Spring 2000

Mink Stole My Heart

Anna Laura Baldree

University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj

Recommended Citation
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/362
I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Clark Stewart, Faculty Mentor

Date: March 30, 2020

Comments (Optional):

This has been a strong project in both conception and execution by a student from whom much is expected in her post U.T. career.
Mink Stole My Heart

Laura Baldree
I have recently found myself fascinated by mass culture's obsession with celebrity and how that obsession translates into a search for identity. Perhaps the best examples of this phenomenon exist in the guise of Elvis enthusiasts whose home decor, personal effects, and day-to-day lives revolve around their infatuation with the King. Therefore, my work deals with these obsession and identity issues by exploring my own infatuation with a camp actress named Mink Stole. Not only do Mink Stole and I possess similar physical appearances and mannerisms, but I also feel that in some ways she personifies a larger-than-life version of myself, or at least the person that I will someday be.

The idea that obsession often is linked to sexuality and spirituality is one that greatly influences my work. Individual pieces reference Byzantine iconography -- almond or half-almond shaped body halos, stylized figures, etc. -- in order to "code" the work as "spiritual" and also to endow upon the pieces the ideas of religion and tradition. Further references to tradition manifest themselves in the hodgepodge of artistic styles that I employ. In keeping with the jumbled imagery of modern society, I have pulled from art history whatever styles I feel deal with spirituality (oftentimes through repetition): Art Deco, Pop Art, and Minimalism, to name a few.
An important recurring factor in my work is the idea of kitsch. Many of my pieces either directly employ or indirectly allude to camp, American nostalgia, and thrift store art. In my own quest for identity, I have felt the need to address the identity of art. I work to transform the second-rate into art, for aren't the ideas of transfiguration and the saving of the damned chief tenets of Western religion?
Act I: Introduction

"I guess there are just two kinds of people...
my kind of people and assholes. It's rather obvious
which category you fit into. Have a nice day."

-- Connie Marble

_Pink Flamingos_
When I was sixteen, I saw *Pink Flamingos*, my first John Waters' film as well as my introduction to an actress by the name of Mink Stole. One by one, my friends left the room as the movie's vulgar glamour progressed and little by little, I found myself mesmerized by the vision of a white trash paradise. At the center of my focus was a fiery, crass, petite, and unconventionally attractive woman with candy apple red hair and rhinestone cat-eye glasses. What can I say -- it was love at first sight! Smart, commanding, sexy, unsinkable: she became the symbol for that which I perceived myself to be and which I hoped to become. Thus, I immediately grasped the image of Mink Stole as an icon for the brand of femaleness to which I subscribe.

When I was twenty-one, I was in the midst of a struggle to instill my work with a greater sense of identity, of ownership. At the time, I had been making pieces that dealt with my childhood, notions of innocence and sexuality. The finished pieces seemed to distance themselves from me; the work failed to address many dominant aspects of my character. I needed an image rich with history and shared allegiance that could be used as a surrogate for myself. Upon reviewing the role models, icons, and living symbols in my life, I chose Mink for our physical similarities and chameleon-like ability to assume different personas.

Unsure as to how to begin this new series of work, I turned to art history, particularly modernism. For the artist or art student, the history of art takes on a "religious" structuring complete with its sects, orders, monks, priests, and
patron saints. Minimalism and Pop art both seemed to play with notions of the sacred: the former sought to sanctify the pure while the latter fought to redeem the vulgar. Hence, I painted *Pink Mink*, an imperfect assimilation of minimalist and pop ideas and form.

In the painting, the image of Mink as a reclining nude Connie Marble from *Pink Flamingos* is repeated in flat shapes of pink, beige, and red. The colors suggest consumerized femininity, the sort associated with feminine hygiene products and young girls' clothing. Atop this field is the image of a winking Mink, the Religious Whore from *Multiple Maniacs*. By applying this new image as a glossy line drawing that fills the majority of the painting, I created a figure who would be ethereal and omni-present if not for the commercialized quality of the polyurethane itself. The lascivious expression of the winking Mink reinstates the lewd sexuality that had been stripped by the now-flattened field of reclining Minks.

Upon reviewing the finished painting, I concluded that Pink Mink seemed more like a commentary and less like the real thing. It was too far removed from the notion of glamorous trash from which it was conceived. Moreover, I felt the painting as a whole was too anonymous. If my paintings were in some way to deal with tastelessness, they would have to become tacky. Furthermore, I wanted to go past mere religious allusions and actually code the work as "religious". I began by painting *Mandorla Womb*, the first "icon" in the Mink series.
Act II: Development

"I have never found the antics of deviants to be one bit amusing."

-- Peggy Gravel

Desperate Living
Orthodox icons amaze me. In the Orthodox Christian faith, icons are mystical communication devices, timeless portals to each other and ourselves. An icon's purpose as a meeting ground for the physical and spiritual is evident in its distinctive blend of two and three dimensionality that is not only manifested in the painted images but also by the ornate covers that sometimes surround the finished icon. I set about to create an icon that would place Mink in the company of the saints. By taking this approach I labelled myself as both commentator and fanatic who instills meaning through power of belief.

With rabbit fur and gold satin -- two staple fabrics of trailer trash couture -- I created an almond shaped area on the canvas. This almond shape in Orthodox iconography is called a "mandorla", a peculiar type of body halo that is typically seen around the resurrected Christ. What I find intriguing about the mandorla is that it can be traced all the way back to the earliest Christian art. At that time, much of the imagery combined both Christian and pagan elements: the mandorla was a hybrid of Christian holiness and pagan sexuality in the form of a stylized vulva. Unlike many other hybrid images in early Christian art, the mandorla remained in use and became imbedded in Orthodox iconography. On a side note, it is not important for my viewers to recognize the almond shape as "mandorla", although such knowledge does add to the understanding of my work. Regardless of a viewer's sensitivity to iconographic devices, the mandorla does read as a symbol for female sexuality.
The image of Mink in *Mandorla Womb* is from *Mondo Trasho* in which she plays a lunatic who tap-dances topless in a tutu. I chose this image because it is both sexual and nonsexual, much like the icons of Mary of the Desert that depict a haggard woman in tattered furs with one breast exposed. To paint dancing Mink in the style of an icon, I flattened and redefined her form; I repressed her original meaning to fill her with my own signification. She becomes precious, her tutu gemlike. All in all, I felt this piece to be far more successful than the first.

With the next piece, I stepped away from such heavy references to iconography and toward the basic Christian concept of redemption. *Mink 12* became an experiment, a project to turn "art" into Art via process. First, I meticulously painted the same bust of Mink as Connie Marble from *Pink Flamingos* twelve times. I then scoured the many Am Vets and Goodwills of Knoxville searching for a diverse selection of "thrift store art". Some are crappy prints glued to wood; some are hand painted by either a hobbyist or one who fancied himself an artist. Some are landscapes, others still lifes and the occasional religious scene. One in particular is a mortuary fan from the 1950's that depicts a young boy and girl kneeling in a pew under a stained glass window. The odd and hypnotic looks on the children's faces reflect the absurd sincerity underscoring the caption at the base of the image: "Reverence". Once I finished gathering pieces of "art", I burned an iron shape in the middle of each picture with a clothes iron then attached one of the small Mink paintings onto the center of each iron burn.
The twelve are displayed in the fashion of household shrines, composition determined by symmetry and hierarchy. The homey feel of the piece is reinforced by the "home-decorating" nature of the individual thrift store pictures and by the iron shape which is read less as a half-mandorla and more as a symbol for female domesticity. The darkness of the burns inverts the notion of the halo and also plays with the idea of alteration in a very literal sense. Repeatedly painting the same image of Mink devalues the paintings by alluding to mass-production then instills them with new, greater value by calling attention to the subtle differences in each painting.

Although, or perhaps because, I liked *Mink 12* more than *Mandorla Womb*, I decided to make another icon. This time, I focused on icons of the Theotokos, literally "Mother of God". Many such icons are so greatly reverenced that they have specially designed covers made of gold, pearls, and other precious materials that only expose areas depicting "skin". Once again I used rabbit fur, but this time for the construction of a three-dimensional cover for the image of winking Mink. I returned to stylized Orthodox painting technique, but one associated with older iconography. Mink is painted in gold leaf and a red oxide paint similar to the type used in Orthodox icons.

In many ways *Minkotokos* is more successful than *Mandorla Womb*. The constructed cover organizes and activates the ground while producing very sensual folds of fur. Interestingly enough, the gold leaf skin reads as "dark" and Mink begins to look very much like Aunt Jemima -- a correlation both funny and
fitting. The simplicity and compactness of the piece reinforce its objectness and place it in the realm of personal effects.

Instead of creating more icons, I decided to further explore the ideas of repetition, mass production, and value. In *Value Study*, I painted three canvases based on an autographed photo of Mink. Each was painted separately and without looking at the other canvases. Thus, each painting has subtle differences in proportion, tone, and paint application that lend each canvas its own reading. I used an autographed picture because it is Hollywood's surrogate for the icon: to the admirer, the personalized photo becomes a symbol of accessibility. In *Value Study*, the mass-produced (read: impersonal) photograph of a film starlet becomes personal through the autograph. The autographed picture is then rendered impersonal by its open-ended script, recalling to the viewer that this autographed image is in no way different from countless others produced by the same actress. The image is next personalized though artistic selection, then devalued through further (implied) mass-production, and finally made personal by subtle differences in each canvas.

This same play on value and the personal I brought into cast metal sculptures. The first set of sculptures, entitled *Dirty Taffy*, consists of cast figurines of Mink as Taffy Davenport from *Female Trouble*. Each is made of aluminum then painted with acrylic to take on the look of collectible figures, like the kind you buy through home shopping channels and magazines. The second set of figurines, *Three-Way Connie*, depicts the reclining nude Connie Marble of
*Pink Flamingos.* Each is aluminum covered in rabbit fur, acrylic, and kaolin (the powder from which porcelain is made).

Both sets of sculptures lie in the realm of camouflage, of masquerade. The flip-flop of identity along with its connection to value is evident not only in the physical actuality of the pieces but in the form they depict -- a woman pretending to be someone else. While I feel that *Three-Way Connie* expresses these ideas more clearly, I prefer *Dirty Taffy* for its endearing charm and humor.

When I turned again to painting, I decided to reuse the same bratty image of Mink as Taffy Davenport upon which *Dirty Taffy* was based. This time however, I focused on spatial issues; I wanted this tacky little girl to exist in a traditional figurative space that begins to warp into a central, oversexed mandorla formed by Taffy's curly hair and frilly dress. A darkened iron shape in the background acts as an arch that frames the figure. This mandorla is repeated in the space between Taffy's legs, in Taffy's mouth, and in the halo-like plant stand to the left of the figure. The color and painting style in the figure specifically allude to the kind of commonplace portraiture that is regularly advertised in such upper middle class magazines as *Southern Living* and *Veranda.* In the finished piece, *Kiss Them For Me,* both image and space are stacked one upon the other. Because of this stacking, the periphery of the painting is subordinate to the central area of the canvas in which most of the layering occurs.

I hoped to handle space differently in the next painting, *Lingus.* Mink (as Connie Marble) and the mandorla exist separately from one another in an
ambiguous space made of swirling fleshy paint that at times seems sexual and at other times intestinal. The type of flower design associated with fabrics and wallpaper weaves through the ground. This flower field plays humorously with the notion of landscape which is supported by the white tree line behind the figures.

In the movie, Mink is holding a flaming torch which she is prepared to throw into a trailer home. In the painting, however, I wanted Mink and the mandorla to interact in dynamic and questionable ways. For instance, the mandorla alternately reads as a free standing figure, a floating portal, and a rift in the field. Moreover, it is unclear whether Mink is hitting, poking, rubbing, or probing the mandorla.

In the end, I didn't really care for this painting. Although several components of the painting seemed to be successful, the piece as a whole distanced itself from me. Lingus strayed too far into the arena of "bad painting", a genre to which I hold no particular allegiance. Upon review of the finished piece, I resolved to raise my level of painting in both technique and form.
Act III: Resolution

"I thought I'd come see you one last time before your karma caught up with you."

-- Taffy Davenport

*Female Trouble*
The next and subsequently last piece, *No More*, consists of two separate canvases of roughly traditional portrait size. To address some of the problems evident in the previous piece, I decided to simplify both image and idea. Each canvas holds a single portrait-style bust of Mink Stole -- as Peggy Gravel in the left canvas and as Sister Mary Ignatius in the right. Because color proved problematic in my previous paintings, I chose to tighten my palette considerably. Both figure and ground share the same palette chosen for the panel: the left canvas is primarily amber with warm yellows and reds while the right canvas is burgundy with cooler reds and violets.

One of the more successful aspects of *No More* is the interaction between Mink and the mandorla. Each mandorla is held by Mink and acts as a removed section of the ground present in the complimentary canvas. In the left canvas, Mink cradles a gem-like burgundy mandorla as if it were a baby or a football. In the right canvas, Mink stretches the amber flower-patterned mandorla like one would plastic or rubber.

This visual exchange between the two figures/canvases is also evident in other aspects of the paintings. The bearing and countenance of Peggy Gravel is solemn and stately, befitting a nun more than a suburban housewife. Likewise, the demeanor of the Sister Mary Ignatius is jolly and even frivolous -- an attribute expected more in the housewife than in the nun.
I feel this diptych to be the most successful work of the series. The two canvases work well together and create a satisfying whole. By far, the painting technique in *No More* surpasses that of the previous works. To continue the comparison with previous pieces, *No More* is more accessible and viewer-friendly, so to speak. Moreover, the canvases' simplicity only seems to add to their visual impact and staying power. Upon reflection, I feel very pleased to conclude the series with *No More*.

Over the course of producing this body of work, I have tried to exhibit the pieces regularly. "Art Bitches", a two-woman show at Gallery 1010 in February 1998, displayed the earliest pieces: *Pink Mink, Mandorla Womb, Mink 12*, and *Minkotokos*. At the 1998 Annual Juried Student Art Exhibition, *Mink 12* won the Norman Magden "Best New Genre" award. The following March, another two-woman show entitled "Cream" at Gallery 1010 exhibited the remaining works in the series: *Dirty Taffy, Three-Way Connie, Kiss Them For Me, Lingus*, and *No More*. At the 1999 Annual Juried Student Art Exhibition, *No More* was purchased by the University of Tennessee.
Production Photos and Documentation

"I'm pretty good at it.

In fact, it's the only thing I ever do, so I guess

I should be pretty skilled by now."

-- Mink, a.k.a. the Religious Whore

*Multiple Maniacs*
Pink Mink
49" x 60"

Mandorla Womb
24" x 36"
Mink 12 at "Art Bitches"

98" x 47"

detail of Mink 12
Minkotokos

16" x 20"

Value Study

37" x 8"
Dirty Taffy

each sculpture: 5" x 4.5" x 10"
Three-Way Connie

each sculpture: 12" x 5.5" x 4.5"

Dirty Taffy and Three-Way Connie at the

1999 Annual Juried Student Art Exhibition
Lingus

48" x 60"
study for *Dirty Taffy*

8" x 10"

*Dirty Taffy*

36" x 48"
No More

each canvas: 36" x 48"
Bibliography


at "Cream"
Laura Baldree
&
Laurel Kiewitt

invite you to

come to view art

come to be entertained

come to get culturally stimulated

come to Cream

come to Gallery 1010
Candy Factory (next to KMA)
Thursday, March 11
8:00 to 11:00 pm

live musical performance by Dreamwhip
plus other supercreamy entertainment
Laura Baldree
and
Amy McGuire
request the pleasure of your company at the closing reception of their show Saturday, the twenty-first of February at seven o'clock in the evening
Gallery 1090, Candy Factory
1060 World's Fair Park Drive
Knoxville, Tennessee

Art

Bitches