



Posted on Wed, Nov. 28, 2012

UMKC group exhibit 'Look Attractive' takes aim at misogyny

Show is a compelling reminder of the societal forces that still objectify women's bodies.

By NEIL THRUN
 Special to the Star

Seven artists explore body image and feminism in "Look Attractive," an exhibit of photographs, paintings, drawings, prints and video at the UMKC Gallery.

Carol-Anne McFarlane's "Female Target Series" depicts female silhouettes in poses suggestive of advertising and pornography. The solid black silhouettes each have a target — just like the targeting pattern used at gun ranges — over the genital area.

By turning the sexy female silhouettes into gun targets, McFarlane is comparing the media's objectification of the female body to the objectification of an animal when it is "de-subjectivized." Her metaphorical gun is either a penis aimed toward a woman's vagina, or the gaze of the viewer, morbidly focused on a woman's body. Still, these metaphors are not present to incriminate male viewers, but to instead incriminate our cynical culture for its marketing of female bodies.

Erin Zerbe's "Control" is a video of an overweight woman putting on underwear. The woman starts with simple panties, a bra and some tights. She continues, putting on more tights, girdles, and form-fitting tank tops. By the end of the film, the woman is breathing heavily and getting sweaty. Each item of clothing gets tighter and tighter, until the woman is letting out small grunts of pain. With the final bodice tied, the woman's form is squeezed into an hourglass shape. She then quickly undresses.

The three-minute labor of putting on more than a dozen undergarments is an effective metaphor for the work and potential injury many women face when trying to reach an "ideal body." The bodice is the perfect symbol for the kind of "augmentation" many women have historically faced, while the use of nylon girdles makes clear that the 21st century has continued inventing means for subjugating a woman's body. These ideas are nothing new, but Zerbe's video is a good reminder that these problems have not disappeared.

Dawn Woolley's "Substitute Series" are large printed photos of what appears to be men and women making out, but on a closer look something else is revealed. While the man in each photograph is real flesh and blood, each of the women is merely a photograph. Each woman's paper cutout is carefully cradled and embraced to give an illusion of sexual activity.

The metaphor is obvious; what we are seeing is no different from pornography. All of Woolley's photographs take place in environments such as parks and fire escapes, not unlike pornography, where the fantasy of sexual passion overrides any taboo of public decency.

While there is something silly about these men kissing paper photographs, the implications are realistic: As digital media become more advanced, sexual activity no longer requires two people. Instead, we have "sexual interactivity" between a person and an illusion.

Curator Davin Watne's "Look Attractive" is full of strong selections, including Kate O'Donovan Cook's androgynous "Waldorf" photographs and Max Key's "Wad," a still-life painting of abstract candy blobs.

In today's world, feminism is no longer a fringe ideology, but its acceptance into mainstream culture is incomplete unless it fully displaces misogyny, especially in marketing. All it takes is a television to realize that sexism persists and that women are still largely marketed as sex objects. Because feminism and misogyny are "equal" ideologies in today's culture wars, this current of feminist artwork is important.

© 2012 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansascity.com>