [and an] extreme restriction of mobility" (Cullen). While

wearing the pannier, the woman witnessed a loss of humanity through the lack of functionality provided by the garment.

While the performers are supporting the sculptures, they are also in full-face makeup of 18<sup>th</sup> century fashion, and wearing large French “pouf” wigs. The manipulation of the female form is one of the driving forces behind my work, and in reality, this was not achieved only by the addition of the large panniers. Women “painted” their faces with white powder, rouge, and red lipstick. Pale skin was a symbol of affluence, and the makeup was not intended to look natural (Démodé). Historically, pale skin was achieved with a lead-based powder, but for my purposes I am using a collection of contemporary cosmetic products to achieve the desired look. The performers have pale faces and shoulders, red cheeks and lips, and a dramatic cat eye; bringing in my own personal aesthetic. Their wigs, made of alpaca wool felted onto a chicken wire armature, are each about 2 to 3 feet tall, and decorated with bows, ribbons, and various small found objects. I am interested in making each of the wigs reference the function of the garment each performer is wearing. It wasn’t unusual for the grand wigs of the 18th century to be decorated to correspond with specific events. For example, Marie Antoinette wore a wig with a large battleship perched on the top to a mock navel battle (Démodé). Each performer is wearing a different piece, which explores how the female body was masked and manipulated to achieve the standard of beauty at the time. The large sculptures dramatically alter the women’s silhouettes, and the large hair and makeup cover the natural beauty underneath.

The sculptures are all primarily constructed out of welded steel rod. I chose steel because of my own personal attraction to the process and the enduring quality of the resulting form. The power and strength of steel allowed me to create large sculptures that read as incredibly forceful and confining. The material qualities of steel lent themselves to the theoretical portion of my work, objectification through physically shaping the body and restricting movement. The female form seems so delicate and soft in contrast to the cold metallic power of the steel. I wanted my choice in materials to resonate with the theory behind my work. The sculptures inspired by large garments are made of welded steel to underline the strong sense of objectification and loss of humanity, while the tall wigs are made of fluffy alpaca wool to include my simple visual attraction to the lightness and frivolity of the period.

The performers, who will only be present during the exhibition opening, are important pieces of the sculptures. The three performers will be dressed in the same long-sleeve black leotard, out of the desire for the focus to remain on the sculpture and the wigs, as well as to provide a little more contrast against their stark white face makeup. The entire show is inspired by the aesthetic of the frivolous fashion during the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in France. The form of the sculptures, design of the wigs, and inspiration for the makeup all comes from my artistic attraction to this era. But once the sculptures are worn, a lot of importance is placed on the interaction between the performer and the piece as a wearable object. The objectifying nature of the sculpture is seen through its relationship with the human body and the female silhouette. During the exhibition opening, the performers will

be instructed to remain passive; that is separating themselves from the viewers and limiting their interactions as much as possible. They will be demonstrating how the restrictions of the sculptures in terms of mobility and function. The women wearing the table and bookshelf will walk as freely as they can in predetermined paths through the reception, while the woman wearing the birdcage will be wheeled to different places a few times during the evening. About every half hour the performers will be instructed to make their way back to a common location so that the viewers can have the experience of seeing them together as a series.

As an artist, I live in the twenty first century where women are still objectified and seen as second-class citizens in much of the world. Feminism is still a necessary movement needed promote the ideals of equality and bring some of these problems to the forefront. Objectification is a notion central to feminist theory, and by applying it to an antiquated aesthetic, I am by no means writing it off as a struggle belonging to women of the past. This project was my attempt to understand and translate these blatantly objectifying garments into my own language of fiber and steel. I wanted to create an extreme example of the objectifying potential of our clothing, showing the relationship between body and garment in a clearly stated and visually interesting way. I was captivated by the aesthetic of 18th century aristocratic French clothing, and the glitz and glamour of Marie Antoinette's court when I began looking critically at the basic design of the under supports worn by these women. Amongst the infamous frivolity and extravagance, these women were literally caging themselves in the name of fashion. By drawing attention to the actual humans wearing these famous designs, I aim to highlight the humanity lost amongst

the skirts. My approach was equally grounded in visual research and an exploratory making process, resulting in my final collection of three sculptures and wigs, cohesive in their materiality and design. This work, simply put, explores the negative potential within the relationship between the female body and the clothing it wears.

\*Addendum 1\*

The exhibition opening, which took place from 5-8PM on Friday May 9, 2014, was an enormous success. The three performers were dressed and in positions when the doors opened, and the overall first impression of the viewers was shock, awe, and wonder. The performers remained composed during the three hours of the opening, responding to questions asked of them, engaging viewers, and directing them towards the artist statement and the artist herself.

The bookshelf was originally intended to be on wheels, providing the performer limited mobility as she walked throughout the gallery, but when the sculpture was finished, the weight of the steel, wood, and books were too much, and the wheels broke off. The sculpture and performer remained stationary, near the performer inside the birdcage, and the woman wearing the table was the only performer and sculpture that displayed any type of mobility.

The audience's reaction to the work was astounding. They were very interested in the well being of the performers, continually asking if they needed or wanting anything, and making sure they were as comfortable as possible. The viewers were cautious to talk to the performer in the birdcage. Because of the

sculpture she was elevated about two feet off of the ground, and visually placed the viewers below her gaze. The performer said that children were afraid to get too close, and that while people were talking to the other two, she was left alone for much of the opening. Another interesting reaction was how unrecognizable the performers were once they were wearing their wigs and makeup. They all reported that the audience seemed uncomfortable not knowing who was wearing the sculpture. One of the performers, my roommate of four years, told me that my father came up and introduced himself, truly not seeing who was behind the mask of makeup and hair.

The success of the opening went far beyond my wildest hopes and expectations. During the exhibition I existed only as the creator of these forms, as the performers and sculptures took on lives of their own. The audience truly brought the work to life, and my intention of showing the discomfort and impracticality of these objectifying garments shined through the complaints of the performers, the concern of the audience, and the sheer scale of the sculptures. Through all of the challenges of making, and stress of installing, the work spoke for itself, and the opening was everything I had hoped it would be.

#### \*Addendum 2\*

The most challenging aspect of writing this thesis was sounding certain and convincing in my convictions about my own artwork and research—I was writing about an event with a live aspect that hadn't taken place yet. The actual performance took place at the exhibition opening, Friday May 9, 2014, and before

then I had a very slim idea what it would be like. In performance and live art, so much depends on the reaction/participation of the audience. On the night of the opening, I was overwhelmed by the viewing public's positive and supportive reaction. The performers seemed unrecognizable after they were made up, wigged up, and placed inside their sculptural dresses. People were extremely interested in talking to them and examining the sculptures closely. One of the most successful components of the live performance was the actual, authentic discomfort of the performers. When designing the sculptures, I was looking to recreate an experience similar to what it must have felt like to wear a pannier-supported dress. The women inside would be stuck inside the large welded steel forms, which restricted their movement and function. Their real discomfort showed the viewers evidence of the impracticality of garments this large and burdening, and showed the effects of an objectifying relationship between clothing and body.

I have heard some feedback questioning my decision to direct the women to express their own personalities during the performance. By means of reply, I intended the viewers to be able to relate the to experiences of the woman confined within these structures. Having them behave in any other way (neutral or passive for example) would have created a distance between the audience and the performer that I wasn't interested in. The viewers were openly concerned with the clear displays of discomfort seen in the women. I was thrilled by the entire discourse, for example, my grandmother carried on a long conversation with the performer wearing the bookshelf. The two of them talked as if she wasn't confined to a burdensome structure, which I loved observing.

One of the biggest challenges in this project was finding my own voice--the voice of an artist and feminist living in the 21st century--while pulling so heavily from a historical aesthetic and time period. When I began writing this paper I was unsure where I stood when considering the objectification of women today. I was looking so far in the past, I was unsure how all of this fit into my personal life experiences, and where I sit on the continuum of historical and societal baggage surrounding me. All of the feminist theory that was useful and relevant in my research was written decades ago, and I could not definitively state that women were still objectified through their clothing. Now, after so much research and visual exploration, I have changed my stance. I have learned so much about the ways women are objectified and how powerful the relationship between the body and clothing can be, that I can absolutely say that the status of the objectification of women has remained stagnant. I was interested the process a woman undergoes when being turned into an object whether sexually, or more symbolically. Clothing changes the way that we as a society see ourselves and others, but also dictates what you, as a human, are capable of. For example, it's impractical to run a marathon in stilettos. High heels dictate a woman's capacity for movement, simultaneously removing innate human qualities, and replacing them with feminine adjectives. She is no longer strong, fast, and agile, but dainty, fragile, and attractive. Women are objectified through their clothing, by their peers and by themselves. Clothing is a conscious decision, a means of self-expression, and has a close relationship with our bodies. Women are objectified by what they chose to wear. Through months of research and exploratory making, I learned that this fact is as

valid in 18th century courtly France and it is in 21st century Alfred, NY

This project opened my eyes to the opportunities available through performance and live art. I learned some of my personal limits as an artist, a maker, and a feminist. I found ways to combine the personalization and fitting skills gained through clothing construction with the innate size and strength of welded steel. This thesis and series of work is just scraping the surface of what I am capable of. The feedback I received from audience members and mentors got me excited to continue exploring exactly what type of relationship exists between body and clothing, and how my personal take on the subject will change my artmaking process.

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