

Objects of Desire

Karen Mainenti

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Bard
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Objects of Desire grew out of a series of happy accidents while browsing the wide-ranging and captivating Bard Graduate Center Library books and objects in the Study Collection.

One early discovery, which became a central inspiration for this project, was *Chaekgeori*, a genre of late-eighteenth century Korean still-life painting displayed on folded screens, and which translates roughly as “books and things”. Originally commissioned by King Jeongjo to display behind his royal throne, these life-size paintings were used as an attractive and dignified backdrop, intended to signify one’s refined taste, affluence and most essential, *scholarly* intellect. In addition to stacks of books, these massive paintings depicted other markers of social status, including writing tools and imported luxury goods like antique vessels and incense.

But as *Chaekgeori* became more popular, ordinary people began commissioning their own versions of these decorative paintings. Suddenly, artists with little or no formal training were depicting decorated vases, dishware, flowers and food, often awkwardly floating atop each other, as opposed to the neatly arranged scholarly bookshelves of the ruling class. Now, rather than reflecting a patron’s high social status and elegant tastes, these became portraits reflecting how the average Korean wanted to be perceived, with all of their wishes and hopes for a happy life.

I was struck by the similarities between this ages-old tradition and our contemporary American culture in which people are constantly preoccupied with how they are viewed by others. Consider the “beauty shelfie”—a variation on the “selfie”—proliferating on Instagram today, where women proudly show off their beauty products by displaying them on shelves, vanities or in medicine cabinets, sometimes followed by lengthy explanations of their extensive beauty regimen. With undercurrents of elitism and affluence—both the cost of the products that are shown and the free time with which one has to use them—the parallels with *Chaekgeori* abound. Indeed, the products and the medium may have changed, but the desire to invent a favorable and curated image of oneself remains.

This *Chaekgeori* folk art style has inspired my own large-scale still-life drawing. Using a long roll of heavyweight paper, I created a graphite drawing accented with gold leafing that depicts contemporary beauty products. The

jars and bottles of beauty serums, elixirs, concentrates, and precious creams were drawn floating within the composition, alongside or stacked among piles of decorative books. The names of the beauty products exemplify the unrelenting messages that prey on women’s personal insecurities—*Drops of Youth; Hope in a Jar*—simultaneously inventing flaws in need of correction, while conjuring religious faith as the only panacea for women’s inherent imperfections.

My installation in the alcove bookshelves brings the *Chaekgeori* concept to life in three dimensions. Each of the twelve shelves is adorned with a backdrop of ornate early twentieth century American wallpaper that I discovered in the Study Collection, with small porcelain sculptures carefully arranged and stacked on books. I cast these sculptures from my own everyday beauty and makeup containers, using colored slip in a soft palette to reveal their fine details. Here, rather than highlighting the marketing messages on the product packaging as in my drawing, I was interested in stripping the products down to their bare shapes to reveal their delicate forms, evoking the female figure and archetypal idols of femininity.

Mounted behind these sculptures are images which I’ve excised from vintage magazine advertisements from the nineteen-fifties and sixties and accented with gold leafing. The brassieres, soaps, perfumes, powders—feminine trappings as otherworldly symbols—add yet another layer to the multi-faceted portraits of women that modern culture has created, and which women are compelled to assimilate as they struggle to define themselves.

Artist Bio

Karen Mainenti is a visual artist working in Gowanus, Brooklyn. She has exhibited at La Bodega Gallery and Trestle Gallery in Brooklyn; Gallery MC and the Society for Domestic Museology in New York; Guest Spot @ The Reinstitute in Baltimore Maryland; and the Cornell Museum of Art in Delray Beach, Florida. Her work has been featured on Hyperallergic, Gothamist, Brooklyn Magazine, and Bmore Art. In 2014, her outdoor street art installation, *DUMBO Underfoot*, was exhibited at the DUMBO Arts Festival in Brooklyn, and she had a solo show at Chashama’s pop-up gallery in the Garment District. In 2013, she attended the School of Visual Arts Summer Residency Program and was a visiting artist at the Tulsa Girls Art School in Oklahoma.