Desire and Fantasy Between Commercialism and Personal Room

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Desire and Fantasy Between Commercialism and Personal Room

by

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I apply two aspects of my life history to my art; my childhood experiences and my advanced studies in sociology. My work therefore combines a highly personal reading of my experiences of social interactions and my ongoing analysis of the nature of capitalism and socialism, commodification and media, especially in regard to the experiences of women in particular and consumers in general.

I grew up in a small town in Japan during a bubble economic boom in the 1980’s. At that time, Japanese people celebrated the bubble economy, and spent generously on nonessential things, such as culture, leisure, and shopping. Culture, art, and natural landscapes were highly commoditized and many Japanese people experienced those features of life by consuming them. The bubble economy was a superficial money game, but I was an innocent child at that time, so it left me a glorious memory. Today’s global economy in all capitalist advanced countries including Japan is stagnant, so my generation cannot expect a great future as previous generations did. I remember the bubble economy. That time seemed to be a bright and colorful entertainment, like a big festival. Compared with today’s stagnant Japanese economy, it was like a sweet cotton candy and three layers of decorative cake. When I grew older I came to understand the forces behind the bubble economy and to recognize how they had affected my life.

In my childhood, Japanese society was highly homosocial, especially at the worksites for enterprises in urban and suburban areas. Most males worked full-time, and their wives stayed at home and supported their family members. A paternal system was used to build a powerful economy in post-war Japan. In 1951, Japan signed a Security Treaty with the United States which caused the U.S. to start setting up many military bases in Japan; also Japan started to make
peace with the Western bloc at that time by accepting capitalism. Japan became politically, militarily, economically and culturally westernized due to American and European influences after the World War II. In order to recover from the loss of the war, Japan took full advantage of a patrilineal system to maximize productivity, and as a result Japan had an economic boom during the 1980’s. In this way, traditional gender roles were enlisted and rigorously codified to serve both a dynamic economy and conservative values.

The bubble economy was a climax of the economic growth of post-World War II Japan, the period of my childhood. Sexuality was governed to further the progress of economic growth in Japan. Corporations wanted to obtain a workforce that would fully commit itself at all times to generate their profits. They used masculinity to build an economic “sublime.” Females have been excluded from this sublime, and they were assigned to work for their families’ well-being and expected to produce children to maintain the Japanese population as a future workforce. The Japanese government did not provide adequate welfare services for citizens and instead depended on Japanese females to provide similar services in their homes so it could cut welfare costs from its budget. All government benefits were constructed and premised upon “standard” families composed of heterosexual couples with two children (Males work full time, and females are unemployed). Those systems have kept Japanese work sites homosocial, yet there have been a lot of people who could not fit into the government’s concept of a “standard” family; they could then be isolated from Japanese society.

Basically, the patrilineal system is a silent violence, and harmful to all social groups because government and enterprises exploit and control everyone by creating fantasies about sexuality. Paul McCarthy’s video “Sauce” from 1974 expresses discontent with the exploitation of sexuality, by trying to escape from the repressive fantasies that accompany a concept of
masculine social dominance. To develop, capitalism needs to exploit labor. European planters in colonies violently deprived African people of their independence in order to exploit them as a free workforce, creating wealth in the early modern period. In a less visible way, the control over peoples’ sexuality is comparable to slavery; the power structure is basically the same, because exploitation enters into every aspect of life in order to develop capitalism.

Even though the economic situation has changed, the system still exists today. The Japanese economy has been slowing down since the economic boom collapsed and now corporations have started to re-structure their organizations, and cut their full-time workforces. Women who used to be assigned to being housewives needed to go to work. However, the old patrilineal system is still in place and has made that process difficult. The collapse of the bubble economy has revealed the limited and exploitative idea of gender identity in Japanese society.

My previous work in the MFA program involved making patterns by arranging packages of commodities or fetish objects such as Sweet'n'Low, handles of IKEA shopping bags, or false eye lashes and printing them on copy paper. I pasted these papers to a grid on my studio walls to create a kind of wallpaper. I used these items to create a personal interior in my space with a domestic atmosphere. I mimicked the experience of living in a consuming culture by purchasing commodities at retail stores and incorporating them into my installation to reflect how in our personal lives we buy into commodities as a way to create an ideal life. The appreciation of commodities leads to the desire for new perches, however those goods never lead to sustained fulfillment. These commodities were either detached from their real character when they were reproduced for the masses or, most likely, they did not have any real quality when they were produced. They are designed to fix many people’s problems or fulfill their desires, but it is not possible that these mass-produced products can fix everyone’s problems or completely fulfill
their desires, because individual situations are different. Therefore, I am frustrated that there is no real human condition that exists in consumer culture. Also, I feel it is pathetic when I see personal spaces that are filled with an accumulation of commodities. These commodities are an index of the expectations people put on objects to improve their lives, or of a longing for things they miss in their lives. The rather claustrophobic results relate to my fear that I cannot escape from capitalism because it invades all of our personal spaces, including our sexuality. Human wants and needs are controlled by the system.

In related work I copied on envelopes things that imply femininity and have exchange value in the free market, such as women’s clothes and accessories, pornography, and posts of individual childcare services from Internet sites and installed them on the wall. This work is about my investigation of individual sexuality and how it is linked to the desire of consumption by consumer culture. I am always confused if my point of purchases comes from my desire to be feminine for my profit or someone else’s profit. I used pornography and nannies because they indicate femininity that is directly exchanged for currency, connecting to the consumption of femininity. The media projects a fantasy that women are happy with companions such as children, men, or creatures, and single women are regarded negatively. There is also the myth of masculinity, whereby single men are drawn positively. The fear of being viewed negatively as a woman leads women to seek out commodities to fulfill their desires. This manipulated desire generates profits. I am therefore in a muddle about how to relate my desires to my purchases.

I was not a social person when I was a child. I preferred to stay by myself and did not want to be too close with people because I felt more at ease surrounded by objects than people. I thought that people could hurt me, but objects would not. Also, there were a lot of sophisticated commodities available, so I could create my own world by choosing, collecting, and being with
them. In my childhood, I spent most of my time by myself reading books or comics at libraries, playing with stuffed animals and dolls at home, watching insects, playing with flowers and the blades of plants in the garden, or swimming at a swimming pool. These were my favorite activities. I did not like any interactive or group activities such as hanging out with classmates, doing Girl Scout activities, and playing team sports. Dolls and stuffed animals were my constant companions. I spent a lot of time with them, and they were my friends at that time. I still keep one teddy bear from my childhood, and he is still my best friend. The teddy bear’s name is FaFa, which is an onomatopoeic Japanese word that means soft. FaFa is a mascot of Snuggle, an American brand of fabric softener, sold in the global market. I felt healed of my loneliness by looking at FaFa’s fixed, adorable smiley face and cuddling his soft body made from synthetic materials. For this reason stuffed animals, which I am using in my thesis work, are a symbol to me of a happy, simple, and glorious past. They are also, as the example of FaFa’s connection to Snuggle shows, part of the commodity structure of capitalist society.

The utopian impulses that are rooted in human nature come to take the shape of commodities in capitalist societies. Commodities solve consumers’ problems, or satisfy their imaginary desires. I appreciate capitalism because it provides me with sophisticated commodities or services that meet my needs and wants, but at the same time I feel like a victim of the system that keeps selling consumers on the idea that they have problems or desires that can only be solved by commodities, just in order to sustain capitalism.

I have had two important experiences that have informed my ideas about capitalism and socialism, especially in relation to commodities. When I was younger, paper media such as magazines and flyers were the dominant vehicles for advertising and I was an innocent youth who was fascinated by the images in those media. They gave me dreams and a sense of freedom
that the real world was missing. Therefore, I went to commercial photography school and learned how to create advertising images designed to attract many people. While I was studying there, I was disappointed by what I learned about the “backstage” of commodities and advertisement. I questioned the fact that commercial photographers spend a lot of effort and special skills and knowledge to make one perfect image of a commodity that does not have value equal to the effort. For example, to make a great image of a can of beer, photographers intentionally cover the can with condensation to express the coldness of the product. I came to see advertising as the propaganda of capitalism. I began to wonder what a non-capitalist society looks like so I traveled to Havana, Cuba by myself. Cubans had simple lives in the early 2000’s. I saw more stars in the sky than I had ever seen in my life because the neighborhood where I stayed had its electricity supply cut off at night. Giant vacuum tube radios were still used in bars. I envied that Cubans still had a slow life that people in capitalist societies can no longer return to. However, I soon found out that I had a fantasy about the nature of non-capitalist society, and was not sure if I could live in non-capitalist countries like Cuba with their poor infrastructure systems and lack of commodities. I need to use bathrooms with toilet paper, drink hygienic water without having diarrhea, take showers as much as I need without waiting for a water supply car, and go up or down unlit stairs at night without having to memorize how many steps there are. I want access to food at markets where there is more than one kind of each item. I soon found that I want to satisfy my desire to purchase products that I really like. From my trip to Cuba, I found out that socialism is not a more perfect project than capitalism. My experiences in the advertising business and in Cuba have had a great impact on my beliefs and my work.

Simply put, my work and ideas have also been greatly informed by my experience of being a woman. In my experience, femininity is naturally nostalgic but it has also become a nostalgic
fantasy in advanced capitalist countries. Most people have sentimental feelings about motherly love coming from their childhood experience with their mothers. Femininity is therefore connected to memories of the past. Starting in the late 1960s, women in advanced capitalist countries began to leave their nurturing position in their homes to pursue careers and third world women covered the resulting domestic losses. For example, many nannies and sex workers I see in New York are from other countries. The feminine social role became more or less obsolete, and today femininity is to some degree purchasable. Femininity has become artificial in hyper-consuming cultures. Symbols of femininity are available at retail stores, salons, and gyms and consumers can tune their degree of gender orientation or style by choosing commodities.

Other experiences have affected my idea of femininity with consequences for my work. In the Japanese language people do not really use third person pronouns such as “she” and “he,” so an individual’s gender in a sentence is ambiguous. Speaking English I am painfully aware that others recognize me as a female through the use of pronouns and such words make me feel embarrassed. At one point I dressed in masculine items such as stiff cotton shirts with pointed collars and dark heavy wool pants, and smoked pipe tobacco. I found out that people reacted to me because they were seeing something they did not expect. I felt isolated so I gave up my masculine appearance and returned to wearing feminine things.

Single women and men are conceived differently by society; women are seen as lonely and men are seen as independent. Cindy Sherman’s "Untitled Film Still series" and Richard Prince’s "Untitled (cowboy)" from 1989 show how mass media and popular culture characterize gender, imprinting individuals’ perceptions. My sense that people see single women as lonely makes me fear my power over my own life being taken away by masculinity. My work seeks to validate my sense of independence and self-motivation and in doing this offers a defense against masculine
In my childhood, I did not see any mature female role models in my family. Women in my family seemed to live in the safe limited circle of their community; they were like domestic animals. Or they were obligated to provide motherly love to their families to comfort them, making other activities impossible. It seemed like women’s lives were limited, and motherhood and femininity were imposed on them. Therefore I assumed that women were being punished by something invisible. As a result, I have misogynist feelings and cannot accept and celebrate myself in order to grow up and become a mature woman. I was disappointed when I had my first menstruation. It was a sign of the ending of my childhood and of the possibility that I could be truly myself anymore. I was afraid that my life would be restricted and compromised with things that I did not want to do and that my femininity would be exploited after I became a woman. In other words, I was afraid to place myself in a woman’s role in homosocial society, where one gender deprives the other gender and monopolizes the power.

In relation to all of this, I have been having a fantasy; I do not want to grow up and become an adult, because being a mature woman for me is a nightmare, not a celebration. This is the reason I want to make a fantasy of FaFa in my work. The second reason I want to use my nostalgic toy from my childhood in my work is so that I can feel safe and secure in a “good old days” fantasy, in today’s stagnant economic situation.

In this thesis show, I would like to investigate how fantasies are channeled through fantasies and also to show how fantasies are channeled through commercialism. I am my own example since my feelings of desire and original fantasies, are completely enfolded in these consumerist formats. Like ghosts, my feelings haunt the commercial forms I have selected and drawn. I have nostalgic feelings based on my personal experiences with commodities but I am
also wary of the ways in which my desires are mitigated by what I consume. These desires can be satisfying and at times at odds with one another. My show is composed of two parts, a projection of stop-motion animation and a performance during which I make drawings in Sharpie pen of commercials and Hollywood animation images with FaFa in the room. I make large numbers of these small, Sharpie drawings and have completely lined the room with them. I want the space to feel like a shelter at first but then to succumb to capitalism; commercialism invades all personal space.

The stop-motion animation features my teddy bear FaFa because of my recurring fantasy with him. My personal memories with FaFa add another layer of value to him, an increased value from his original worth. My fantasy with the teddy bear is different from the one sold by the fabric softener company trying to promote it to consumers. The company sells its product by using the teddy bear to give a utopian desire to people wishing to have soft laundry. I created my own fantasy of FaFa in my stop-motion animated video in which he begins to move and act. In the first half of the animation FaFa plays with edged tools and male genitals with cat eyes that come out from glue sticks and lip balm. Those male genitals become blue and the blue transforms into a lake. Multiple FaFas soon appear, bathing in this lake. This scene references Frederic Bazille’s painting "Bathers (Summer Scene)" of 1869. In the other half of the animation, I bring FaFa back to the original fantasy that was created by the fabric softener company. The bathing scene becomes part of an advertisement for the travel industry. For the video I also created “catalogues” that I assembled from advertisements in magazines; these are comprised of women’s apparel, accessories, and cosmetics ads. I used animation to “flip through” these advertisements and catalogues for the viewer. Finally, FaFa is brought to a girl’s room in an interior catalogue alongside the original Snuggle fabric softener TV commercial.
The second part of my thesis exhibition is a drawing performance in a room where I am surrounded by a wall full of drawings on ruled notebook paper. I copied advertisements and retail websites of woman’s clothes, accessories, gym, cosmetics, Disney princesses, and Disney songs. These found images speak to two culturally inscribed desires: my desire to be cute and the commercial world’s desire to sell products. I am always confused as to whose desire drives me to consume.
References

Bazille, Frederic. *Bathers (Summer Scene)*. 1869. Oil on Canvas. Fogg Museum (Harvard Art Museums), Cambridge, MA.


Image list for Thesis Show images:

1) “FaFa (Soft)”
   Single Channel Video
   3:03
   2016

2) “Room”
   Performance
   Dimensions Variable
   2016
1) Documentation of “FaFa (Soft)”
1) Documentation of “FaFa (Soft)”
2) Documentation of “Room”
2) Documentation of “Room”
2) Documentation of “Room”
Image list for previous works in MFA program:

1) “Room”
   Ink jet prints, soap, false eyelashes, domestic objects
   Dimensions Variable
   2014

2) “Envelops”
   Drawing on envelopes
   Dimensions Variable
   2015
1) Documentation of “Room”
1) Documentation of “Room”
1) Documentation of “Room”
1) Documentation of “Room”
1) Documentation of “Room”
2) Documentaion of “Envelops”
2) Documentation of “Envelops”