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Dress code

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DRESS CODE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Art in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Laurel Farrin

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Zoe Alaina Hawk

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art at the May 2011 graduation.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
DRESS CODE.....	1

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. <i>The Ladies' Room</i>	4
2. <i>Boarding School</i>	5
3. <i>Majorettes</i>	6
4. <i>Scout Camp</i>	7
5. <i>Red Flag</i>	8
6. <i>Recess</i>	9
7. <i>Fieldtrip</i>	10

DRESS CODE

We often observe girls wearing uniforms, waiting for a bus or playing in a schoolyard. On fieldtrips, they flood museums with their blue blazers and green plaid. They are depicted in books, dwelling in gloomy Victorian boarding schools or happily learning to sew from their Girl Scout leaders. We recognize from their collars, skirts, and buttons that they are in training and require guidance. They are intended to function as a unit, and are therefore instructed in group activities, taught to walk in orderly lines, and coded by color and dress.

Through these uniforms, my work investigates the relationship between identity, social interactions, and institutions. The implementation of uniforms and group activities is presented here not only as depiction of the practice itself, but also as a metaphor for the mechanisms of gendered socialization; normalized clothing, hairstyles and mannerisms categorize our identities and ensure our inclusion in larger society. The girls in these paintings are being trained to become ladies, as signified by their identically feminine garments. But within this attempt at assimilation, an intricate play of yearning, mischief, communion, and rebellion develops.

These characters inhabit their own little worlds within the boundaries of their respective institutions, acting out social and internal dramas that both reinforce and resist the homogenizing effect of their coded clothing: they flock and flee, exclude and embrace, quarrel and ally. Here the need to become integrated

into a group conflicts with a want of individuality, coinciding with a simultaneous longing and resistance towards femininity.

These scenes are often presented from a higher vantage point, allowing the viewer to look down upon the action. This is intended not only to better observe the formations created by the clustering and scattering figures, but also to reinforce the notion of institutional power and to implicate the adult viewer. This is furthered by the doll-like scale of the figures, which points to the malleability of young minds and bodies, and references the childhood play that readies children for their roles in society. In addition, the illustrative style of the paintings evokes school texts and storybooks traditionally used for the instruction of young girls and boys.

As the figures in uniform move across space, the repetition of color creates a visual effect similar to the experience of viewing a flock of birds or cluster of flowers, enforcing the collective. But upon closer investigation, expressions and gestures distinguish one figure from the other. Differentiations between each girl become markers for their individuality in the face of homogenization, whether it be a conspicuous act or a minute feature, such as an upturned lip or furrowed brow.

The girls engage in activities that seem to teeter on the edge of the humorous or morose, the gleeful or sinister. The perceived playfulness of standing on a chair may in fact be punishment; the reaching of one girl's hand towards another may be in the spirit of helpfulness or malice. The intricacies of their actions and relationships flourish, despite the unification of the group through enforced dress code.

Ultimately, the characters are not reduced to diminutive objects, doomed to be orchestrated and manipulated. On the contrary, these girls insist on their personhood. Some are quiet and contemplative, others rowdy and disruptive. There are thoughts behind their features; they are mournful, frightened, aggressive, loving, and cunning. The delicacy of their painted faces and lushness of their candy-colored worlds are testimony to their souls. Under the watchful eye of institutional power, the spirit of these girls endures as they reveal the complexities of their character.



Figure 1. *The Ladies' Room*. Oil on board, 36" x 36". 2010



Figure 2. *Boarding School*. Oil on board, 36" x 42". 2010



Figure 3. *Majorettes*. Oil on board, 23.5" x 34". 2010



Figure 4. *Scout Camp*. Oil on board, 36" x 42". 2010



Figure 5. *Red Flag*. Gouache on paper, 18 x 24", 2011



Figure 6. *Recess*. Gouache on paper, 22" x 30", 2011

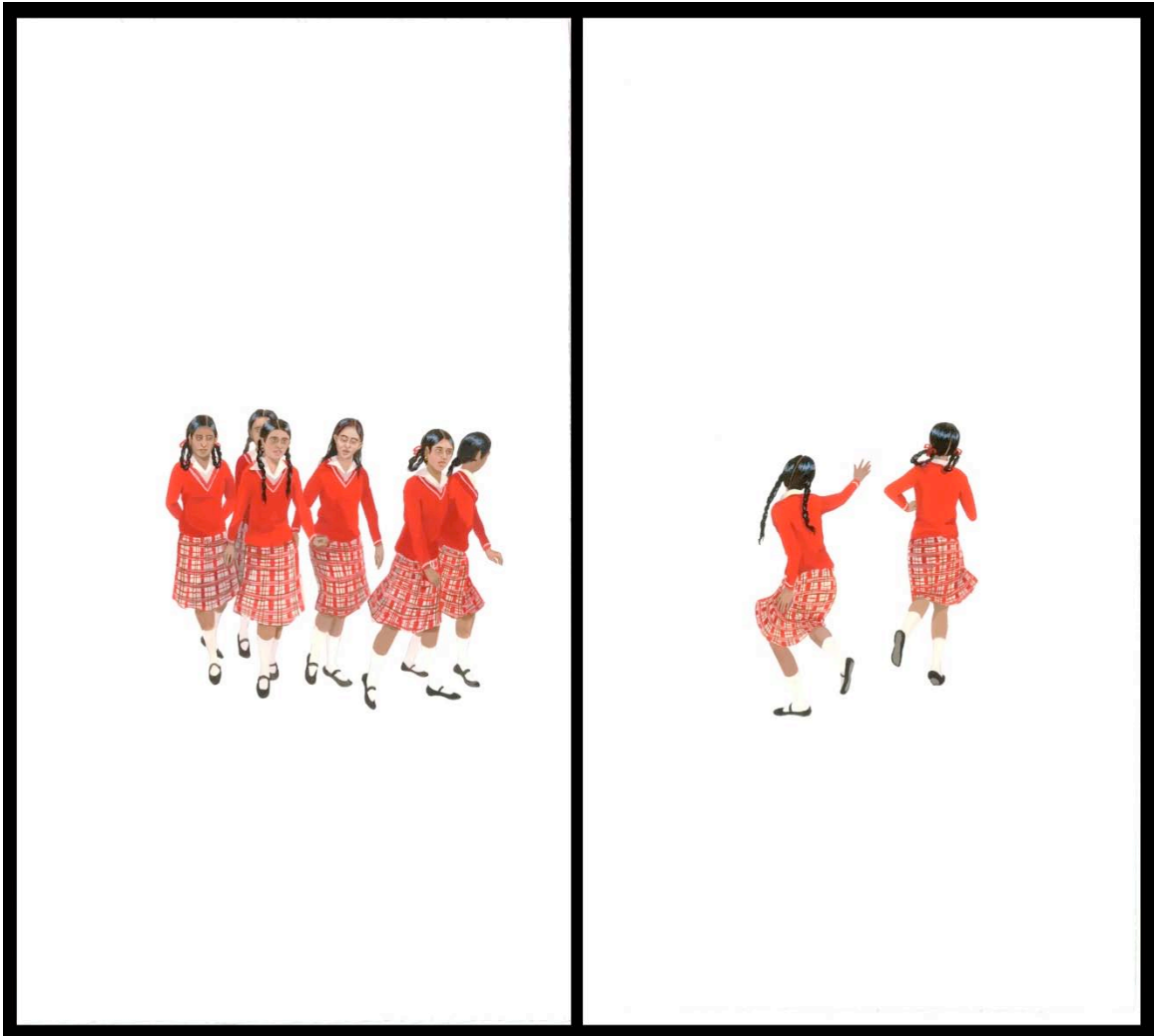


Figure 7. *Fieldtrip*. Gouache on paper, 22" x 25", 2011