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Reframing Domesticity

Domesticity, traditionally and as described in common terms, is the fondness one has for family life and running the home¹. This definition hearkens back to a very different time, a time when men were the breadwinners and women were likely to maintain the home—expected to cook, clean, take care of the children, and do needlepoint in their spare time. More recently, feminism cast the term in a negative light in order to empower women toward equality; domesticity was considered exploitation because women were supposed to perform household duties and there was little other choice. In the contemporary United States, though, these views of domestic life are outdated. In order to update the term, I look to feminism to provide us with a more contemporary framing. I assert that contemporary domesticity is a coping mechanism to fill the void left by the “feminist sublime”, and the prevalence of traditional, and stereotypically domestic, craft methods in contemporary art provides a lens through which to reexamine domesticity.

In Bonnie Mann’s *Women’s Liberation and the Sublime: Feminism, Postmodernism, Environment*, the feminist sublime is described as the terror, the “mundane, daily fear that grips a woman dependent on her planet for survival, yet unable to stop either her own or anyone else’s participation in its destruction.”² The dominant nations have lost their connections to the earth and instead rely on industrially produced and packaged food-like substances, exhaust-emitting automobiles, imported goods made by third world citizens earning ten cents per day, and other “earth-defiling

technologies.ⁱⁱⁱ” We hear about distant wars and genocides, global warming, famine, and oil spills, and there is nothing we can do to change the status quo because the people with the most power and money make all decisions (almost exclusively men)^{iv}, and we are just along for the ride. We depend on our planet for the necessities – air, water, food, shelter – while simultaneously destroying it, and Mann asserts that this is where the sublime, a bit of a paradox, comes in. We are simultaneously terrified of the destruction and exhilarated from the power of being able to destroy.

It is terrifying to have so little control over our surroundings, arguably more so for women because, as Mann suggests, we do not have “masculinist fantasies of independent, sovereign subjects in control of themselves, other people, and the planet.”^v Masculinity, according to a common definition, is marked by strength and aggressiveness^{vi}, while women are stereotypically less aggressive and more empathetic (though studies of this are subjective, and empathy may be related more to gender roles than sex)^{vii}. Gender aside, those in power have it because they sought that power, and the rest of us are subject to their decisions, no matter how much we disagree with or fear the decision. I also venture to say that the feminist sublime is made all the more intense by motherhood because we desperately want to protect our offspring from the horrors of the world. Our children’s future is at stake, which is far more terrifying than our own future being compromised (please refer to Afterthoughts 1).

Traditionally, domestic acts are those women carry out around

the home. Many of these acts are repetitious—washing dishes, folding laundry, vacuuming and dusting, preparing food, mending clothes—and serve to keep idle hands constantly moving. Through performing these monotonous acts, women are given the feeling of being able to control something. We may not be able to plug the flow of oil in the Gulf of Mexico, but we can keep up with the laundry. It is this illusion of control that helps us get through the day without constantly worrying about the bigger picture. By doing laundry, we keep ourselves busy and provide care for our immediate surroundings, both of which I feel are essential aspects of coping with the feminist sublime. We are also solving an immediate problem, which is so important to self worth; laundry piles up and we take care of it.

Domesticity goes beyond basic household chores, though; it encompasses all of the making that we do, from careful food preparation to decorating to crafting. Feminist artist Faith Wilding, in her essay *Monstrous Domesticity*, observes, "...the transcendental nature of the repetitive process of crocheting brings many questions to mind regarding what has been shared by generations of women who silently participated in various states of altered consciousness through enactment of repetitive activity inherent in women's work.^{viii}" It is this act of *making*, of repetition and filling physical space, which provides us with an illusion of control, and therefore a way to address the fear of the feminist sublime. Many contemporary artists are using these repetitive craft methods in their artwork, which leads me to believe that craft is being used widely to cope with this sublime (please refer to Afterthoughts 2).

Just as the Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the 20th century responded to the rise of the machine, so too have current artists. Technological advances rule Western culture, and while these advances improve convenience and create connections, technology also isolates us. Thanks to the Internet, one never has to leave their home if they choose not to. A Facebook message is far less personal than a phone call or handwritten letter, and using the ATM means we will interact with one less person on a given day. Manufacturing corporations have grown to astonishing sizes, and due to the cheapness of outsourcing, a vast quantity of the merchandise we consume is produced in far-off countries with highly questionable labor practices. Faythe Levine's 2009 documentary *Handmade Nation* shows interviews with a number of contemporary artists utilizing craft, and the overarching message is that these artists are concerned about and opposed to mass production, big business, and certainly the abuse of factory workers^{ix}. Their domestic craft methods are a reaction against these troubling industrial practices and a way of voicing their concern. The artists are dealing with their sublime fear by producing with their own hands.

Each item produced with domestic craft methods shows evidence of the human hand that painstakingly crafted it. All objects have personal touches, and they need not be perfect because imperfections add to the allure. Peter Dormer, in *The salon de refuse?*, observes, "Technology has given us the economics and scale, but in achieving this it has necessarily adopted the strategy of simplification and removal of the possibility for human error."^x I agree with Dormer and insist that human error and imperfections

increase the charm of handmade pieces; it is apparent that the items took time and effort to make and are unlike anything else in the world.



Figure 1
India Romeo booth at craft fair,
featuring purses made of
vintage fabric

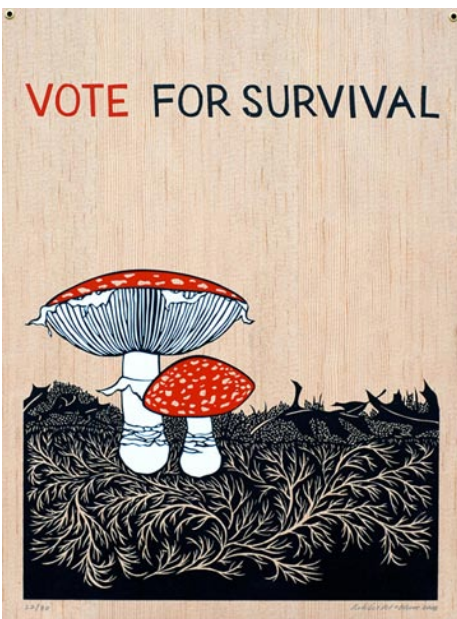


Figure 2
"Vote for Survival" paper-cut
by Nikki McClure

Many artists who utilize craft are environmentally conscious and thus use sustainable practices. These craft artists, like Ileana Rodriguez of India Romeo (Fig. 1), do their best to reuse, repurpose, and recycle, being the least obtrusive on the environment as possible^{xi}. Rodriguez and other artists demonstrate their arguments and values through what they do and how they live; it's a lifestyle^{xii}. Vintage fabric, buttons, and zippers are Rodriguez's materials of choice, while paper-cutter Nikki McClure and many print artists utilize recycled paper and soy inks (Fig. 2). For Rodriguez, using vintage notions that once belonged to her mother is as much about continuing tradition as it is about being friendly to the environment^{xiii}. Craft fairs and small, artist-owned shops are a new wave of "Mom and Pop" stores, replacing those which were run out of business by the swift sprawl of large corporations like WalMart and Target. The craft objects are not being manufactured in a country across the globe and then shipped to stores throughout the United States, they are coming straight from the artist's own hands.

Domesticity is a way for artists to cope, and it is a way of rejecting the state of the world through a celebration of values—locality, community, repurposement, and femininity. Since we cannot control the rise of technology, the decline of the environment, a decrease in personal interaction, an increase in importing and outsourcing, the fear of war, disease, and destruction, we create

the illusion of control by repetitively filling the space with our craft. Craft is at once celebrating the beautiful and pushing against the horrible.



Figure 3
"Reclaim" from calendar



Figure 4
*from "Take Care: 15 Postcards
by Nikki McClure"*



Figure 5
Laundry

McClure, a self-taught artist living in Olympia, Washington, certainly celebrates the beautiful when crafting her highly detailed paper-cuts (Fig. 2). McClure displays and sells original paper-cuts in addition to marketing her art to a wider audience by producing posters, books, cards, and yearly calendars (Fig. 3). She has also designed several record and book covers and illustrations for magazines.

McClure's intimate paper-cuts, always from one sheet of paper, show scenes of motherhood, nature, agriculture, and other simple themes from everyday life. Her work shows a vast appreciation, and fixation, for the things many people take for granted. McClure's illustrations are beautifully intricate, showing a level of care that clearly requires the utmost patience; she carefully and meditatively draws with her exacto knife, sometimes making mistakes along the way, but appreciating these mistakes as chances to solve problems^{xiv}. McClure is pushing against the quick pace of the technology-obsessed world we live in by slowing down and celebrating the ordinary, which we realize is not ordinary at all, but incredibly lovely and inspiring (Fig. 4). This is how McClure addresses the feminist sublime—she obsessively busies herself with the cutting out of these intricate designs that pay homage to our immediate environment. Images of the mundane, like a woman hanging laundry on a clothesline (Fig. 5), are elevated to beauty through McClure's delicate and repetitious acts of cutting paper.



Figure 6
Gloves, from the *Trousseau* series, 2008



Figure 7
Negligee, from the *Trousseau* series, 2007

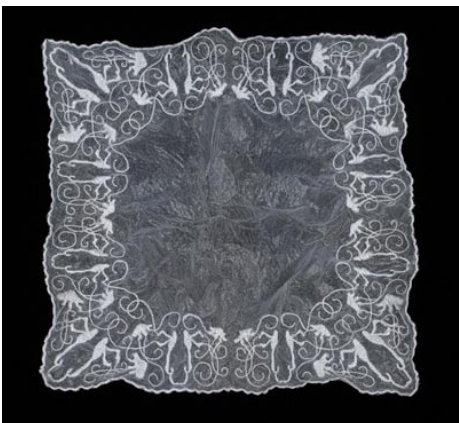


Figure 8
Handkerchief (*The Anatomy of Tears*), 2008

Of her own work, McClure says, “I do have some lofty art ideals, too. I want to make a better world, a cleaner, safer place to live for all--people, trees, bees, water. Hopefully I am making at least a few people’s days better.^{xv}” McClure and other artists are problem-solvers, and though the state of our world is not a problem we can solve, we cope by focusing our energies on the smaller things we can address.

Laura Splan, a mixed media artist living in New York City, is single-handedly reframing domesticity. She grew up in Tennessee and received her Bachelor of Fine Art from University of California, Irvine and her Master of Fine Art in sculpture from Mills College in Oakland, California. Splan mixes biological materials like blood, intravenous tubing, and cosmetic skin peel with traditional craft methods to create pieces that invoke contrasting feelings of comfort and discomfort (Fig. 10). A viewer is drawn in by the beauty of the work and then repelled and forced to reconsider their initial thoughts once they realize what materials are being used.

Splan’s most recent project, and I feel her most domestic and feminine, is her *Trousseau* series, where she coats her body in cosmetic skin peel and then carefully removes it in sheets which she sews as if it were thin, gauzy fabric. A trousseau is a dowry, and a clear reference to domesticity. Splan is essentially sewing and embroidering thin layers of her own skin to create beautiful objects—gloves, a purse, negligee, a fan (Fig. 6, 7). Several of the items are computer-embroidered with designs created directly from our own biology; for instance, *Handkerchief (The*

Anatomy of Tears), made from water-soluble cosmetic skin peel, is embroidered with the anatomy of tear ducts (Fig. 8). These items cause the audience to simultaneously feel comfort due to the familiar, domestic methods with which they are produced, and discomfort because of the grotesque nature of the material. The result is a marriage of what is traditionally handmade and feminine with what is technical, scientific, and stereotypically masculine. In a review of Splan's work in *American Craft* magazine, Elizabeth Lopeman observes, "Our ideas about traditionally handcrafted domestic objects are subverted by the use of materials with a direct connection to the body.^{xvi}"

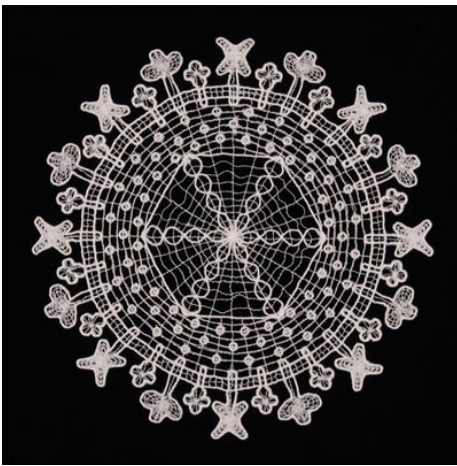


Figure 9
Herpes doily, 2004



Figure 10
Blood Scarf, 2002

Splan is flattered when onlookers call her work feminist. "These readings are of the same work that people call exquisite or beautiful. That's when I know I'm on the right track. That's what is so wonderful about craft (feminine or otherwise): it can serve as a camouflage for another underlying meaning or agenda.^{xvii}" Prior to her skin peel project, Splan created beautiful doilies representing herpes, HIV, and other virus cells (Fig. 9). An article by Virginia Davis in *Fiberarts* magazine notes, "The doily, with its nostalgic evocation of middle-class gentility, becomes the marker of the biological hazards that have invaded everyday life.^{xviii}" By merging domestic technique with terrifying viruses, she brings the things we are afraid of into an arena we can fathom. Through projects like *Blood Scarf* (Fig. 10) and the doilies, Splan is addressing the terror of biological warfare, germs, and disease, and also the feminine terror of vulnerability, by bearing what is normally hidden. Splan is exposing these issues and at the same time, celebrating them for their undeniable beauty. She manages to address the feminine

sublime and Kant's sublime by bridging what is traditionally considered "feminine" and "masculine". Kant's sublime, simplified and in my own terms, is the brain's reaction of awe and reverence to that which is unfathomable—the infinite, and in the case of biological warfare, the miniscule. The feminist sublime is a reaction to the environmental elements that are much closer to home and affect us directly. Splan grabs both versions of the sublime by the horns and directly addresses our fears and wonderment.



Figure 11
Overcoat, 2004

I believe men and women alike feel the terror of being unable to control their surroundings and the desire to create an illusion of a safe space (please refer to Afterthoughts 1). The work of Charles LeDray responds strongly to the feminist sublime with its painstaking repetition and attention to detail (Fig. 11). His aptly titled show, *Workworkworkworkwork*, is currently on display at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and showcases approximately 50 sculptures. As the title suggests, there is an air of obsessive busyness about the show. Each sculpture has many miniature parts making up the whole, so there are in fact thousands of bits and pieces making up the work (Fig. 12).

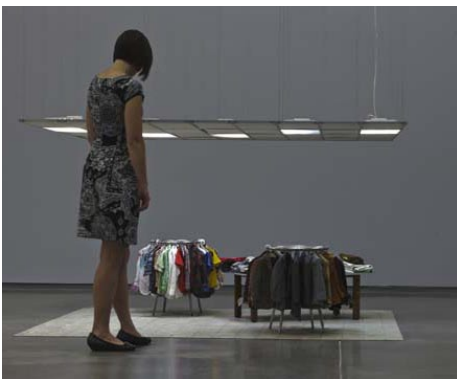


Figure 12
Mens Suits

Each piece is meticulously made entirely by hand, some carved from bone, some hand sewn and modeled, and some raised on a pottery wheel. The show inspires awe from onlookers due to the sheer magnitude of tiny components. The viewer is at once struck with wondering how much time LeDray has spent creating these bits. A review of LeDray's work in *Arts Magazine* frames the feeling captured by his show well:

LeDray's scaled-down, sewn-by-hand objects have an intimate domestic quality and conjure a host of tiny vulnerable beings, and indeed the subject of his art is the joy -- but mostly the pain -- of this domesticity... you get the feeling that LeDray has lavished so much attention on these weird dolls in order to protect them from some awful environment, some concealed fate; that these pygmy sculptures are surrogates for a self which has felt the storm of anger and the hand of violence.^{xix}

While Splan confronts the sublime through the strong contrasts in her work, LeDray keeps the terror of the sublime at bay through his apparent fixation with making. The infinitesimal detail in LeDray's work can only be done justice in person. It is striking and undeniable that this man's hands never stop moving. The large cases filled with miniscule ceramics are sublime themselves, in the Kantian sense, because it seems utterly impossible that a single man could have raised them each by hand (Fig. 13). LeDray, more than any other contemporary artist I've come across, illustrates the act of keeping one's hands constantly moving in order to fill the space around him. To me, it seems compulsive in a similar way to hoarding—desperately trying to fill a void within by physically filling up the space around him.



Figure 13
Milk and Honey, 1994-96

These contemporary artists, and so many more, show us how far we have come from the days when domesticity meant women's only choice was to maintain the household while men earned a living. Domesticity used to be the result of an assigned gender role, and a sign of financial dependence, and as a reaction against this, feminism cast domesticity in a negative light. But times have changed, and domesticity is no longer an obligation—it

is a choice. It is a tool for the contemporary woman, man, and family, a tool with which to cope with the fear of being utterly out of control. Rather than focusing on what we cannot control, we devote our energy toward crafting repetitively, and this gives us the illusion of being somewhat in control of our lives and maintaining a safe space in which to exist. Domesticity is also a celebration of values—locality, community, repurposing, and femininity. Independent, self-sufficient women are reverting back to traditional methods in order to assert themselves and take an illusion of action against the problems that are outside of their control.

In a time of political mistrust and fragmentation, environmental decline, and economic distress, it is easy to become overwhelmed by that which we cannot control. The presence of domestic craft methods in contemporary art speaks to this sentiment; it is social, personal, back to basics, and environmentally conscious. It is a presence that has responded so thoroughly to our current social, political, and technological climate, and as a result, craft is no longer a low art reserved for housewives and hobbyists. Domestic craft is a reaction to our current climate. Despite the democratic values in place in our society, it is impossible to enact change on a substantial level, and filling our time and space with the domestic act of *making* allows us to cope with the fear of having no control.

Afterthoughts

1. I would like to mention that I do not wish to exclude men from the feminist sublime. Though a feminist writer has coined this definition of the sublime, I believe men also experience the terrible sublimity of being unable to control their environment and protect what they hold dear. The affects of the feminist sublime on men could be the topic of another paper entirely, though, and so for the purpose of this piece, and since I am a woman myself, I will address these issues from a more feminine standpoint, though not strictly feminist. On the verge of becoming a mother for the first time, I feel especially attuned to this definition of the sublime. I have been uncomfortably aware of being out of control for some time now, but never has it been so scary as it is now. How can I protect my child from the things I have no control over? I can only do so much, and I, along with other women and men like me, need to cope with the fear somehow.
2. I believe there are two general categories of people who are using domesticity as a coping mechanism. There are those who avoid or reject information about the state of our world by burying themselves in their immediate surroundings, caring for what is close to them, and busying themselves with their personal environments. These are the people who use domesticity as avoidance of the sublime. The other group of people, the group I focus on in this essay, is aware and informed of current events, and is conscious of being unable to control their surroundings. They use domesticity, and craft, to assuage the overwhelming fear that comes with this lack of control.

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