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Get Pretty

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Rochester Institute of Technology

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School for American Crafts
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts,
Glass program**

Get Pretty

by *Hye Sook Choi*

11. 7. 2016

Thesis Title: Get Pretty

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Thesis proposal

In my thesis I want to pursue a body of work that explores the ironic tendencies that accompany notions of beauty and desire within contemporary culture. Elements of luxury, obsession, gender, status, passion, satire, consumerism and popular culture will be used as sculptural motifs to conduct work that questions personal issues of identity in the context of current day societal convention.

This body of work will utilize characteristic associated with glass such as transparency, reflection, gloss, and fragility in order to express a heightened of vanity, elegance, and beauty. Moreover, kiln-casting and kiln-forming; fusing, slumping, and pate-de-verre will be used in conjunction with glass imaging process to create a meaningful relationship between form and graphic application in accordance to the content of each piece.

Thesis Abstract

I want to investigate the concepts of modern beauty and how it has an influence on people, particularly women in their 20s and 30s in contemporary Korean society. As society changes, the standard of beauty changes and the social expectations for beauty grow. In general women are more concerned about their looks than men are, because beauty plays a major role in their life through first impression and social status. However, with a strong focus on consumerism and society's standard of beauty, women have turned to materialistic goods, especially purses and high heels, to satisfy the artificial ideal beauty. It has resulted in women becoming more obsessed with the way they look and leading them to spend more time and money to acquire the products for their external beauty in order to enhance their self-esteem and to increase their confidence.

Purses and high heels are merely products, but they have a symbolic meaning of female desire that has become a reflection of the culture in modern day. As women's advancement in society has increased, they have been able to use purses and high heels as a means of expressing outer beauty more than practicality, and aesthetics to support their attractiveness. Those ordinary items have gained value into becoming "must have" items for the modern women and symbolize the desires for beauty in modern women. I believe that these products have become an obsession among the young generation that questions the personal issue of identity in the context of current day societal convention.

By investigating the ironic tendencies that accompany notions of beauty and desires, especially in women within the current day, my thesis aims to attain a better understanding of female behavior, obsession, consumerism, materialism, and vanity.

I have researched contemporary artists of international standing: Sylvie Flery who is known for her critical works which reveal fashion and luxury as deceptive appearances; Barbara Kruger who critiques consumerism and desires; and Hyun-jung Kim who seeks to break certain stereotypical expectations towards Korean women, revealing their real desires for beauty and addressing the faux-naïf. Their works reflect the feminine psychology: the desires for beauty, an obsession with luxury, and women's vanity which are related to my theme. I will look into their perspective of modern beauty and how they express their thoughts through their artworks.

Concerning materials, I have utilized characteristics associated with glass such as transparency, reflection, and glossiness in order to express a heightened sense of vanity, elegance, and beauty, which

fit into the themes of female desires. Moreover, I will use another materiality of glass: fragility. By using the medium of glass frits and powders to be seen as very fragile and weak, such as relics, that allows me to convey the message that nothing is permanent.

Through the satirical use of ordinary female items as a metaphor for female beauty in my work, I want viewers to reflect upon how they define themselves. My other intent is to focus on how personal identity develops in this era where beauty ideals are constructed.

Thesis Source and Research

Beauty is a highly subjective concept to define and the standard for beauty is diverse depending on the countries and cultures in which it is being judged. What one culture believes ideal beauty is can be deemed ugly by another culture. The famous saying “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” as mentioned above reflects that everyone has a different perspective, as each person has their own definition of beauty.

When I moved to the US four years ago, the most noticeable thing I observed was how differently women wear the clothes and put on makeup depending where they were from. It forced me to question what would be considered “normal” or “the standard of beauty”. Wherever I encountered something different from my own cultural standards of beauty, I thought to myself, like “how strange it is.” On the other hand, people might also be thinking to themselves that the way how I wear looked strange to them as the cultural standards of beauty and expectations are different. In other word, some of things considered attractive could be totally bizarre and unattractive to others as there is no standard of beauty in the world.

Although we cannot define the standards of beauty, the idea of beauty in 21st century has been manipulated as an outward look by mass media and advertising which creates a stereotype of what the socially ideal beauty is, especially for women. Jackson (1992) states that physical attractiveness is more important for female than for male because traditional female roles offer fewer objective criteria for evaluation performance than that of male roles. Hence, subjective criteria, such as physical attractiveness are more important in evaluating females.

It is particularly predominant in South Korea, where an appearance-oriented society and appearance has an enormous influence on success or failure in their lives. In another survey of job applicants conducted by a Seoul-based online job portal, 27.4 percent of job applicants answered that they think they were rejected at a job interview because of their looks, and 73.4 percent said they have considered plastic surgery in order to try to [do] better their chances the next time (<http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=7322673&page=1>). Inability to pursue the standard of beauty defined by society causes women suffering that contributes to low self-esteem and self-confidence. The study (as cited in Hickey, 2009) shows that women are under social pressures to be beautiful. Also it can cause an enormous problem to young women since they are more likely to define themselves by a socially defined standard of beauty.

In today's society, we are living in an age of mass media; the modern standard of beauty has been created by advertising, magazines, and cosmetic companies. Hickey (2009) stated that, "women in this capitalistic nation are woven into the cycle of commercialism and materialism in an attempt to fulfill their low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction." With the development of industry, a myriad of companies advertise products which could not only set the fashion trends, but also create the cultural standards of female attractiveness. Hickey further noted that focusing on an unattainable beauty ideal and being bombarded by advertisements from a young age causes one to turn toward products and other materialistic items to fulfill that false ideal, but it can also have some serious behavioral consequences like identity confusion or conspicuous consumption.

Beauty matters for women in today's society based on consumerism and materialism. Rapid economic growth and the arrival of capitalism changed the notion of beauty throughout the world, especially Asian countries. Additionally the advancement of females in society has also increased, allowing women to use purses and high heels to express individuality as a means of expressing physical beauty. To be specific, I have focused more on South Korea's contemporary society since many of the women in the younger generation have become obsessed with materialistic goods and spend more time and money on obtaining these products to be seen as more beautiful because beauty expresses personal identity and even social status in South Korea. One website, 'Asiasociety.org,' described the current status of the commodity market in South Korea:

Mr. Cavallo (Country manager of TOD's Korea, TOD is a name of brand) described Korea as a "dream market" and explained that luxury goods were a status symbol for Koreans. "My first impression of this market was really unbelievable," he said. "People coming out from the store are really excited after buying the bags and shoes." Mr. Shinn (Presenter of the news program Primetime on eFM) shared his journalistic perspective on the economic and social impact of Koreans' obsession with luxury goods. After South Korea's rapid modernization and economic growth after the Korean War, members of the upper class sought a way to distinguish themselves from the lower classes by buying expensive western goods. He explained how over the decades, this desire for luxury goods has contributed to issues such as bullying in schools and the pressure to exchange tens of thousands of dollars in luxury gifts between families when a couple gets married. (cited in Sohn, 2013)

I believe women in the younger generation, however, care too much about how they look. They are susceptible to chasing fashion trends; internalizing the superficial standards of beauty to look like a universal standard. They have resorted to luxury goods and wear them as a part of their outward appearance; a tool of how they are perceived by others.

This phenomenon is especially prominent in South Korean society. According to a Dentsu survey (2007), many young people in Korea are concerned about how they are judged by others surrounding them. 81% of middle school students, 82% of high school students, and 84% of college students are

more nervous about how people see them (M. Kim, 2011). The younger generation eventually ends up engaging in excessive consumption because it is a way of showing themselves off. For instance, women tend to show off their fancy purses, high heels, wallets, or cosmetic products to boost their outward appearance. Purses and high heels have surpassed the level of mere accessories that reflects women's consumer sentiment and now represent possessive desires as well as personal vanity.

About 10 years ago, there was a newly coined word in South Korea which is 'Doen-jang girl'. This term is satirically used to call a certain type of girl who is indulged in vanity like skimp on essentials, such as food and overspend on conspicuous luxury products. Y. Kim noted that, "[the] younger generation who cannot afford authentic luxury brand clothing and bags work part-time jobs to purchase a \$5000 dollar bag equivalent to two or three months' salary (1)." Another example of what "Doen-jang girls" do for their excessive desire for luxury is to purchase a shopping bag with a luxury brand logo on it, as if they can afford to buy a tremendously high priced commodity. This is not, however, the case for a majority of young South Korean women- generally just for those who live in the big city. This case can also be seen in another big city: New York City. One online article (<http://huffingtonpost.com/>) stated that:

[S]troll down any street in New York, get on any subway, and you'll see that women... discovering a way to show their so-called status, without actually having to spend thousands of dollars on their fancy store purchases... the fancy store shopping bag is now being used in lieu of the designer handbag itself... (cited in Freinquel, 2011).

Overall, modern women have a tendency to possess luxury products to upgrade their value through the image of the luxury product. The use of high heels or a high-priced purse, in particular, becomes the symbol of modern fashion; and women use them as a means to show their personal identity. This phenomenon has generated social pressure to be beautiful. According to Steele, "[high heels] are an intimate extension of the body and seem to say so much about our attitudes, sexuality and social status (cite in Siegel, 2013)."

There are some artists whose works reflect the feminine psychology: the desires for beauty, an obsession with luxury, and women's vanity. First, Sylvie Fleury is a contemporary female artist who is known for her critical works which reveal fashion and luxury as deceptive appearances.

Sylvie Fleury considers parallels between art and commerce with paintings, sculptures, and installations that critique intrinsic value rather than brand name affiliation of luxury goods. By using common advertising strategies including slogans and flashy presentation, the artist manipulates the optics of the modern economy. Her critique of superficial beauty has been compared to Pop art—she has painted sweaters stretched seductively over the female body, added furry sections to Mondrian-esque compositions, composed small arrangements of luxury shopping bags, and gilded shopping carts and shoes. She deems fashion and glamour fetishes in contemporary society, susceptible to high degrees of longing, seeped in wishful thinking and hunger for the next best thing. (http://www.artspace.com/sylvie_fleury/)



Figure 1. Sylvie Fleury, Kelly bag (1998)



Figure 2. Sylvie Fleury, Serie ELA/75K (2000)

Second, Barbara Kruger is an American conceptual and pop artist best-known for laying directive slogans, questions, and aphorisms over black and white photographs she took from mass media. All statements in a powerful style she combines with photographs are in regards to materialism and consumption that ironically criticizes consumerism and social members who tend to replace their own self worth with materialistic items. One of Kruger's works that has become popular is '*Untitled (I shop therefore I am)*'. Through this piece, Kruger articulates her criticism on consumer-obsessed society today that people focus on more what they have or what they wear since their belongings and social images constructed by the media define who they are.



Figure 3. Barbara Kruger, I Shop Therefore I Am (1987)

Lastly, Hyun-jung Kim is a Korean artist and communicate lecturer. She seeks to break stereotypical

expectations towards Korean women, revealing their actual desires for beauty. Lee (2014) construed a work of her as ‘humorous take on Korean elegance’ and mentioned that:

Koreans have certain stereotypical expectations toward those dressed in traditional clothes. In old Korean paintings, those wearing traditional hanbok are usually sitting calmly, sipping tea and appreciating beautiful mountain views. Artist Kim Hyun-jung subverts such conventional perceptions of Korean painting. Her paintings show women in beautiful, elegant hanbok dresses playing pool, going rock climbing and doing sit-ups (<http://thekoreaherald.com/>).

Hyun-Jung, Kim has said that “my paintings seek to break the images associated with the Korean traditional costume and expectations that follow about its wearer’s behavior. I do so to address the faux-naif... The subjects in my paintings often reflect my regular behaviors and habits. It could be an honest confession of my life (cited in Lee, 2014).”



Figure 4. Feign : Oops / 내숭:아차(我差) (2012)



Figure 5. Feign : Heritage of the Mind / 내숭:공(空) (2013)

As a woman, I also have felt myself living in an appearance-oriented society, just as the younger generations do. Caring for and maintaining my outward appearance has become one of my daily routines. We become obsessed with appearance since beauty has a major impact in life through valuable first impressions and social status. The standard of beauty is constantly evolving in modern society, but appearances can be deceiving, masking what may be shallow on the inside.

Critical Analysis

Carrying luxurious purses or wearing high heels for women in contemporary society has become a means not only to transform completely an outfit for the better but also to provide a boost to self-confidence, although with high heels women have to undergo pain in their feet. My use of ordinary female items such as purses, shoes, and a lipstick are a vehicle to reflect an obsession with outward appearance and how women in their 20s and 30s define themselves with the use of those items that are derived from the modern standard of beauty created by society.

I want to express my thoughts in my works with three different concepts within a main theme of female desires for beauty.

The first concept of my work is 'Vanity'. Obviously the standard of beauty has changed and there is a drift towards taking more care of one's appearance in recent years. Many women dream of owning fancy, luxurious handbags and spiked heels because having these desired accessories makes them feel very attractive. They also feel these items enhance their appearance. Vanity is a psychological construct that describes a person's excessive concern with physical appearance or achievement (Durvasula et al. 180). When I was in Korea, all of these played a much more prevalent role in my life. I was much more likely to focus on external beauty and luxuries. Although I never bought said items, I always thought about it. I witnessed many people purchasing these items and it made me think, "should I get at least one of these items?" It put a lot of pressure on me as an individual. I have created works that focus on creating a virtual image of female accessories, such as those of purses and high heels, which is an internal vacancy inside of glass which highlights the vanity of women. My work also reflects the current attitude of society; that we are vain and materialistic.

The second concept of my work is 'Social pressure'. I have always thought there has been societal pressure to be beautiful as a woman in the past and even now there is still constant obsession with the thought of how one should look. It influences women through showing what is considered the social ideal image through mass media and commercials. This pressure develops an anxiety for women, including myself by making us feel ugly which in turn can contribute to mental issues. Due to societal pressure, as a young woman, I am more susceptible to internalizing the accepted standard of beauty which causes me to either get plastic surgery or focus on getting luxury commodities as a means to enhance my physical look. On this basis, I expressed my repressed anger in my work, representing a conflict between society and woman in a satirical way. 'A wish balloon' is used as a social commentary on what society has constructed. Moreover, I also put glamour on ordinary female items and make them to appear as weapons to allude to the power of beauty in the current day.

The third concept is 'Consumerism'. In modern society it seems that women are more concerned with their appearance. This leads to female shoppers who are more likely to opt for cosmetics, clothing, and luxury commodities over essentials, like food. In other words, women skimp on other expenses, such as meals so they can overspend on luxury commodities. This tendency has been triggered by a variety of factors: advertising, social media, human relations, competitive society, and social status. As this journal shows (Durvasula et al., 2011), "material possessions become a means of documenting the success of personal achievement... the advertising industry positions products on the basis of consumer's desires to make themselves more physically attractive or to show off their achievement to others". In this way, I put emphasis on the correlation between material possession and an aspect of vanity into my works by using famous designer's brands that act as symbols for consumerism and materialism. Moreover, I have created several similar purses to represent the female consumer's attitude towards purchasing counterfeit goods. It has even become a common sight to see many women carry same designer's purse regardless of whether or not it is fake or genuine. This is the result of rampant consumerism.

The last concept is 'Relics'. A relic is defined as a remnant of something left after decay or that which has survived from an earlier era. I try to think about what would be a typical for female beauty of this modern era as viewed from far future, like the 25th century. I think the most representative items of beauty would be luxury goods particularly purses and high heels, of which could be either counterfeit or genuine. It reflects on young women are obsessed with famous designer goods to enhance an external appearance and on the female attitude on buying these items. In this way, I emphasize the materiality of glass: fragility. By using glass frits and powders, I could make my work to appear as a remnant from the distant past; a relic. To further create the illusion, I put broken pieces together to give it an older feeling, like real relics seen from the historical museums.

Through the concepts in my work, I want to show the ironic tendencies which accompany the notions of beauty and desire within contemporary culture. I mean to show this in two different ways: satirical and humorous.

Regarding materials, glass is the main medium for my works. The materiality of glass, such as transparency, translucency, opacity, and reflection are used in retail merchandising to sell luxury items. These characteristics of glass are used in order to express a heightened sense of vanity, elegance, and beauty, which fit into the themes of female desires. The characteristics of transparency and opacity are utilized with clear glasses and opaque color glasses. I do this by kiln forming or kiln casting and using the technique of sandblasting to make the glass translucence instead of transparent. Reflection is utilized through lights, texture, and imagery. The texture and imagery are formed from multiple layers

of screen-printed sheet glass. Aside from that, another characteristic of glass, fragility, is utilized by the use of glass frits and powders to express a piece as fragile and weak. This allows me to convey the meaning of impermanence.

In making my works, I used glass kiln casting, kiln forming, and printmaking on glass. I believe there are commonalities between the glass casting technique, specifically core-casting, and vanity. Producing an internal cavity inside glass during the creation of glass core-casting relates to female consumer sentiment. The negative space implies emptiness and a sense of vanity. In addition to the process of incorporating images and text onto sheet glass, I used screen-printmaking techniques to allow me to create imagery and graphic surfaces on glass to deliver my message. I used kiln-forming techniques, such as the fusing and slumping techniques to create a relationship between form and graphic application in conjunction with the glass imaging process. Another kiln-forming technique I used is Pate-de-verre, using paper and sand as a mold material. These all allowed me to make precious forms with the characteristic of fragility, fitting into my theme of a series of relics; reflecting on women's anxiety about non-permanence as well.

Conclusion

Assessment of work

‘Virtual Image’ - This piece looks like a shoe box and incorporates high heels-shaped negative space inside the glass. I made this work through the glass-casting technique and used clear glass to allow people to see through the high heels and take a closer look at it. I intended to make viewers, particularly women, feel happy just by looking at the high heels, which is on the wish-list for women without knowing of the internal vacancy of it. This work shows that ordinary female items, such as high heels and purses, provide by itself the image of dignity; a creation by media and advertising. The implicit meaning of this work wants to reflect on the vanity of humans in terms of external beauty and our present culture, which has changed into an overly materialistic society.

‘Keep Buying Luxury and Eat Junk Food’ - Showing four pieces of a well-known designer’s brand purse with the same design, this work represents the consumerism of current society and also satirizes specific women who skimp on essentials, like food, to overspend money on commodities, regardless whether or not if it is genuine or counterfeit. The purpose of material possession for women is to upgrade the value of their physical beauty by using brand-name bags out of vanity; which can be just for show and not for practical value. These works are made by glass kiln-formed techniques; fusing and slumping in order to form a purse-shape through a number of steps like the processes of creating a famous designer’s purse by artisans. The screen-printing technique was also used to incorporate images and text onto the glass. By mixing two different brands, a famous designer’s logo and a fast food logo, I tried to express in a humorous way this current phenomena: obsession with outward appearance and luxury.

‘How Would You Define Yourself?’ – Considering the current atmosphere of society, people are judged by appearance and it seems young women define themselves through materials they possess or buy. To maximize the personal behavior out of vanity in my work, I created an “x-ray” through a purse with overlaid images, seen through each layer of glass. As seen from the x-rayed purse, there is not much inside of the purse. Just junk food and a couple accessories, which represent that the purse is being used for show with little practical use. I used screen-printing technique with enamels on several layers of clear glass with a different image on each. They were overlaid together to create one singular image. I also used the kiln-forming techniques, fusing and slumping, in order to form a perfume-shape in several steps.

‘A relic of the early 21st century’ – These three pieces: the remnants of high heels, a purse, and a shopping bag, are in a series of relics that I have created with my imagining of what would be representative of relics of beauty in the early 21st century as viewed from the far future. A purse can be used as a mean of expressing external beauty more than functionality in the current times and to identify themselves as well. Especially famous designer purses are the items that exemplify conspicuous spending over the past decade in South Korea, and have almost become must-have item since many women in 20s and 30s have them. Based on my observation, I have created three pieces: a relic of a purse, high heels, and a shopping bag reflecting the current era. To make the work seem like ‘relics’, I used the materiality of glass: fragility with using glass frits and powders. To conform to the certain shapes, such as a purse, high heels, and a shopping bag, I used one of the common techniques in kiln-forming: slumping.

‘Get Pretty’ – A modern woman who is in the middle of her daily routine, making herself look beautiful to fulfill the social expectation. This piece represents that women are under enormous pressure from society to be beautiful. Ironically, I put the phrase of ‘*GET PRETTY*’ on balloons. Usually wish balloons say ‘GET WELL’, but I think for women in contemporary Korean society, getting pretty could be almost synonymous with getting well. The techniques that I used include mold-blowing, casting, and kiln-forming: slumping to conform the mold-blown balloon into the shape of a flat balloon.

‘Keep Calm and Treasure Inner Beauty’ – As seen from this installation work, balloons are rising up and a woman is looking at it through her window. She was holding onto the balloons, but decided to let go and now reflects on how she can define herself without any of personal belongings. This work represents the emotional inner-conflicts between chasing artificial ideals of beauty and cherishing inner beauty. When you see through the balloons, inside are objects associated with ordinary female items. These items are used as a metaphor for the artificial ideal of beauty that modern women are chasing for their external beauty. I used core-casting technique to make inner objects inside of balloon to be seen through faintly which implies hidden desire for outer beauty.

Implications for the future

I have been working on the theme of female desires since my undergraduate years and my work is based on contemporary Korean society and motivated to identify the conflicts that consumer culture bring upon gender and identity. Working with this theme in the US, I came to realize that there are differences of thought and attitude about beauty between countries. In my new approach to the subject matter, I will further research what is or are considered universal desire(s) for beauty in women for

my future work. Regarding materiality, I will enhance my current exploration of imagery, textures, and a materiality specific to glass: fragility. I will accomplish this using glass powders and frits in two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms. I would like to continue to develop the capabilities of my work to integrate print and imaging processes into various glass-working processes in new and unconventional ways, and then introduce my glass work to the field of art.

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Image Sources

Figure1. Sylvie Fleury, Kelly bag (1998), Retrieved from <http://ropac.net/exhibition/bronze-sculptures>

Figure2. Sylvie Fleury, Serie ELA/75K (2000), Retrieved from

<http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/2010/06/sylvie-fleury-at-almine-rech/>

Figure3. Barbara Kruger, I Shop Therefore I Am (1987), Retrieved from

<http://www.art21.org/images/barbara-kruger/untitled-i-shop-therefore-i-am-1987>

Figure4. Feign : Oops (2012), Retrieved from <http://www.kimhyunjung.kr/>

Figure5. Feign : Heritage of the Mind (2013), Retrieved from <http://www.kimhyunjung.kr/>

Documentation of the work

Title: '*Virtual Image*'

Dimensions: 11W x 6D x 14H (inch)

Media: Glass, Brass



Title: *'Keep Buying Luxuries and Eat Junk Food'*

Dimensions: 14W x 4D x 14H (inch)

Media: Glass, Brass



Title: *'How Would You Define Yourself?'*

Dimensions: 14W x 4D x 17H (inch)

Media: Glass, Mixed-media



Title: *'A relic of the early 21st century; the remnants of a purse'*

Dimensions: 12.5W x 7D x 16H (inch)

Medium: Glass



Title: *'Get Pretty'*

Dimensions: Each balloon 8W x 4D x 8H (inch)

Media: Glass, Mixed-media



Title: *'Keep Calm and Treasure Inner Beauty'*

Dimensions: Each balloon 3.5W x 2D x 3.5H (inch)

Medium: Glass

