

WINTER 2015  
MATERIAL GIRLS



# EXHIBITIONS | CENTRAL GALLERY

## Material Girls

Morehshin Allahyari, Jaime Angelopoulos, Christi Belcourt, Katherine Boyer, Karin Bubaš, Andrea Carlson, Ying-Yueh Chuang, Raphaëlle de Groot, Abigail DeVille, Soheila Esfahani, Ran Hwang, Sarah Anne Johnson, Felice Koenig, Deirdre Logue, Rachel Ludlow, Jodie Mack, Amy Malbeuf, Sanaz Mazinani, Meryl McMaster, Allyson Mitchell, Dominique Rey, Winnie Troung, Alex Cu Unjieng, and Marie Watt

Curated by Blair Fornwald, Jennifer Matotek, and Wendy Peart

JANUARY 30 TO APRIL 5, 2015

Raphaëlle de Groot Artist Talk: Friday, January 30, 6:00 pm, RPL Film Theatre

Opening Reception: Friday, January 30, 7:00 pm

Rather than preparing a communal curatorial essay for *At the Dunlop for Material Girls*, each curator has contributed an individual text on thoughts informing the exhibition or selected works within. This moves from our desire as co-curators, to acknowledge the distinct ideas and individual views we each share about the exhibition.

## Being Material

by Wendy Peart, Curator of Education and Community Outreach

I am a material girl. I'm not necessarily the kind that flocks to Prada handbags or Gucci sunglasses, but the kind that is mesmerized by the nuts and bolts section at the hardware store or cannot resist touching the molten wax on a burning candle. I love stuff and its potential to scintillate, to speak, to do damage, and to cultivate an idea.

Popularly known as the material girl, Madonna's debut album came out when I was in high school. I carried a love/hate relationship with her and her mainstream popularity, overt sexuality, and exaggerated presentation, but I nevertheless



respected her. I could not say then what I know now, that she was, and still is, a feminist icon, albeit a controversial one. She eluded definition, controlled her own representation and charged sexual persona, challenged gender conventions, and mastered the media. She has reinvented herself multiple times over and remains a shrewd businessperson as well as a viable beauty icon.<sup>1</sup> Her venture is absolutely invested in the material and the commercial. Nonetheless, she has always known how to work it.

Titled after perhaps the most ubiquitous of Madonna's many singles, the exhibition, *Material Girls* was born from a personal interest in female artists who work within and through materials to challenge notions of excess, desire, and consumption. Working with Dunlop's curatorial team of two other women, this basic premise immediately expanded, becoming a survey that reflected the number of talented women artist using materials to push the boundaries of tradition while harnessing distinct female voices. Challenged with this abundance, *Material Girls* became somewhat excessive in itself, maximalist, lush and decidedly girly. This exhibition is a gallery takeover of women artists who are claiming space, plundering through a lexicon of gendered assumptions, and challenging cultural homogenies. These artists reference our sensate condition, acknowledging our immediate relationship to the tactile things that stimulate our imagination, our desire, and our unique relationships with the material world.

One of the striking commonalities in this exhibition is a predominate, but oblique exploration of the female form. Dominique Rey, Rachel Ludlow, Sarah Anne

Johnson, Meryl McMaster, Raphaëlle de Groot, Winnie Truong, Sanaz Mazinani, Amy Malbeuf, and Morehshin Allahyari reference the female body in their works, but these bodies are abstracted, absent, obliterated by other material forms, or repeated ad infinitum. This is perhaps not surprising. Arts education research notes that when young girls draw, they very commonly draw the female body, excessively decorated and exaggeratedly feminine.<sup>2</sup> Works in the exhibition address queries relating to the subjectivity of the self, the narratives embodied within cultural representation, and the politics surrounding the fetishization and ornamentation of the female body. More importantly, these works incite the transformative potential of re-envisioning or reconstructing the self, demonstrating what Lucy Lippard describes as the “significant psychological factor (that) converts these bodies or faces from object to subject.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, the work takes a cheeky peek into the pleasures (or denials) of the female body, and its cultural, sensory, and sexual significance within a charged political sphere.

It has been a fascinating and gratifyingly indulgent challenge to curate this exhibition, which expresses an abundant multiplicity of personal, cultural, and gendered perspectives. *Material Girls* embraces this bounty, filling the gallery like a teenage girl’s bedroom, in all of its space claiming, self-identity asserting, and coming-of-age glory.

<sup>1</sup> *Forbes* cited Madonna as top earner on their *Celeb 100* list in 2013. *Forbes* website, accessed January 5, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/profile/madonna/>. Additionally, the 56 year old was recently announced as the face of Versace’s new fashion campaign. Charlotte McDonagh, “The ultimate Material Girl!” *Express* December 4, 2014, accessed December 5, 2014, <http://www.express.co.uk/life-style/style/543605/Madonna-Versace-fashion-campaign>.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Machón, *Children’s Drawings: The Genesis and Nature of Graphic Representation*, (Madrid: fibulas PUBLISHERS, 2013), 351-357.

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Womens’ Body Art,” *The Pink Glass Swan* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 102. Reprinted from *Art in America* 64, no. 3 (May-June 1976).

## Some thoughts on Miley Cyrus, *Material Girls*, and the aesthetics of feminine excess

by Blair Fornwald, Assistant Curator

As you may have heard, pop star Miley Cyrus, also famous for nudity, twerking, and lasciviously sticking out her tongue, is a visual artist now. She made her debut at New York Fashion Week last year with a solo exhibition titled *Dirty Hippie*. Endorsed by fashion designer Jeremy Scott and celebrity gallerist Jeffrey Deitch, Cyrus's show contained a half-dozen trippy, intensely-colourful sculptural assemblages produced in the marijuana-fueled wake of her beloved dog Floyd's death. She evidently found comfort and purpose in the therapeutic act of "gluing a bunch of junk to stuff,"<sup>1</sup> adhering trinkets from fans, plastic toys, googly eyes, rainbow-coloured pony beads, pompons, neon hair extensions, and a joint to a sleep mask, a vibrator, and a five-foot bong, among other things. They look a bit like Mike Kelley sculptures (as Deitch noted), but they also look like rave garbage. They're dumb, but Cyrus didn't set out to create staggering works of genius: "I had a bunch of fucking junk and shit," she explained to *V Magazine*, "and so instead of letting it be junk and shit, I turned it into something that made me happy."<sup>2</sup> Consider for the sake of argument that Cyrus' statements might be of the faux-naïve, Warholian variety, not indicating a lack of intelligence, but rather reflecting a stubborn refusal to trump up what she's doing, to obfuscate her true intentions by suggesting that the theoretical framing of the work is more important than the work itself, and the pleasure she received in making it. Perhaps she's not a "pop pop dumb dumb," but someone strategically and politically positioning herself as the unflinchingly lowbrow anti-diva.<sup>3</sup>



The work itself, while produced under the disarming guise of art therapy, is not without art historical precedent. Gleefully constructed from a hoard of craft supplies and sentimental objects, it is sexual but not sexy, abject, autobiographical, garish, and accretive. Cyrus' work shares aesthetic and conceptual grounds with a certain kind of feminist art: Méret Oppenheim's fur-covered teacup that implores one to imagine it spit-wet against the lips, Judy Chicago's busy tapestries and yonic tablewares, Carolee Schneemann's manic and absurd *Meat Joy*, Yayoi Kusama's obsessively polka-dotted or phallus-covered surfaces, Liza Lou's sparkly, kitschy, beaded kitchen and backyard barbecue scenes, Tracy Emin's dark, sad confessions, Sarah Lucas' slackerish post-feminist sex jokes and celebrations of smoking.

Excessive materiality – particularly in the wake of conceptualism, minimalism, and other dematerializing practices — suggests discursive excess as well. Specifically, it suggests a textual outpouring that extends beyond the boundaries of discourse, into messier emotional and visceral realms, like Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*, the inscription of the feminine body into text.<sup>4</sup> The aesthetics of excess are found in, or reference, vernacular spaces: the pages of Lisa Frank sticker books, the full tables of potlucks, the surface patterns and textures of the domestic sphere, the crowded interiors of thrift stores and teenage bedrooms. Excess speaks to the pleasures, discomforts, and unruliness of the body, its messy outpourings and subjective truths.

*Materials Girls* embraces this aesthetic. As curators, we have shamelessly toed the line between “enough” and “too much,” a strategy that encourages uneasy but productive dialogues to emerge. We have filled the gallery to its maximum capacity, allowing



the exhibition to spill out into other spaces, to weave its tangential threads through related exhibitions, performances, and screenings. *Material Girls* is not a perfect reflection of where feminist art is at, or where it should be.<sup>5</sup> Where it succeeds, however, is in its ability to suggest affinities between seemingly-disparate entities, practices, or politics. Envision, for instance, how Karin Bubaš' dreamy, sublime photograph of candy-coloured clouds of smoke hanging in a landscape and Raphaëlle de Groot's comparatively weighty *Stock*, womblike sacs of performance detritus hanging from the gallery ceiling, both document fleeting gestures and moments of claiming space for the feminine. How Deirdre Logue claims the space between her own legs, transforming her vulva into a glittery disco-ball-like surface, repositioned not as a site of Freudian lack, but as one of production, plentitude, and pleasure. How Andrea Carlson draws the viewer into a seductive vortex of her own, where conflicting styles, cultural signifiers, and images of invasive marine species coalesce to form an unsettling metaphor for assimilation. How Jaime Angelopoulos' charmingly crude, brightly-painted abstract sculptures reference a vulnerable, exertive body and how Felice Koenig's meticulously-dotted, luminously-textured forms might do the same, but differently. *Material Girls* proposes all kinds of difficult marriages: between high and low culture, between micro and macro politics, between knowing and feeling, brains and guts. It gestures toward feminism's endless capacity for growth and reassessment, and toward feminist art's real-world-changing aspirations.

<sup>1</sup> Kevin McGarry, "Miley Cyrus Presents" *V Magazine* online exclusive story, accessed December 29, 2014, <http://www.vmagazine.com/site/content/2963/miley-cyrus-presents>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> See Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No 4 (Summer 1976), 875-893.

<sup>5</sup> The exhibition regrettably privileges cisgender women's experiences and voices.

## The Decorative Effect

by Jennifer Matotek, Director/Curator

The demonization of femininity, according to writer Julia Serano in her book, *The Whipping Girl*, is enforced by categorizing and vilifying typically feminine traits. These qualities include being consumed by an interest in the decorative. Women are also often used as decoration – in popular video games, films and television, women all too often serve as attractive background to a central male story. Despite the expectation for the decorative female to be neutral, demure, and hypersalient, decoration itself is rarely neutral. Works by several artists in *Material Girls* dispute the presumed neutrality of decoration, creating culturally- and politically-charged works that simultaneously embrace multiple facets of the decorative impulse, including repetition, exquisite craftsmanship, and declarative beauty.

Many of these artists use culturally-specific design motifs and imagery to reflect hybrid identities and perspectives. Korean-born artist Ran Hwang's *Two Love Blossoms* is comprised of hundreds of freely-moving decorative buttons hung on pins. Fragile and sensuously beautiful, the work's airy qualities are in sharp contrast to the laborious process of its making. Soheila Esfahani also combines "hard" and "soft" media, inscribing intricate motifs and designs onto wooden shipping pallets. As an Iranian-born Canadian citizen, Esfahani is interested in the idea of cultural translation, of how one can hold onto the perspective of one's culture while living within another culture. The shipping pallet is a sculptural medium that embodies ideas about perpetual transit, and translation as something that "carries across."



Ying-Yueh Chuang's porcelain plates, painted in primary colours and laden with ambiguous-looking fruits and vegetables, display some of the hybridity Chuang feels as a Taiwanese-born Canadian artist.

Other works make use of the specific narratives and histories embodied in materials. Marie Watt's works use woolen blankets, which may refer to the domestic sphere, womanhood, colonial trade, or potlatch. Creating tall and stately towers of folded blankets, Watt's work potentially asserts the power of matrilineage. Christi Belcourt's gorgeously symmetrical paintings follow the patterns and style of Métis floral beadwork, and speak to her deep respect for the traditions and knowledge of her people. Her works also express ecological concerns, such as the global extinction facing plant species, many of which are used in traditional medicine. The subject matter of Regina artist Katherine Boyer's beadwork is equally personal, cultural, and political, drawn from her Métis heritage in general, and her family history and travelled geographies in particular. Abigail DeVille's immersive installations also emerge from a personal place, and frequently speak to the experiences of those close to her. The materials used in her work are deliberately humble; found and inherited, often decorative, objects are configured in ways which connect, literally and abstractly, to historical events and political issues such as marginalization, connecting a material world with an otherworldly universe.

The female body is used as a kind of subversive decoration by several artists in *Material Girls*. The yonic pattern in the wallpaper of Alex Cu Unjieng's *I Know Very Well, But Still...* could be seen as a celebration of the beauty of the vulva, or a means

of drawing attention to and countering the ubiquity of the phallic form in everyday life. Sanaz Mazinani's *Together We Are* is symmetrically patterned, referencing traditional Islamic tilework and tapestry designs. From afar, it resembles a two-dimensional object unfurled, but close up, the pattern tells a different story – images of a bikini-clad Paris Hilton kaleidoscopically merge with images of a female suicide bomber, two “types” of women, Eastern and Western, each problematically empowered in different ways. Allyson Mitchell uses decorative objects to allude to a strong feminine body. In the photograph, *Fifty Shades*, two doilies and a macramé wall hanging “stand in” for primary and secondary female sexual characteristics. As the artist states, the work “visualizes the “the body” as sign vs. symbol.”<sup>1</sup> Morehshin Allahyari's internet work *Like Pearls* alludes to the erotic female body from a contemporary Iranian perspective. Comprised of gifs and text fragments, the images Allahyari uses are derived from spam email advertising lingerie to women's husbands. Such invitations seem to be about female enjoyment, but are, in fact, for the pleasure of men. The artist refers to these texts and images as “explicitly regional” and “nicely censored,” with white or textured patterns decoratively covering the bodies of the lingerie-clad models.

Decoration's depth goes far below the material surface it inhabits. Decorative acts are always culturally-specific, politically-charged, and pervasive, never to be reduced as exotic. What we may perceive from our limited points of view as being decorative, are never light, easy or neutral. Everything has a history, and everything is personal.

<sup>1</sup> Allyson Mitchell, “Creep Lez, 2012” Artist's website, accessed January 3, 2015, [http://www.allysonmitchell.com/html/creep\\_lez.html](http://www.allysonmitchell.com/html/creep_lez.html)



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## Credits

WINNIE TRUONG *Transitions* (detail), 2014, pencil crayon on paper. Collection of Erin Stump Projects. Image by Don Hall.

MERYL MCMASTER *Meryl 2* (detail), from the series *Second Self*, 2010, digital chromogenic print. Image courtesy of the artist.

RAPHAËLLE DE GROOT *Stock* (detail), 2013, sculptural installation. Collection of Galerie z20 Sara Zanin Gallery. Image by Don Hall.

EXHIBITION VIEW. Image by Don Hall.

EXHIBITION VIEW. Image by Don Hall.



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