

Come into my world

Emilia Sundqvist

Konstfack

Craft! Department

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Tutor: Andrea Peach, Bella Rune,

Birgitta Burling



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Abstract

Come into my world

My creative beliefs come from an idea of wanting to invite a viewer into a world where Cuteness exists as an aesthetic for arts and craft, and elevating vulnerability to a strength. Through printed patterns and textile sculptures I create this world.

This paper explains the varied works I have made in textiles and the theoretical contexts of them. It's also an investigation of cute aesthetics and how cute can be used to disguise deep and complex emotions, such as vulnerability, distress, and pain.

I work with materials, such as silk and velvet. The fairness of these materials combined with my big, visible, unconventional stitches creates a new expression that becomes both powerful and vulnerable.

I am using aesthetics that can be recognised in contexts such as Disney, folklore and children's toys (such as Steiff-animals), with these aesthetics in mind I try to add a twist to the nostalgia, questioning it, exaggerating the darkness found in old-fashioned stereotypical interpretations depicting the welfare of the woman and the animal.

The outcome of my practise is a world where animals become human-like, and humans become animal-like, where cute things becomes sardonic and where emotions get mixed up and tangled up in each other

I will compare my way of work with earlier practising artists whom I can identify with so I can easier clarify theoretically what I do.

Keywords: Sensuality, Female desire, Vulnerability, Soft materials, Punk, Gaze, Cute, Clashing emotions.

Introduction

Purpose and aims for studio and paper

The intention of my artwork is to recapture feminine attribute such as cuteness, vulnerability, and playfulness, from the stereotypes in mass media and popular culture. This activity of presenting such aesthetics has long been perceived as a female and domestic activity. In my opinion these attributes can belong in a public art context.

Research question

How do cute ludic objects, figurines and sculptures work in the contemporary craft and art scene?

How can cuteness become an aesthetic for art and crafts, where vulnerability is elevated to strength?¹

This paper explains the varied works I have made in textiles, and reflections of cuteness as a way of aestheticizing vulnerability, despair, hope and love. The aim of my works is to question the value of femininity and cuteness as a form for art. I shall explain how I use such forms, as well as by invoking fragility through imperfection in order to express sadness, pain and loneliness, disguising these complex emotions with beauty and humour.

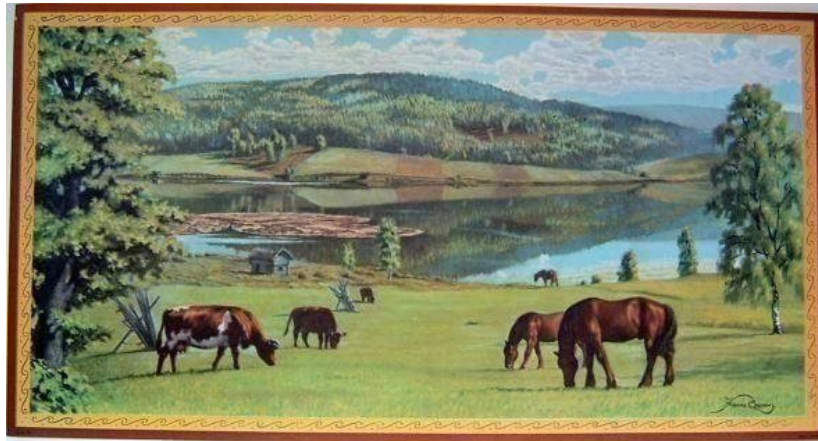
¹ According to *Cambridge Dictionary* the concept ludic refers to “lively and full of fun” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ludic>).

I will compare my way of work with earlier practising artists whom I can identify with so I can easier clarify what I do and where I can belong.

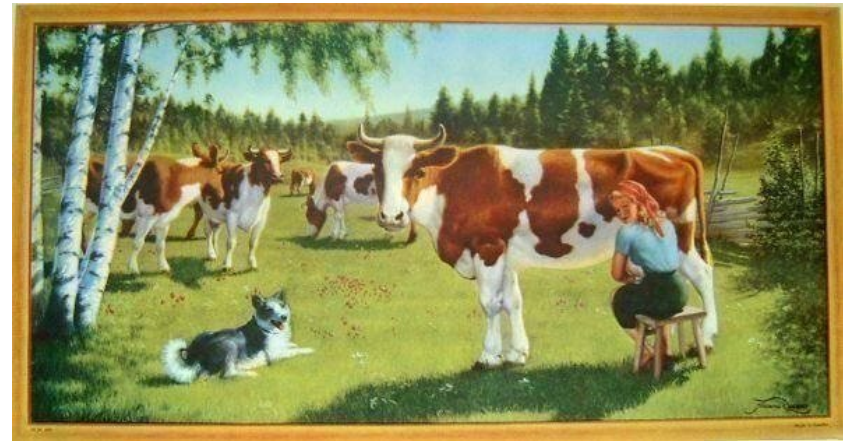
I create playful sculptures in textile, and (printed) illustrations on textile, of animals and femininity, embracing their beauty and their vulnerability. The intention of my artistic practice is to use feminine attributes such as cuteness, vulnerability, and playfulness, in a new artistic context and to deepen it. These attributes have, for a long period, been used as stereotypes and are often seen as lacking in power. By means of recontextualizing these aesthetics, my imagery will carve a new legacy, where these devalued aspects are flipped into strengths. My method to express this is through textile sculptures and silkscreen prints; I will use fair materials, such as silk and fur, and exaggerate strength and clashing emotions through use of big visible stitches.

I will use inspiration from folklore, in this project I want to evoke the classic romantic hanging-tapestry, of, for example, women milking cows or animals grazing on a meadow of flowers, and add a twist to the nostalgia, questioning it, and exaggerating the darkness that stands for these old-fashioned stereotypical interpretations of the welfare of the woman and the animal.

1



Anders Ollsson
No title found
1960



My work stands for something visually feminine, encompassing both the feeling of having a body and being aware of it, and the female sensibility of care. I want to embrace this because it's a characteristic I hold dear, that is to be valued, in both women and men. I want to undress men's power through focusing on the power that comes with vulnerability, which all living beings carry.

Ludic objects, in my opinion, are things you can find at the flea market, in a hidden second-hand shop, or in your granny's attic, things that have experienced time and may in some way be broken. I myself collect porcelain bambi

figurines and lace. Now I try to create such “ludic objects” myself and put them in a contemporary art and craft context.

My studio research will focus on a sentimental approach to fairy tales, feminine loaded objects, and cuddly children’s toys (such as *Steiff*). Through working with these aesthetics in mind I will create a new style, distinct from Steiff and the like, and to nostalgic hanging tapestries, creating a world where these things are celebrated and regenerated, allowing them to become interesting and powerful in their smallness.

Background

The background to this project, *come into my world*, comes from an idea of inviting a viewer into a world where cuteness and femininity become aesthetics for art and crafts, and where vulnerability is elevated to strength.

Cuteness, femininity and vulnerability are feelings that I have experienced as much as I have experienced feeling strong, ambitious and confident. I have decided that I want to create art from this and make objects and a wall tapestry that can be cute and feminine and still stand for something strong, intelligent and interesting.

I am using aesthetics that can be recognised in contexts such as Disney, folklore and stuffed cuddly children's toys. I am attracted to childhood and the freedom we have during this period of our lives, to take each day as it comes. In the movie *Angel over Berlin* (1987) the speaker seems to have contact to his childhood when speaking out loud this poem.

When the child was a child
it walked with its arms swinging,
wanted the brook to be a river,
the river to be a torrent,
and this puddle to be the sea.
When the child was a child,
it didn't know that it was a child,

to it, everything had a soul,
and all souls were one.

When the child was a child,
it had no opinion about anything,
had no habits,
it often sat cross-legged,
took off running,
had a cowlick in its hair,
and made no faces when photographed.

Peter Handke 1987

I juxtapose the freedom of being a child with the restrictions of adulthood, whereby you are self-aware, melancholic and considerate of your choices. The outcome of my practise is a world where animals become human-like and humans becomes animal-like, where cute things becomes sardonic and where emotions gets mixed up and tangled up in each other. I want to do art that lingers in between the eye of a child and the eye of an adult, and loosens up the boundary in-between.

I made a cake in textile inspired by my time in Vienna. I was 21 when I moved there (the age when you are supposed to be the most attractive as a woman, for men it is 41, bit unfair right?), I had so much to do and was excited and hungry for life (and of course I ate lots of Viennese cakes, often instead of lunch). However during this time I also felt like a simple prey for idleness. Whilst often I was meeting new friends and socialising, I felt, in a contradictory way, very lonely. I lived in a very small apartment that looked like a hallway and I had nothing really to be responsible for, except myself. This made me very aware of my body and appearance. Vienna felt more conservative and socially backwards than Sweden, for example one of my teachers used to name me “doll face” when she talked with me, and about me with others, I’ve been told. One student wrote me a message where he repeatedly text *sota flicka, sota flicka, sota flicka* (which means ‘pretty girl’ in Swedish). Someone always pointed out my Swedish “cute” accent. It was weird and nice in the same way. I felt seen and still I felt superficially judged, these comments lacked substance, but still consumed me. It seemed not quite real. It felt like a bit of a horror where in those innocent comments it felt like I was a cake (See figures 2, 3, and 4).

2



I felt like a cake
2019
68 x 63 cm
silk, lace, polyester, bunny-fur, satin

3

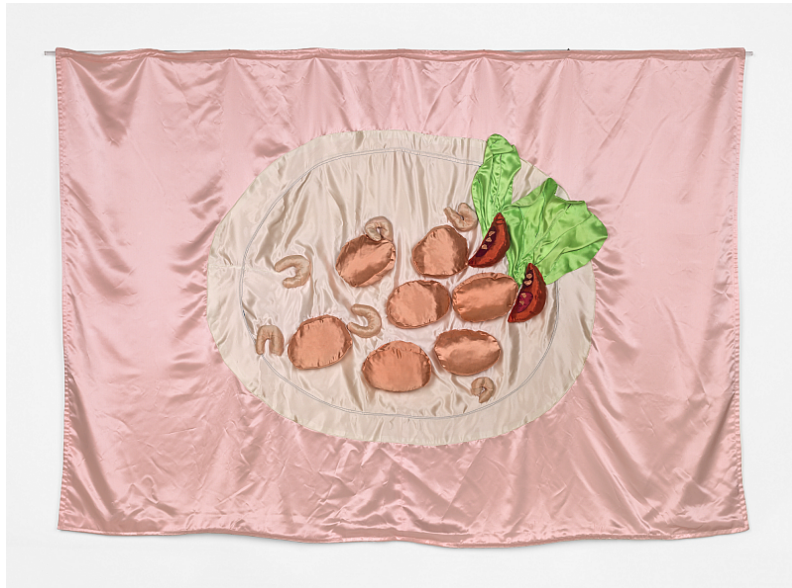


4



The artist Marie Louise Ekman's works in textile influences me, for example, *fish balls with lobster sauce* 1968 (see figure 5). Her way of using delicate luxurious looking fabrics and using the textile in a playful and naïve way to portray the mundane events in life inspires me a lot. Also the artist Natalie Djurberg's dark way of evoking fables and fairy tales from childhood amuse me a lot, especially the sculptures she made in clay, of flowers and women (see figure 6).

5



© Marie-Louise Ekman/Copyright 2020
Fish balls with lobster sauce
1968

6



Natalie Djurberg and Hans Berg
En resa genom träsk och förvirring med små glimtar av luft
2018.

I am also influenced a lot by my mother's collections of ludic objects.

My mother has for a long time collected weird old toys and figurines which she has very strong emotions towards, she would see an object where something is missing or broken and still she looks at them with love, taking care of them as valuables. Her collection is a mixture of injured Steiff animals, plastic squishy animals, and dolls, high and low, from Lisa Larsson and Goebbels to hand made furry wooden trolls. Her passion for these objects has created some kind of mythical amusement for me and I like the idea of them. Something she says is that a figure has got "it" and I right away understand what she means (see figure 7, 8, 9). You can't really explain why it gives you endearment towards it or why you want to keep it as a valuable on your nicest shelf. However, during this project, I have played with the idea of creating my own ludic objects and making them sardonic.



8



9



Theory: Recontextualising Cuteness in an artistic way.

In my art, I consciously use cuteness as an aesthetic. Cuteness is strongly and deeply associated with the infantile, the feminine, and the unthreatening. The cuteness can become even cuter when perceived as injured or disabled. So, when one brings in pain or clashing emotion to the cute something more, something interesting can occur. I have used this in my imagery since I started making paintings and sculptures; it has been a method for me to express my emotions.

Traditional cuteness is strongly connected to popular culture and it often stands outside the form of any high culture. I want it to have a place in the high culture because I think it can carry a lot of emotion and power, it is accessible to the viewer through being aesthetically pleasing however may also express more complex and subtle feelings.

Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami are Japanese artists who started to exhibit their work in the 1990s, and whose bodies of work allow us to grasp cuteness (Japanese *kawaii*) in theoretically worked out forms (Ngai 2012, chap. 3 page. 78). In Japan there has been a rise of the Cute (*kawaii*) since 1945. The Japanese people were ravaged in the final phase of the Second World War by the United States. There was a vacuum after the Atom bombs and the disasters opened space for new values in society. At the same time there was a need for diminishing the distress from what the bombs caused. By means of giving the atom bombs the perversely harmless names, “Little Boy” and

“Fat Man” the horrible situation became somewhat diminished. Japan was also facing three heavily armed communist neighbors, Soviet Russia, and especially China and North Korea. They were filled with hatred for Japan’s recent cruelty to their inhabitants. It was in this environment Japan devoted itself to finding a new way of being, a new aesthetic that was opposite to all the cruelty (the scary (*kowai*)) that the country was associated with. The aesthetic of cute (*kawaii*) eventually appeared (May 2019, chap.5).

In the 1950s and the 1960s the society was restored from its wounds. From the 1970s there was, however, an opportunity for a more relaxed, and also a more rebellious, mood amongst youngsters. This mood appeared almost exclusively in a female movement, called the *shōjo*, a group of adolescent, young unmarried females. Later women of various ages joined the movement, and after the 1980s it was embraced by an increasing number of young men, it became accessible for all different groups for whom, according to Sharon Kinsella,

‘cute fashion represents freedom and an escape from the pressure of social expectations and regulations,’ and who ‘fetishize young women- either real girl friends or syrupy sweet little girl heroines depicted in Lolita complex comic books for adolescent boys.’ (May 2019, chap. 5 page. 61).

This mood, kawaii, which – as Takashi and Nara, among other artists, agree more or less describes “cute”, in 1992 was called “the most widely used, widely loved and common word used in modern living Japanese” (May 2019 chapter. 3-5 page.59-91).

I will now describe examples of how these artists use the cute in order to understand how cute can be presented in different contexts.

10



YOSHITOMO NARA
Too Young to Die
2001

11



YOSHITOMO NARA
The Fountain of Life,
2001

Yoshitomo Nara made a series of acrylic paintings on plastic plates (see figure 10). “In its association with food, the dinner plate does more than just supply a material support for Nara’s images of mutilated or injured children. Evoking the expression “You’re so cute I could just eat you up” (Ngai 2012, chapter. 1 page. 78).

Nara’s use of food related objects makes space for, and visualizes, the *cute/kawaii*. This is even more extended and exaggerated in *Fountain of Life* (see figure 11), a sculpture in which seven doll heads appear on top of each other in an oversized teacup with accompanying saucer, with tears/water flowing out of their closed eyes. According to Sianne Ngai, the artist is underscoring the aggressive desire to master and overpower the cute object. The tie that exists between cuteness and eating in Nara’s works becomes an explicit metaphor for our eagerness (Ngai 2012, chapter. 1 page. 78). This is also what I wished to express in my piece *I felt like a Cake*.

The Japanese artist Murakami Takashi works frequently with cute, questioning and embracing its aesthetics, and has theorized his art, terming it “Superflat”. This is expressed in an exhibition called “Superflat” held in Japan 2000 and also staged in USA 2001. Takashi’s essay “Superflat manifesto” opened the catalogue for these exhibitions (Ivy 2010, page. 6). In this text he presented distinct theories of Japanese art. Superflat art was based on a digitally constituted world. In “Superflat” Takashi made a settlement between popular culture and any form of high culture and questioned what can be considered high and low in art. Among these hierarchies Murakami looks at the differences between children and adult’s ways of perceiving art and the relationship between it and the gazing

subject (Ivy 2010, page. 7). I think this is very interesting in relation to my own work, because sometimes I hear that my art looks like toys, and I don't think they are toys because they are too fragile to play with (see figures 12, 13). When a child looks at what I am doing it often says that it looks scary or weird.

12



Puck
2019
30 x 35 cm
silk, polyester, velvet, satin

13



Connie is a giraffe
2019
65 x 35 cm
silk, polyester, velvet, satin, gouache, fur

In a companion essay “to Murakami’s ideology”, *Superflat aesthetics*, the philosopher Azuma Hiroki uses the work of Jacques Lacan to theorize the work of the gaze, or the play of the gazes. Azuma explains: “I look at you. You look at me. And it is the interaction of our gazes . . . that provides us with the sense that we share the same space, that we occupy a common ‘there.’” (Ivy 2010, page. 6). This I think is beautiful with objects that are supposed to be observed closely in a gallery or museum context, and especially the work of the gaze of the object-observer.

Azuma further states: “A child sees something, and in so doing feels desire. But the child has no conception of the self-looking at something. Simply put the child is unaware of the relativity of its own perspective. Lacan understood this state as lacking an awareness of gaze. The child may be charmed by images, but the adult is conscious of the gaze.” (Ivy 2010, page 6; on the relationship between childhood and cuteness also see May 2019, chapter. 3-5).

I am also very fascinated by pictures of women when they are portrayed with their animals. The combination seems to be a common motive, I think it is because there is something very similar to a fair lady and a bird (see figure 14) or a zany lady with her dogs (see figure 15), it exaggerates the expressions in the animals and humans by highlighting their likeness to each other (see figure 16). I think it’s interesting to think that the self-aware women and non self-aware animal seem to help, and comfort each other.

14



15



16



Murakami Takashi's work embodies a type of popular child culture, his never-ending motifs of anime-like figures with big round empty eyes are combined with colourful patterns with digital videogame aesthetics (see figures 17, 18) Takashi's art does not speak to me in an aesthetic way, but I'm interested in contextualising the cute art.

17



Copyright Takashi Murakami
Superflat Monogram: Panda and His Friends,
2005

18



Copyright Yoshitomo Nara
NICE TO SEE YOU AGAIN,
2011

Azuma Hiroki also discusses that the cute and the gaze as something that can be viewed in the Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara's pictures and this is relevant as an artistic reference to my own work. Nara's work embodies a different relationship to the child and to the gaze compared to Murakami's imagery. The child is often depicted alone and lonely, and, at the same time delicate and violent, adorable and vulgar (Ivy 2010, page. 6). This is a typical motive in Nara's paintings and sculptures. These aspects of clashing emotion can also be seen in my own work (see figures 19, 20).

19



Gray pudel
2019
90 x 50 cm
velvet, polyester padding, satin, pastel-chalk

20



Bunnybaby
2020
Silk, velvet polyester padding, gouache, fur

Nara's paintings have been compared to the French artist Balthus, known for his erotically charged images of pubescent girls. Others see it as a celebration of outsiders, or children's art itself (Ivy 2010, page. 7). I think these artists succeed in using cuteness as a powerful tool through their conviction and distinctive style. Cuteness is a versatile form for expression but only when in the right hands and when stereotypes are let go, I think Nara succeeds in this.

I use transgressive emotions in my "Cuteness" through showing unexpected details or clashing emotions, worried eyebrows, clenched mouths, gazes focussed somewhere far away or eyes completely shut, fur unexpectedly put in the wrong place (see figures 21, 22 and 23).

21



22



23



Close-ups of selected works
2019-2020

It is interesting to maintain the distinction between the gaze of the child and the gaze of the adult. Actually I think Nara depicts something in the middle, a post Oedipal sensibility. His figures seem to be aware of their appearance, and at the same time they demonstrate disapproval of being in the picture and of being interpreted as “cute”. The soft colours and the soft forms of their bodies clash with their emotional expressions. The images express anger and arrogance, when holding a knife, or smoking a cigarette. The expression becomes vulnerable (cf. Ivy 2010, page. 9). These underlying themes are recognized in my own work, I believe, where cuteness and vulnerability are present (see figures 24, 25).

24



Dear
2019
30 x 25 cm
fake leather, velvet, fake eyelashes, gouache,
polyester

25



Silkeskanin med tofflor
2019
25 x 12 cm
velvet, fur, polyester-padding, gouache

I am also interested in the quick and undigital in Nara's work. In my own work I try to achieve such expressions. Some of his drawings, as he exhibits, are considered incomplete, and works in progress (see figure 26). These characteristics represent a childish lust of process. They evoke an aesthetic of the fragmented. In their disruption they evoke the minor and the occasional, the spontaneous, and the misfit. See Nara's many references to punk (Ivy 2010, page 7).

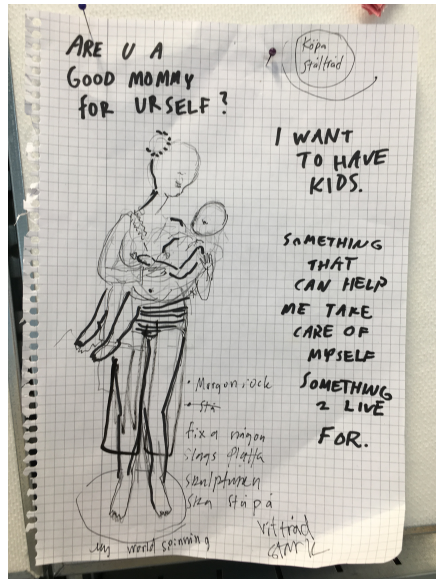
I think working with lust and intuition is an honest way of expressing yourself. I also like the reference to punk because of its DIY attitude, and that it is kind of vulnerable to dress up and want to be seen as tough and hard. It's so cute in my eyes with a certain kind of punk or Goth, and its vulnerability, such as the Sex pistols' Sid Vicious. On the next page there are photos of a standing doll figure that is longing to have something to take care off, and yet still has this sexy outfit. When I finished her I wasn't happy with how the work of her body and her hair came out as it took the attention away from her delicate face. I remember when I first made her I had done a real nice ponytail before I put on all that curly hair. I decided to return back to how it looked from the beginning cutting the body off and picking out the curls. I like her now because she has such nice calm and sad face expression exactly like she longs for something (see figures 27, 28).

26



Yoshitomo Nara
Home installation
2014

27



28



Ponytail
2020
41 x 35 cm
silk, velvet, fur, gouache, silkscreen print

Yoshitomo Nara's signature characters, the girls with big half-closed-eyes glaring, can be seen as strange configurations of the round eyed Über-cute girls from manga pop culture. The manga eyes that are shown in Murakami's imagery are just representations of eyes, but in Nara's pictures there is something more to it that makes the relationship of the gaze more inviting (see figure 29).

Nara's pictures are perhaps interpreted as "cute pictures" at first sight (the colours, the forms, the girls, the dogs), but if you give them a thorough observation they look rather sad, frustrated and glaring. It is not often they present just a happy face (see Ivy 2010, page. 9).

Nara brings up the post-oedipal child who has already abounded the symbolic order. In his aesthetics he locates a range of affects that effect "the cute". It is exactly this I wish to accomplish within my imagery.

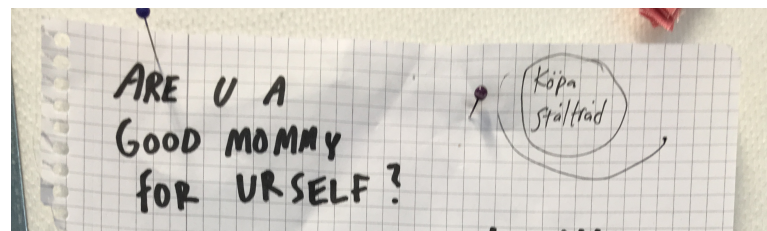
29



Yoshitomo Nara in studio

My illustrations (silkscreens) on textiles originally come from quick drawings sketched during the night-time. I do the sketches in bed before I go to sleep, as a goodbye to the day. Then I look through these pictures from notebooks, once in a while, and pick out what could be a good illustration that is worth printing or sculpturing. This feels highly connected to how I described the occasional and direct and “unfinished” in Yoshitomo Nara’s work (see figure 26). I would like to use my sketches in the future more as final pieces (see figures 30).

30



Beauty In distress is the most affecting beauty

The American theorist and philosopher Sianne Ngai investigates in her book, *zany cute and interesting* (2012), cuteness as an aesthetic to identify and judge. Ngai writes: “Should descriptive judgement like ‘cute’ even be regarded as distinctive aesthetic judgement, as opposed to mere variation vicissitudes or declensions of the judgment of beauty?” (Ngai 2012, chapter. 1 page. 54). I want cuteness and the feminine aesthetics to be taken seriously and be respected as any other aesthetic in art and crafts. I argue for this aesthetic as a “knowing one” - rather than using the stereotypical I am subverting the cute and the feminine in that sense.

I think cuteness, as a category, needs a supplement in order to become art. I use cuteness in combination with unfulfilled beauty (visible stitches and asymmetry) and longing (gaze), in order to expose vulnerability. I think cute objects have no edge to speak of, usually being soft, round, and deeply associated with the infantile, and the feminine, if not put into context. In my practice and writing I always try to put cuteness into some kind of context or use clashing emotions.

I found this lamp (see figure 31) and I thought it was cute, we had it at home for a long time but both my boyfriend and I have disliked it since we put it up. I decided to take it down and add some weirdness to this cute romantic lamp, and ta-da!

It became a lovely crafty decorative light sculpture that can shine as a sun over my other pieces in the installation come in to my world.

31



Glimtar i ljuset

2020

65 cx 65 cm

Silkscreen-printed silk organza, Fox-fur, bunny-fur, lace, lamp-skeleton found

Marilyn Ivy quotes Sianne Ngai who states thus: “The cute object is, she says, the most reified or thing like of things, the most objectified of objects, and the extremity of that objectification is precisely the fundament of the potential resistance of cuteness.” (Ivy 2010, page 14). This I believe is an important aspect in my own creative practice as well. I purposely put my girls and animals, or objects, as individuals; they exist in their own right, and at the same time they constitute the “most objectified objects”. In that sense they become exposed and vulnerable and I question the structure of prejudices towards cute things and ludic objects.

Cute objects invite us to touch. Softness, roundness, furriness, and simplicity are important in such contexts. I think the cute object carries an illustrate form of something transformed from one state to another. The act of transforming from reality to cuteness can provoke ugly or aggressive feelings as well as tender and motherly ones. In my opinion, it is brave to illustrate such a naïve perception of life! I use this in my own imagery to depict submissive, long-limbed, unbalanced animals or unconfident, unsatisfied and cute/beautiful ladylike creatures. I want to describe dissatisfaction, submissiveness and helplessness. In addition, I think self-observation is interesting since it harmonizes with passivity and vulnerability. Maybe the cute object is often intended to excite a viewer’s brutal desire to dominate and control as much as the person’s desire to cuddle (Adam and Ngai 2011).

Method

First I get an idea of what I would like to make. The inspiration could be anything, a movie or someone I have seen during the day, a new fascination for a celebrity, or a certain animal. After that I start to draw, making sketches and finding material online or from books to visualize the idea. Then I make a pattern, I cut out the forms and sew them together on my sewing machine. Sometimes I keep the patterns if I am pleased with how a pattern for a sculpture has turned out, and then I can reuse it.

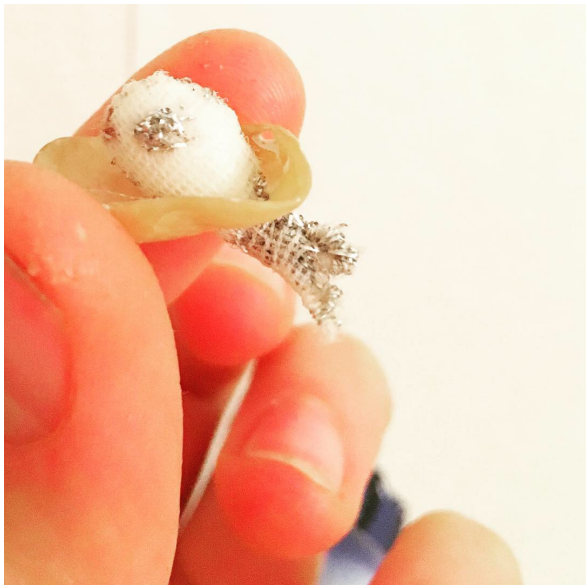
I pad the sewed parts up with polyester stuffing and push and press and squeeze to get the right sculptural forms. After that I sometimes sew new stitches over the sewing machines seams, these stitches are visible and somehow make the sculpture fit better and tighter. The idea of the visible stitches is to add a touch of imperfection.

Then I put details on, I embroider or paint eyes, paws or nipples etc. I make shadows with pastel chalk to make them livelier and sometimes make hair out of fur. The sculptures also need to be made steadier because of the textiles fragile and light characteristics. So I put rice in the bottom of them (to make them heavy) and I make a metal skeleton, inside the figures that are bigger, so they can stand up and be lasting objects and not perceived as toys.

When this is done I like to present them nicely so they can be exhibited and have posture. I like to put the small sculptures on pedestals to higher their awe and value, the bigger objects are the easier to present, just a low podium on the floor is enough. But I am also interested in working small as the minor can more easily embody the cute, and it can be more intimate for the viewer. It can be difficult to make such small things, and just as time consuming as it is to work big. I am torn between small and big. I wish it could work to exhibit and create small things for public spaces

and galleries but I imagine in the future I will work more with bigger pieces. For me it is much about the financial and space constraints that force me to work small. See the fish (figure 32) that got too small because I wanted it to fit inside a hole of a shell versus the big shell I made as a bed for one of my larger girls (figure 33).

32



33

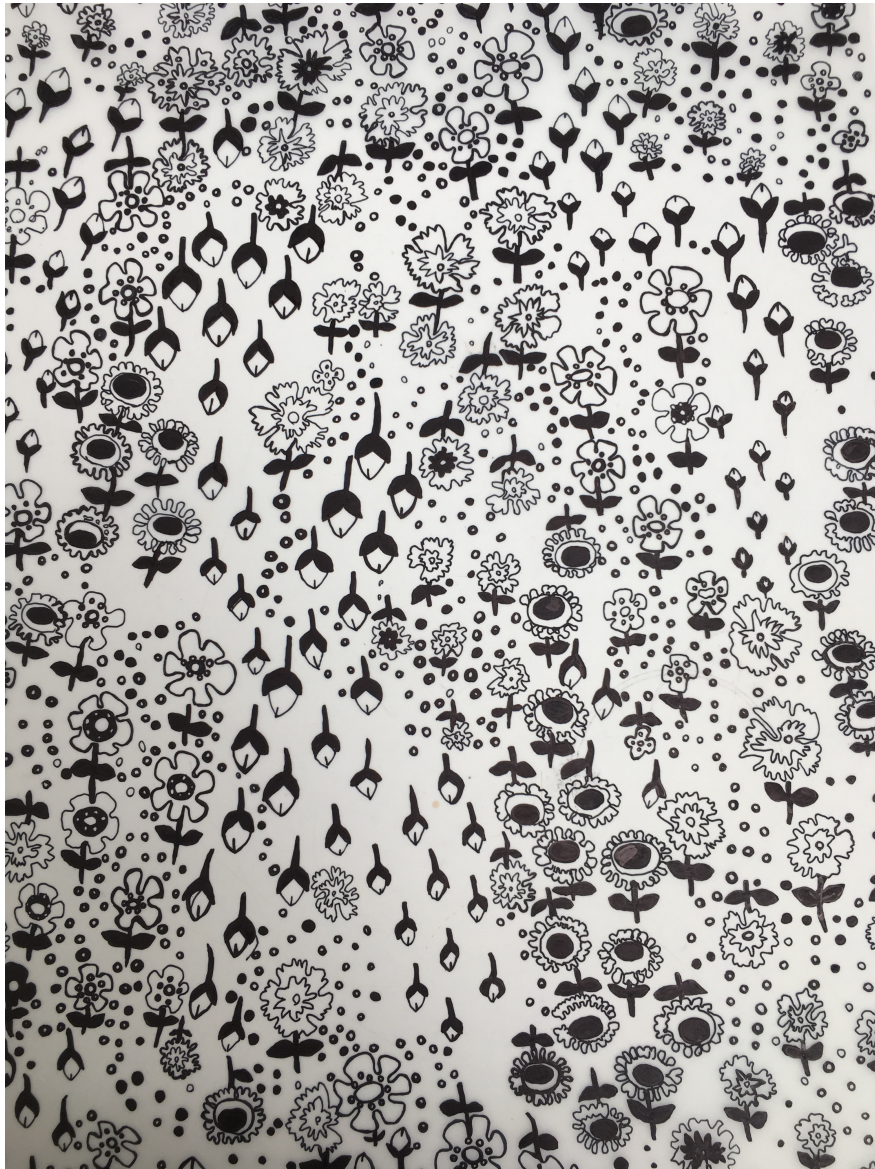


Shell on the shore
2018
110 x 90 cm
satin, fur, polyester-padding, cardboard

Always when I am working I am aware that I want my objects and illustrations to be able to communicate and fit together, for the purpose of installation, or when I look back at my earlier artistic practise I want it to make sense that I am 100% myself when I create. I want people to recognise my distinct style, I want all my creations to belong together, and in the end become one massive art installation, with hundreds of girls, animals, decorative objects, floral patterns, and lace.

One other method is to work flat with illustrations/prints on textile, the fabrics can be embedded in my installations, as curtains, or clothes, this is great because it becomes an added layer of my own expression in my works. I like printing on see-through fabrics at konstfack, I have experimented with printing on silk organza, and it is difficult but the outcome is beautiful. I make my prints by hand, drawing on overhead paper, direct from the sketch. I enjoy the repetition in patterns and it reminds me a lot of sewing stitches (see figures 34, 35).

I am also using silkscreen for making illustrations on paper and textile (see figure 36).







Untitled, 2019, silkscreen on satin 90 x 60 cm

Materials

Since I was 13, and could decide a bit more of what to wear, I have wanted to wear white, because, in my opinion, it has a “cleansing” effect. As an extension of this obsession of white I have, during my Masters project, worked a lot in white materials, white fur, white velvet, and white silk. Even white prints on white fabric. It is satisfying and beautiful, with white on white, but hard to document as it has the potential to look much like invisible ink, becoming a bit too flat, impersonal, and actually depressing and sterile. So, when working with white I choose to accentuate with contours, patterns and colours as well.

I use gouache. I love how the watercolours flow out onto the fibres.

I often find old clothes at flea markets, or second hand shops, that I cut up and use, the decision is often very intuitive and impulsive, I follow my instinct of what I like and try to not over-think my choices.

I however prefer working in silk and velvet, the delicateness and exclusiveness of the materials complement my visible stitches and playful way of sewing. I use details of vintage fur, because I think fur is so interesting and sickly, it is such a dead material. It is very carnal to work in. I hate the actual sewing of it because it makes me so allergic and stuffed in my nose, but it's worth it because of the associations it brings in, that little edge and brutality clashing with cosiness, like a portrait of a cuddly bunny made in real bunny fur, it's weird. Or, a little detail of brown fox fur can really emphasise an expression of uncertainty, which I always like to do, confuse others and myself.

Influences and Inspiration

I walk a lot with my dog. I go into the forest or into the town. In the forest I get inspiration from the trees and the colours, I often fantasise that the woods are filled with animals and that they have their lives and routines going on as much as us humans. When I go into town I get inspired by looking at women, especially older elegant ladies, I think they often carry a grace, beauty and confidence, coming from experience and acceptance, these women can inspire me visually.

One of my projects “Bunnybaby” was inspired by a new trend, Botox lips. I see them everywhere. It makes me a bit sad to see the normalisation of plastic surgery. I also get this vision of something beautiful. I think all these girls appear to be related, I see them as sisters, the swollen hard lips seem to hurt, but it feels like they have chosen to carry this pain together (see figure 37).



Bunnybaby
2019
44 cm x 29 cm
silk, bunny-fur, polyester gouache, lace,
organza

Theoretical Methods

In my present work the conventional concept of cuteness is questioned. I want to create something beyond the conventional discourse of cuteness, beyond merely sweet, and find arguments supporting cuteness, teasing indeterminacy, and using cuteness as an artistic way of exaggerating vulnerability and courage. I have from time to time struggled with not having been taken seriously. I have been told that I have a very light voice and that my appearance is cute. This has frustrated me because I have felt like I hold so much more inside of myself. To say someone is cute differs from saying they are beautiful, or handsome, it feels like a lower aesthetic judgement. However I have felt more and more that I have come to peace with this aesthetic whilst investigating cuteness. Who says cuteness can't contain beauty and underlying power, intelligence, sexiness and humour.

Cuteness and mildness also provide a sense of familiarity for most people and there is often more to it than we first assume. It's how we look at cute that decides, however, if it is weak or powerful. Referring to Nara and his plates with girls, and the saying '*your so cute I could just eat you up*', his girls look angry and disapproving, the round forms and soft colours associated with cute aesthetics, however their facial expressions and belonging show disapproval of being portrayed "cute". They can't help their cuteness and hate it, I have felt the same, I can't help that my expression is cute, but I can explain with symbols and contextualisation that there is more than just sweetness to it.

Discussion

I think it is interesting to take up one more perspective of how one can look upon the cute and the feminine regarding my work. I want to highlight that I think cute and feminine attributes are extremely interesting and they have a strong connection to the sentimental.

Cute, interesting, and zany are based on the complex feelings that come from our meetings with especially “formless” and “fragmental” forms: the squishy blob, indecisive sequences, and the chaotic flow of things happening (Adam and Ngai 2011).

Sentimental feelings are also complex, they appear as blobs and fragments in your head from a long bygone era, we can carry them as a smell or a picture in our head like the madeleine cookies of Proust (1913, Vol. 1).

What brings this together is that they both are non-cathartic feelings. It is neither beautiful nor disgusting. It is neither good nor bad but it irritates. It irritates me that I am so sentimental, that I am so amazed by childhood and that I glorify certain types of feminine attributes so much. So I have to express this in my art.

I think cuteness, femininity, vulnerability and nostalgia is so interesting to discuss. They all belong together.

I think it is almost impossible to identify what cute is or what my creative practise is really about. But I'm certain about its potential; I think it can, beautifully, be compared with this haiku:

even in kyoto
longing for kyoto
the cuckoo.

Matsu Basho, 1644-1694 (May 2019, chapter. 5 page77)

This haiku is so clear for me but so tiny, it shows both humour and the powerlessness of longing for something whereby the expectations cannot live up to the dream. It is innocent but also shameful to have this longing. There is definitely darkness to the frustration of dissatisfaction. I want to undress the hierarchies and make the human's triviality beautiful and big in my art.

I portray animals and females in a vulnerable and cute way, it can be seen as a bit typical and clichéd, but these combinations interest me just because of that. I stir up and flip the stereotypes and use them to portray strength. I see my figures as being in control of their cuteness and vulnerability, acting with their indecisiveness, and almost ironizing it.

To whom who gets annoyed with my way of portraying femininity and animals, in a way you might see stereotypical and powerless, I am happy to cite what Simon May wrote about Yoshitomo Nara's paintings of girls and dogs:

“Well, if this is what *you* want and need, then here it is. Let me not only be powerless but play powerless for you; it doesn’t bother me.” (May 2019, chapter 5 71-72)

This touches me because I don’t try to portray women as just vulnerable or animals as just cute. They are cute and vulnerable but also cheeky, fun, attractive, impulsive, curious and strong. They are aware of their cuteness but disapproving of being portrayed only as such. If my figures and pictures are perceived as just sweet and cute I feel like I have failed with my practise, the cuteness is supposed to tease and irritate because of its double-ness. In this essay I have not had time to investigate the uncanny but I am very aware that cuteness and my work has strong connections with it, this is something I would like to explore further.

Conclusion

How do cute ludic objects, figurines and sculptures work in a contemporary craft and art scene? Why does it work?

My feelings to reactions of “cute” have changed since investigating and re-evaluating cute as a category of aesthetics. From a historical perspective aesthetics such as beautiful and sublime are respected as valued forms for art, from my perspective I don't see cute to be a fully established aesthetic yet, but there are artists working around the themes, of cuteness and vulnerability, and I myself follow in this tradition also.

It is not enough that an object is just skilled and exquisitely made. But if it wants to work in its own right there must be a nerve to it, an imbalance, disapproval, or a mystery to it. It also needs a determinacy that is established, that the artist who made it will do it again, it must be presented intelligibly, otherwise cuteness and ludic can become too indecisive and hard to understand for the viewer, and too much associated with toys and hobby figurines. There must be more to it than “pretty cute looking” if it can work as art and crafts.

I am aware of cutes weakness from a stereotypical perspective now, however I think cute (if put in a context) can become a powerful aesthetic in art. It is direct, it has a weird double-ness and it pleads an interesting human behaviour of wanting to be dominated and cuddled.

I think it is almost impossible to identify what cute is or what my creative practise is really about. But I'm certain about its potential and I look forward to creating more sculptures and wall tapestry's, aiming to contextualise them in public spaces or in art gallery's.

How can cuteness become an aesthetic for arts and crafts, where vulnerability is elevated to strength?

Vulnerability is universal. Its universal to want to hide your vulnerability, and it often shines through, such as when a person falls over and quickly jumps up to pretend like nothing happened, with blushing cheeks betraying their nonchalance for the situation. I interpret that as cute and vulnerable. I want to amplify this, to keep on making cute feminine sculptures that reflect on the vulnerable and perishable in our existence. I love the aesthetics of cuteness and femininity from a sentimental perspective; I love childhood and the getaway of play. I love my mother (feminine caring). I love white furry things. I love to care about my ludic belongings and arrange them in different orders. I think these feelings are dear, honest and vulnerable. My intention is to enlighten the pain that comes with something being dear (something dear can very easily be lost). Memories. Youth. Love.

To call my things cute, in vivid contrast to, say, beautiful, interesting, or disgusting, is to leave it ambiguous whether the observer thinks of it positively or negatively. This is problematic, I think, because I often find the art scene to be a

bit narrowed. However, I have now theorized my practise and it has definitely given me more confidence to see I follow a tradition in my artworks.

My future work will aim to further explore folklore, using prints, tapestries and sculptures. The idea is to create vivid worlds of those trapped within domesticity, including women and animals. I will use cuteness as a method to express deeper and darker emotions, furthering what has been discussed and shown here.



Thank you for coming into my world

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Born 1944

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Fiskbullar i hummersås, 1968

Fishcakes in Lobster Sauce

Appliqué on satin

Bildmått: 121 × 174 cm Yttermått: 136,5 × 187 × 11,2 cm

Textile

Purchase 1968

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