EXHIBITION REVIEW

Sara Greenberger Rafferty: Gloves Off

SAMUEL DORSKY MUSEUM OF ART
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT NEW PALTZ
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Curated by Andrew Ingall, Sara Greenberger Rafferty's exhibition *Gloves Off* explores the ways in which comedy, fashion, surveillance, and big data can dehumanize us. The colloquialism is rooted in pugilistic masculinity, its etymology traced to a boxer's willingness to brawl with bare knuckles. Using this title as a female, Rafferty insinuates that she's abandoned any ladylike pretenses. Certainly, her deft interweaving of multiple media defies traditional categorizations, and elegant white opera gloves serve as chapter dividers in her video *Identify* (2017), rather than adorn a debutante's arms. But overall, the work is so aestheticized—and so cerebral—that it never really leaves the realm of the mannerly. This is not a bad thing, however, and I would argue that Rafferty pulls off a rather difficult trick in making work that is as formally captivating as it is conceptually rigorous.

The most accessible of Rafferty's work uses women's clothing as signifiers for a "female-bodied person," and as such, poses questions about the systems women readily let oppress them.[1] While the pair of jeans and white button-down in *Untitled* (2013) can serve as a stand-in for a body of any gender, most of the sartorial iconography Rafferty utilizes is irrefutably feminine.
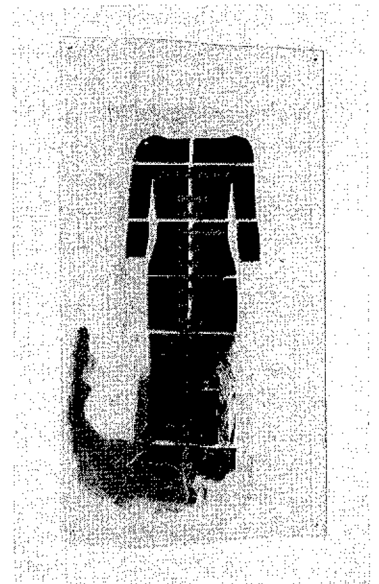
Additionally, most of the frequently decapitated bodies that fill them are unmistakably female. *Y2K Moschino Dress* (2016), a black, long-sleeved, tubular dress, is emblazoned with the words, "It's 2000. How do you feel?" and a score of possible responses to check off below. The terse format of the answers ("scared," "modern," "moody," "fat," "in love") mirrors the generic form of the dress, and recalls the silly quizzes found in women's magazines and the limitations such media puts on its readers. Our willing adherence to gender norms is also wittily critiqued in *Grid* (2016), in which a white body models a pink dress with a gray windowpane pattern. Her hands hang demurely at her sides, but Rafferty includes a third female hand that appears to place another piece of the dress on her own torso, as if to perfect the picture. Both works are comprised of semi-conjoined rectangular prints that organize the bodies into grids, thus elucidating how women are conditioned to see themselves as segments, commodified parts of a whole, but never one unified self. This is particularly evident in *Grid*, where the figure's legs appear to be sliced like so many pieces of cut-up ham.

Rafferty states that many of her idiosyncratic processes—punching through paintings and then re-photographing them, allowing acrylic polymers to drip and ooze under the plexiglass, "waterlogging" her inkjet prints until they morph into multicolored blooms—were initially due to economic constraints, and she found inexpensive but ingenious methods to manipulate her found imagery until it spoke on its own. In this way, her work reminds me of Jasper Johns's famous sketchbook dictum, "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it." *In Jokes on You* (2016), Rafferty sheaths a number of life-size prints of women's designer clothing in one large plexiglass panel, which is then crudely cut into irregular sections. A "wife-beater" tee, a pink 1980s blazer that recalls Jackie Kennedy's infamous suit as well as Julia Roberts's made-over prostitute in *Pretty Woman* (1990, directed by Garry Marshall), and an oversized shirt printed with the *de trop* lashes favored by model Peggy Moffitt, are worked and reworked until they seem like shattered iconic remnants of the last century's culturally sanctioned tropes of pseudo-emancipated femininity. By including comedienne Phyllis Diller's self-deprecating one-liners as part of these encased collages, it becomes clear that "woman" is indeed a cultural construct.

Y2K Moschino Dress (2016) by Sara Greenberger Rafferty; courtesy the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery

Fittingly, Rafferty uses the words "benign violence" to describe the way her processes mutilate the original image.[1] Like "friendly fire"; "fresh frozen"; or the term George Carlin famously mocked, "military intelligence"; Rafferty's oxymoron initially rolls off the tongue with alliterative ease. Once pondered, however, the phrase is clearly insidious, and we are forced to realize that we are complicit dupes. Violence, by its very definition, is never benign—even if it doesn't mar the body, it always scars the psyche and distorts the memory, erasing what was ephemeral and leaving spectacle in its stead. This is adroitly implied in *Phyllis* and *Phyllis II* (both 2009), two found images of Diller that Rafferty then scanned and waterlogged—a process in which she saturates the image with water until it bleeds, and then rescans it to produce the final, fixed image. The resulting portraits are brilliantly colored and exquisitely blurred, formally reminiscent of Helen Frankenthaler's soak-stain method. But in Phyllis, the comedienne's red-lipsticked mouth becomes a hemorrhaging gash, recalling the vulgar slashes that suffice for lips in Willem de Kooning's *Woman* paintings (1950–53), or the macabre off-register mouths of Marilyn Monroe printed by Andy Warhol, and Diller's whole face becomes a polychromatic nightmare. "Woman" as parody once; "woman" as parody still.

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