

Doll

Artist Statement

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Doll seeks to broaden erotic imagery beyond the male gaze. It aims to show a complicated female desire that exists outside of the aesthetics of mainstream pornography. *Doll* asserts that a stereotypical “female gaze” can be just as problematic as a male one, and that female desire is allowed to be just as dirty as men’s. Furthermore, engaging in consensual acts of sexuality that mirror real-world violence can become a stage of resistance, and even healing, for many women. The pornography industry is a capitalist one that creates sexuality devoid of eroticism, and *Doll* offers an alternative to this. *Doll* is made up of images of myself in a vac bed, which can be best described as a latex sleeping bag that has had all the air sucked out of it, not unlike a vacuum sealer for humans! I have then collaged cut-up images of myself (from a photoshoot), which resemble the classic pin-up style and obscure the vac bed pictures underneath. The collages have been pasted together with liquid latex, which dries into a skin-like substance that crinkles the collages and fringes it with rubbery edges. *Doll* aims to show us what is possible when erotic imagery expands what sexuality can look like, rather than systematically reinforcing itself.

Being a kinky feminist sex worker/advocate has put me in a complicated intersection of women’s issues over the years. On the one hand, I am staunchly anti-censorship and advocate for the rights of sex workers. On the other, to simply suggest that all porn is feminist because a woman has consented to participate in it is absurd. There obviously needs to be some nuance between these two options, but in a lot of feminist discourse this seems to be the extent of the discussion. The porn industry is undeniably problematic, but this has very little to do with the medium itself. As Virginie Despentes, a pro-porn feminist, writer, and sex worker, explains, “Men alone conceive of porn, direct it, watch it, and profit from it. And female desire is subject to the same distortion: it must only occur via the male gaze. We have only recently begun to get familiar with the notion of female pleasure” (2010, 96). From this quote we can see that the problematic issues relating to the industry are not unique to porn, but are concretely intertwined with a systemic issue found in any field, namely, that men typically hold all the power.

For the purposes of this essay, I define mainstream pornography as material produced by professional film studios that exist within their own reinforcing classifications, and which build upon a history of tropes that cater to what the male gaze is supposed to look like. Perhaps most critically, mainstream pornography

ignores the existence of a female gaze, which exists only tangentially to its male counterpart. I would not consider independent creators who both produce and act in their own porn to be part of this structure. In mainstream pornography, the gender signifiers of the subjects are enhanced and emphasized. In *Doll*, the gender of the figure in the vac bed is obscured, therefore queering its desirability. The typical hierarchy of man viewing woman is not present, rather, we are viewing ambiguous flesh. Ambiguous flesh does not have a gender, and so the intended viewer does not necessarily have to be the heterosexual man, but anyone who wishes to look. This was an essential part of the work for me, because as Despentès explains:

Desire is an exclusively male domain. It's extraordinary that one can despise a young girl screaming her desire when John Lennon strums his guitar, but find it amusing for an old guy to whistle at a teenager wearing a mini-skirt. There is on the one hand healthy desire—approved by society, encouraged, looked on with benevolence and understanding—and on the other a necessarily grotesque, monstrous, laughable appetite which must be suppressed. (2006, 99)

This “healthy” male desire is represented by the classic looking pin-up images that are collaged onto the some of the doll figures. However, the bodies in the vac bed take desire out of the exclusively male domain. Furthermore, desire itself is potentially taken out of the equation when the displayed nude figure is viewed. The figure in *Doll*, obscured by layers of latex, both within the image and on top of the image, is so abject that it is not desirable, at least not in the expected sense. If the viewer does find the figure in *Doll* to be erotic, it is in the fetishistic sense that exists outside of most pornography, definitely all mainstream pornography. My aim is not to remove any possibility for arousal in the viewer of *Doll*, but if this is their experience of the piece, I want it to be outside of their usual experience with pornography. *Doll* hopes to highlight the desire which Despentès has described as “grotesque, monstrous, [a] laughable appetite which must be suppressed” (99). If my viewer learns that they can experience arousal from erotica that does not play to the established male gaze, then *Doll* is operating exactly as I had intended.

The solution to misogyny in porn is therefore not censorship, but instead an expansion of female-directed porn that includes the feminine gaze and values female desire. While “porn for women” exists, it is often as equally limiting to women’s sexuality as mainstream pornography is, as feminist pornographer Tristan Taormino explains,

The dominant view within the industry is that couples and women want softer, gentler porn. This notion both reflects and reinforces stereotypes about female sexuality: we want romance and flowers and pretty lighting and nothing too hard. And that’s true for some women, but *not all of us*. (2013, 258)

This representation of women’s sexuality is just as one-dimensional as what you find in mainstream pornography, and drips with condescension. More to the point, as Taormino states, it does not reflect the diverse reality of women’s sexuality.

Anti-porn rhetoric that was born of out the sex wars of the second-wave feminist movement critiques porn as violent, grotesque, dirty, and degrading to women. However, in my experience as a porn creator, my actual sexuality is much more violent, grotesque, dirty, and degrading than any of the pretty, highly curated content I have made for the male gaze. The problem with porn is not that it displays women engaging in and enjoying specific acts which we have coded as exploitative or degrading, but that it shows these acts and the supposed female pleasure that comes with them in a way that is only designed to titillate heterosexual men. No sexual act in and of itself should be labelled “degrading,” so long as the participants are enthusiastically consenting to it. Degradation is only a connotation that can be projected onto an act. Anti-porn feminists who try to proclaim that there is a “right way” to have sex, a way that is truly equalitarian, are ignoring the true complexity of female sexuality and desire. In “Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality,” Carole S. Vance illustrates this:

some feminist analysis runs the risk of overemphasizing sexual danger....

The anti-pornography movement in a sense restates the main premises of the old gender system: the dominant cultural ideology elaborates the threat of sexual danger, so the anti-pornography movement responds by pushing for sexual safety via the control of public expression of male sexuality...the focus continues unchanged in that sexual pleasure for women is still minimized and the exploration of women’s pleasurable experience remains slight. (1984, 6)

Vance is stating that when feminists emphasize only the dangers of pornography and call for censorship, they are doing nothing to advance an alternative for women. They are simply shutting down all expressions of sexuality, including women’s. She goes on to say,

Women’s actual sexual experience is more complicated, more difficult to grasp, more unsettling.... The truth is that the rich brew of our experience contains elements of pleasure and oppression, happiness and humiliation. Rather than regard this ambiguity as confusion or false consciousness, we should use it as a source-book. (1984, 5–6)

Vance proposes that we stop viewing women’s sexuality as a binary between pure, good equitable acts, and dirty, wrong, oppressive ones. Sexuality is more fluid and complex than that, and all these things can exist simultaneously.

So what erotic imagery can we present that does not fall into the trap of a binary? In Angela Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman*, she argues that pornography only appears violent because it explicitly reveals the misogyny that is usually kept under wraps in normal society. Carter believes that sex is innately unequalitarian and unjust in a patriarchal system. So how does Carter suggest we get out of this bind? As she explains, “Sade describes the condition of women in the genre of the pornography of sexual violence but believed it would only be through the medium of sexual violence that women might heal themselves of their socially inflicted scars, in a praxis of destruction and sacrilege” (1979, 26). Thus Carter suggests (through Marquis de Sade) that we do not avoid the exploitative elements of pornography by trying to purify it, but that by leaning into these elements,

women might heal themselves from the oppression they have endured. There is a reason for this, because by acknowledging this innate inequality, women can play with it on their terms and let their sexuality permeate in messiness, rather than a clean, pleasant, passive sexuality that in actuality is more appealing to the male gaze. *Doll* plays with a sexuality that is about restraints, and so could be considered sexually violent. But it is also a portrait of an individual, there is no other figure in the piece that the doll is submitting to. The body in the vac bed operates in a praxis of destruction and sacrilege entirely of its own volition, and there is something inherently healing about subjecting your body to extreme acts with your own agency. This suggests that reveling in sexual violence can be a way to resist oppression within a patriarchal society.

But why is our figure subjecting their body to such an objectifying act? Georges Bataille explores the origins of eroticism in his *Eroticism; Death and Sensuality* and says the following, “eroticism is assenting to life even in death. Indeed, although erotic activity is in the first place an exuberance of life, the object of this psychological quest, independent as I say of any concern to reproduce life, is not alien to death” (1957, 11). Throughout the book, Bataille expresses the overlaps between eroticism and death, danger, violence, ritual, and transgression. For example, he lays out the similarities between sex and ritual sacrifice: “It is intentional like the act of the man who lays bare, desires, and wants to penetrate his victim. The lover strips the beloved of her identity no less than the blood-stained priest his human or animal victim” (90). Contemporary mainstream porn pushes upon us the most explicit, hyper-stimulating imagery it can conjure, and yet it needs to continuously one-up itself to keep its audience interested. This is partly because porn operates like any other industry under capitalism, extracting its raw materials until they are totally depleted. As Maggie Nelson explains:

we’ve entered a new, post-Fordist era of capitalism that Preciado calls the “pharmacopornographic era,” whose principal economic resource is nothing other than “the insatiable bodies of the multitudes—their cocks, clitorises, anuses, hormones, and neurosexual synapses...[our] desire, excitement, sexuality, seduction, and...pleasure.” (2015, 111)

From this we can see that ethical issues within the porn industry parallel those found in all other industries under capitalism, porn just happens to be unique because in its case the raw material is human flesh. This constant need for new bubble-gum content that is easily chewed up and spit out by consumers exists because, ultimately, contemporary porn is not satiating their appetites for the eroticism that Bataille is speaking of. Pornography has an endless output of streamlined sexuality that is devoid of any eroticism. While independent, feminist, and small-scale creators are forced to operate within this capitalist system, their output offers a practical harm-reductionist approach. There is no completely ethical consumption under capitalism, and so, like *Doll*, they aim to expand possibilities within the existing system, and offer a transgressive alternative. *Doll* does not contain any explicit sexual content, but it is dripping with abject eroticism. The vac bed body in *Doll* is in ritualistic sacrifice, bound within latex, and its corpse-like look has elements of death, danger

and violence. Its ability to be sexual while containing aspects of ancient, universal, larger-than-life themes gives it an eroticism that pornography is desperately lacking.

Doll references the shallow sexuality that mainstream porn represents through its collaged images of classic pin-ups. In parts of the installation, these collaged images work to cover up the unmanufactured images of the dolls below. They all have severed heads, totally objectified and repetitive; one could easily replace another, representing how women's bodies are portrayed in mainstream porn. They are bodies exposed, as Bataille describes women's bodies before sex:

The woman in the hands of her assailant is despoiled of her being. With her modesty she loses the firm barrier that once separated her from others and made her impenetrable. She is brusquely laid open to the violence of the sexual urges set loose in the organs of reproduction; she is laid out to the impersonal violence that overwhelms her from without. (1957, 90)

Although these pin-ups could not be more aesthetically different than the latexed bodies beneath them, their positions are not wholly different. The bodies in the vac beds have all the similar tropes found in porn and in Bataille's description of real-life sex, they are the submissive female body: open, passive, on display, and conquerable. And yet, the layers and layers of latex act as a literal barrier between the viewer and the body, making them impenetrable and inaccessible to us. They maintain their agency.

American sexologist, artist, and sex worker Annie Sprinkle once said, "My feminist mother used to come into my room and joke whether I would grow up to be a whore or an artist. She was exactly right!" (qtd. in Williams 1993). Williams offers the following analysis:

In this quotation the feminist mother poses the question of her daughter's vocation as an opposition: will her daughter be an artist *or* a whore? Without confronting the mother directly, the 'postfeminist,' 'postporn' daughter counters her either/or with destabilising agreeability... The daughter unsettles the familiar opposition: she is neither artist *nor* whore but artist *and* whore. (1993, 177)

When looking at pornographic images of myself, even if these images do not reflect the "real" me, they are still *of* me. Furthermore, representations of the real me can only occur within the already existing system. Let us not attempt to shut down or censor the system, but rather work within it to expand what it can look like, what it can be. Just as it is not enough for there to only be my false manufactured sexuality, it would be too much for sexuality to *always* be as deep and transgressive as my doll's—maybe one cannot exist without the other. Perhaps the artist needs the whore just as much as the whore needs her.

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Figure 1.
Doll 1, latex on collage, 8" x 11"



Figure 2.
Doll 2, latex on collage, 8" x 24"



Figure 3.
Doll 3, latex on collage, 8" x 10"



Figure 4.
Doll 4, latex on collage, 8" x 20"



Figure 5.
Doll 5, latex on collage, 24" x 42"