

SWEET NOTHINGS

By

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A PROJECT IN LIEU OF THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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To the Women and Men who have supported me through this endeavor.

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Abstract of Project in Lieu of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts

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Sweet Nothings, a collection of sculptures, offers a new context in which women can be viewed. *Sweet Nothings* uses traditionally disempowering gender roles found in figurines to reinforce the binary conflict between the power of femininity and its objectification through the male gaze. By destabilizing a male tradition of commodification and voyeurism, my project transforms subjugated femininity into a strategy for subversion.

Embellishing human-like characteristics, *Sweet Nothings* accentuates the muted subtext frequently disregarded in figurines. The figurine is powerless because of her objectness; she was manufactured for display. In the sculptures, the figurine objectifies themselves so unabashedly that they reclaim control over themselves as a spectacle

taking full advantage of the viewer by cultivating tension between naïveté and awareness. Embracing Laura Mulvey's notion of male gaze and John Berger's female Otherness, *Sweet Nothings* uses visual routine to change the tradition of power dynamics and gender observation.

In my project, *Sweet Nothings*, the female is a constant "Other. Using this model of spectator and subject, my work addresses this conflict in femininity. *Sweet Nothings* evaluates the tension between something functioning as intended "bearer of meaning" and the decision to evolve into "maker of meaning." Positioning artifice against itself allows for new definitions of femaleness. If women are commodities and figurines are commodities, then I want my work to change the meaning of these figurines and by extension redefine femininity. Building on Duchamp's legacy, I create visual situations of appropriated objects that refuse the convention of commodification. Subverting the way these objects are visually consumed, my work complicates the notion of gender power. The figurines are still objectified, but on new terms.

PROJECT REPORT

Introduction

Sweet Nothings, my project in lieu of thesis, developed from my interest in appropriation. As a girl I would sit in front of the television surrounded by stacks of magazines. Piled high between *Teen Beat* and *Seventeen*, I would scan the pages carefully maneuvering my scissors around the coveted image. Organizing the excess of my selections, I built a visual archive of cute boys, landscapes, textiles, and women posing for the camera. Nothing seemed strange about this obsessive behavior of filing away for the visual database. In hindsight, it is much more bizarre that these were all collected under the glow of *Gone With the Wind*, *Sound of Music*, and *Mommy Dearest*, creating a very warped sense of female empowerment. A paper ritual I performed for at least ten years, sorting and saving these magazine images has now evolved to include intense digital image collecting and bookmarking.

While I'm grateful this collecting process never caused me to develop a poor body image or an eating disorder, it did make me acutely aware of objects, goods, and the ways they are displayed. I learned that I identify with these commodities and feel bound to become one. I identify myself as an object to be looked at; thus, my *objectness* determines my value. This realization has given me the authority to

manipulate gender roles and power dynamics. If I am an Other, then I need to redefine these terms.

In her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey wrote, “Women stand in the patriarchal culture as a signifier of the male other, bound by symbolic order in which men can live out [their] fantasies and obsessions. . . by imposing them on the silent image of women, still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”¹ In my project, *Sweet Nothings*, the female is a constant “Other.”² Using this model of spectator and subject, my work addresses this conflict in femininity. *Sweet Nothings* evaluates the tension between something functioning as intended “bearer of meaning”³ and the decision to evolve into “maker of meaning.”⁴ Positioning artifice against itself allows for new definitions of femaleness. If women are commodities, and figurines are commodities, then I want my work to change the meaning of these figurines; and by extension, redefine femininity. Building on Duchamp’s legacy, I create visual situations of appropriated objects that refuse the

¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 833.

² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger* (London: British Broadcasting, 1972).

³ Mulvey 834.

⁴ Mulvey 834.

convention of commodification. Subverting the way these objects are visually consumed, my work complicates the notion of gender power. The figurines are still objectified, but on new terms.

Women have always been the subject of voyeurism and commodification. By embracing the notion of male gaze and female Otherness, *Sweet Nothings* uses this visual routine to change the tradition of power dynamics and gender observation.

Through the following discussion of individual works in the exhibition, I will explore more fully the themes of commodification, voyeurism, and gender imbued in my sculptures.

Pack of Grey Standing Wolf

Pack of Grey Standing Wolf is a homogenized group of forty male, porcelain wolves circling themselves. Moving around an empty center, the wolves are oblivious to the small delicate fawn sitting on the cusp of the pack. The viewer approaches the work as the voyeur, an outsider observing a display before them. The circular arrangement of the wolves, pointed in continuous direction, focuses on a hollow center, an absent subject.

In this way, *Pack of Grey Standing Wolf* engages notions of gender and subject. Ceramic figurines exist in a traditionally feminine realm of collecting, display, and social class. Yet, these figurine wolves are gendered male because of the animals' association

with ferocity. Even as fragile domestic objects, the ceramic wolves still pose a threat to the fawn made from the same fragile material. The pack, focused on the empty center, hunts something not present. The lack of the Other *inside* the circle creates a persistent tension. The fawn, the sole female presence, rests on the outside of the group in the background. She is the literal outsider, the Other. The blank space in the center heightens the viewer's desire to make her the subject.



Figure 1. *Pack of Grey Standing Wolf*. Found object and table. 35 inches by 36 inches. 2010.

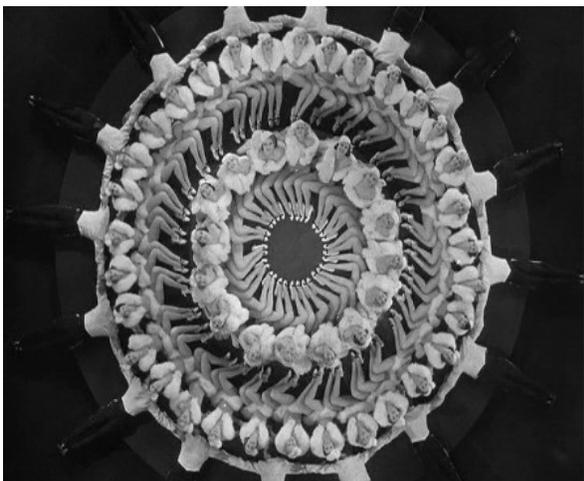


Figure 2. *42nd Street* Film Still



Figure 3. *Pack of Grey Standing Wolf* detail

The arrangement of figurines in this work is based on a kaleidoscope design taken from Busby Berkeley films, such as *Dames* and *42nd Street*, where dancers formed complex geometric patterns. Berkeley's work used a large number of showgirls and props as fantasy elements in spectacle-driven performances. The wolves perform in the same manner. In Berkeley's films, this commodified spectacle produces a desire for the homogenized mass.⁵ For the voyeur, the body parts become objects indecipherable from each other.⁶ The display is a bounty of material ready to be consumed. The subtle presence of the fawn interrupts this homogeneity of the mass-

⁵ "The spectacle subjugates living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them. It is no more than the economy developing for itself. It is the true reflection of the production of things, and the false objectification of the producers." Guy Debord, "Society of the Spectacle, 1967," (Marxists Internet Archive, Web, 09 Mar. 2010. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>) Section 16.

⁶ Siegfried Kracauer and Thomas Y. Levin, "The Mass Ornament." *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995) 75-86.

produced wolves. Rather than desiring the spectacle, the viewer is drawn to the Other, or the absence of such. Simultaneously, *Pack of Grey Standing Wolf* subverts the homogeneous and produces a desire for the Other.

Multiplicity

Multiplicity is a six-foot table layered with 600 tiny, mass-produced bunnies posing a critique to the commodification of the individual. The organizational strategy for the bunnies is based on display of collectibles common to flea markets or antique malls, where endless tables filled with salable objects are arranged with no discernable hierarchy. This display strategy makes the shopper's task overwhelming and absorbing. While many of these figurines are differentiated from each other, the amalgamation of goods makes their difference difficult to decipher.



Figure 4. *Multiplicity*. Poured plastic, paint and table. 6 feet by 1 foot. 2010.

Individually, the bunny exists as a trinket. As a group, the bunnies form a greater whole, allowing a change in the viewer's relationship to the original. Referencing back to Berkeley's musical productions, we know that desire can be effectively cultivated through commodification.⁷ In the dynamics of the spectacle, the object loses its individual value because of larger shifts in scale and space. Because the individuality of the bunnies is subsumed to the mass, the viewer's relationship to the male gaze becomes re-complicated. In *Pack of Grey Standing Wolf* the viewer desires the Other; in *Multiplicity* the viewer connects with the crowd of objects. This confusion elaborates the complexity of female representation and identification.

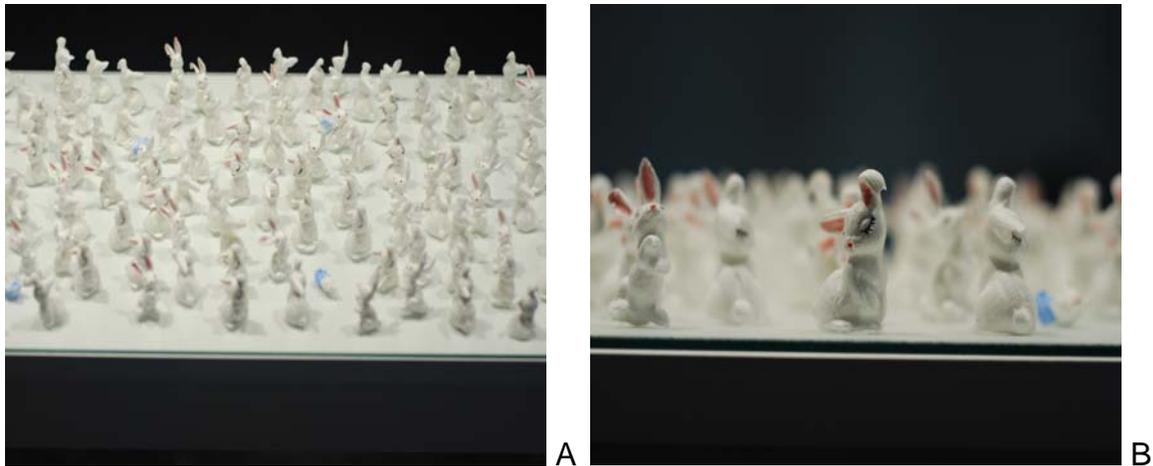


Figure 5. Series of *Multiplicity* details. A) Group view. B) Individual view.

The bunnies in *Multiplicity* are non-threatening, alluring, and demure. The addition of eyelashes and clothing amplifies their gender. Bunnies have always been a

⁷ Deboard "Society of the Spectacle, 1967."

part of popular culture yet, over time, there has been an inherently sexual shift from Peter Rabbit and Velveteen Rabbit to Jessica Rabbit and the Playboy Bunny. I'm interested in this popular idea of the sexy, reproducing rabbit. The title in itself is a play on the animal's sexuality and the popular term "multiplying like rabbits" or the cruder "fucking like bunnies." *Multiplicity* becomes a double play on this idea of reproduction.

The final collection has a complicated origin: the 600 plastic bunnies in the sculpture represent copies of copies of copies. Hagen Renaker, a porcelain miniatures company, produced the original figurines that sold as a family set: "Flirty Rabbit, Listening Rabbit, and Baby Rabbit." My original find was a plastic version of the porcelain miniatures, discovered at the bottom of a junk box in the middle of a forty-acre flea market. The version on display is a poured plastic sculpture made in multiples from a silicon mold—a handmade plastic copy of a machine-produced plastic copy of a mass-produced porcelain original. While the original form has been reproduced, to excess, it retains and redefines the sculptural notion of authenticity.⁸

Reproducing these copies marries manufactured reproduction with sexual reproduction and allows for a humorous analysis of the gendered commodity. Engaging

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999).

with Susan Sontag's model of camp,⁹ this low-value, plastic object moves beyond pure artifice and becomes something of meaning. In *Notes on Camp*, Sontag writes about the intersection between high and low art, defining the essence of camp as the love of artifice and exaggeration.¹⁰ "The whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious. More precisely, camp involves a new, more complex relation to the serious."¹¹ Each work in *Sweet Nothings* references this anti-serious approach with the gender objectification of figurines. The camp object disarms the viewer with its kitschy form, making the conflict of male gaze more accessible. Sontag goes on to say, "Camp discloses innocence, but also corrupts it."¹² The sculptures exaggerate the personified behavior to address built-in issues of social status and gender.

Chains

The *Chains* sculpture features an eight-foot trapezoidal table extending from the corner of the room. At the smaller far end is an elaborately dressed female figurine. She is embellished in pink and gold ruffles designed to match the two anthropomorphic,

⁹ "The Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense... it is not the familiar split-level construction of literal meaning and symbolic meaning. It is the difference between a thing meaning something, anything and the thing as pure artifice." Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Against Interpretation And Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001) 281.

¹⁰ Sontag 275.

¹¹ Sontag 288.

¹² Sontag 283.

spaghetti poodles at the opposite end of the table. Connected with two eight-foot sloped chains, the figurine restrains the pets as they veer toward the edge of the table. By embellishing human-like characteristics, *Chains* accentuates the muted subtext frequently disregarded in figurines. The figurine is powerless because of her objectness; she was manufactured for display. While the chain is gold, a material representative of wealth and privilege, its existence as a restraining circumstance cannot be ignored. The gold leash enacts the paradoxical tension between the powerless object and the reclamation of feminine identity. Yet the leash becomes a futile exercise of control as the disproportionate length gives the dogs the ability to reach quite beyond the normal limit. The exaggerated scale of the chain enables the leash to signify gender limitations, bound to domestic obligations and spatial margins.



Figure 6. *Multiplicity (table view)*. Altered found object. 8 feet by 2 feet. 2010.

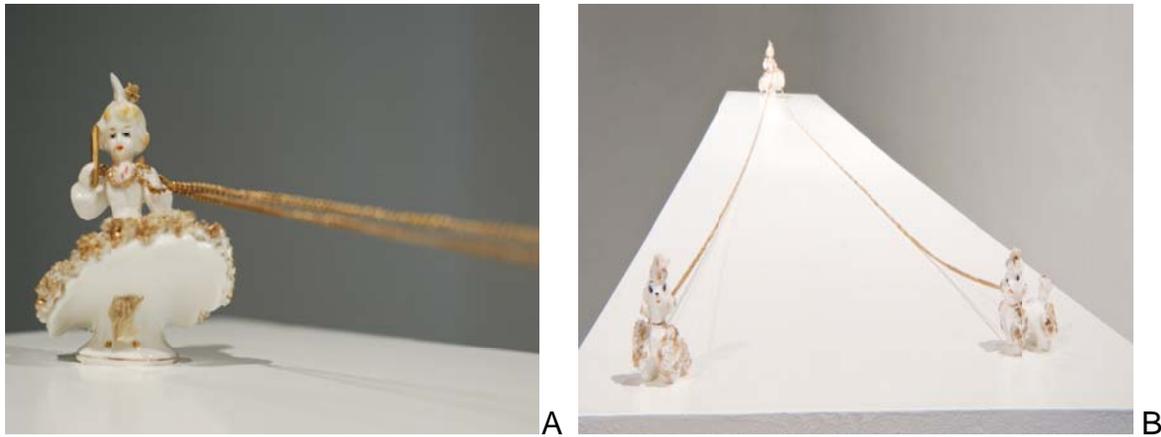


Figure 7. Series of *Chains* details. A) Lady detail. B) Tabletop detail.

Reminiscent of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, the woman is aware she may be bound to her dogs, but she does not hesitate to parade with them.¹³ She is acutely aware of her displayed behavior and decorative appearance and is not shy about the attention she creates, walking her likewise decorative dogs with long golden chains. In the sculpture, the woman objectifies herself so unabashedly that she reclaims control over herself as a spectacle, taking full advantage of the viewer by cultivating tension between naïveté and awareness. It is difficult to objectify someone so consciously objectifying herself through display.

The large table also justifies her behavior, as she commands so much space in the room. In contrast to their normal placement on tables, mantels, and curio cabinets,

¹³ Baudelaire's *Flâneur* has a double mission to exist in the public sphere as both objectifying observer and objectified observed. Charles Baudelaire and Jonathan Mayne, "The Painter of Modern Life," *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 2008).

each display unit in *Sweet Nothings* was specifically designed to unify object and display as an inseparable form, a strategy that removes the figurine from the traditional role of commodified decoration in the home. In *Chains*, adding to the figurines' command is the trapezoid shape of the table that plays with the idea of perspective. Like the chain, the table dimension creates a dichotomy as it pushes and pulls between flattened space and real space. The table dictates the viewer's behavior and redefines the occupied space of the gallery. On one hand, the figurines are decorating a tabletop as small, cute objects. On the other, they subvert that role by misbehaving: they leave the domestic space for which they were intended, and enter a sterilized gallery space to dominate this traditionally masculine zone.

Slick

Slick, the sculpture of a colonial woman surrounded by a tar-like substance, also shows a woman asserting herself over her surroundings. The juxtaposition between *Chains* and *Slick* elaborates that femininity is limited by gender roles and also by social status. In place of the chains holding groomed dogs, the figurine in *Slick* drapes a puddle of tar that circles her. *Slick's* provincial clothing, a signifier of social class, places her in the countryside. The fashion distinction between the cosmopolitan dog walker

and regional woman playing with tar introduces a labor division.



Figure 8. Slick. Altered found object. 30 inches x 36 inches. 2010.

Slick's gesture (the position of the body and hands, and the angle of the head) and the thick, black, sticky surfaces she holds, imply an event or performance unavailable to the viewer. In researching the cultural significance of ceramic figurines as a genre, I found that collectors use them as decoration and memento; a placeholder for a time or place that can no longer be accessed. As Susan Stewart has astutely observed:

The souvenir is to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience, and, at the same time to discredit the present. The nostalgia of the souvenir plays in the distance between the present and an imagined, prelapsarian experience. The location of authenticity becomes whatever is distant to the present time and space; hence we can see the souvenir as attached to the antique and exotic.¹⁴

¹⁴ Susan Stewart, *On longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, and the Collection* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 139-140.

As a result, the collection of figurines becomes a hunt for a memento, a reminder of something we can never experience again. The object is a keepsake and emotional holder. The detachment arouses sympathy; we are less involved in these objects and can enjoy them, rather than being frustrated by the emotions and nostalgia they produce.¹⁵

The heart of *Slick's* tension occurs in the thinly draped line stretched from the thick, black surface. The paint becomes an abstraction of femaleness. Sticky and in motion, the materiality of the surface speaks about the conflict between messy and clean, pure and infected; and the confusion of filling two roles at the same time. My overall work in *Sweet Nothings* seeks to define the female experience and the duplicity of being both “bearer and maker of meaning,” while challenging these binary positions.¹⁶

Mess (I)

Mess (I) also uses the materiality of poured paint to address this clash. Hung high on the wall is a small cherubic putto. His matte finish and creamy skin reinforces his angelic nature in contrast to the flowing abyss of latex beneath him. Stretched between his pudgy hands is a frail line connecting him to the draped paint beneath him. This tension between figurine and plastic form is an anti-modernist gesture. The glossy

¹⁵ Stewart 140.

¹⁶ Mulvey 834.

material mocks its plasticity. Clement Greenberg's medium specificity suggests that a medium needs to adhere to its inherent properties to be successful.¹⁷ *Mess (I)* challenges that meaning with a figurine at the helm by juxtaposing the decorative object against the fetishized paint.

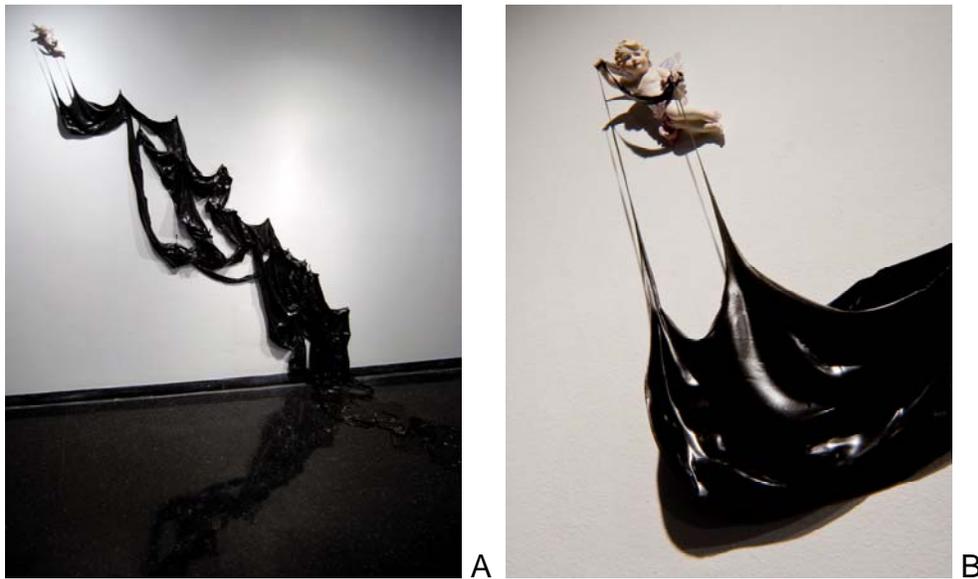


Figure 9. Series of *Mess (I)* views. A) *Mess (I)*. Found object and poured latex. Dimensions vary. 2010. B) *Mess (I)* detail.

The porcelain putto is literally playing with the poured paint, and with the idea of high and low material. In the canon of art history since antiquity, putti, or cherub figures, have held high symbolic visual value, while this modern incarnation as decorative ceramic ware has inverted this high value. Installed high on the wall, the figure in *Mess (I)* suggests the religious image of the putto participating in a mythological scene.

¹⁷ Emma Bee Bernstein, "Medium Specificity," *Theories of Media, Keywords Glossary* (The University of Chicago. Web. 09 Mar. 2010. <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/specificity.htm>).

Traditionally, putti are associated with Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, and accordingly with romance and eroticism; peace and prosperity; mirth and leisure. The iconography of the putti is deliberately unfixd. . . so that they may have many meanings and roles in the context of art. Later in history, the putti were used in renaissance paintings in relationship to the image of a nude woman. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger's book and film on voyeurism and commodification, the putti function as stand-ins for the sexually suggestive. In the film, Berger says, "Most nude oil paintings have been composed by the painters for the pleasure of their male owner"¹⁸ As a pictorial symbol of passion, in the form of a small boy, the putto exists as a nonthreatening, vulnerable form. The female subjects of Berger's discussion of oil paintings passively look at the spectator, submissive and silent. They exist to feed an appetite, not to have one of their own.

Mess (II)

The putto in *Mess (I)* is not a method by which to access the nude; but rather, a dialogue about voyeurism and representation. Anti-modernist and anti-male gaze, the sculpture uses the history of putti and the plasticity of paint to destabilize the popular symbols represented.

¹⁸ Berger *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger*.

In the center of the gallery floor, *Mess (II)* presents a different putto challenged with an overwhelming form. A putto mars a pyramidal pile of 450 pounds of sand coated with fifty pounds of pink powered hand soap; he and his wheelbarrow skid out of control down the slope of one side. The pink color and soft smell gender the sculpture feminine, while the soap itself reintroduces elements of domesticity. The scale of the pile contrasted against the tiny putto uses the aesthetics of camp to dethrone the serious and engage the absurdity of the putto's situation. The putto's task, whatever it may be, seems insurmountable.

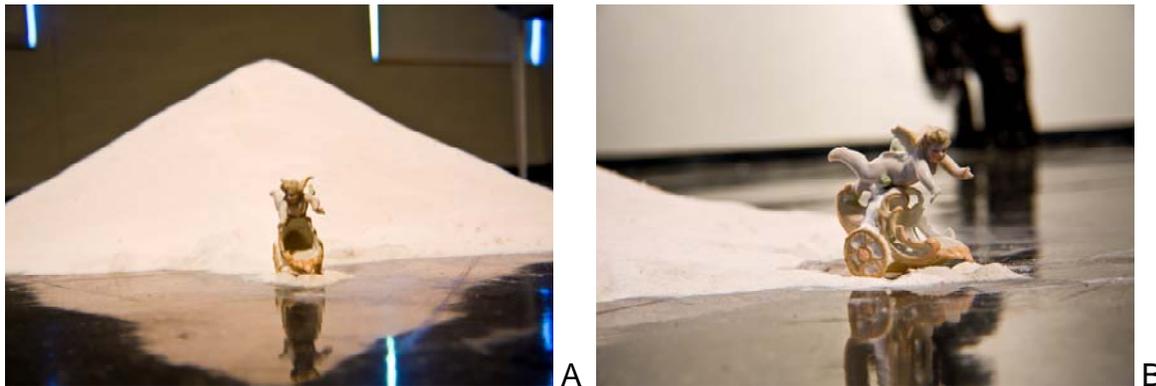


Figure 10. Series of *Mess (II)* views. A) *Mess (II)*. 450lbs of pink powered hand soap and found object. Dimensions vary. 2010. B) Detail of *Mess (II)*.

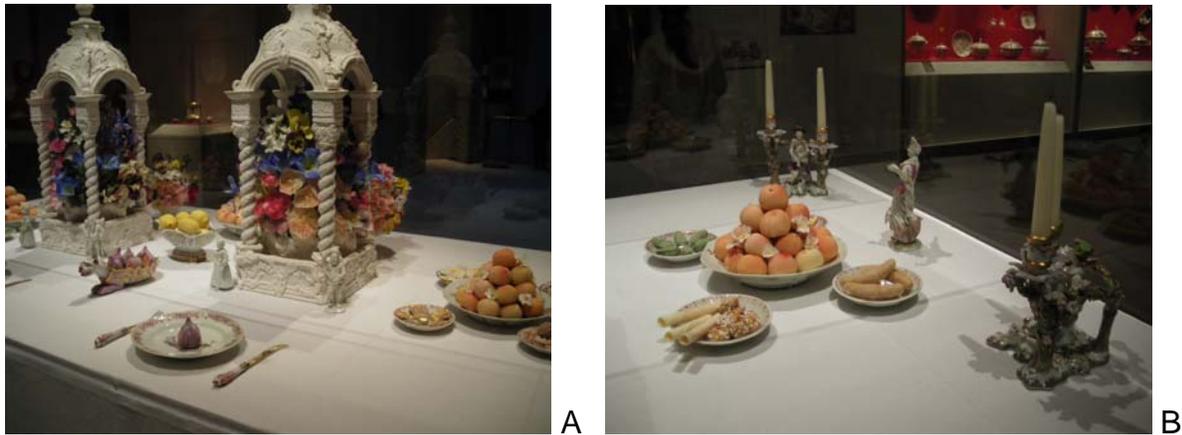


Figure 11. Viennese Dessert Service displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A) Side view of table. B) Detail of dessert service.

Unlike, other figurines in the exhibition this small putto and wheelbarrow are actually the only objects with a literal function beyond decoration. Normally this object would be placed on a dining table as a saltcellar. Guests would use the ceramic ware for the condiment on the table.

The Meissen Factory was the first European factory to produce a complete porcelain dinner service, which featured decorative figurines not unlike this putto saltcellar. Originally modeled out of sugar-paste, figurine decorations were used in the final *Konfekt* course, prepared by the pastry cook.¹⁹ Once the method of manufacturing porcelain was discovered in Europe, sugar sculptures evolved into ceramic models, which were then incorporated as part of the centerpiece for the table. These decorative

¹⁹ Coutts, Howard. "The Discovery of True Porcelain in Europe," *The Art of Ceramics: European Ceramic Design, 1500-1830*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 95-96.

objects became a permanent substitute in the dessert service, and were crafted much more finely than sugar.

As the commodity of Meissen porcelain ware became popularized, so did porcelain figures, with their creative placement on the table. The molded figures were created to embody the lighter, more comic mood of dessert. Two figures were often posed against each other, responding with animated expressions and mischievous frivolity.²⁰ With this whimsical use of ceramics and the differentiation of new types of wares, the figurine became a standard item of tableware throughout eighteenth-century Europe.²¹

Referencing the levity of the dessert service and proper etiquette, *Mess (II)* uses the history of the figurine to alter its meaning as a decorative object. The large pink pile and figurine merge to become one gracefully extended form, demanding much more space and attention than its function as a small, precious decoration. As in all the sculptures in *Sweet Nothings*, changing the figurine's meaning from passive to active allows us to observe these forms differently. Quiet and docile, figurines serve a gendered role because of their relationship to decoration and domesticity.

²⁰ Coutts 96.

²¹ Coutts 99.

Conclusion

Sweet Nothings offers a new context in which to view women. As a young girl, the notion of women tied to commodity shaped the way I viewed myself and the objects around me. As a woman and an artist, this perspective has only intensified and matured. The more aware I become of the male gaze and the culture of commodity, the more I seek to manipulate these concepts for my own empowerment. *Sweet Nothings* uses traditionally disempowering gender roles to reinforce the binary conflict between the power of femininity and its objectification through the male gaze. By destabilizing a male tradition of commodification and voyeurism, my project transforms subjugated femininity into a strategy for subversion.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jennifer Kahn is a sculptor addressing the social conflicts fashioned through materialism and identity. She was selected as an emerging artist by the Atlantic Center for the Arts, was a two-time recipient of both the Dennis and Collette Campay Scholarship, and the Albert K. Murray Fine Arts Grant. In the past, Jennifer has interned at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center as the marketing and gallery assistant. This summer she was selected to work at the Chianti Foundation, a contemporary art collection in Marfa, Texas.

Jennifer attended Florida State University (Tallahassee, Florida) where she earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts in studio art and a Bachelor of Art in English studies. In May 2010 she completed her Master of Fine Arts degree, in the School of Art and Art History at the University of Florida (Gainesville, Florida).