

## Sex Roles

Perhaps the richest of these categories is how women's (sex) roles and how gender in general is constructed. The social construction of gender—the ways in which society helps to form public ideas about how the difference between masculinity and femininity is marked—is present in some way in most of the works in the exhibition.

**In her series, *Good Girls, Bad Girls*, Margaret Murphy uses objects purchased at the 99-cent store for her acrylic and watercolor paintings (cat. no. 16). Formed largely by popular concepts of gender, these figurines show romantic visions of women as maternal, instinctive creatures wedded to nature or lost in reverie. Another set of inspirational objects—the bad girls—was purchased in Amsterdam. These topless, bottomless or nude figurines are cell phone cradles that the artist turns into models for her paintings. Stretched out against a wall-paper-patterned background, the oversexed figurines possess Barbie-like measurements with lithe limbs, enlarged breasts and are virtually hairless, a marked contrast to the “good girl” figurines.**

This same concept of women as a equally a virtuous, decorative and sexual creature is addressed in Ayakoh Furukawa's work, *Her Problem that Had No Name* (cat. no. 8). Drawn in lettering from this phrase, Ms. Furukawa's image uses letters to create the lines of her figure, a woman occupying a role that is simultaneously decorative, sexualized and powerful.

The same inscription, repeated over and over again, creates the lines and forms of the subject and affirms the subject of Friedan's book with the purposefulness of a mantra.

The pressure to procreate is addressed by Esperanza Mayobre's work *Y Dio a Mucha Luz* (cat. no. 14) Translated, the work's title means “And she gave much birth;” the transliteration is “And she gave much light,” in which “dar a luz” is used as an idiomatic expression in Spanish meaning to give birth. The identical nature of each of the rubber balls underscores the inevitability, the perpetuity, the endlessness of the cycle of life in which both men and women participate. The number of rubber balls, their grid-like installation and the addition of light are all elements that serve to re-inscribe the ideas addressed by the work and its title.

Influenced by painters like Jenny Saville, Jennifer Mazza creates small paintings that are intense, fierce, even slightly disturbing (cat. no. 15). Tightly focused on the hands, face and mouth of her subject, the artist brings the viewer directly, uncomfortably into her space. Lying prostrate on the bed with her, we feel the suffering of each figure as she bites her finger or pulls on her lips. We imagine an invented scenario, perhaps borrowed from a soap opera, in which she has suffered some injustice. The diminutive proportions of the paintings emphasizes the intimacy of the moment captured in the painting and asks viewers to step closer, approaching the implied space of the painting.

Placing herself literally into the role of homemaker, Jeanette May depicts herself attending to household duties in her photographs (cat. no. 13) These images are then inserted into various texts: Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the New Single Girl* (1962) and Kate Miller's *Sexual Politics* (1968). Each crucial in their own way, these

texts are milestones in the contemporary history of gender studies. From the pages of *The Feminine Mystique*, the apron-clad artist offers the viewer a dozen freshly baked muffins in her role as homemaker. Significantly, the image is placed within the page in which the writer states the thesis of her book. We read:

*“When the mystique of feminine fulfillment sent women home again, housewifery had to expand into a full-time career. Sexual love and motherhood had to become all of life... family responsibility had to expand to take the place of responsibility to society...”*

Friedan goes on to elaborate about the need for appliances for the home and their constant use by housewives. The artist portrays herself in the guise of someone presenting the fruits of her labor, borne from the use of such appliances. But the expression on her face belies the act as one of happy home-making.

Noelle Lorraine Williams's work is a complex, multi-layered sculptural program with references to the historic view of bodies and contemporary expectations about femininity and power (cat. no. 34) In her discussion of the significant role played by Friedan and her book's relevance to later generations of feminists, Ms. Williams notes:

*Friedan and {bell} books share an important perception that the fragmented self and the hunger for wholeness is/was a significant aspect of Black and white womanhood in the mid twentieth century. Friedan concentrated on the hunger, the yearning—what she labeled the “feminine mystique” of women—mainly as white domestic caretakers in their families while hooks’ theory of “self recovery” to “reunite fragments of being...” concentrates on a cultural yearning of Black women in the United States.<sup>7</sup>*