

Va-Va Venus

Gallery Talk

In my thesis exhibit I explore gender and femininity in relationship to the formation of my own identity and memory of the many contradictions about gender that I encountered growing up. The fluidity of memory is an important aspect of my process. I am intrigued by how one memory can invade another, intertwining to form something entirely new. My work creates a narrative about my personal history. For this talk I have decided to give a little insight into my personal history in relationship to this body of work and to briefly touch on some of the topics that I have used to explore my personal history.

I grew up in Chicago, Illinois and am the only girl of three siblings. I have two brothers; one who is five years older than I, and the other is my twin. Growing up with two brothers I learned to be tough. I was extremely close to my twin; we would roughhouse and wrestle, play sports (tackle football being one of our favorites) and war games. We even shared all of the same friends, most of which were male. If I was not outside playing in the mud with my twin I was in the garage helping my father rebuild car engines. He called me his “little princess” (and still does) but my mother disagrees, calling me her “little tomboy.” I remember my mother coming home from work seeing me in the garage, oil smudges all over my clothes and face, shaking her head in dismay, and as she walked by she said: “I wish I had two sons and a daughter instead of three sons.”

Around the age of seventeen I got a job working at the trucking company with my twin and cousins. I was hired to paint advertisement signs but soon found myself attracted to the raw power of the forklift and the skill of the operators. I would watch the forklift operators maneuvering large palettes of merchandise, using the forks as if they were an extension of their own body—twisting and turning, pushing and pulling. I loved the sounds and smells: I can still remember the roar of the engines and smell of propane as they drove by, the sounds of the metal forks as they hit the hard dock floor. I worked there for almost ten years and was the only female driving a forklift in the warehouse. I

loved the job: the physicality of the work, using the forks as an extension of myself, having to be aware of my total surroundings.

When I started working there I was very naïve about my gender and how that separated me from the other workers. I always thought of myself as one of the guys, a lesson I learned well from my brothers and friends. As time passed I started to realize that gender was important in the way in which I was received by fellow employees and drivers. I would catch them peering and peeping at me around corners or through palettes. Eventually this became a game that we played with each other.

It is this “game” that the relationships and practices of looking first peaked my interest. It is this that started my research into peep show, burlesque, and American pin-ups. The way in which the female form is both revealed and concealed; the distortion of form that this creates; and the art of enticing the viewer into engaging in looking.

Another inspiration for my thesis work was *The Birth of Venus* by Botticelli. Venus represents the idea of female perfection and has become a metaphor for what the discovery of the nuances of the feminine experience has been for me. She both reveals and conceals her body. She is so beautiful that we do not notice the distortions in her form that help to create her soft silhouette. She stands in the position of the pearl as she is blown to shore riding a shell. I utilize the pearl as a stand in for Venus; a symbol of purity and innocence.

I also reference the “Doll on a Music Box, Truly Scrumptious” from the movie *Chitty, Chitty, Bang, Bang*. As a child I was fascinated with music boxes and I had many of them. My music boxes held my secrets and treasures. This installation and the objects within function as my music box once did, holding secrets and treasures around every corner.