

BATLEY ART GALLERY
Market Place, Batley, WF17 5DA
25TH OCTOBER TO 22ND NOVEMBER 2014

Paula Chambers: *With Intent: Fanciful Objects*

Written by Sam Broadhead, Leeds College of Art

Paula Chambers' tenth solo show has been installed in the gallery on the first floor of the *Batley Library and Resource Centre*; a survivor from Batley's successful economic and civic past at the beginning of the last century. The artist describes it as a 'traditional' hang that contains a series of wall-based works and appropriated objects shown on plinths. The walls are painted with a dreamy greenish white on which a series of mirrors reflect and shimmer. The visual effect unifies the whole exhibition and signifies an overall interest in the vintage.

The objects comprise of a series of found furniture; headboards, footstools, tables that could be viewed as sculptural; but the artist's primary concerns are not about form or space. Rather, she is using these items, gleaned from the domestic space, as a framework for her collaged and montaged ephemera that signify a lost world of girlish femininity. *Daddy's Little Girl* and *Daddy's Little Princess* are works that have been made from sewing patterns that have been subtly modified by the artist:

The images have also been individually altered, the little girls in these pictures have become cruel and malevolent, they pinch, they steal, they drink and smoke. One carries a rifle too large for her small frame, one a butchers knife, she wears an apron smeared in blood, yet continues to smile sweetly out at us. (Chambers 2014)



Daddy's Little Princess: Headboard and sewing patterns

Chambers wishes to explore and reveal the ways in which the domestic spaces of home continue to imprison young girls, restricting their hopes and dreams for the future to that of pretty servitude. However, through small acts of subversion that can be mischievously disruptive; the girl-subject can resist or reject the domestic role. This can also be seen in the works *Haunt I; 1967* and *Haunt II: 1973*

where the artist aims to evoke the uncanny 'table tapping' of the Victorian séance through the transposed images of girls and horses on glass topped coffee tables. Chambers' work plays with the notions of 'haunting' and 'poltergeist'; seeing them as feminine manifestations of domestic revolt.



Haunt I; 1967 and Haunt II; 1973: Coffee tables and digital montage

My academic interests are grounded in feminism, and most recently I have been exploring ideas around disrupted domesticity, home as an internal exile, and the potential for domestic objects; furniture with memories, to subvert, upset, and deconstruct traditional understandings of women's relationship to the domestic. (Chambers 2014)

It is possible contextualise Chambers' work within those feminist artists who engaged with the domestic during second wave feminism. *Feministo: Portrait of the Artist as housewife* (1977) (1), a postal event and installation of domestic crafted objects and Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) (2). The works from the 1970s have rawness and spontaneity (or rough-and-readiness) to them that signify the rage and frustration that some women felt in relation to the constraints of the domestic space and role (3). Chambers' works have a certain restraint and coolness to them due to being carefully crafted and considered. This allows the viewer to experience a wider range of emotions that includes nostalgia, pleasure and even melancholy. For example *Bridie* consists of individual free standing carefully cut-out brides; the images are appropriated from a vintage bridal magazine and are drawn over by young children with brightly coloured felt tip pen. The effect is of childish exploration and playfulness evoking familiar memories.



Bridie; 21: Vintage bridal magazine, plywood and felt pens

The exhibition contains many threads but overall it is about a feminism that is reflecting on its recent past. Through the meticulous crafting of the objects that are thoughtfully curated within a time-worn space the work becomes a dialogue about all our childhood memories. This evokes nostalgia not only for the domestic spaces of the 1970s and 1980s but also nostalgia for second wave feminism itself.

References

- 1) Jefferies, J. Textiles. Within Feminist Visual Culture. ed. Carson, F. and Pajaczkowska, C. Edinburgh, 2000. p 192.
- 2) Johnson, C. Femininity, Time and Feminist Art. London, 2013. p 105.
- 3) Johnson, C. Femininity, Time and Feminist Art. London, 2013. pp 30-32.