You Love until You Don't
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"At all points, I was open to listen, to talk, to compromise, to improve – to worship you. Now, I go home to burn the photos and cry one last time. The pictures show such intense love for three months. What on earth went wrong?"¹

"I believe you are Mr. Right, you just have to be made right."²

-both anonymous, *Found*

Desire, longing, and obsession are complex emotions. These feelings can manifest in many forms including escapism, vicarious living, materialism, and romance. I believe that many of our most deeply ingrained desires develop in childhood and adolescence. The desires of this period often remain with us through adulthood even though we may try to hide them. We hold on to our delusions; we never really grow out of our childish fantasies. These emotions become especially complicated when that which we desire is out of our reach or perhaps doesn’t even exist at all. We often have a love-hate relationship with the things we desire. A longing for something that is unattainable can be accompanied by a desire to destroy that thing. My work is an exploration of the ambivalent relationship we often have with objects of desire.

*You love until you don’t* (2012) is a mixed-media installation consisting of embroidery, drawing, collage, watercolor, oil, cut paper, candy, soft sculpture, and other works (fig. 1, 2). Two-dimensional works are arranged on the walls in clusters, with sculpture and a floor installation existing in the space of the room. The walls have been painted and the lighting is low to create an intimate space in which the work can exist. Within the work, the catalogue
image, with heavy emphasis on the male model, features prominently alongside unicorns, hearts, and references to domestic interiors. These subjects coexist to create what I hope is an environment which is at first pretty and inviting, but upon closer inspection deals with the darker, sometimes obsessive nature of desire.

**Strategies and Subjects**

The most used resource in my art-making is the magazine or catalogue image. The figures in my work nearly always come from magazines or catalogues. These figures interest me because I simultaneously do and do not have a connection to these individuals. I do not know these people, so they are nobody, yet they are also anybody and everybody. These are the unrealistic images and ideas people build their lives around. For adolescents, magazine pinups have sentimental value; they get hung on your walls or stored in special boxes. People identify with these images, no matter how unrealistic these identifications are. The person in the image is not an identity but an ideal. These are the people we constantly see, the people we are conditioned to admire and strive to be like.

In much of this work, the face of the magazine/catalogue figure, usually male, is obscured in some way. One way this is achieved is by portraying the figure as a silhouette. A silhouette functions as a symbol of something rather than the thing itself; it is the absence of
something real. Our lives are often filled with such things. A memory of something or an idealization of the way something or someone should be becomes more important than the thing or person itself.

_You Were the Objects of My Affection_, one work within the installation, consists of nine wooden oval plaques, each containing a bust-length silhouette of a male figure cut from floral scrapbooking paper (fig.3). The silhouettes are derived from the male figures found in teen poster magazines such as _Bop, J14_, and _Popstar_. Historically, a silhouette created from an individual’s profile gave an indication of the physical identity of its owner and was often kept as a memento of a loved one. Even the myth of the origin of the silhouette emphasizes this connection of the silhouette with remembrance of one dearly loved. In this story, the Corinthian maid, Dibutades, traced the outline of her lover’s shadow before he departed for war as a means to preserve the memory of his likeness. The silhouettes in my work, however, are frontal, and as a consequence the distinguishing characteristics of the individual disappear. The identity of these male teen idols is not really important; they are simply romantic ideals. The floral patterning and decorative status of these objects emphasizes this. Just as the posters and pinups found in teen magazines can adorn our walls in youth, _You Were the Objects of My_
*Affection* has transformed these idols into another sort of wall adornment— one which speaks of sentimentality, nostalgia, romance, and kitsch.

A connection already exists between art, female adolescence, and the male ideal. Girls often draw and attempt to create likenesses of their favorite male stars. Many of the teen poster magazines run a feature where girls can submit these drawings to the magazine with the possibility of getting the work published. Artist Amy Adler writes, "There’s something incredibly sad and funny about that, a love and a longing so intense that it inspires drawing as a way to become intimate with that otherwise untouchable body, to make him your boyfriend, to make him your own." In my work, I at times take on the persona of the teenage fan artist, caring over the work as if it was a loved one, and at other times my approach is more removed. The work of Karen Kilimnik has been very influential to me. I have always admired the importance she places on display, from her haphazard scatter art to her elaborately contrived installations (fig.4). But the thing I admire most is the approach she takes to her subject. As Ingrid Schaffner writes, Kilimnik presents “the possibility of taking no stand at all.” Kilimnik presents us with historical and pop culture pastiche, not aiming to be critical, or funny, or intellectual. She simply shows us. In the same manner as the young artist submitting drawings of her favorite celebrity, Kilimnik presents us with objects (or arrangements of objects) created with love and care.

Another strategy for obscuring the identity of the male model is by covering the face with some material. Flowers, hearts, and other materials are often placed over or affixed to the model’s head. Covering the face makes the figure anonymous; however, this abundance of seemingly harmless materials can, in effect, smother the individual. The nature of the materials gives us the sense that this act was carried out by a female presence, but it is unsure whether this suffocation was done purposefully or as the consequence of an overabundance of love and admiration, just like a child who hugs her bunny so tightly that she kills it. As the work has
progressed, covering the face has evolved into replacing the face or head altogether. Stripes, flowers, stitches, and other patterns replace the face and, sometimes, other exposed areas of flesh, creating a new skin that is strange and surreal (fig.5).

Along with the male catalogue model, several other subjects appear often in this work. These include the heart, the unicorn, and the domestic interior space. The repetition of a small variety of subjects allows for the significance of these subjects to be more fully understood by being seen in a variety of contexts. The reappearance of identical subjects contributes to the sometimes unsettling nature of these themes and underscores the subjects' importance. As put by Gertrude Stein, “There is no such thing as repetition, only insistence.”

The Heart. Similar to the silhouette, the heart shape acts as a symbol rather than an object in itself. The heart can be simple, childish, and trite. It stands for love in its most generic, impersonal form. Both the heart and the silhouette represent an absence- the absence of a person, the absence of an identity, or the absence of sincere feeling. In the drawing, You Love until You Don’t, from which the installation derives its name, each black glitter heart can be read as a concentrated feeling of love or perhaps the love for a certain individual (fig.6). As the hearts progress down the page, they become fewer until they stop all together, just as feelings

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Figure 5. Upholstery, oil and glitter on panel
Figure 6. You Love Until You Don’t, ink and glitter on paper
of love often die off. The heart shape depersonalizes these feelings, the generic shape emphasizing the often generic nature of love.

*The Unicorn.* Unicorns are connected to childhood naivety and belief in that which does not exist. They also have a strong association with sexual desire, as all of the medieval legends of the unicorn center around the potency of the creature's horn. The unicorn in my work functions as a stand-in for the male presence. The ancient and medieval unicorn is always male, and his destruction lies in succumbing to his desire for the human female. His horn is the source of his power and underscores his masculinity. Removing the horn is equivalent to castration. The unicorn serves as a substitute for the romantic male ideal. Neither exists outside of the mind, yet this is perhaps a more powerful type of existence. "The salvation of the Unicorn is its non-existence." He can be anything because he is nothing.

*It's Only Human to Want to Kill a Beautiful Thing* is a collection of glittery white paper unicorn cutouts pinned to the wall in the form of a heart (fig. 7). The silhouetted shapes are created from four different clipart designs which repeat over and over again. Each unicorn is affixed to the wall by a single colored sewing pin stabbed through its abdomen. The pins pierce the objects like insects in a scientific collection. The act of collecting is very important to my work. Collecting soon grows into hoarding and obsessing as more and more objects accumulate. Collecting and accumulating allow us to keep, cherish, and possess. One never has to let go.

*The Domestic Interior Space.* Domestic interiors, especially as they are presented in home living catalogues and magazines, are representative of our aspirations to a certain standard of living as well as our notions of what creates a "home." There are many aspects of the arrangement of *You love until you don't* that reference domestic spaces as do several of the individual works within it. The two-dimensional works are arranged on the gallery walls in
clusters. The wall behind each cluster has been painted either soft purple or yellow. Patterned vinyl rectangles placed behind some of the works create an effect similar to wallpaper. A chandelier provides soft light. The effect of this is a space that references domesticity but does not fully inhabit that realm.

The centerpiece of the installation, Holding On, pulls together many of the above mentioned subjects and themes (fig.8). A three-tier chandelier with lollipop crystals hangs from the ceiling of the gallery. The candies are in the form of unicorn horns, originally about six inches long, and attach to the chandelier frame by ribbons tied around the lollipop sticks. Directly underneath the chandelier is a circular white faux fur rug, upon which rests a variety of floor pillows. Six of the pillows are adorned with black silhouettes of male teen heart-throbs, two with buttons covering the faces of toile country folk, and one with a cluster of rough black sandpaper hearts upon a floral background. Small stuffed unicorns lie among the pillows, and altered clothing and home interior catalogues are laid open for perusal. As time progresses, the chandelier "crystals" elongate from the heat of the lights and drip until they pool upon the pillows below. The repeated subject of the obscured or silhouetted model appears again, this
time in a manner that invites viewer interaction. These pillows can be held or hugged or even sat upon or walked over. They become sticky and defaced as the candy drips more and more. The “pristine” chandelier, which often functions as an indicator of class (or aspiration to class) in a private home is a perishable object that deconstructs as the exhibition progresses.

**Materials**

I work in whatever materials and processes I find necessary to achieve a desired result; however, collage, painting, and embroidery are the three most common forms my work takes. Collage is “a way of living with available images by a process of making them one’s own.”

Collage allows me to take a simple, straightforward approach to my subject matter by using the original catalogue page as the base for the work. These pieces are the least removed from the original source. Cut paper, paint, glitter, and other materials are affixed to the glossy page. My collages are often subtle; at times the alteration is not perceivable at first glance. Paper works are fragile; they show the wear of handling and the discoloration of time. The collages are presented tacked to the wall so as not to disrupt the torn edges and to allow the subtleties of the work to be viewed without the barrier of glass or plexi.

Painting allows me to create new narratives from the catalogue/magazine image by arranging them in a seamless composition. As opposed to collage, the subjects brought together in a painting are often not questioned as to if they are related. Being created from the same material- paint- they belong unquestionably to the same world regardless of the apparent disjuncture in imagery. My most recent paintings not only use the magazine image as a source but also reference the layout of magazine and catalogue pages. The compositions are divided and images are inset within the larger composition (fig.9). This functions in a manner similar to collage, allowing connections to be implied between various subjects. When I paint, the oils are heavily diluted with mineral spirits and applied in very thin layers. The transparent oil paint has an unfinished quality; the image is not fully present. This is in sharp contrast to the
reference images which are glossy, concrete, and mass produced. The figure undergoes a transformation when reinterpreted in paint. Despite its lack of presence, I find the figure more personal, more human than its photographic counterpart. The source is still recognizable, but the figure has obviously changed.

Embroidery allows for a more intimate relationship with the work. An embroidery can be taken home or carried with me so that I may work on it outside of the environment of the studio. It follows me into other areas of my life. Embroidered works show time, process, and the obsessive repetitive act of the stitch. When embroidered, the subject carries a quality of tenderness which comes from the process of having been carefully labored over in a repetitive, meditative process not so distant from the act of obsessively doodling hearts or the name of a loved one over and over again in a childhood notebook.

It is often the case that the idea of something is far more appealing that the actuality of it, yet these ideas are just as important to our existence as realities. I neither condemn nor condone the subjects I explore because my own relationship to them is constantly shifting. The ambivalent feelings toward the subject and the ambiguity of the images themselves are where my fascination lies. I attempt to explore the love-hate relationship with our delusions of the perfect life, the perfect home, and the perfect relationship that has always existed in our minds.


