FAKING IT: THE SEDUCTION OF SURFACE

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by
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FAKING IT: THE SEDUCTION OF SURFACE

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATIONS

Thank you...

To Eric, for bringing me down this road with you and for holding on tight. I could not be this person or do this work without you by my side. You challenge and inspire me to be courageous and do more! I love you...and your beard.

Who would've thought that the dreams come true?
And who would've thought I ended up with you?
And who would've thought what they said was true?
But it was and you are, lighted darkness come through  (Rancid)

We swore we’d travel darlin’ side by side
We’d help each other stay in stride
But each lover’s steps fall so differently
But I’ll wait for you
And if I should fall behind
Wait for me   (Springsteen)

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**FAKING IT: THE SEDUCTION OF SURFACE**

**Introduction**

In the theater of life humans constantly perform a variety of roles for audiences both public and private. When sex comes into the picture the spectacle intensifies. My collection of wearable sculptures satirizes the often-ostentatious masquerade of American mating rituals. Channeling a carnivalesque Rococo spirit, I parody gender stereotypes and behavioral posturing through a series of lavishly adorned, latex-infused costumes; temporary “second skins” of illusive identity one might don to entice a mate. Such transformative sexual strategies are often engrained into our biological makeup and cultural psyche, becoming amplified and exalted through the distorted lens of visual media sources, particularly via the celebrity culture of unscripted “reality” television.

Within the gallery setting of the Faking It show mannequins wear these erotic prosthetics, populating an artificial but alluring arena. The vibrant fabricated environment—inspired by Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* and the paintings of Fragonard—floats somewhere between a Macy’s window display, surreal oasis, and reverential altar space.

Ornamenting the titillating forms with stereotypical materials gleaned from popular culture and art history, my work takes a critical but arousing peek at the superficial American social landscape and its effects on sexual personae. Here I present a humorous portrait of an insecure society obsessed with surface relationships and dedicated to “making it” through *Faking It*. 
PART 1: SKIMMING THE SURFACE

The Installation

Upon entering the gallery the viewer is presented with a garishly colored garden-like environment made up of plant-covered suitcases, six strangely costumed mannequins situated on individual landscaped oases, a sequined reflecting “pool” with three purple swans, and two large pink and green wall installations (fig. 1.1). On the front gallery wall the title of the show, “Faking It”, and the artist’s name shine like pink and purple fool’s gold; these letters, encrusted in glitter, are seductive and reinforce the installation’s theme of surface obsession (fig. 1.2).

Below the wall lettering sits a small area landscaped with green artificial turf, plastic plants, and multi-colored aquarium rocks entitled “Beating Around the Bush”. One sees a stacked variety of four blue suitcases tiered with plastic turf and plants to resemble terraced gardens (fig. 1.3). The top suitcase is open, revealing an exotic scene of masked toy figures cavorting within a lush pastel grotto made of plastic plants, toy animals, latex roses, pink feathers, mosaicked shells, and a mirrored “pond” (fig. 1.4). In the top of the suitcase sit two gold frames that house bright pink condoms, treasured like pressed flowers. This scene is a diagram suggesting to the viewer that such erotic encounters occur in the larger space they are about to enter. The closed suitcases stacked below propose that other such salacious treasures might exist within those hidden spaces.

Surrounding the suitcases sit a number of small pink and green fleshy flower-like objects (fig. 1.5a & b). Upon closer examination the viewer finds these flowers are actually small porcelain figurines partially covered in layers of multi-colored latex. One might wonder if the figures are in the process of being masked or un-masked as they become hybrids—simultaneously figures, flowers, and genitals. Each figure-flower is contained within its own tiny landscaped oasis, skirted by small plastic plants. Like the suitcases, these hybrid figure-flowers use small familiar objects (such as toys and knick-knacks) to refer to idealized characters, and to provide clues (such as garden symbols and
sexual souvenirs) to guide the viewer toward the erotically charged installation space.

As the viewer moves through the gallery, she is given a circular path to follow in exploring the rest of the garden; six costumed mannequins surround the perimeter of the path (fig. 1.6-8). Each oddly dressed character is simultaneously familiar, yet strange, portraying hybrid human-animals. Like the small figure-flowers in “Beating Around the Bush”, the mannequins exist in their own contained gardens ornamented with a variety of flower-like objects, odd trinkets, and plastic turf and plants, and are edged by small brightly colored aquarium rocks (fig. 1.9).

In the center of the garden one finds “Menagerie”, a large reflecting “pool” with waves made of sparkling multi-colored and gold sequined fabric, suggestive of seductive but murky waters (fig. 1.10). Small multi-colored aquarium rocks encircle the perimeter of the pool along with a fringe of auburn hair and plastic plants. Populating the pool are small fish and three dark purple plastic swans. Heavily ornamented and coated with dark purple and pink latex, the swans cavort in the pond as if performing in a parade or beauty contest.

The first costumed character to greet the viewer is “The Domestic (Service with a Smile)”, related to the mid 20th century American nostalgia for the loving, submissive wife (fig. 1.11). Most of the white mannequin is hidden by the almost full-body, luscious light-pink latex costume. A large pink lacy vessel, stacked high with artificial cakes and candies so that the assemblage resembles a latex-laden Rococo wig, covers the head. On the headpiece the sweets are surrounded by layers of lace, cording, and pearl trim, with light-pink latex oozing like honey out of numerous orifices. A pink latex lace veil with tulle panels extends down from the bowl-like vessel to cover the face, save a small round dark hole situated directly in front of the wearer’s mouth, similar to a blow-up doll. The light-pink, slightly translucent latex-covered lace apron hangs at the neck, moves down the body, and hits just above the knees. The translucency of the apron allows some hints of the wearer’s body to show through, like a peek-a-boo nightie. The low-cut apron allows for a glimpse of the wearer’s cleavage and is lined with latex lace and pearl trim around the outer edges, suggesting
that the wearer has been given a “pearl necklace” (a sexual euphemism) (fig. 1.12). The latex apron is pulled tight to the body by peachy-pink ribbons forming a neat bow in the back. The organza ribbons hang seductively over the wearer’s backside, which is covered with layers of tulle similar to a bridal train (fig. 1.13). The bow makes the wearer’s body into a surprise or a present that can be unwrapped at anytime. It also reinforces the idea of the domestic submissive, giving the dominant partner the power to decide when to unwrap his “gift”. The lower legs and feet feature a pair of kneepads and high-heeled shoes, ornamented like the rest of the costume with lace fabric and trims and heavily coated with light pink latex. At the actual knee placement, the pads are covered with lace fabric, suggesting stockings or perhaps broken blood vessels from laboring on one’s knees. The prevalence of latex covered objects might suggest that the viewer is witnessing a revelation of body rather than a body covering, as the latex objects all read as seductive pink flesh or organs. Though “The Domestic’s” accessories signal her active servitude, the formality of the whole costume suggests that perhaps she does not serve as readily as one might think.

Next the viewer meets “The Crafty Gallant”, a cross between a carpenter and a knight in shining armor (fig. 1.14). This costume consists of a hard hat, modified Dickie’s overalls, and work boots, all heavily ornamented with a variety of ready-made decorative wooden knobs, balls, and round shapes, which are swimming in pools of metallic gold latex. Like a knight, the mannequin wears a decorative hood and two golden duct-tape sleeves, all covered with crocheted gold yarn and edged in a scrolling gold trim; the effect of this ornamentation resembles chainmail. Using ready-made wood for the armor, as well as the addition of chainmail and birdhouse codpiece, pushes the character further from the realm of mere workman or carpenter into the realm of domestic leader or warrior (fig. 1.15). The excessively ornamented wood and oozing latex surface physically creates a very rigid structure, which like “The Domestic” seems more for show than for actual work. Though armor is meant to protect the wearer, there are moments in “The Crafty Gallant” costume where the white surface of the mannequin is revealed, such as at the upper arms and between the legs, suggesting that even this strong, shiny warrior might be vulnerable to a lover’s “attack”.


As the viewer travels further into the gallery the gaudy garden appears to have grown; the lime green and bright-pink plastic “vegetation” gets larger and denser, and the characters read less as human and more as hybrid creatures.

“The Novelty” appears next on the path, reading as a cross between a body builder, a bizarre bird, and a cheap inflatable child’s toy (fig. 1.16). This costume also references the hyper-masculine “Guidos” of the East Coast, muscle-bound Italian-Americans like the young male characters on “The Jersey Shore” reality television series. Adorned in bright reds with hints of blue and yellow, this male character is enormous; his upper torso is puffed up like an aggressive parrot or body-builder, which makes his “feathered” head look tiny in comparison. The hyper-extended plastic muscles on his upper and lower body are covered in small plastic mouthpieces. Body builders are often referred to as having “hard” bodies; “The Novelty” reads as inflated, but is actually stuffed and soft. Because his muscles appear to be inflated with air, they signal emptiness, void of anything meaningful. His large red muscles seem to be ripping through a bright reddish latex skin, making him look like a shiny piece of meat. His buttocks are scarred or branded with the word “juicy”, a reference to trendy sportswear as well as steroid users, who are commonly known as “Juiceheads” (fig. 1.17). Though “The Novelty” seems quite manly with his abundance of muscles, an asymmetry to his form and a noticeable lack of genitalia in his costume, bring his masculinity into question. The overt reference to parrot or “parroting” suggests that “The Novelty” is mimicking poses he’s seen before as the visual transmission of this type of character spreads like a cultural virus across the airwaves.

Strolling further one finds “The Novice”, a brightly colored character seemingly in the liminal state between girlhood and womanhood (fig. 1.18). Her fluorescent costume is skintight and covers the entire body, including hands and feet, so that nothing of the character underneath is revealed. She has a large teddy bear-shaped headpiece made of multiple small stuffed animal heads and crocheted ruffles. The crocheted floor-length dress has large breasts and buttocks covered in light pink poms topped with googley eyes so that her “assets” gaze impassively towards the
viewer (fig. 1.19). The hands and feet are covered with mittens and socks (respectively), causing those extremities to look like paws. There is a sense of electric blossoming in the garment with the lacy latex-trimmed sleeves resembling flowers in the process of blooming. The front and back of the dress feature two giant zippers trimmed in bright pink latex-infused lace. These spaces become fleshy, like labia, and signal another type of opening or blooming that the viewer can control. On the right hand an opening in the mitten reveals a small unicorn head covered in bright pink latex. This unicorn directs the viewer's eye to the two needlepointed unicorns that flank, but face away from the wearer's genital region (fig. 1.20). The finished needlepoint canvases play off the blank shaped plastic canvas found throughout the garment, suggesting “un-pierced” areas to explore on the body either physically or visually. While her costume appears optically assertive in the bright colors and odd textures, the tight form and lack of dexterity generate a feeling of submissiveness and helplessness.

Behind “The Novice” on the back wall of the gallery the viewer finds “(H)Air Garden”, consisting of a variety of inflatable vinyl tubes and plastic bowls transformed into a vertical flower garden (fig. 1.21). Stacked bright pink and green tubes suggest different moments of growth, and have green cylinders growing out of their centers like trumpet flowers. These vaginal-like cylinders are edged in lace and long, straight hair, and have shiny pink “bubbles” emerging from within (fig. 1.22). Smaller lime green inflatable tubes sport showy pink and green “blossoms” constructed of ruffled plastic bowls, pink feathers, green plastic plants, and mysterious latex objects (fig. 1.23-4). The gallery lights shine on these inflatables creating strong shadows and rings of colored light on the walls around the stacks.

Across the gallery from “The Novice” is “The Titillator”, a ruffled female costume that reads as a bizarre burlesque dancer, or perhaps a cast member from “The Jersey Shore” (fig. 1.25). Multiple artificial breasts, with nipples pierced by beaded tassels, cover a large globe-like mask; each breast is surrounded by swirls of lace all coated with sunset-like pinkish orange latex (fig. 1.26). The mask hides the wearer’s head, then extends down onto the body, over the wearer’s breasts, and comes to rest on the belly. The
shape of the breastplate mimics a warrior’s armor, extending down the body and landing as a small circle on the belly, playing visually as both navel and female genitals. The “armor” also descends past the shoulders, coming to rest around the middle of the wearer’s back. The entire form is coated in thick layers of latex, reinforcing the ideas of both skin and fetish-wear. Her lower torso is covered by a short tutu, which opens at the front to reveal latex bead fringe and lacy panties. The costume also includes pinkish-orange latex and lace-covered fingerless gloves, and ruffled high-heeled shoes. The hoop she holds may serve as a performance accessory for her, or may provide a barrier a potential mate must cross. While “The Titillator” may seem as though she is sexually liberated, the density of the lace covering the body and the high “collar” lend a somewhat Victorian feel to the piece, leading one to conclude that she might actually possess a more conservative side. Like many of the other characters, she also exhibits binary signals—simultaneously covered, yet revealed; orthodox and siren; candy and raw meat; sexy, but malformed.

On the walls behind “The Titillator” is “Peep Show”, another vertical garden consisting of multiple repeated round plastic green trays (fig. 1.27). The circular forms cover the back and side walls, spreading across the space like blossoms, cells, insidious plants, or even sexually transmitted diseases. (A few forms have even found their way to other parts of the gallery, “growing” in corners or sneaking up next to other sculptures.) There are small ruffled glittery orifices in the center of the forms, each housing a googley eye that stares back impassively at the viewer and beyond to the performances within the gallery space (fig. 1.28).

Lastly the viewer finds the court jester of the group, “The Drum Circle Jerk”, seated and nestled among the tall vegetation (fig. 1.29). The body of “The Jerk” is covered with a thick felted costume that includes bits of wool, dryer lint, a flannel shirt, and a striped woven poncho. A hood, numerous knitted dreadlocks, and an enormous orange beard mask his head and face, so there is a mystery to the direction of the wearer’s gaze. His hands—covered in bright crocheted gloves with elongated hot pink latex fingers—rest upon a reddish latex-covered drum. Also resting on the drum is a large felted phallus tipped with an enormous brass bell (fig.
1.30). The legs and torso of the costume are covered in small brass and silver bells, as are the edges of the hood and sleeves. The “Jerk” seems so involved in his suggestive “sound” as an attractor that his costume has become an almost impenetrable barrier. By now perhaps the viewer would know better; he is performing just like the other characters, simply with a carefree attitude. The seated position reads as passive at first, but upon closer inspection is actually the most active of the group: he rests on a pedestal, looking as though he may spring up any moment to dance or grab a mate. His supposedly carefree attitude is foiled by the active display of his large phallus and his dreadlocks, tipped with small latex phalli, which wind through his garden seeking out the receptive viewer (fig. 1.31).

And so the viewer has now come full circle around the garden path—the suitcases that signaled the beginning of the journey now signal the end. It is time to unpack...
PART 2: DIVING BELOW THE SURFACE

Rococo Roots

The seriousness with which Rococo patrons and artists took “decoration” made the whole style vulnerable to complaints about its lack of human substance, its narcissistic dream-worlds and pastoral fantasies, its self-entanglement in its own potentially vacuous refinement, its strangely precious and trouble-free nature, its ignorant cultivation of a child-like innocence, its growing tendency to eroticize all subjects and human beings as if pleasure was the primary end of human life, titillation the chief goal of the visual arts, and voyeurism the main response to art works. (Baldwin, An Introduction to Rococo Art, 1717-1775)

A Rococo aesthetic in the Faking It installation enhances motifs of artificiality and transformation through the use of contained space, simulated nature, sexual symbolism, and themes of pleasure. Rococo paintings, especially those of Jean-Honore Fragonard, portray idealized figures, youthful and vital, enveloped in picturesque gardens or lavish chateaux. These scenes most often involve the figures engaged in some sort of pleasurable activity such as picnicking, swinging, or playing musical instruments, or amorous games like “Blind Man’s Buff”. The private environments and gardens featured in Rococo artworks were not the only subject matter treated with lush, decorative surface effects. The figures in paintings and porcelain objects were ornamented as well, sporting blushing pink cheeks and dressed in luminescent fabric, ribbons, and lace; each scene laden with covert symbols that helped to further the suggestions of pleasure and eroticism (fig. 2.1). These symbolic allusions create a superficial, but titillating veneer for the work so “[t]he beholder [can concentrate] attention not on penises and vaginas but on grapes and baskets” (Sheriff 112). Allusions allow the Rococo works of art, as well as the works in Faking It, to exist in two
worlds simultaneously: as delightful pastoral scenes and also as erotic narratives for those who wish to decode the work and see past the façade.

There are numerous contemporary artists like myself making what I refer to as “Nouveau Rococo” work—mining the Rococo for its abundance of decorative and erotic symbolism and its relationship to pleasure and artificiality. The aesthetic influences of Fragonard shine brightly in Will Cotton’s paintings, *Consuming Folly* (2010) and *Cotton Candy Cloud* (2004) where Cotton depicts lovely porcelain-skinned young women—posed like pin-up girls—enveloped in pink cotton candy and ice cream clouds (fig. 2.2) (Will Cotton). The sun-drenched figures lounging in the sweet, sticky pastoral environments are realistic representations—seeming as though one could reach out and feel them—but the flat plane of the canvas reminds the beholder that we witness merely a window into a fantasy world, a seductive ornamental façade that can only be viewed, never entered.

Chris Antemann also creates fantasy worlds; rather than paintings, she produces small-scale porcelain sculptures inspired by Rococo figurines. Though her work is three-dimensional, her figures are idealized, like Cotton’s, and transformed through the use of ornamentation: decals and metallic lusters treat the otherwise neutral white surface. According to Antemann’s website, her works “parod[y]... decorative figurines by delving into the darker side of relationships and domestic rites: twisted tales of master and servant, the innocence of the floral-clad maid, the dominance of patriarchal desire. Tricked out in frilly camouflage, these characters disregard tradition, exposing society's cistern of unmentionables” (Antemann, Liberating the Figurine). While Cotton’s
paintings lack a narrative specificity, relying on realistic “window dressings” to titillate the viewer, Antemann creates miniature theatrical productions with her figures to reveal hidden stories of the characters. In Antemann’s *Feast of Impropropriety* numerous glossy ceramic figures—some nude, others bedecked in fine clothing—interact in a sexually charged dining room setting. Seated around a long table laden with fruits and sweets, male and female figures gaze longingly towards one another, while two males fight over a female’s affections, and a couple lovingly embraces on the tabletop (Antemann, Feast of Impropropriety). Antemann’s porcelains provide a dramatic façade to play out the characters’ sexual fantasies while Cotton’s paintings provide fodder for the sexual fantasies of the viewer.

The work in *Faking It* does both: the costumes are meant to seduce the viewer while the garden setting enhances the sense of immersion in a fantasy world where the viewer becomes part of an ongoing narrative between the competing characters. Works by “Nouveau Rococo” artists like Will Cotton, Chris Antemann, and myself are laden with superficial seductive themes—veneers of pop culture and historical art references, and decorative ornamentation—that allow such artists to critique various aspects of contemporary society, exposing human nature’s foibles.

Superficial veneers similar to those seen in Rococo and Nouveau Rococo works can be found in the fabricated spheres of American popular culture that inspire my work. Unscripted “reality” television shows like *The Jersey Shore, The Bachelor, Rock of Love, Bridezillas*, etc. turn seductive strategies, and participants, into caricatures through a veneer of outrageous and excessive
personal presentation and behavior. In the unscripted wedding-centered show *Bridezillas*, soon-to-be brides are shown acting like monsters, ordering loved ones around, bullying hired help, demanding to get their way like spoiled children, and even smashing cakes and flower arrangements; despite this revolting behavior people are still willing to marry these women. In *The Jersey Shore*, male and female cast members are often shown falling down drunk, fighting in bars, lying to get someone into bed, or trying to get out of work. Much of the time *The Jersey Shore* crew is depicted obsessing over and augmenting their appearance—which involves artificial tanning, breast enhancement, excessive make-up and hair product use, and wearing skin-tight clothing (fig 2.3). Television producers and viewers support all of this self-centered behavior, which encourages the antics to escalate and get wilder.

Outrageous characters have become the norm for reality television shows; bizarre performances translate into more face time and therefore more money. Tiffany Pollard, aka “New York”, was an infamous contestant on Season 1 and 2 of the *Flavor of Love*—a dating show where women compete for the affection of music star Flavor Flav. Pollard became so popular on the *Flavor of Love* that she was eventually given her own show, *I Love New York*, where men then competed for her affections (VH1). “Stars” of *The Jersey Shore* are frequently seen doing commercial endorsements for products ranging from pistachios to skin bronzer to nutritional supplements, proving that their extreme behavior is not only good for the shows in which they star, but that it is also financially rewarding for the cast member and culturally influential (Price). It seems as though the public is
buying what these characters are selling in order to become more like their venerated icons.

Like the blushing idealized youths in a pastoral Fragonard painting, reality show characters seem familiar because they remain so prevalent in American visual culture—clown, virgin, whore, jock, housewife, prince charming, etc.—all archetypal masculine and feminine personae. Unlike the Rococo works, the television characters sometimes read as less than ideal, often appearing more as clichés of archetypes or inflated personae rather than flesh and bone humans. The publicized versions of the characters' personal moments are carefully edited; space and time are distorted in television shows so that, in the end, television producers become artists, creating new translations of hackneyed characters, and new superficial interpretations of reality and truth.

For Faking It I act as artist, producer, and editor: inspired by the decorative arts of the French Rococo, the works of “Nouveau Rococo” artists, and cast members in unscripted television shows, I embellish reality through elaborate costumes and objects, presenting caricatures of “self” as a celebration of the cliché sexual personae and a fantastic imagining of the extremes seen in rituals of attraction and seduction.

**Hybrids: Hot or Not?**

Like many of the media productions already mentioned, my work revolves around a sort of satirical comedy using exaggerated scale and absurdity of objects and composition to discuss artificiality, transformation, and sexual masquerade. The *Drum Circle Jerk*, for example, has a giant phallus tipped with a large brass
bell (fig. 1.30); using the sexual pun of bell/ball he is garnering attention visually and aurally. *The Novice* has a giant bear-shaped headpiece made of small stuffed animal heads; she could be a helpless creature that needs assistance or a savvy hunter who is both camouflaged and displaying her skills (fig 2.4). At first glance the ornamentation and dusty pink color palate of *The Domestic* seems quite feminine, while the structure of the headpiece begins to resemble a large phallus—reinforced by the Cyclops-like eye opening in the mask (fig. 1.12).

From afar all these compelling characters and objects can read as attractive or idealized. The costumes in this collection push the concept of fabricated erotic enhancement and disguise into more extreme territories than the smaller plant-like garden objects that surround the mannequins. Using excessive or exaggerated ornamentation such as enlarged genitals, multiple breasts, an array of synthetic hair, and eroticized craft materials allows the costumes to transform from a relatively superficial reading of ideal or attractive into the realm of repulsive or grotesque, moving into a place where they become more hybridized creatures.

A hybridity visually similar to my work is found in Hieronymus Bosch’s painting *Garden of Earthly Delights*, which inspired the *Faking It* installation’s Eden-like, fleshy aesthetics. *Garden* offers three painted panels that depict humans and hybrid creatures experiencing various states of corporeal pleasure and pain, the fecundity of flora and fauna seen in the left and central panels being the most influential on my work (Bosch). In Bosch’s garden, “[t]he hybrid creatures—part human, part vegetable, and part animal—bespeak the deterioration of humankind and the...‘confusion’ between the...natural realms”
(Battistini 256-7). Sexually liberated figures have their heads covered in berries and flowers, others fuse with birds; while some creatures are familiar—like mermaids—others seem to be new breeds (Silver). There are even instances when the lines between architecture and body blur as pink fleshy fountains and monuments and odd genital-like flora pepper the landscape. These decorative and eroticized amalgamations in *Garden of Earthly Delights* have influenced my body of work.

In *Faking It* the viewer finds hybrid moments with such works as *The Titillator* whose numerous perky breasts begin to resemble tumor clusters (fig. 1.26), or in *The Novelty* whose muscles seem to rip through his latex “skin” enhancing the illusion of raw meat (fig. 2.5). Other such instances are found in *The Drum Circle Jerk* whose dreadlocks so obscure his face that he begins to echo an octopus or strange anemone (fig. 1.29), and in *The Novice* whose breasts and buttocks simulate muscle tissue or insect anatomy (fig. 1.19). The garden vegetation also read as hybrids: fusing plastic vessels, synthetic hair, fabric, and latex to suggest an amalgamation of animal-esque plant forms.

Not only are the sculptures hybrid objects, I see the entire body of work in *Faking It* as its own hybrid form—an aesthetic conflation of the French Rococo and contemporary visual media, especially romance/sex-related reality television. The blending of these superficial worlds provides a flexible framework for me to parody the narratives and mythologies that continue to influence popular culture’s participants and voyeurs.
PART 3: TRANSFORMING THE SURFACE

In his book *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*, author James Trilling contends that, “[t]he business of ornament is to transform shapes and surfaces (by whatever means) into something other than what they really are” (38). Ornamental transformation can also act as a means to control the perception of what lies below. For many humans the idea of control is important when considering how to present oneself to a potential mate. This control may be limited to keeping one’s emotions in check or extend to methodically manipulating physical appearances (ranging from the use of make-up to various types of body augmentation). However one decides to regulate the interior and exterior surface there is usually a sense of containment in order to project, preserve, and protect, what might be regarded as “truth”. Ornamental transformation as a method of control and containment furthers the notion of obsession with surface relationships, and is essential to the work in the *Faking It* installation, providing a foundation for the characters and objects that exist in the garden as well as the structure of the garden space.

**Ornamental Containment**

A decorative garden is a composed environment, a place where nature is staged for the beholder’s visual and perhaps olfactory pleasure. Though an ornamental garden contains elements of the “natural” world, there is a sense of artifice and fantasy involved as the gardener attempts to control the scale and aesthetics of the plants. A gardener's containment method can be compared to
that of artists and television producers who carefully compose ornamental spaces (i.e. paintings, installations, or programming) in order to control the way a character “grows” and how a viewer perceives the work. In this way the attractive façade is maintained while an undercurrent of artifice and manipulation holds the environment together.

The sculptural works in the *Faking It* installation are placed in contained environments that can be likened to those in Rococo art works and in reality television shows: porcelain figurines sit inside small “flower” bowls edged in plastic plants and pink ruffles; latex-covered balls and cups grow out of bowls trimmed in artificial hair; verdant dioramas rest within suitcases; the show itself resides inside the large gallery “container”. The *Faking It* installation is a composed garden, but this time with a mix of ready-made plastic plants sold for their “natural” look, and “plant” forms assembled from vessels, hair, toys, and other oddities, furthering the sense of artificiality in the work. And like a garden, there is even an olfactory element to the installation, with a synthetic vanilla aroma enveloping the viewer as she enters the gallery.

The mannequins in my installation stand in their own self-contained environments that mimic the decorative garden-style pedestals on which many idealized Rococo porcelain figurines reside (fig. 3.1). The oasis-like islands, which surround my costumed mannequins create an ornamental, but rocky physical barrier between the figures and viewer. The vibrant aquarium rock border acts as a method of control to keep the viewer at arm’s length since most viewers would be unlikely to step onto the decorative floor covering. Creating distance through placement is indicative of the characters’ own isolating self-
absorption and, like wearing a costume, is also a way to create distance so that no real intimacy can develop between wearer and beholder. This manner of containment encourages superficial relationships much like the ones between characters on television, as well as cast members and viewers.

Even the gallery lighting is meant to contain these showy figures, spotlighting each one to create a reverent altar-like quality to the space. This type of veneration makes the figures seem almost holy, glorifying them like reality show “celebrities”, and serving to highlight their erotic extremities. Focused lighting also serves to intensify the darkness around the figures, masking the space and creating a more mysterious enclosure as seen in the many Rococo garden paintings of Fragonard. In his paintings *The Progress of Love*, there are blushing figures cavorting amorously in sunlit gardens while the wild, dark forests surround them (fig. 3.2). Spotlighting idealizes and enhances the figures in the paintings just as it does in the *Faking It* garden installation. Editing and focusing illumination transforms objects by making them special: each character gets a moment in the limelight—like a reality show cast member—to strut his or her stuff.

Additionally, the costumes and masks I construct act as ornamental containers; they are social armor meant to disguise identities as well as the imperfections and insecurities that all humans tend to possess. According to folklorist Dr. Anand Prahlad, “[t]he word ‘mask’ has its origins in the Arabic word maskhara, meaning ‘to falsify’ or ‘to transform’...”(208). Masks not only provide a means of transformation for individuals, they also are important to social communities all over the world. Costumes and masks are often integral
components in events such as annual renewals and rites of passage, rituals that function as a means to control cyclical events.

Masks perform in Europe, as elsewhere, at critical junctures in the yearly cycle. The seasonal passages...variously intertwined with elements of a more ‘arbitrary’, historical and cultural nature (Christmas, Carnival, Lent...) are the occasions for masquerading. Like all transitions, these times are critical. Life is no longer what it was and not yet what it will become. (Mack 201)

Ceremonial masks provide a symbolic boost to rituals, adding a tangible layer to control a desired outcome. Similarly, one dons my costumes in order to sell oneself to a particular audience, thus hoping to ensure a certain positive (and sexy) conclusion.

Using masks in the ritual of seduction allows the wearer to conceal one's most public feature (the face) and artificially inflate aspects of one's own personality or step into a new role as an exaggerated character. “Masks can...be artefacts [sic] used to reincarnate” (Tonkin 242), and reinforce the malleability of identity. The African Yoruba tribe stage performances at their Gelede festival wearing large carved masks on top of their heads that act as a “second face,” hiding their own faces under veils. It is with these masks that they are transformed from human into spirit (Philip & Wilkinson 239). Like the Yoruba, the wearers of my costumes take on the “spirit” of these sculpted personalities, temporarily performing new identities such as a muscular jock (like The Novelty) or a burlesque dancer (like The Titillator).

The theme of mutable identity in contemporary culture is addressed through Cindy Sherman’s oeuvre of photographs in which:
[t]he characters [Sherman] portrays aren’t really ‘characters’ at all; they’re images, and they consistently draw attention to the artifice of their surface.... Her staged photographs articulate again and again that what you see is not always what you get; that behind every hip and every eyelash are decisions about what the subject is and what gender and identity are. The ability of Sherman to play multiple roles and switch between young and old, and male and female, suggests the fundamental instability of gender roles. (Herd)

Like my costume characters, Sherman’s Untitled Film Still series also touches on mid 20th century gender stereotypes, using “well-known film clichés of female characters such as The Girl on the Run, The Devoted Housewife and The Luscious Librarian” (Herd). Similar female stereotyping is seen in my work with The Domestic, The Titillator, and The Novice. Sherman says that she numbers the work instead of titling each individual photograph to avoid the viewer’s preconceived notion regarding a character (Art21). My work, on the other hand, is labeled to provide a familiar contextual lens for viewing the forms, especially in relation to the ornamental objects that make up the surfaces. The familiarity of persona through costuming—which both Sherman and I use—makes our work accessible to viewers, while confronting them with the tensions inherent in stereotyping, visual artifice, and the construction of identity.

The artifice of a worn façade can facilitate in the fluctuation of one’s perceived identity. Head and body coverings act as enclosures for the wearer, providing comfort in the fact that the wearer’s true identity is unknown, thus offering an opportunity to deceive and/or manipulate the targeted viewer. Not only can masks “falsify,” they can “elicit and manage Power, which can include energy and dynamism as well as coercion and domination” (Tonkin 246). My costumes function in a similar way, allowing the illusion of the new character’s
persona to deceive the beholder. For instance, *The Novice* costume represents a naïve youth on the verge of womanhood (fig. 1.18), but it can be worn by a person (female or male) of any age who desires to play a younger self, with less sexual experience. A person of any height or weight can wear *The Novelty* costume in order to seem larger and stronger (fig. 1.16). Each costume in the *Faking It* series can be donned by either gender as a temporary method of transformation and/or deception, as a way to control the viewer’s perception of the wearer’s identity. *Faking It*’s transformation through seductive ornamentation is meant to encourage a physical relationship between costume wearer and beholder while simultaneously discouraging real emotional intimacy, continuing a cycle of relationships based on false information provided by the costume’s surface.

**Symbolic Transformations**

James Trilling suggests in his book on modern ornament that, “[o]rnament is decoration in which the visual pleasure of form significantly outweighs the communicative value of content. Ornament can and often does have representational, narrative, and symbolic content, but visual pleasure must be paramount” (23). The transformation of objects (through ornamentation) as well as beholder (through the pleasure of viewing) was a key goal of the artists of the French Rococo, and inspires the work in *Faking It*. Most Rococo objects, such as paintings, porcelain figures, and even entire themed rooms, were created for the delight of the beholder and, like my own sculptural objects, depend on artificiality and illusion to provide those pleasurable moments.
The illusionary surface ornamentation that Rococo artists and I use in our work falls in line with Trilling’s opinion; it is visually appealing and most often ripe with meaning. Rococo artists frequently employed ornament heavy with sexual allusion, as scholar Mary Sheriff writes in her book *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*: metaphorical devices used by Fragonard include...

[a] parody of motifs from traditional history paintings..., the imaging of verbal puns that depend on a comparison between two objects with similar visual characteristics (as in the *bouton* [meaning nipple or rose bud]), and the introduction of things that metaphorically substitute for the sexual organs (like the *chapeau* [hat]). (107)

Sheriff points out that feminine signifiers were usually containers or other passive objects, or suggested woman as a garden or field ready to be “planted”. Substitutions for female genitalia were blooming rose bushes, baskets of flowers, an open hat or vase, eggs, and the folds of a dress or apron (referencing the Greek myth of Zeus impregnating Danae with his golden shower). Male symbols relate to insertion—cutting, piercing, or penetrating an object; the male characters are active participants, complementing the female figures by plowing, planting, watering, or cultivating. Masculine substitutions include the rake, watering can, bird, shoes, scythe, gourds, and grapes (110). These subtle (and not so subtle) signs representing genitalia and suggestions of sexual acts add a delightful twist to the work, giving the viewer a chance to actively participate in deciphering the layers of meaning.

Like Rococo artists, I employ excessive artificial ornamentation in my sculptural work through the use of synthetic hair, imitation flowers and plants, sequins, glitter, shells, mirrors, lace, wood, plastic toys, and more. The Rococo
tendency to eroticize subjects carries over to my work through the metamorphosis of these innocent decorative objects into phallic and vaginal-like sculptural forms. The synthetic materials used to construct and transform the sculptures found in the *Faking It* garden installation are most often ready-made objects; in isolation each reads as a craft commodity or plastic vessel, but when bound together they morph into luscious, heavily encrusted fetishes that denote fecundity and sexuality.

Transformation occurs in two ways for sculptural forms in *Faking It*: the identities of costumes and garden objects are transformed through heavy ornamental surface accretion, while the embellishments transform through the re-contextualization of their use and the physical act of surface application. I employ decorative objects to convert these surfaces not only for aesthetic purposes, but also to provide a means for visual stimulation—a humorous narrative path for the viewer to decode. Some common elements I offer for erotic symbolic purposes include lace—as labia on all the female costumes and much of the garden objects; roses—as female genitalia on garden objects; wooden knobs—as phallic forms on *The Crafty Gallant* (fig. 1.14), and small pink pompoms—as clitoris or interior flesh on *The Novice* (fig. 1.19) and in other garden objects. *The Novice’s* head is built of small, colorful stuffed animal heads—items commonly found in a child’s possession—that reference cute, helpless creatures. Lace fabric and trim becomes an apron on *The Domestic*, harkening back to the Rococo reference of apron as female genitalia. *The Drum Circle Jerk* is covered with bells that act as his “balls”. In *Beating Around the Bush* small gold frames hold condoms pressed as though they are flowers (fig. 1.4). Using recognizable and
accessible components allows the viewer a glimpse of the products’ origins to help build context as the materials are assembled into new and unusual forms.

Crafting materials offer creative opportunities for the masses, both to children and adults; they are inexpensive surface-altering commodities and are considered a naïve and superficial method of ornamentation. Plastic containers and inflatables most often relate to pleasurable activities such as parties and outdoor play. They are cheap, temporal objects, often good for only one or two seasons of use. Their utility is limited and somewhat frivolous because of their ephemeral nature. These stereotypical materials serve to reinforce the character costume stereotypes, expanding and enhancing the pop culture lens through which this work can be viewed, and hence furthering the notion of superficiality embedded in the work.

**Latex: Ornamental Flesh**

The conceptual and physical transformation in my work is highlighted by the abundant use of latex as an ornamental coating for whole costumes (as seen in *The Domestic* or *The Titillator*), assemblages (such as the swans in *Menagerie*), and individual objects (such as balls, lace, cups, flowers, etc.). Coating or casting in latex shifts objects from their initial context as decoration or toy and masks them in a new artificial “skin”. In both cases the original object is either obscured or mimicked and its identity abstracted, continuing the confusion between the artificial and the actual.

Many contemporary uses of latex tend to mimic flesh and act as masking agents for the body. Such modern applications of natural and synthetic rubber
include commercial costume production, fetish wear, sex toys, and hygienic protective barriers (gloves, condoms, dental dams, etc.), as well as fine art sculptural applications.

Since the 1960’s artists like Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois began working with latex because of that ability to simulate flesh. Bourgeois’ latex sculptures, “allowed the artist to explore increasingly amorphous physical and psychological states” and develop “representation[s] of the body and sexuality” where she could “merge imagery—phallic breasts, male and female, passive and active” (Posner 35-6, 38). In Costume for a Banquet, Bourgeois created a wearable amorphous fleshy form that reveals only the wearer’s head and legs. The wearer’s body is abstracted and transformed into a different type of organ-like being. Conceptually this hybrid work serves simultaneously as refuge (a place to hide) and trap (the wearer’s arms and body are constricted).

The conflation of gender difference or the collapse of opposites in Bourgeois’ work—including such dualities as male/female, penis/breast, inside/outside, dark/light—produces what French writer George Bataille (1897-1962) has called the informe, a formlessness that dissolves both physical shape and categorical distinction. (Posner 38)

Using latex in her work allowed Bourgeois to explore dualities as latex bounces between malleable and fragile, fluctuating much like one’s identity. These same types of mutating dualities exist in my own work through the interplay of gender motifs, themes of attraction and repulsion, and interior/exterior revelation. While Bourgeois’ work exists most often as pure abstractions of body, my forms exist as recognizable body parts—abstracted through the heavy surface ornament accretion—that relate to the constructed sexual persona.
Thanks to groundbreaking artist foremothers and to revolutionary, fetish-inspired fashion designers, popular culture has embraced the wearable latex trend. Celebrities such as Katy Perry and Lady Gaga are often seen draped in colorful flesh-like gowns on the red carpet or even while meeting the Queen of England. The material used for such garments is a ready-made, sew-able latex fabric that comes on rolls. The natural liquid latex I specifically employ in my work, on the other hand, is sold commercially as a body paint that can be used for costuming and in sexual play. It comes in numerous colors, (but not flavors), which can be altered with small amounts of paints and pigments if desired. This type of personal ornamentation is most often used as temporal, one-off fetish-wear for private games, professional photography, or theme parties.

In this context, pleasure and desire is key, linking this material conceptually to its use in my work as catalyst to create “attractive” mating adornments. This transformation creates a new fleshy hybrid, changing object into “sex object” (similar to the gowns worn by celebrities), and titillating and converting the object viewer into voyeur. Latex-infused lace and trim read as labia in *The Domestic*, *The Titillator*, and *The Novice*; porcelain figurines read as phallus and flowers (fig 1.5b). *The Crafty Gallant* is almost completely covered in latex, becoming like one large phallus (fig 1.14). In each of these examples there is a transformation of material into thickly encrusted flesh-object and a suggestion of engorged genitalia. These moments suggest to viewers that they are seeing something private, a personal revelation to a public audience, though what they are seeing is merely a disguise.
“Natural” Ornamentation

Disguising vulnerabilities and imperfections is not just a human phenomenon. Though humans have struggled for years to separate themselves from their carnal connections, we remain animals with similar instincts and physical needs, and sexual desire is high on the list. Humans compete with ferocity in the reproduction arena, as do other species, both animal and vegetable. Any edge a competitor can gain in the courtship “jungle”—through visual or performance ornamentation—might garner special appreciation from that potential partner, leading to a connection. There can be an intense rivalry between fruit trees and flowers to attract an animal’s attention and therefore ensure the transmission of the plant’s genetic material. Sometimes by developing the brightest colored and most aromatic treasures plants can even affect the display of the animal itself:

If a male primate happens to evolve a bright red face, he might prove more attractive to females. He might catch their eyes, because their survival for millions of years has depended on seeking out ripe fruit. Her senses are biased to notice bright colors, and this “sensory bias” may influence the direction that sexual selection takes. (Miller 141-2)

Comparing the visual strategies of animals and plants to distinct moments in my work reinforces the human connection to the animal and plant kingdoms. The type of body mapping used in my work could be viewed as similar to the more obvious visual displacement seen in the animal world among male and female gelada baboons that often transpose external clitoral symbols onto their chests (Hersey 9). The body coverings I create not only act as masking agents, but also hint (and sometimes scream) at male and female reproductive
equipment. Though the scale of my costumes does relate to human proportions, increasing the size, number, or placement of normal body parts assists in getting more attention as, “sexual selection tends to emphasize, perfect, and exaggerate certain qualities. Pronounced attractors signify greater fitness to survive” (Hersey 5).

The character costumes in *Faking It* also offer exaggerated visual signals to signify sexual extremities. In *The Titillator*, one sees a multitude of deep pinkish-orange candy colored breasts on the headpiece surrounded by layers of labia-like lace—the color a reference to both tanning (as seen with the bronze-bodied characters of *The Jersey Shore*) and female anatomy (fig. 1.26). The latex-infused lace runs from head to toe on the front and back of *The Novice* (fig. 1.18). This bright pink “labia” surrounds a zipper, which acts as a closed threshold, transforming the entire body into genitalia. *The Crafty Gallant* has a variety of phallic wooden knobs on the helmet and overalls; his golden color palette gleams seductively to suggest his value as a partner (fig. 1.14). *The Novelty’s* color palette is bright red, like a giant ripe, juicy fruit; he has small mouthpieces surrounded by reddish latex placed all over the body, which read as nipples or small phalluses, begging to be inflated (fig. 1.16). On *The Drum Circle Jerk*, small bells act as shiny gold testicles and bright orange latex-tipped dreadlocks act as snake-like phalluses to attract the eyes and ears of the beholder (fig. 1.31). In essence, all of these ornamental instances act as body-mapping systems, transposing genital imagery up to the head, face, or other areas of the body. The wearers of these costumes want attention and through exaggerated and excessive ornamentation are bound to get it.
Wearing their own type of “mask”, the swans in Menagerie have been altered in multiple ways to obscure the fact that they are plastic garden planters. In order to complete the transformation, each of the three swans is decorated with artificial flowers, toys, beads, or doll faces, then slathered with multiple layers of latex (fig. 3.3). Like the “tarted-up” and artificially augmented contestants on such dating shows as Rock of Love or Flavor of Love, this excess of ornamentation transforms the swans into fleshy “beauty queens” so they can compete with each other for the attention of the viewer.

“Plant life” in the garden spaces has its own pronounced attractors. The aquarium rocks that make up the garden borders are artificially treated with bright colors so that they begin to resemble candy more than rocks. Much of the garden vegetation is constructed of plastic vessels (fig. 3.4), a common visual substitution used in Rococo paintings to suggest female genitalia. I stack and repeat these vessels not only to reference female and male genitalia, but also as a play on the idea of the “container garden”. These bowls reflect the surrounding light, rendering the surface moist and skin-like. The day-glow colors of the wall and floor vegetation are meant to whet the appetite of the consumer who acts as pollinator for these products, purchasing the color and product a la mode.

The entire Faking It show can be viewed through a similar lens of sexual competition. The garden, like a dating show, is full of colorful artificially enhanced characters that seem to compete with each other, as well “plants” that all together vie for the viewer’s gaze in order to win the mating competition.

Along with the profusion of latex used as an ornamental covering for the sculptural works in Faking It, the garden is also rich with synthetic hair, which
decorates many of the stacked plants and wall pieces. These assemblages use hair as sexual commodity, as well as liken the augmentations to animal or plant forms used for visual reproductive manipulation. Hair on the head and body is historically linked to sexuality through axillary hair that develops at puberty and acts as a clear signal for sexual maturity. Synthetic hair is most often used on the human head to enhance or mask the naturally occurring growth. The growing popularity of synthetic hair use can be seen not only in the prevalence of celebrities wearing hair extensions, but also in the number of hair competitions around the globe, and in the reality television world with the establishment of shows like *L.A. Hair*.

In many cases, wigs and other forms of artificial hair are used to supplement loss due to illness or age, but it seems that in the majority of cases both synthetic and natural hair acts as a type of contemporary sexual ornamentation.

...[I]n Darwinian terms, the human female has become so denuded of hair on face and body that, by contrast, her remaining largest area of hair has gained in desirability, and secondly that, by “displacement,” a woman’s head hair is to the male a symbol of her pubic hair and hence of her very womanhood. (Cooper 65)

The amount or type of hair that is on a person’s head or the way the hair is worn might also signal something about that person’s personality. Tight curls cut close to the head, braids, or buns might suggest a conservative or withholding personality, while loose curls or long hair could suggest a tendency for unfettered behavior (Cooper). Long, loose hair is used in the majority of the garden assemblages, pushing that overture of wild, untamed growth (fig. 3.4). Edging
the assemblages, the hair functions as plant tendrils or flower petals and doubles as a genital “gateway” signal, transforming these areas of the “plants” into erotic orifices (fig. 1.22). Because an excess of synthetic hair is used to ornament floor and wall garden objects, this sign of desire can also work to simultaneously repulse the viewer.

Like wigs and other head adornment, male beards also have ornamental masking properties. Beards act as facial augmentation agents, as well as metaphorical armor. “As a sign of manly strength—and to add to a fearsome appearance—beards and moustaches have gone to battle in a variety of shapes and forms [and colors]” (Cooper 41). Fashionable or not, beards have always been a visual and emotional source of power. “…[M]ale hair equals virility, equals power, equals strength. It is a very ancient belief that a hairy man is a strong man” (Cooper 38). “…[B]ecause facial and body hair is one of the most obvious characteristics that differentiate the male from the female, it is not surprising that hairiness has become a symbol and a proof of masculinity” (Cooper 37). Beards are a hot topic in contemporary pop culture, as seen in places like The Love of Beard Facebook page—dedicated to honoring those with beards and challenging the manhood of those without—and Whisker Wars, a reality show based on the world of competitive bearding.

The concept of hair and masculinity is addressed in two of the male character costumes. In The Crafty Gallant, the decorative wooden shapes act as scales or hair: on the helmet they begin to morph into facial hair, on the coveralls morph into chest and body hair (fig. 3.5). This type of coverage is suggestive of a burly workingman, but the well-organized patterning reinforces the formality of
his knight-like attire, providing two types of signals in order to expand his possible mating pool. In *The Drum Circle Jerk*, the character’s sexual allure is heavily dependent on his dreadlocks and beard, constructed in bright orange colors, which stand out against his dark blue costume and catch the eye of potential suitors (fig. 1.29).

All of these artificial enhancement strategies used for ornamenting the costumes and sculptural objects serve to visually engage and seduce the viewer. They are alluring “traps” used as disguises to convince viewers that the surface is real, when in reality personae and “plants” are all a façade.

**Transformative Narratives**

The physical surfaces of sculptural objects are not the only moments of transformation within the *Faking It* installation; there are phenomena and narratives regarding transformation, pleasure, and seduction embedded in much of the work too. Mythologies and personal stories are important in the way they transmit information through time and space, acting as moral tales to encourage or discourage certain types of human behavior.

At the front of the *Faking It* gallery installation are the stacked suitcases in *Beating Around the Bush*, meant to infer travel and adventure (fig. 1.4). Often some of our wildest experiences occur when we’re far from home and are therefore unknown by the new community. Joe Francis’ *Girls Gone Wild (GGW)* video empire provides a contemporary cultural model for provocative vacation behavior. In these soft-core sex videos, available online and as “hard copies”, college girls attend booze-infused events, and are then invited to be filmed while
engaged in sexual experiences with other women. It is highly unlikely that at home these women would behave so hedonistically, but when on Spring Break—fueled by alcohol, a camera, and a potential audience—personal inhibitions tend to dissolve and caution is thrown to the wind. Some of GGW’s most popular videos involve “first timers”, women who are transformed by having their first sexual experience with another woman (Girls Gone Wild). This type of amateur performance seems more “real” than those of paid porn stars, making the performers more relatable, and sometimes more titillating. Fox’s 2001 reality show Temptation Island is another model for provocative vacation behavior. This romance-related show challenges couples to remain faithful while separated from each other. The likelihood of fidelity for the couple dwindles as sexy singles and titillating tropical island adventures constantly seduce them over the course of the show (Collins).

It is these sorts of adventures that are temporarily transformative, when people act as their “vacation selves” they often feel more courageous and liberated since they are away from their regular lives and seemingly more anonymous in the new environment. Beating Around the Bush cues viewers to the fact that they will be going on a journey through this garden and perhaps will be transformed by the experience.

Transformative mythological connections are embedded in The Novice, as seen in the costume’s unicorn motifs (fig. 1.20). A contemporary decorative device often found in the world of young girls, the myth of the unicorn tells of a wild beast that can only be tamed by a virgin who ventures into the woods where the creature lives, suggesting that a journey must take place in order to
transform. Upon meeting the virgin, the unicorn will lay its horn in her lap, thus transforming each other: the feral brute becomes docile while the girl becomes a woman (Unicorn). Besides the latex unicorn on the hand and needlepointed unicorns near the crotch, there are two more unicorns for the viewer to discover on the front and back of *The Novice’s* headpiece. Both of these unicorn horns are covered in the same bright pink latex that is used on the hand—visually connecting all the horns to the labial-like lace on the rest of the costume, and making each area seem more sexual in nature. As these sections of the costume transform from stereotypical child’s toys to sexual objects, *The Novice* costume conveys that, like the virgin who tames the unicorn, this character straddles the worlds of girlhood and womanhood.

Another type of transformative sign is the group of swans in *Menagerie*, which offer more clues for the viewer to decode (fig. 1.10). Swans have symbolic associations to mythological narratives dealing with transformation and seduction. There is the Greek tale of *Leda and the Swan*, a sordid myth involving Zeus who disguises himself as a swan in order to escape the eye of his jealous spouse so that he may seduce the lovely Leda (Cisco). Another is that of Hans Christian Anderson’s *The Ugly Duckling*, a tale of a small water bird deemed ugly by his family and peers and rejected by his community. As luck would have it, the “duckling” grows into a swan, considered to be the most beautiful of all the water birds, and is finally socially accepted. His own reflection in the water is what informs the swan of his transformation and subsequent beauty (Anderson). In both tales the main characters’ physical transformation enables them to gain the trust and approval of the beholder in order to become more socially intimate.
Mythological and personal narratives can serve similar purposes when viewed through the lens of visual media sources such as books, television shows, videos, articles, and advertisements. Often these tales are decorated with instances of transformation and pleasure, as well as characters that model conduct and personal ornamentation, all of which can impact the way viewers navigate the world.
PART 4: PERFORMING THE SURFACE

Mannequin as Performer

Like the figures found in Rococo paintings and porcelains, and the eccentrics seen on reality television shows, artificially enhanced characters populate the Faking It garden installation. Six matte-white mannequins—the same kind used for marketing clothing in a retail environment—wear costumes meant to tantalize the viewer. A connection to the retail world is important when considering the costumes and characters as commodities or packages that, like reality shows, are devoured voraciously by the public. These mannequins are idealized forms—barely proportioned to match most humans—and are visually related to classical white marble and plaster sculptures of gods and goddesses and to the porcelain-skinned figures in Rococo artworks. Rather than being the main event like the classical sculptures, these mannequins’ bodies act as performers or pedestals for the costumes that cover them. Each mannequin is specifically chosen for its gesture, activating the costume and suggesting a possible scenario for the “customer”.

Also employing gestural mannequins is artist Yinka Shonibare MBE, in his work critiquing the British Empire and its tenuous relationship with the African continent. There is a blurring or hybridization that occurs in Shonibare’s work as the mannequins lack heads (and hence identifiable facial features) and racial specificity, therefore relying on gesture and costume to contextualize the narrative installations. In Shonibare’s erotically charged 2002 series, Gallantry and Criminal Conversation, “[t]he figures have all lost their heads and are
engaged in an assortment of naughty trysts”—leaning each other over desks and on their knees providing oral pleasure (Py-Lieberman). This series focuses on “the European Grand Tour, the coming of age journey that the young elites and socialites of the 19th century took to the fashionable European capitals of the time, Venice, Paris and Rome” which involved “experiencing” the culture and the locals (Py-Lieberman). Shonibare consciously uses historical art references where gesture provides important erotic context, as in his 2001 Fragonard-inspired works *The Swing* and *The Crowning.* These Rococo-based installations are of course critiques of aristocratic frivolity, but are also based on sexual innuendo—the acts of swinging and crowning specifically tied to sexual selection and activity. So, like my work in *Faking It,* Shonibare relies on costuming to create identity, but also on gesture to provide additional narrative context.

The gestures of the mannequins in *Faking It* work to either reinforce or confuse the costume’s intention, which can enhance the work’s artificial and hybridized nature. *The Domestic* uses an assertive mannequin that strides forward into the world rather than remaining submissive the way a housewife might. *The Crafty Gallant* mannequin seems still and almost relaxed, contrary to a stance an active warrior or workman might take. *The Novelty* mannequin mimics a large male bodybuilder who grows even larger when wearing the costume. *The Novice* mannequin has a submissive stance, in line with her restrictive costume. The mannequin for *The Titillator* looks as though she is a dancer in motion, tantalizingly shaking her hips. As mentioned previously, the seated mannequin for *The Drum Circle Jerk* seems to be the most “alive” of the group even though the character desires to be read as relaxed. However the
mannequin relates to the costume, it transforms the wearable sculpture (just as the costume transforms the mannequin), enlivening the costume while it waits for the perfect customer to arrive. The mannequin’s gesture serves to artificially breathe life into the work as another strategy to catch the viewer’s eye.

**Costume as Performer**

Using costumes to create and/or erase identity is an important aspect of the *Faking It* work. Nick Cave is a contemporary visual artist that, like me, also works with transformative wearables. Cave constructs “Soundsuits” that envelop almost the entire body, including the head. Most of Cave’s costumes are scaled to human proportion in the upper and lower torsos, but often have coverings that augment the head in extreme ways. Cave’s work should be heard and viewed while in motion, the object itself completed when activated by a human performer. Cave’s work is less about the creation of identity and more about its abstraction or removal—becoming something greater than a mere character through the wearing of the costume (Avila). When encased in a suit often only the wearer’s hands and heels are revealed, otherwise his suits erase the wearer’s identity, allowing Cave to transform completely and channel the spirit of the suit like a Yoruba festival player. Though Cave’s suits are constructed for a live performer, they are most often seen on a gesture-less mannequin in a museum or gallery setting, yet lose none of their power sans a warm body.

My costumes, on the other hand, rely on identifiable labels and thrive on the suggestion of a future performance. Suggestion, rather than prescription (when worn and performed by a human), gives the viewer/customer a chance to
project oneself into the costume and fantasize about how he or she might perform. In this way my costumes are active (presented by the posed mannequin), but also passive (because the mannequin is actually still) and waiting for the right customer to come along. Thus the work seduces on multiple levels: these costumes are enticing not only for the potential viewer/mate, but also for the wearer who has hopes of temporarily becoming someone new. If the act of covering is thought of as loss or eradication of the old into a new physical form, then that supplanting can be viewed as a rebirth. Not everyone can naturally project the type of virility or sexuality he/she considers most important (for physical, genetic, emotional, or economic reasons). So the individual often performs in supplementary metaphorical and corporeal masks. One can think of it in terms as “dressing to impress”, which again reinforces the reliance on surface relationships in order to guarantee attention.

**Viewer as Performer**

Upon entering the *Faking It* gallery space the viewer transforms into beholder, customer, and at times, sculptural object. The suitcases at the front of the space signal a journey is taking place, but it is up to the viewer to decide what to make of the journey. Viewer as “beholder” can be somewhat passive if she wishes, merely appreciating objects for their surface value and their beauty. A beholder has no personal attachment to the objects and can meander about the garden space freely, finding pleasure in the scene, but remaining emotionally distant from the work. Viewer as “customer” can take a more active role than a beholder, studying the scene and identifying what’s most attractive (or repulsive)
to him or her. A customer can become intimate with the work in order to decide what to “buy”. The intention of this installation is to create not just an erotic decorative garden, but also a department store-type space where the viewer becomes a customer and where each costumed mannequin acts as a commodity—an object of desire that can be possessed either by wearing or by dating/mating.

A delightful revelation occurred once the work was in the gallery space: not only do the costumed mannequins act as objects of desire for the viewer, but as the viewer moves through the space, she too transforms into a sculptural object, becoming part of the show and in essence, part of the competition. Because the mannequins are set up around the perimeter of a circular garden path the viewer becomes physically immersed in the space, surrounded by the odd towering forms. When alone with the work in the space—whether standing on the path or sitting on the bench provided—the viewer feels small and vulnerable, almost at the mercy of the characters that seem to sit in judgment. It is at this moment that the viewer, as sculptural object, might become more aware of her own personal presentation and start to feel self-conscious and insecure. Or perhaps the viewer is already dressed in his or her mating costume, projecting a persona to the world that masks whatever lies below. Either way, the viewer as sculptural object is more than an active participant, he or she transforms into a living statue whose own surface ornamentation becomes part of the show.
PART 5: SHEDDING THE SURFACE

The heavy accretion of decorative objects and latex to my work’s surfaces provides moments of ornamental transformation meant to disguise the ordinary and breathe new life into objects—whether they are plastic bowls, a pair of overalls, or department store mannequins. The nature of ornament, as proposed by author James Trilling, is to provide visual pleasure (23). My surfaces also provide context—layers of meaning that relate both to the identities of the decorative materials used to transform, as well as the objects being transformed through surface ornamentation. My French Rococo, “Nouveau Rococo”, and reality television referents support that reasoning, providing their own seductive and carefully crafted facades for visual consumers.

Like my influences, superficial readings of the work in Faking It prematurely delude the viewer into a false sense of security. Closer inspection and further thought allows the viewer to understand the simultaneously attractive and repulsive nature that lies on and beneath the costumes’ and garden objects’ seductive surfaces. This revelation of the repulsive or grotesque does not take place until the viewer becomes more intimate with the work, getting physically and emotionally closer to each piece. So, like any relationship, the more time you spend with that character, the attractive façade breaks down and you begin to see the imperfections or artificialities. When artificial pretense falls away to reveal the vulnerabilities below, then real intimacy occurs.

Establishing intimacy between viewer and object helps one to understand the critique embedded in the work—a mocking of superficial relationships and
the cultural glorification of excess, especially that celebrated by the visual mass media. Constructing forms with components—and references—gleaned from popular culture and art history provides a familiar and sometimes humorous entrance into the work and a lens through which viewers can begin to contextualize the symbols and objects they see. The parodying of commoditized sexual personae through wearable sculptures and heavily ornamented surfaces permits viewers to dive in and dissect the work as well as themselves. *Faking It* charges visitors to consider what they find attractive (or repulsive) and to ponder what sorts of social armor they themselves don in order to attract others.

In a world that values casual, affordable comforts, this work offers some uncomfortable tension as viewers consider what they “buy into” and “fake” in order to mask their own insecurities and seduce a mate. Though *Faking It* is not a condemnation of ornament nor a moral judgment, embedded in those decorative layers is a concern for a culture that so overtly celebrates the artificial. Just how do 21st century Americans want to construct our identities—with ready-made personae peddled by popular culture and mass media, or with colorful odds and ends collected through experience? As participants in a fast-paced, competitive society, it is important to decide what we value in ourselves and in our partners. That way, we can play the game with eyes wide open, process the copious amounts of information received, and make informed decisions about how we want to perform and how we would like to be perceived,...in other words, how we want to honestly live. Without an introspective evaluative process one is tied to the surface—living a pastoral fantasy that lacks understanding, intimacy, and most of all, authenticity.
Figure 1.1
Faking It installation shot, 2012
George Caleb Bingham Gallery
Figure 1.2
*Faking It* signage, October 2012

Figure 1.3
*Beating Around the Bush*, installation view
Figure 1.4
*Beating Around the Bush*, mixed media with latex, 2012
Figure 1.5a
*Figure-flowers* installation detail, mixed media with latex, 2012

Figure 1.5b
*Figure-flowers* installation detail, mixed media with latex, 2012
Figure 1.6
Faking It installation view #1
George Caleb Bingham Gallery
Figure 1.8
*Faking It* installation view #3
George Caleb  Bingham Gallery
Figure 1.9
Garden details, mixed media with latex, 2012

Figure 1.10
*Menagerie*, mixed media with latex, 2012
Figure 1.11
The Domestic (Service with a Smile), mixed media with latex, 2012
Figure 1.12
*The Domestic* (head detail)
Figure 1.13
*The Domestic* (bow detail)
Figure 1.14
*The Crafty Gallant*, mixed media with wood and latex, 2012
Figure 1.15
*The Crafty Gallant* (bird detail)
Figure 1.16

*The Novelty*, mixed media with latex and vinyl, 2012
Figure 1.17
*The Novelty* (“juicy” detail)
Figure 1.18
*The Novice (Bearly Legal)*, mixed media with latex and yarn, 2012
Figure 1.19
*The Novice* (back detail)

Figure 1.20
*The Novice* (unicorn & hand detail)
Figure 1.21
(II) Air Garden, mixed media with vinyl tubes and synthetic hair, 2012
Figure 1.22

(II)Air Garden, mixed media with vinyl tubes and synthetic hair, 2012
Figure 1.23
(H)Air Garden (tube & bowl detail)
Figure 1.24
(Discrete Air Garden (bowl detail))
Figure 1.25
The Titillator, mixed media with latex, 2012
Figure 1.26
The Titillator (head/breast detail)
Figure 1.27
*Peep Show*, Mixed media, 2012
Figure 1.29
The Drum Circle Jerk, mixed media with yarn, latex, and bells, 2012
Figure 1.30
*The Drum Circle Jerk* (phallus and bell detail)
Figure 1.31
*The Drum Circle Jerk* (dreadlock detail)
Figure 2.1
Oil on canvas, 125” x 84”
The Frick Collection
ARTstor AMICO_FRICK_103804601
Figure 2.2
Will Cotton, *Cotton Candy Cloud*, 2004, oil on linen, 75” x 100”
ARTstor, LARRY_QUALLS_10312603208

Figure 2.3
*The Jersey Shore* cast, 2012 (Hines)
The Clicker on Today, 10/30/12 (Bosch)
Figure 2.4
*The Novice* (head detail)
Figure 2.5
The Novelty (chest detail)

Figure 3.1
Derby Porcelain Manufactory, Bagpiper and Lute Player, porcelain, 1770’s
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute
ARTstor, AMICO_CLARK_1039413860
Figure 3.2
Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Progress of Love: Love Letters*, 1771-2,
The Frick Collection
ARTstor, AMICO_FRICK_103804603
Figure 3.4
Faking It garden details
Figure 3.5
*The Crafty Gallant* (helmet detail)
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