

# THE PROBLEM THAT HAD NO NAME

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*The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stifling, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—“Is this all?”*

—Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)



This opening passage from Betty Friedan's critical text briefly describes the reason for her extensive research: a general unhappiness that seemed to plague American women in the 1950s. Published on the dawn of the second wave of feminism (from the 1960s on), Friedan's text is crucial to understanding the early stages of the women's struggle for social and economic equality. Through her job as a magazine writer, Friedan began conducting a series of interviews with women centered on issues around this unnamable dissatisfaction.

This exhibition of contemporary art features the work of women who address feminist issues

either directly or obliquely, filtered through a contemporary response to Betty Friedan's critical text, *The Feminine Mystique*. Discussed as “the problem that has no name,” the indefinable unhappiness faced by women at mid-twentieth century is re-visited in the work of these artists who take up this familiar issue, as well as a host of new ones, for the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Friedan's central concerns about the socially prescribed roles for women are addressed throughout the exhibition. *The Feminine Mystique* articulated a variety of issues born from Friedan's careful and extensive research that

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included personal interviews with women and the makers of products for women, archival research, investigation into corporate research and development departments, and her own shrewd observations. For example, she noted:

*The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity...It says that this femininity is so mysterious and intuitive and close to the creation and origin of life that man-made science may never be able to understand it...The mistake, says the mystique, the root of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination and nurturing maternal love.<sup>1</sup>*

Though the gist of the book dates from her research that began with publications from the mid 1940s, many of the symptoms of the *Feminine Mystique* continue to plague women in contemporary society. Overwhelmingly, Hollywood films, television productions, women's magazines and other media continue to portray women as needy figures who are only happy when (finally) settled with family and children. Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991) is filled with statistics about women who abuse their bodies in an attempt to match the look of the impossibly thin women portrayed in women's magazines. In the face of continuing and highly-publicized problems with eating disorders, 2007 Madrid Fashion Week organizers declared a minimum body mass index for professional models. These issues about women, their appearance, and their social roles as researched and presented in Friedan's book, remain critical and significant.

Through her investigations, Friedan discovered that many women, women deemed “normal and healthy” were, in fact, living lives filled with regret and unhappiness. Women who had been educated for a future career had elected to stay at home instead, raising their children and caring for their home becoming a full-time job. She described the following:

*I came back again to the basic paradox of the feminine mystique: that it emerged to glorify woman's role as housewife at the very moment when the barriers to her full participation in society were lowered, at the very moment when science and education and her own ingenuity made it possible for a woman to be both wife and mother and to take an active part in the world outside the home. The glorification of woman's role, then, seems to be in proportion to society's reluctance to treat women as complete human beings; for the less real function that role has, the more it is decorated with meaningless details to conceal its emptiness.<sup>2</sup>*

Thus, commodities were marketed to women who needed time to fill with endless duties in the home. The home was constructed as the single place where a woman's creativity would be most effectively developed as a wife and mother.

Responding to Friedan's text, or to the work of other significant feminists, works of art in this exhibition illuminate a number of themes that include the cult of domesticity or the domestic environment, fertility, aging, the roles played by women in contemporary society, the social construction of gender, motherhood, appearance, and race. These categories, of course, are porous and the works of these women frequently address more than one theme at the same time.

The Feminine Mystique

## Women and Domesticity

One of Friedan's central concerns is how woman is perpetually linked to her domestic environment in magazine texts, in advertisements, in television commercials and in the general representation of women in society. Even before Friedan's observations about the home and the woman as primary consumer for the home, Simone De Beauvoir had already noted:

*[Woman's] attitude toward her home is dictated by the same dialectic that defines her situation in general: she takes by becoming prey, she finds freedom by giving it up; by renouncing the world she aims to conquer a world...Thanks to the velvets and silks and porcelains with which she surrounds herself, woman can in some degree satisfy that tactile sensuality which her erotic life can seldom assuage. These decorations will also provide an expression of her personality: she is the one who has chosen, made, hunted out furnishings and knick-knacks...they reflect her individuality while bearing public witness to her standard of living. Her home is thus her earthly lot, the expression of her social value and of her trust self. Because she does nothing, she eagerly seeks self-realization in what she has [original emphasis].<sup>3</sup>*

A number of artists in the exhibition have explored the link between the creation of the domestic environment and the role of woman in the home.

Aliza Augustine works with dolls, creating invented scenarios for them, culled from popular culture and invented through her imagination (cover ill.). In *The Good Mother*, an exhausted woman (make-up nonetheless perfect) sits before a bottle of Johnny Walker red and a pack of Winstons. The chaotic state of the floor indicates that perhaps her child has just been put down for a nap. Similarly, the frenetic decoration of cakes as typified in Meghan Wood's works underscores the constant pressure to create perfection in the home (cat. no. 25). Created from actual cake icing, these works, and their abundance in the exhibition, evoke the constant travail of home making as it was largely accepted at mid-century. The unglued mother who sits at her kitchen table, shot in one hand and cigarette

in the other, was one of Friedan's most important subjects. As she duly noted: “If a woman had a problem in the 1950's and 1960's, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage or with herself.”<sup>4</sup>

Underscoring the domestic duties often encountered in the home, Juana Valdes, Carson Fox and Nancy Friedemann all take decorative elements such as lace, filigree and crochet, to extremes. In her critical text, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), Ann Douglas traces the American fascination with Victorian culture, particularly romantic writing of the period, and its influence on subsequent cultural and social development.<sup>5</sup> The attention to decorative elements and the sentimentalization of culture, she argues, was a welcome distraction catalyzed by the use of nostalgia. Translated to visual terms, elaborate crochet and lace works, paint-



(fig. 2) Adrian Piper, *Let's Talk*, 1992, Serigraph, 26 x 26 in., Museum purchase, 1992, 1992.16.7

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ings of flowers, animals, innocuous landscape scenes and all forms of decoration might be among the usual suspects. A few of the artists in this exhibition also address this notion of the decorative and its possible meanings where the manipulation of gender is concerned.

Fashioned from wire and synthetic hair, Carson Fox weaves a soft, decorative series of wire scrolls into a colossal, lacy screen (cat. no. 6). The opposition between the medium—wire—and its expression—a wall of delicate filigree—emphasizes the artificial contrast that is often also present in the (artificial) separation of gender roles and the complicity with which one falls easily into socially-prescribed gender roles. Her smaller, more delicate print, *Sweetheart* (fig. 3), also applies wire and synthetic hair to the process of creating multiples. Placed between two sheets of tissue that have been imprinted with the form of a lace doily, the work freezes the single word among lacy, Victorian forms.

The reference to lace, enlarged and intensified, is also seen in Nancy Friedemann's magnificent and colossal *Byzantine Grid* (cat. no. 7). Significantly, this work also features a signature panel that makes reference to Spanish Colonial paintings. Emphasizing the role of the artist as maker, her signature panel acknowledges the creation of the object by herself, a woman, working in the tradition of Colombian lace-makers like her grandmother. At the same time, the monumentality of the work has the effect of overpowering the viewer with concentration, obsessiveness and the literal representation of labor. Similarly concerned with labor and femininity that vaguely allude to femininity is the untitled print by Louise Bourgeois from the museum's own collection (fig. 1). The forms curve into one another, bounded on some sides by decorative motifs. Like a giant, lacy teardrop, the abstract forms allude to nostalgic forms of late nineteenth century works by women.

The Feminine Mystique

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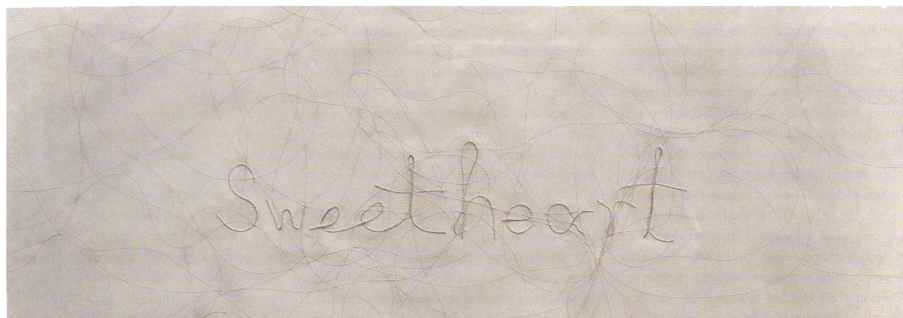
Two artists in the show, Juana Valdes and Heather Hart, use crochet as a tool for protest. Juana Valdes's pink cobweb (cat. no. 22) takes crochet work to an extreme. Creating a spiderweb from long chains of crochet stitches, the artist makes a literal statement about the trappings of domestic environment that is also a metaphor for Friedan's thesis. No longer a mere decorative motif, the doily stretches itself into an impossible size, occupying an entire corner. Heather Hart uses crochet and draws on the tradition of making objects for the home to create “cozies” for toy guns (cat. no. 9). Tea cozies, toilet paper roll covers, covers for tissue boxes, and a variety of other handmade objects fill the home and cover a variety of household items, revealing their original forms while covering them with a decorative exterior. Ms. Hart presents us with the feminized exteriors of guns, covering them entirely in a series of the fact that they are made from ivory yarn. Despite the gentle that they are called cozies, these outer layers completely cover the gun, making removing the cozy impossible. A hardened interior is completely obscured by a feminized exterior.

Underscoring the confinement of the nurturing environment, Gema Alava Crisostomo has re-created a cast-iron grille like the kind seen adorning windows in the south of Spain (and subsequently throughout the Spanish colonies). Made from thread, a gendered material, the artist creates elaborate forms by wrapping thread around pins (cat. no. 1). Usurping the original function of the pin and thread, the

artist instead constructs a complex space with these simple, feminized elements. The literal craftiness of the work is in the artist's ability to allude to space by the mere forming of various lengths of thread around innumerable pins. Perhaps the most well-known reference to the role of women and this decorative metalwork is seen in a painting possibly by Francisco de Goya or his son, Xavier, *Majas on a Balcony* (before 1812). Goya created young women of the image, one featuring two versions of the upper classes and the other presenting two prostitutes. The cast-iron grille work could serve equivalently to protect and to display the body seen behind its exquisitely curving forms.

Shelly Bahi's drawings on wallpaper use the domesticity implied by the wallpaper patterns to create a contradictory image (cat. no. 2). Luxuriating atop a luxury convertible sedan, the women seem freed from their domestic roles. At the same time, they become decorative motifs and seem equally constrained by the wallpaper as by their poses—despite the implied glamour.

Finally, Pam Cooper's mixed media soft sculpture, *My Spine*, presents the exterior of a home created entirely out of fabric and lined with images of children in the domestic environment. She continues to work with ordinary objects drawn from the home—paper, scissors, thread, fabric, sewing patterns, photographs—to create her images that evoke nostalgia, a sense of home, melancholy and memories.



(fig. 3) Carson Fox, *Sweetheart*, 2003, White cotton blowout and plastic, 17 1/8 x 20 3/8 in., Gift of the Brodsky Center, 2004.16

## The Body

In her groundbreaking text, *The Beauty Myth* (1991), feminist Naomi Wolf writes about the years that followed the development of the feminine mystique and how the hegemony of commerce helped to create a new problem for women:

*In the breakdown of the Feminine Mystique and the rebirth of the women's movement, the magazines and advertisers of that defunct religion were confronted with their own obsolescence. The beauty myth, in its modern form, arose to take the place of the Feminine Mystique, to save magazines and advertisers from the economic fallout of the women's revolution...High-fashion culture ended, and the women's magazines traditional expertise was suddenly irrelevant. The Feminine Mystique evaporated; all that was left was the body. Women's sense of liberation from the older constraints of fashion was countered by a new*

*and sinister relationship to their bodies...In a stunning move, an entire replacement culture was developed by naming a “problem” where it had scarcely existed before, centering it on women's natural state, and elevating it to the existential female dilemma.<sup>6</sup>*

Addressing issues of the body are just by Babs Ringold, Rachael Serbinski, Justine Reyes, and Kara Rooney. Noting how the female body can be undermined, deconstructed, interpreted and reconsidered in a variety of ways, these artists ask viewers to think specifically about the image, its manipulation and its (mis)interpretation.

Kara Rooney's *Welcome to the Fair* alludes to a number of concepts associated with gender and representation (cat. no. 19). This poetic work addresses both the physical and social constraints placed on women during the nineteenth cen-

tury. As she conducted research on the World's Fair of 1891, the artist was impressed by the number of women leaving their homes and making the long trip to Chicago to see the fair. The corset became a kind of reliquary, signifying both memory and struggle. The Ferris wheel, created as the centerpiece for the fair, became the metaphorical object that could represent these ideas. Vaguely reminiscent of a vaginal opening, the wheel links the female figure to the fair. With its elevation, the wheel defies gravity. At the same time, its perpetual circular motion re-inscribes the limitations of being a woman during this period. The artist, referring to the Ferris wheel, notes, “Just like the corset, once in it, one can only succeed at going around in circles.”

In her portrait photograph of her mother, Justine Reyes takes a frank look at the representation of the aging body and reflects on the relationship

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