

Sarah A. Weber
Artist Statement

**Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder; although it is sometimes in the mind of beauty.
It is a real thing, based on visible qualities of line, form, light, proportion and grace.**
Bob Colacello- *The Tyranny of Desire*

My paintings celebrate femininity and style. I explore fashion and the erotic appeal of women's clothing. This body of work also analyzes the change of silhouette and body image within the history of fashion; particularly from the early 18th century to the present. I encourage my viewers to simply enjoy a pleasurable aesthetic experience of looking at a work of art through elements of color and form.

Clothing is a form of nonverbal communication that reveals characteristics about the kind of people we are. The way we dress is a visual 'guide' to express attributes about us such as our personality, culture, gender, and/or sexual preference. Clothing in general is sexual. It has a close association with the physical body and an artificial object. It is the job of clothing to perform many roles such as protection, modesty and attraction, however it is used quite often to attract attention to the body. Valerie Steele, author of *Fashion and Eroticism* talks about two theories pertaining to the sexual display of women's clothes:

Attraction of Concealment Theory: Clothing is erotic because it arouses curiosity about the "hidden parts". When anything is in constant view, it leaves nothing to the imagination and tends to be perceived as ordinary and eventually, it is hardly noticed at all. By concealing the body, clothing arouses sexual curiosity and inhibits desire within a viewer. Whenever the female body is covered up, the exposure of any part focuses the erotic attention (42).

Shifting of Erogenous Zones Theory: Women's fashion is said to attract by means of selective exposure, concealment and emphasis on the various erotic "zones" of the body. These can be the secondary sexual characteristics (such as the breasts, hips and derriere) or parts of the body that acquire sexual connotations (such as the legs, feet, back, wrist, shoulders and so on) (34).

The theory of shifting erogenous zones is researched by fashion historian James Laver, he

writes:

“In the early 1930’s the emphasis shifted from the legs to the back. Backs were bared to the waist and, indeed, many of the dresses of the period look as if they had been designed to be seen from the rear. Even day dresses had a slit up the back, and the skirt was drawn tightly over the hips so as to reveal, perhaps for the first time in history, the shape of the buttocks” (241).

Laver is discussing the shift of sexual interest in the 1930’s to the bared back as erotic appeal.

Malcolm Barnard, author of *Fashion as Communication* also examines the shifting erogenous zone theory in relation to changes with fashion history. He claims that the shifts of sexual

interest of the female body are reflected in the ways in which fashions change (55). Barnard

explains:

For example, fashion designer Vivienne Westwood experimented in the mid 1990’s with the bustle as an attempt to shift attention to women’s bottoms, as opposed to their breasts or legs. She was interested in accentuating a “new” erogenous zone of the female body.

The progression of change within fashion is a primary theme within my paintings. I integrate several time periods within one composition, derived from fashion history. *Ladies #7* implies past and present through the female figures and their attire. Within this painting, there are seven figures the same size positioned across a rectangular picture plane. The female figure on the right is from the mid eighteenth century. She is wearing a formal ball gown with an embellished bodice and layered petticoats, typical of the time period. Standing next to her is a contemporary fashion model wearing blue jeans and a tight shirt revealing her stomach. The pose is reminiscent of a runway model with her hand on her hip and balanced contrapposto with her weight shifting to one side. There is also a reference to the early 1920’s style. The tubular figure next to the contemporary model is suggestive of the flapper look with the long necklace and tiered one-piece dress.

Fashion is always changing; it draws its inspirations from everywhere and anywhere. Stuart Ewen, author of *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* reveals: “With time I realized that any book about style which attempts to be *up to date* is doomed... One of the main points of a style is that it will not remain current” (Ewen 4). The suggestion of time and fashion infuses Cubism within my paintings.

Cubism was one of the most influential art movements of the twentieth century. It inspired new ideas in theater, literature, movies and fashion. Much of the origination of Cubism came from interest in the works of Paul Cezanne, by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in Paris between 1906 and 1908. The Cubists created an abstract, nonrepresentational method of painting to depict three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional plane while preserving multiple perspectives. The artists chose to break down the subjects they were painting into a number of facets, showing several different aspects of one object simultaneously. Cubism challenged the tradition of seizing natural objects from a single angle under the laws of perspective, a custom that had existed since the Renaissance. Cubism abandoned the theory that a painting is not fixed upon one single viewpoint and can be a complete illusion of reality through multiple perspectives (Cooper, 11).

Nonetheless, Cubism generated a systematic process of seeing. It introduced the portrayal of time by juxtaposing multiple facets of an object/person. In relation to this idea, my paintings convey movement and change. I incorporate the same model in different poses. *French Maids* exemplifies this concept: within the composition there are three standing ladies wearing French maid costumes. They are essentially the same model standing in three different poses. Looking from right to left, each pose changes to demonstrate a walking movement. Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* has inspired my work by the representation of movement. The figure depicted is multiplied and gravitates downward from left to right, portraying a sense of

mobility. Each pose overlaps each other to create the illusion of motion. *French Maids* is a more simplistic example, only using three figures, however it conveys much of the same notion that Duchamp intended.

The culture of Cubism influenced a reformation of change within the fashion industry. Through the years of 1908-1925, fashion abandoned the bold aggrandizing silhouette of the Belle Epoch and evolved into a soft and supple cylinder shape of the 1920's. Richard Martin, author of *Cubism and Fashion* reveals:

To melt the obdurate silhouette is one achievement of those critical years. To disintegrate the forms of dress, allowing for the multiple readings and ambiguities, is another. Like the dislocations of focus and the new lack of surety in perspective, fashion underwent a similar reformation in several stages. The flat overlaps that replaced the architectonics in wardrobe established planes in uncertain relationships. At times, we do not know what underlaps, and what overlaps. Further, in dresses by Vionnet, Chanel, and others, the new segments that form the garment are all of equal importance, causing the eye to flicker among the various fragments. In short, the same indeterminacy of forms that Cubism fostered in painting, sculpture, and collage obtains in fashion during the years of innovation, albeit fashion's process is more attenuated.

For fashion, dynamic lines realized on the flat plane could be equivalent of pattern pieces, and the process of design in two dimensions through draping could be parallel to Cubism's affirmation of the planar probity of art. Fashion serves as a kind of proof of the viability of Cubism: The Cubist aesthetic in fashion had to allow for movement and the workable surround of a three-dimensional being even while it expressed the forms of Cubism.

Within a group of paintings, I incorporate geometric patterns derived from plaid fabric designs. The grid blueprint is implemented primarily as a formal device for the break-up of the picture plane. I juxtapose portions that are well defined and precise with other areas that disappear into the background. The figures are integrated within the grid creating an interesting figure/ground relationship.

Process

I initially begin my paintings by laying out geometric shapes in charcoal or graphite that are derived from sewing design patterns. I analyze the basic construction of clothing and integrate female figures within. I draw the complete figure and use the shape of the clothing that the model is wearing as a method of abstraction. After everything is drawn in, I start to paint with thick and thin washes of paint. I spend a substantial amount of time drawing and it is important to allow some of the process and under layers to show through. This adds visual interest and hints at decisions that I have made throughout the painting process. There are some areas of the under painting that I leave untouched, only revealing traces of ghostly drawn marks. Color is then added monochromatically at first, so that I can understand the figure foreground relationships with the geometric shapes. After most of the painting is planned out I begin adding more color. Color is very significant within my work. I have chosen delicate combinations of pastels to suggest an ironic use of femininity and daintiness. These paintings are pleasurable to look and enjoyable to experience. The color is provocative in relation to the poses that I choose which are extremely flirtatious, fun and vibrant. The faces are obscured in each painting to have my viewer focus more of their attention on the body rather than a recognizable face. I find it more interesting to leave out the facial features so that the figures are not confrontational in any way. The “ladies” become more of a “general” idea of woman.

Edge contrast is also another element within this work that reveals particular characteristics of the female form. There are moments of clarity juxtaposed with geometric shape and blocks of color. I intentionally reveal certain sexual erotic zones of the body such as the breasts, thighs, legs, and buttocks. I also expose certain objects that relate to the sexual interplay such as high heel shoes and undergarments. Through edge contrast I signify the areas of the female body that are fetishized.

I refer to the concept of fetishism as an erotic appeal to either objects of fashion that have sexual connotations or certain areas of the body that are considered sensual. Fetishes can be categorized into two groups: animate and inanimate objects. An animate object fetish involves parts of the body such as feet, legs, buttocks or breasts. An inanimate object fetish includes specific objects such as shoes, stockings, or underwear. Within the inanimate fetish it can be divided into two parts: form and media fetish. In a form fetish, the object and its shape are important, such as high heel shoes. In a media fetish, the material of the object is important, such as silk or leather. Fetish clothing has influenced much of our contemporary fashion world, Valerie Steele suggests: “Today, bondage, underwear as outerwear, leather, and rubber dresses are all directly available from high end designers such as Versace, Gucci and Gaultier. In 1992, *Vogue* reported that many of the world’s most important fashion designers were inspired by sexual perversity. For the past thirty years, the “playful” use of fetishistic themes have been increasingly assimilated into fashion.”

Certain fetishistic objects appear in my work such as the stiletto high heel. In our contemporary culture, high heels are associated with femininity, sexual attractiveness, and sophistication. Women feel sexy and powerful wearing heels and also become enthralled by the “fetishistic” purchasing power of many pairs of shoes. A stiletto heel is basically a restrictive “garment” for the foot that enhances the curves of the body and also creates an erotic appeal. Nancy Etcoff, author of *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* talks about the high heel shoe:

Heels reached their apogee in 1953 with the stiletto, created in Italy and popularized in Paris. Heels are popular with women because they do much more than add inches. Model Veronica Webb, put it bluntly: wearing heels is “like putting your ass on a pedestal.” Balancing precariously on the balls of their feet, wearing heels forces women to throw back their shoulders and arch their backs, making their breasts look bigger, their stomachs flatter, and their buttocks more rounded and thrust out. And this is just aside from what they do the shape of the leg, which appears more toned, elongated, and recalling the shape of a leg tensed of arousal. And then

there is the walk, some said that the high-heeled walk is sexy to men because it hobbles the female- she looks fragile, and unable to get away quickly. Others, however think it's the way the hips move. As premier shoe designer Manolo Blahnik said, "I've done wedges—nothing gives you that feminine walk like a pair of high heels. I wouldn't be here if women could resist heels."

Horizontal Pastel Ladies incorporates the stiletto high heel. The composition integrates several women wearing pink high heels. The scale of the women is basically the size of a doll, very small and delicate. Each of the shoes are painted bright pink, signifying the cliché color of femininity. On the far left side, there are three life-size pairs of stiletto heels. Each shoe is a different hue of pink. The life-like quality resembles how throughout history, women have always wanted small feet. It was ideal to have little feet throughout many centuries. The size in reality of the shoes painted is probably a size 5.

Within more recent paintings, the pin-up illustration has influenced my work. I have researched the historical progression of pin-up art, starting in the 1920s and ended in 1970. Louis K Meisel, co-author of the book *The Great American Pin-up* explains that artists chose to paint pin-ups because they wanted to capture and celebrate the femininity of American women. The girls and women they portrayed were free from the influence of a warped fashion world or a distorted feminism. They looked the way most women of the time wanted to look and certainly the way men (particularly those returning from WWII) wanted them to look: sexy but chaste and all-American. Pin-up art was created for many purposes such as magazine covers, advertising, calendars, matchbook covers, ect. There were three categories of illustration: "glamour art", "the pretty girl subject" and the "pin-up". A "pin-up image" is one that shows a full-length view of its subject and characteristically has an element of a theme or some kind of story. The woman in a pin-up is usually dressed in a form-revealing outfit, either one that may be worn in public, such as a bathing suit, sun suit, or skimpy dress, or one that is more provocative and intimate, such as lingerie. A "glamour art" image may be either full-length view or a presentation of only the head

and shoulders of the subject. The “glamour” woman is generally attired in an evening gown, fancy dress, or some other attire that is less revealing than that in a pin-up. “Pretty girl” art is a term used to refer to a general appeal of widespread audiences. The woman depicted was modestly “sexy” and innocent, usually gracing the covers of publications such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Esquire* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* magazines (22).

The pin-up illustration has become an important reference for my paintings. I borrow poses of the women depicted and abstract them through my interpretation of color and form. I enjoy the aspect of feminine beauty that was portrayed at the time that they were created. The women are also very sexy and enjoyable to look at. *Four Sexy Looking Ladies* is a good example of how pin-up art has inspired my work. The painting is composed on four different panels with one woman in each of them. Each pose was borrowed from a pin-up illustrator. The painting of the far left has a woman swinging, holding up her dress just enough to reveal that she has a garter belt holding up her stockings. This painting was inspired by Gil Elvgren, a pin-up illustrator who was renowned for his daring portrayals of a sexy event happening to an innocent girl.

The costume uniform is a re-occurring theme within my paintings in relation to sexual fantasy. In her book *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power*, Valerie Steele suggests: “Uniforms are perfect for the kind of role-playing characteristic of fetishistic sex, because when wearing a uniform, the individual is subsumed by his (or her) role” (180). Uniforms frequently symbolize authority, evoking fantasies of dominance and submission. Several of my paintings include the sexy nurse, innocent schoolgirl, submissive French maid and authoritative policewoman. I am intrigued with how women are willing participants of these sexually charged fantastic characters. By painting these “characters” I am celebrating women and how it is ok to be sexy.

In conclusion, my paintings portray femininity and style. I explore fashion and the erotic appeal of women’s clothing. This body of work also analyzes the change of silhouette and body

image within the history of fashion; particularly from the early 18th century to the present. I

encourage my viewers to simply enjoy a pleasurable aesthetic experience of looking at a work of art through elements of color and form.

Works Cited

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