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Domestic bliss

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Domestic Bliss

Carrie D. Spencer

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

School of Art, Design, and Art History

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis monograph and the body of work it accompanies to my paternal grandmother for providing great inspiration to my life. I also dedicate this to my mother for her unconditional love and immense support throughout all of my endeavors.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my fellow graduate students in the MFA program at the SADAH. You have each touched my life in a unique and special way as we have grown together over the past few years. Without each of your support, understanding, and compassion I would not have been able to make it. You have been the best part of graduate school and I am proud to call each of you my friend.

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Abstract

Domestic Bliss is my ceramic sculpture and mixed media MFA thesis exhibition with supporting written monograph. Through the combination of these works I investigate influences in my life, which ultimately affect the choices I make regarding my role in domestic space. I critically examine illusions of domestic bliss, specifically myths about female domestic roles, emphasizing the impact my grandmother and her hand-made dollhouse have had on my life.

When I was a child I spent every other weekend with my dad. Because he lived next door to my grandparents, this meant spending every other weekend in my grandmother's garage. This is where I performed what became a bi-weekly routine of examining my grandmother's dollhouse. Upon entering the garage, I went straight for the stool, stowed securely in its usual place. I dragged it over and opened it up in front of the dollhouse, perched high up off the ground on a countertop. After flipping on the switch to ignite all of the tiny lights, I climbed onto the stool and began my work of studying all of the small objects. I would pretend I was a doll and that this was my house. I examined every tiny piece of furniture, every picture, and every rug. I would stare at the patterned wallpaper and imagine walking up the staircase. Although this became a routine, every time was like the first time. It was as if I had never seen that small basket before or wondered why I could not just close my eyes and suddenly be small enough to live in this miniature oasis. This only lasted a few minutes during each visit but it felt like a lifetime as I was immersed in the comforts of the dollhouse. (Fig. 1)

There was a safety I felt within the walls of my grandmother's house. Upon entering the kitchen through the back door, my bare feet immediately felt the warmth of the heated linoleum floor. As I called out, "Grammaw?," no matter where she was in the house she rushed to greet me with her usual enthusiastic smile and open arms. I instantly felt comforted through her offerings of treats and suggested activities for the two of us to do. Not only did I experience comfort from her, but I also felt comfort from the relationship I witnessed between she and my

grandfather through the kindness and respect they had for one another.

Observing a small kiss they shared and seeing the happiness my grandmother felt while sitting on my grandfather's lap left a lasting impression on my young mind.

I found serenity in this place and through the confidence and gratitude my grandmother experienced from her life.

The experience of living in a single-parent-family-home often left me with feelings of isolation and detachment. My grandmother and her dollhouse allowed me to believe in the possibility of one day creating a domestic life for myself that brought the happiness and comfort I longed for as a child. This liberated me from the confines of my broken home and gave me a feeling of freedom to choose my domestic life and roles within the home. The perfection I saw as a child in the dollhouse and within my grandmother's life set an example of domestic bliss.

As I have grown older, however, I have conflicted feelings about misconceptions that challenge the freedom to choose my domestic roles. I experience an assumption, from my peers and popular culture, that, as a woman, I will fulfill certain traditional domestic roles. Often this expectation is veiled by a materialistic seduction into a traditional lifestyle. My thesis exhibition examines, what I now regard as, illusions of domestic bliss and addresses the conflicts within my own life that test those freedoms I once felt. I critique myths about home life and domestic roles through my ceramic sculpture and mixed media.

Wallpaper addresses one illusion about domestic bliss. It serves as an attraction to home life through the idea of comfort and security. (Fig. 2, 3) This is conveyed through

the assumption that the gallery is a place of comfort and warmth since the viewer is immediately presented with *Wallpaper* upon entering the space. This is much like the patterned walls of the dollhouse, which gave a feeling of comfort and warmth to the space. This feeling however, quickly becomes an illusion because the piece serves as a lure into the gallery. The feelings of comfort and warmth abruptly end once the viewer is presented with the strange, disturbing, and cold objects found throughout the rest of the gallery. This is similar to the lure within my own life to marriage through the sense of stability that it will provide. Many young women feel that marriage will add permanence and order to their lives. “We’re living in unstable times, both economically and politically, and marriage can feel very secure,” say Pamela Paul, author of *The Starter Marriage*.¹ This can create unnatural or false attractions to certain domestic roles through the lure of safety, making this an illusion of domestic bliss.

Wallpaper is from a needlepoint rug my grandmother made for her dollhouse. (Fig. 4) I scanned the rug to make a digital image of it and then tiled the image to create a repeating pattern, retaining the appearance of cloth in its digital version. This adds to the initial cozy feeling the wallpaper gives to the gallery since the largest wall in the gallery has the appearance of fabric. The yellowish color of the wallpaper, a reference to the nicotine-stained walls of my childhood home, with orange and brown viney floral pattern also adds to the warmth provided by the wallpaper.

Miriam Schapiro and Sherry Brody used a similar tactic of providing an initial serene domestic setting followed by startling discoveries in their collaborative assemblage, *The Dollhouse*. (Fig. 5) *The Dollhouse* consists of six fully furnished rooms, all of which are elaborately decorated and constructed. This serves as the lure to the

¹ Julia Gaynor, “Are You Dying To Get Married... Or In Zero Rush?,” *Cosmopolitan*, April, 2005.

apparent “beauty, charm, and relative safety of the traditional home” and then is

juxtaposed with “the unspeakable terrors that actually exist there.”² Schapiro states

*there are birds pecking at rocks in the seraglio, a rattle snake curled up on the hardwood floor. Outside the nursery window, a grizzly bear stares at the monster in the crib, while the real baby sits near by in an alabaster egg menaced by a scorpion, unmindful of the alligator resting on the shelf in the bookcase. Ten men stare in at the kitchen window, representing a mysterious menace from outside.*³

These ‘terrors’ and dangers can be compared to the alarming objects found within my exhibition.

All of the sculptural objects in the exhibition are combined with ceramic casts of sex toys. Sex toys are objects I use to symbolize freedom and liberation, which I once experienced from my grandmother and the dollhouse. In their function, sex toys suggest sexual independence and liberation for women. Having the ability to self-satisfy, women are not dependent on a partner for sexual pleasure, instead women are able to self-soothe and self-love. Portraying this aspect is important because I use it to represent my role of a single, childless, independent woman; a role negatively referred to as a spinster or “cat lady.”⁴ My role is often viewed as socially unacceptable or abnormal by my peers and stands in opposition to the traditional roles within the home. By juxtaposing a symbol of freedom and liberation with domestic objects I am able to examine these conflicts.

Bottle addresses the myth that childless women live empty, bankrupt lives. I convey this through the juxtaposition of baby bottles, used by a mother to feed, nurture, and pacify her child, with sex toys, used by a woman to instead pacify and care for

² Arlene Raven, “Womanhouse,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 64.

³ Women’s Collective Gallery, <http://womenscollective.blogspot.com/2010/06/show-would-close-with-images-from.html> (accessed March 9, 2012).

⁴ Kiri Blakeley, “Crazy Cat Ladies,” *Forbes*, <http://www.forbes.com/2009/10/14/crazy-cat-lady-pets-stereotype-forbes-woman-time-felines.html> (accessed January 20, 2012).

herself. (Fig. 6) This startling combination of objects resembles the angst I feel from the expectation and ultimate illusion that bearing children will be my ultimate achievement and will essentially be the most important factor in attaining domestic bliss. Feminist authors Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels address this myth in their essay *The New Momism*:

*[Women] are fed up with the myth- shamelessly hawked by the media- that motherhood is eternally fulfilling and rewarding [and] is always the best and most important thing you do.*⁵

This myth leaves some women to feel as if “there’s something really wrong with you” for not sharing this belief.⁶ This can be seen in the romanticizing images of motherhood in magazines like *People*, *Us*, and *InStyle* which have an

*endless parade of perfect ‘sexy’ celebrity moms who have had babies, adopted babies, been to sperm banks, frozen their eggs for future use, hatched the frozen egg, had more babies, or adopted a small Tibetan village, all to satisfy their ‘baby lust’.*⁷

Furthermore, “it is no achievement to simply give birth,” one journalist writes, as she condemns a deadbeat mom.⁸ This illusion makes women, like myself, who do not have children, feel isolated. In fact, it even makes me feel reluctant to express a desire to remain childless.

In *Bottle* the sex toys are attached at the top of the bottles where the nipples should be. This combination creates a certain amount of tension due to the implication of sexuality and babies. Whether it is the baby sucking on the sex toy, or the mother

⁵ Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, “The New Momism,” in *Reconstructing Gender*, ed. Estelle Disch (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2009), 237.

⁶ Douglas and Michaels, 237-238.

⁷ Douglas and Michaels, 241.

⁸ Petronella Wyatt, “The state penalizes women who are childless and unmarried: ‘I might be single, but I’m not a failure’,” *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/9115575/The-state-penalises-women-who-are-childless-and-unmarried-I-might-be-single-but-Im-not-a-failure.html> (accessed March 7, 2012).

penetrating herself with the sex toy attached to a baby bottle, the 'new' function of these hybrid objects seems wrong.

The objects are arranged on the shelf in a row, side-by-side. In this way, they are similar to a display of trophies, signifying the myth that motherhood is the ultimate accomplishment. The shelf is slightly above eyelevel, forcing the viewer to look up at the objects as if they are placed high up due to their importance. The shelf is white with decorative edges and resembles a functional shelf found in a home to store bottles, jars, or mugs. The objects were created through a clay slip casting process that allows me to cleanly combine two objects that are normally not together, giving them a trompe l'oeil quality. This provides a visual surprise for the viewer and ultimately an illusion. The surface of the bottles is a clear, matte glaze that highlights the soft white clay and allows the objects to remain detached from varying associations of color. The white color allows these objects to feel cold, detached, isolated, and bare which contradicts the comfort and warmth provided by the wallpaper and also mimics the isolated feeling I experienced as a child and now as a childless woman.

Utensils represents the expectation from my peers and the media to conform to a traditional pattern of domesticity and the frustration I feel with these expectations. This is conveyed through the amalgamation of ceramic sex toy casts combined with casts of handles of a common kitchen object such as a spatula, a bottlebrush, a meat hook, salad tongs, and a turkey baster. (Fig. 7) There is a tension and uneasiness these new objects create which is similar to the tension and uneasiness I experience when confronted with these expectations.

I use the familiar, common household object handles to represent the traditional and ‘normal’ roles that I am expected to perform, roles are thought to be just as common and customary as the household utensils. These handles are part of small, hand-held familiar domestic tools. I then juxtapose them with the sex toys, which I use to symbolize my role as a single, independent, childless woman; a role that is thought to go against the comforts and order found in traditional domestic life. My intention is to invite the viewer to enter into the piece through this ‘gateway’ of familiarity and commonality of the objects. The five forms glazed matte white, which allows the objects to feel cold and stark, and represent isolation. They are arranged side by side, hanging on the wall from aluminum jello molds, which are altered to include hooks for hanging the ceramic forms. The jello molds, which belonged to my grandmother, are reminiscent of the miniature aluminum dishes I once studied in the kitchen of the dollhouse. Their display is also similar to the display of kitchen utensils in the miniature utopia. The ceramic forms are disturbing in the fact that the viewer can imagine the new function of a turkey baster bulb attached to the end of a string of pleasure beads, or a vibrator on the end of a meat hook handle.

The utensils possess tension and uneasiness, which is similar to the anxiety I feel when faced with these expectations. They expect for me, soon approaching my thirties, to already be married with children. Within this pattern, my peers’ traditional expectations also often include superficial aspects of domestic life such as a stereotypical engagement with much emphasis on the ring, followed by elaborate announcements, wedding invitations, and of course a huge white wedding. Through various forms of peer pressure I am given the false impression that this traditional pattern of fulfilling certain domestic

roles and the materialistic appeal is commonplace and customary. This can be seen in the overwhelming amount of photos and photo albums on Facebook, dedicated to ‘the ring’ and ‘the big day,’ as well as Facebook applications like “My Baby’s Progress” which gives weekly status updates on my friends pregnancy progress. Magazines and television shows glamorize these expectations through materialistic appeal.⁹ This social media push subconsciously sends me messages that in order to achieve domestic bliss and fit in, I must adhere to these expectations and I am fooling myself for not doing so. Other single, childless women also experienced this pressure as one woman writes in an article *I Might be Single, But I’m Not a Failure*, about being subject to “disapproval” and being told “you must have a baby. People will think you’re abnormal.” And in her quest to find ‘Mr. Right’ she was astonished to hear from friends “you can always divorce. A divorcee is better than a spinster.”¹⁰

Rocker represents an illusion about women and the role of mother. I convey the anxiety and frustration I experience from this misconception and the conflict to perform this role through the strange juxtaposition of a rocking chair and sex toy-cushion. (Fig. 8) There is an assumption that women have an inherent natural desire to have children and there “are heavy social pressures” to follow that assumed role.¹¹ This makes happy childless women, like myself, feel as if we ‘have issues’ for not experiencing this ‘natural desire.’

⁹ *Cosmopolitan* reminds women of the importance of the ‘big day’ with articles like “The Big Ring: Does Size Really Matter More?” and *Say Yes to the Dress* makes the idea of marriage suddenly seem so much more attractive by flaunting sexy, stylish wedding gowns.

¹⁰ Wyatt, 2.

¹¹ Kathy King, “Confrontational Ceramics: The Artist as Social Critic,” ed. Judith S. Schwartz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 173.

By adding the sex toys to the cushion of the rocking chair the conflict is presented in the choice of comforting the baby by rocking and essentially choosing to perform the role of mother, or comforting and pleasuring oneself with the altered sexual pleasure-cushion, essentially choosing childlessness. (Fig. 9) The frustration and illusion associated with the role of mother challenge my freedom of choosing my roles and ultimately of attaining domestic bliss.

The piece consists of a wooden rocking chair, painted white, with a ceramic cushion resting on its seat. The cushions surface is covered in light peach flocking fibers, imitating the fibrous surface of an actual cushion. It is combined with three sex toy casts that are protruding from the center of the cushion and are arranged in a line from front to back. Often white and light pastel colors are typically associated with babies and baby nurseries; nursery furniture is sometimes white and baby bedding is usually “baby blue” or light pink. Rocking chairs are usually an essential item in the baby nursery during the early years of parenting. Mothers spend many hours rocking while nursing their baby, reading to baby, or simply calming baby. A comfortable cushion on the seat of the chair is also thought of as essential since mother spends so much time sitting in the chair. The peach color mimics a fleshy color, which pushes the idea of a woman’s bare body coming into contact with the cushion when she sits on it to pleasure herself. However the fiber flock would make this impossible or uncomfortable at least in penetrating oneself with the sex toys because of the dry, fuzzy surface. Imagining the sensation of this act leaves one feeling tense and uneasy.

Kathy King is a contemporary ceramic artist who addresses the pressure women experience to bear children and the inner conflict she experiences with that choice. *To*

Reproduce or Not To Reproduce is a sculptural fireplace and mantle that consists of carved ceramic tiles, wood, mirror, and linoleum print.¹² (Fig. 10) The mosaic mirror frame that hangs above the mantle reads “To Reproduce or Not To Reproduce.” Placed in the center of the mantle is a ceramic clock with the words “Tick Tock” carved in its surface. The center of the fireplace has a carved image of a woman amongst flames and “provides the setting for contemplation on the subject of whether or not to have a child.”¹³ This piece represents the frustration involved in making this decision along with the pressure of an aging body taking away the choice.

In the piece *Emerging* I question the expectations to conform to a traditional pattern of domesticity and address the potential destruction of the seductive illusions. This is done through the creation of three-dimensional wallpaper that consists of ceramic sex toys and floral ceramic decals. (Fig. 11) The ceramic sex toy forms burst through the plainly painted wall. While each cast form is from the same sex toy, many are cut and altered to give the appearance as though they are emerging from the wall at varying levels. The forms were first attached to the wall and then covered with several layers of latex and paint. After completely drying, the paint and latex were peeled back to further suggest the forms break through from the wall. (Fig. 12) This piece is a culmination of the conflicts addressed in the rest of the exhibition.

The pressure and expectations to conform to certain domestic roles challenge the example set by my grandmother and her dollhouse. This causes me to question these expectations and illusions of achieving domestic bliss, but I often ask the question of whether these expected roles are inevitable. I fear succumbing to the lures and

¹² King, 173.

¹³ King, 173.

materialistic incentives of domestic life. This extreme apprehension is due partly to the isolated, mundane, chaotic, and destructive outcome of the illusions of domestic bliss.

The floral decals blanket the ceramic sex toys to signify a transformation of a single and independent role to a more traditional, customary role. The beautiful pink and purple roses on the forms serve as the lure and can easily be deceiving and ultimately be destructive. I use the sex toy to represent single, independent, childless women such as myself, and the floral decals to signify wallpaper, which I use as an ultimate symbol of traditional domestic life. The traditional 'pattern' I am expected to follow is represented visually in the orderly vertical pattern of the forms and decals on the wall, which ultimately give the effect of wallpaper. The possibility of destruction from conforming to the seductive illusions is represented by the forms emergence and essential break through from the wall, demonstrating their power, strength, and inevitability. The floral 'wallpaper' is destroying and damaging the cleanly painted, flat wall and the paint chips and latex particles on the floor are evidence of that.

My artwork is a reflection of the influences, myths, and illusions I have investigated in my attempt to achieve the freedom I experienced as a child. Questioning other models set from popular culture and social circles allows me to discover my true self. Evaluating the conflicts within my own life and recognizing these illusions has given me a deeper understanding of the core of domestic bliss. I believe it is essential to carve my own path and domestic life. Achieving bliss within the home is vital to obtaining contentment. I have been able to open my narrow view of my domestic roles as a contemporary woman. My artwork is a culmination of the lessons I have learned which will ultimately help me to create my own serenity. My grandmother and her

dollhouse provide a great source of inspiration for my artwork and my life as I pursue my passions in a career. With my deeper appreciation of these inspirations, I am confident I can communicate my ideas in future exhibitions and be a leader for contemporary women.

Figures



Figure 1: Untitled, 2010, Carrie D. Spencer. Photograph of dollhouse.



Figure 2: *Wallpaper* (installation view), 2012, Carrie D. Spencer. Inkjet print.



Figure 3: *Wallpaper* (detail), 2012, Carrie D. Spencer.



Figure 4: Untitled, 2010, Carrie D. Spencer. Photograph of rug in the dollhouse.



Figure 5: *The Dollhouse*, 1972, Sherry Brody and Miriam Schapiro. Mixed media.



Figure 6: *Bottles*, 2011, Carrie D. Spencer. Whiteware clay and wood.



Figure 7: *Utensils*, 2012, Carrie D. Spencer. Whiteware clay and aluminum jello molds.



Figure 8: *Rocker*, 2012, Carrie D. Spencer. Clay, wood, and fiber flock.



Figure 9: *Rocker* (detail), 2012, Carrie D. Spencer



Figure 10: *To Reproduce or Not To Reproduce I - Installation*, 2002, Kathy King. Ceramic tiles, wood, mirror, and linoleum print.



Figure 11: *Emerging*, 2012, Carrie D. Spencer. Clay, latex, ceramic decals, paint.



Figure 12: *Emerging* (detail), 2012, Carrie D. Spencer

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