



Main Space

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Girl Germs

Lauren Cullen, Beth Frey, Katie Morton, Amy Wong
Curated by Emily Gove
July 30 – August 22, 2015

“This is my TOP 10. extended dance remix. produced by revolution (summer) girl style now.”¹

-Alison Wolfe, *Girl Germs 3*

The original *Girl Germs* was a zine produced by Alison Wolfe and Molly Neuman of the band Bratmobile in the early 1990s. Each issue consisted of interviews, personal stories, poems, short fiction, top 10 lists and mix tapes from contributors like Kathleen Hanna and G.B. Jones, alongside letters from readers and short descriptions and contact addresses for “cool publications and record company things that deserve some attention.”² As a historic document, each issue of *Girl Germs* functions now as a cut-and-pasted archive of the Riot Grrrl movement, and the connections forged by its distribution across North America.

This exhibition was inspired by zines and mix tapes; the artists and works were selected in an intuitive, relational way. I chose works I wanted to see together and people I wanted to meet each other. Amy Wong describes mix tapes as “mini-curated universes... an art form motivated by love,”³ and that sentiment expresses this show, too. *Girl Germs* also brings to mind dichotomies of sweet vs. nasty, dirty vs. clean, vulgarity vs. politeness, which all of these artists are exploring in some way. Like a mix tape, their practices are

¹ Alison Wolfe, *Girl Germs 3*, reproduced in *Riot Grrrl Collection*, New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013, p 74.

² Wolfe, p 86.

separate, but play off and inform each other within the gallery space. Here's my summer 2015 Girl Germs mix: Amy Wong, Lauren Cullen, Beth Frey, Katie Morton.

Amy Wong is “an angry Asian feminist disguised as an oil painter ;) .”⁴ Inspired by mix tapes and the aesthetics of teenage bedrooms, Wong’s practice occupies space that is not intrinsically welcoming to women of colour.⁵ She redirects and remixes visual pop cultural signifiers to deterritorialize and reclaim these images. In her painting-based installation, *Girl Gang Travel Mix*, paintings, drawings, speech bubbles, YouTube stills, postcards and ephemera are collaged on the wall in an exploded cosmology, the juxtapositions generating new connections, meanings and personal narratives exploring gender, race, class and sexuality. A painting of the *dulya*—a Slavic, obscene hand gesture that replaces the phallic middle finger of the Western action with a clit-like thumb—hangs alongside images of Japanese *kawaii* nail art. A painted facsimile of the popular “Hang in there” motivational cat poster is surrounded by malevolent speech bubbles: “aiya” (a common Cantonese expression of exasperation), “Bitch Please,” “eat shit and die.” Amongst this found and appropriated imagery, Wong has included paintings referenced from personal photographs of living room dance parties and studio hangouts, and her niece striking a “power pose,” an example of the confident posture that social psychologist Amy Cuddy suggests can affect testosterone and cortisol levels in the brain.⁶ The installation is accompanied by an infinitely looping mix tape of pop, hip hop, R&B, throat-singing, disco, New Orleans bounce and Chinese folk songs. The diverse references, images and media assert the impossibility of one true narrative or system of representation, and the fluidity between rigid categories of race and gender.

Lauren Cullen’s practice uses the medium of rug-hooking to explore gendered narratives, both contemporary and historical. Cullen’s rugs differ from traditional hooked objects, in which technical finesse and realistically drawn and shaded patterns are revered, Cullen’s pieces are invested in hooking’s potential to examine and critique the complex history of its practice in Canada. Within this history, the romantic narrative of the Victorian colonial

³ Amy Wong, Artist’s website (Song Projects), Web. July 30, 2015. <<http://amy-wong.net>>

⁴ Amy Wong, “Rhythm and the Monstrous: A Diary Manifesto for Oil Painters (Thesis Excerpt),” *Breach Magazine Issue 1: Decolonial Aesthetics*, June 2015.

⁵ Wong

woman maintaining her domestic home by crafting “happy,” thrifty objects to warm their floors supersedes the contributions of First Nations peoples, and the dispossession required of those peoples in order for those floors to exist.⁷ In contrast to popular rug-hooking patterns, often consisting of landscapes or flowers, Cullen uses text and colour to deconstruct the gender and class hierarchies that exist in hooking cultures. In *Proud to Hook*, Cullen hooks the title’s text into a bright red and yellow rug. Using an intentional pun—“hooking” also refers to sex work—Cullen draws attention to those (predominantly white) women who have the privilege of laughing at that pun. In *Fucked Up, Fuck Binaries* and *Soft Bitch*, Cullen’s profanity rubs against the grain of “polite” language, and hints at the “intrinsically nasty” nature of the rug:

“Rugs conjure hair; both head and pubic. We can cut a rug and we can munch a rug. We can sweep an issue under the rug. We can shake out our rugs trying to rid the wool of dust and skin-cell build up, but we will never truly do away with past residues.”⁸

Beth Frey creates sculptural work exploring girlhood and bodily boundaries. Frey’s sculptures are created using a combination of hard and soft materials: chicken wire bases are coated and covered in pliable plastic sheeting, soft, sometimes melted fabrics, flexible paint skins, feminine garments and wigs in shades of pastel and neon pink, green, purple and turquoise. The resulting figures evoke images of childhood transgression, bodily disruption, or a birthday party gone horribly wrong. In this installation, Beth has created an explosion of exaggerated, abject ‘girliness’. Soft, skin-like materials are layered with traced images of Miss Piggy, Lisa Simpson and Ariel the Little Mermaid to create transgressive girl-monsters; plastic fangs become eye sockets leaking sequined entrails and a pair of white and neon pink lace underwear becomes a mask for a disembodied head. The monstrous nature and leaky physical boundaries question the expectations of feminine etiquette and social mores.

⁶ Amy Cuddy, *Your body language shapes who you are*. TED talk, Edinburgh, Scotland, June 2012.

⁷ Lauren Cullen, “Proud to Hook: Rug Hooking, Matrilineage and the Canadian Palimpsest.” Fifth Biennial Art History Symposium, Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, GA. April 2014.

⁸ Cullen, 2014.

Katie Morton's painting practice explores similar themes of femininity and 'proper' self-presentation. Morton paints images of women that are frequently both unsettling and playful. In *Witch at an ATM* Morton has created a strange narrative: a feminine green figure with a MOM tattoo and painted nails (the witch) swipes their card at an ATM, accompanied by two ghostly figures, described by the artist as "creepy girls,"⁹ peering back at the viewer. An accompanying sculpture, *Cry Me A River*, consists of an angular feminine face with red lipstick and metallic yellow hair, built onto a household fan painted cotton candy pink. As the fan rotates, she cries an unending stream of blue glitter tears. The piece functions as a parody of teenage girl angst: infinite tears to a soundtrack of Justin Timberlake.

The installation of this exhibition was marked by points of connection: Lauren has been studying Beth's great aunt Elizabeth Lefort, a well-known Atlantic Canadian rug hooker, for her PhD research; Beth makes an appearance in one of Amy's paintings, a studio scene created during a Québec residency they both attended. The gallery took on the environment of a teenage bedroom, the floor strewn with ephemera, craft supplies, hair extensions and a pizza box. The final result is a manifestation of that energy, a space charged with positive nastiness.¹⁰

-Emily Gove

⁹ Conversation with the artist, 2015

¹⁰ Phrase borrowed from Lauren Cullen, who has a variation of it tattooed on her arm.