Nearly symmetrical and definitely ostentatious

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NEARLY SYMMETRICAL AND DEFINITELY OSTENTATIOUS

by

Ali Hval

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

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Thesis Supervisor: Professor TJ Dedeaux-Norris
To TJ Dedeaux-Norris, for all the words of encouragement that will support my artistic career.
“Silence is about rediscovering, through pausing, what brings us joy.”
Erling Kagge, *Silence of Noise*

“Spotlight on me and I'm ready to break
I'm like a performer, the dance floor is my stage”
Britney Spears, *Circus*, 2008
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I will forever cherish my years in grad school studying alongside friends and mentors at the University of Iowa; the past three years were critical to understanding my own work, reigning in my most pertinent influences, and making endlessly and without boundaries.

I would like to thank TJ Dedeaux-Norris for helping me realize aspects of community involvement in my work, and Susan White for her generosity and countless life lessons. To my friends and fellow grad students, I thank Reid Dempsey for his candor, and for putting things into words that I could not, and Rachel Connell for daydreaming in the same direction as me. Last and definitely not least, I thank my parents for the eternal support in what I do.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The works and murals presented in my MFA exhibition, “Nearly Symmetrical and Definitely Ostentatious,” explore ideas of fast fashion, sensuality, and contemporary glamour through mediums of painting, ceramics, and sculpture. My rhinestone-bedazzled wall plates, oversized jewelry-like pieces, and painted spaces all play with the presence, presentation, and value of objects. Falling short of symmetrical, my flashy pieces seek to balance themselves in more playful and open spaces; flirtatious, attention-seeking, and deceptively superficial, they toy with their own actualities and potential. In a world which is always eager to move forward, I savor the slow transitions and limitless potentials an object experiences as it moves from one stage to the next.
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NEARLY SYMMETRICAL AND DEFINITELY OSTENTATIOUS

Rhinestones, synthetic fabric, faux gold, and shimmering fabrics evoke specific material things, from luxuriously bedazzled iPhone cases, to bronze-plated, Anthropologie-esque candelabras, to hammered gold earring and necklace sets. My work is born from these sorts of consumerist things, unapologetically aware of the limitations and assumptions its materials and appearance conveys. From a young age I have been a miner, continually gleaning things from the world around me, relentlessly stockpiling observations through text and image. This culling from my world has manifested into many forms over the years: diaries written with glitter gel pens, sketchbook pages doused in fifty-cent craft pigments, and scrapbooks bursting with slick printed images, scalloped glitter edging, and puffy pearlescent paint. I have always been captured by the surfaces and materiality of these outlandishly beautiful things, even in their base cheapness, and the way they dazzle a viewer and strive to maintain such a pleasing, attractive demeanor. I have yet to abandon these pleasant looking things, for they influence the way I approach dressing myself, that which swarms my spaces, and the things I find attractive—all collections I have composed in order to discern the image I am projecting into or seeking in the world. My work, too, seeks to illustrate what I have encountered and the perspectives I’ve occupied in trying to understand these encounters.

My process spotlights how I establish relationships with the sheer amount of stuff I encounter and its absorption with my own sensibilities. I notice the way surfaces of textiles mingle, how retail purchases are packaged and presented, how soft color schematics found in makeup palettes undulate under florescent store lights, and the various ways jewelry and clothing are exhibited to be purchased online. The way products, interior spaces, and catalogues are tailored, presented, and comprehended, are relationships I record and take to the studio.
Unearthing source material from the stuff and relationships that flood my everyday experiences, I embellish tapering ceramic forms and macramé and fabric-wrapped piping to play with this idea of encountering. My work showily advertises to its audience, but refuses an answer. It playfully suggests, but does not explain. It waltzes in and out of familiar places. It frolics with fast fashion, sensuality, and gem-plastic glitz, reaching toward certain specificities but holding back when pinned, like all-too weighty jewelry on limbs, against whimsically painted walls.

My work implores to put on a performance, to writhe within a space. The macramé and ceramic “nubs,” as well as the flashy, relief-like ceramic “wall plates,” dance with decoration in their meticulous materialization. The wall plates are unconventional marriages between wall sconces, frilly thrift store frames, and ornamental shields, all things which dangle off walls in homes, whereas the nubs hold a relationship with the body and body adornment. Both, however, are decorated and lovingly shielded with painted surfaces concocted of metallic paint and inexpensive crushed eyeshadow, grids of glitzy rhinestones, and silky wrapped limbs. The result is objects which are flirtatious, attention-seeking, and deceptively superficial, objects which toy with the actuality of what they are and the possibilities of what they might become.

The pieces I make harken to gilt home décor and gold-plated jewelry, comfortable within a painted space that shifts based on its surroundings and fellow inhabitants. Just as fast fashion transforms rapidly—constantly prompted by the upcoming season, runway fashion, neighboring stores in a mall, and its own previous collections—my work, too, swipes cues from what surrounds it. The distinction is pace; far from frenetic, I savor the transitions my forms make from one moment to the next, highlighting and relishing the amount of detail and repetitive energy siphoned into each piece. Once a piece has reached a pleasing conclusion, the idea for
the form is then melted down, stirred around, and reforged into something with a similar appeal to the initial object. Like charms on a bracelet, the objects and their respective environments gently undulate from one form to the next, each holding a familial relationship to the last. My work acknowledges that there are limitless points in a spectrum, and it loves that possibility: the possibility of infinite divisions, combinations, and permutations.

Temporary and fluctuating, the walls, too, purr potential. They are the summation of imaginary venues the objects can slink in and out of, only conjured when the objects have a physical audience. Against these shifting backdrops, a piece has boundless ways of being framed within the hard-edged rectangular photograph or square Instagram format, either as a tiny glint on a wall or as the main performer. I create my own images from the work, and viewers further frame their own rendition while in a space and establish a new relationship to it. My pieces are not perfectly planted in lit acrylic cases on velvet backdrops, where the diamond ring is blatantly star; rather, they exist in environments which shift and move the focus of a space.

These painted spaces flow from my pieces as if the pieces are wellsprings, reaffirming actions in the objects. Similar marks surface on the wall—albeit with less dimensionality and specificity—which exist in the objects. A slender, woven ceramic ribbon becomes a flat and winding line on the wall, just as the tightly wound wrapping of an object becomes the sharpness of a flat coat of paint wedged up against another. The facets of resin rhinestones bedazzling a thing like glitzy armor is stretched and abstracted to become a larger pattern on a wall, and the sloping curves of a wall piece are echoed in curves and loops that extend from it, and the pieces always whisper hints to the walls, as the walls snag actions from gestures in the pieces.

These works are meant to be imagined in other contexts: in the home, on the body, or in relation to surrounding things. Even in the presentation of my work through photographing and
enclosing it within the borders of a social media platform or backlit digital page, the work garners new appeal, as well as being illusive in that it loses its scale and potential worth. When not photographed in a painted space, the pieces are photographed individually and photoshopped with the whitest white background and airbrushed with a flawless, middle value grey drop shadow. The work loses context of any environment in this way, inciting the viewer to envision their own space for the object to exist. Crisply staged and packaged to a cozy square or rectangle, an object cropped on a flat wall becomes something new beyond its physicality.

Acts of painting and re-painting walls, coiling fabric around pliable structures twirled up from cotton piping and wire, and stippling rhinestones across surfaces made from rounded forms is akin to amending human imperfections. Like applying an Instagram filter to an image, the object is covered in another layer that uproots it from reality and relegates it to a space of pure image. The near symmetry of the objects themselves perpetuates the act of fixing their faults; the pieces have a human quality in that they are aware of their flaws and what conceals them. From afar, they appear self-assured and proportional, but up close, their drooping, lopsided handles, less-than-smooth facades, and obvious asymmetry humbles them. The surface or covering of the object Photoshops whatever self-proclaimed blemishes the object has, illuding its perception.

I insist on refining my pieces with their surfaces, and thus hand-studding a piece with rhinestones without using guides or a laser grid, such a cheap, mass-produced material becomes more precious—the material becomes literally and visually weightier, incrementally, with each repeated motion and the combined total effort. The cheap excess of the rhinestones sparkles in sharp contrast with the meticulous effort funneled into their recontextualizations.
This fixation on repetition is a part of my everyday ritual. It is a nod to the effort put into everyday routines and habits which accumulate over time to something grander and plumper with information, like how one adorns oneself with jewelry, makeup, and clothing until a satisfactory feeling of completeness is achieved. The clay forms, sitting pretty from a distance and especially when on camera, are meticulously treated to attain a fullness or rightness. In the context of an environment, the pieces become performers on the wall, animated gestures which open and evolve to something beyond a rigid structure.

These pieces are sensual and bodily, glitzy things which embrace and empower women's sexuality rather than hiding or denying it. Growing up in the south, being chaste and suppressing one's sexuality was normalized for women, and my work is an ongoing attempt to figure out how to balance my own sexuality with what I have learned since moving from the south to somewhere more open-minded: how can I embrace my own sexuality in a way which is liberating to me, rather than solely believing it must be either what I learned growing up or in this new, more open-minded place I moved to? There is some in-between conclusion that exists between these two points on a spectrum, a balance I am striving to unearth in understanding my own relationship to my body. My work, too, is a balancing act: one between the sexuality of my forms and the innocence and playfulness of the materials I use to understand my own relationship to my body.

The objects that transpire from the materials encircling my experiences have requirements to meet, ways in which they must be dolled up and presented, pieces and parts that trickle into them in order to give them the desired fullness of value and sensuousness of form I seek. The massive abstract wall drawings that accompany the sculpted forms, however, are more open and fluid to adjustments when painted and re-painted, shifting forms and color schemes
while still retaining a sense of their previous iterations. The ceramic pieces have a natural end at their edges. The wall drawings shift slowly and dance through a space. Both, though, undulate from one moment to the next, savoring each transition and fluctuating unhurriedly in a world where things are eager to move on. My work settles down to reminisce, glistening actors in their well-loved homes.

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