SculptureCenter
Anthea Hamilton: Lichen! Libido! Chastity!
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Project for door (After Gaetano Pesce) (2015) is commissioned by SculptureCenter and fully supported by Valeria Napoleone XX SculptureCenter

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Anthea Hamilton: Shapewear, underwear

Ruba Katrib

On a recent visit to an archaeology museum, I was struck by the ornate jewelry dating from the early Bronze Age—bracelets, rings, and necklaces that look remarkably contemporary in design. People have always had a taste for fine things. And of course, these were objects for the wealthy, for those of high social status who were buried with their goods. While I have become accustomed to admiring such items during museum visits, my central thought on this trip was that luxury has always existed. This prosaic musing led me to consider the problematics around luxury. It’s difficult to look at a high-end object without considering the struggles that have brought it into existence. Fancy things are inexorably linked to some sort of strife.

Similarly, Anthea Hamilton’s take on the objects that surround us isn’t quite what it seems, with backstories and references that aren’t immediately legible in the object itself. Delicately crafted artworks, fine materials, high production value... it’s all a bit misleading. The objects are, for the most part, impotent, incapable of functioning as intended, such as a wavy boot made of walnut and a clay knife. Or they are filled with mixed messages, not communicating what social dictates demand, like a kimonos featuring a cigarette-inspired pattern or an ornate chastity belt made of stainless steel. Incorporating references to the designed objects of the present, as well as the past, Hamilton expands the possibilities of what things could be. She also touches on both the expansive and restrictive aspects of the stuff that surrounds us, as signaled in the exhibition title Lichen! Libido! Chastity!.

The theme of freedom and imprisonment in the exhibition is best articulated with the huge ass that busts out of a brick wall. Project for door (After Gaetano Pesce), 2015, is inspired by Italian designer Gaetano Pesce’s 1972 proposal for an entrance to a Park Avenue skyscraper in Manhattan, in which a monumentally scaled man carefully spreads his butt cheeks. Pesce has long been exploring figurative architecture; though his skyscraper entrance was never built, the idea of having those in the upper echelon enter their building between a man’s spread cheeks gains new relevance with recent talk of “poor doors” that segregate entrances in mixed-income Manhattan buildings by class. In Hamilton’s version, the work is built to fit SculptureCenter, a gigantic human shape emerging from the surface of the building. It doesn’t function as a door, creating only the illusion that it is breaking through the wall. On the interior, all of the gallery walls, including the one that appears to be pierced, have been wallpapered in different brick prints. Somewhat filmy in effect, the wallpapering elicits the sense of facade, and sometimes farce, that runs through the exhibition.

The ass that was presumably previously contained by the wall is set free in the work. The liberating, yet offensive, gesture of revealing what has been concealed is reinforced by the spreading of the cheeks. Elsewhere in the space, a brick suit hangs from the ceiling, sans body, an echo of the architecture and the wallpaper patterns. The suit functions almost as a uniform, merging the implied body with the space, blending in, while the ass breaks out of its architectural constraints.

Clothing is a central part of the exhibition: suit, kimonos, hakama pants, and boots. Some are potentially wearable, made in unique prints designed by Hamilton that show motifs like cigarette paper, bricks, a pattern comprised of the phrase “just kimonos,” a mushroom dish, and daisies. The printed image creates relationships to the things it depicts, the thing that it is, and the body it is meant to house. Velvet hakama pants bear the image of a red-and-black platform boot that reappears in the video on view. Venice. The Kabuki Version, 2013 (which resembles an ambiguous commercial for an unknown product or experience), and finds its counterpart in the sculptural boots. The boots printed on the bottom of the pants refer to what we know is meant to be underneath the image: feet. These displacements and associations recur in many of Hamilton’s works, which navigate the strange literalness often created through the merging of an image and an object.

The boots created for this exhibition are exercises in desire and limitation. Some are wearable, some are questionables, others impossible. A bespoke boot of found 1970s towels could be donned, while a wavy alabaster boot is closer to classic sculpture. One boot is decorated with organic material like mushrooms and lichen. Lichen is neither/or, a life form that defies neat categories. Lichen’s variations are endless, ranging in type, place, kind, quality, color, shape, and form. The adaptability and self-sustainability of lichen contrast with the constricting character of a platform boot. The boot exists within a code of fashion: the wearer makes a statement that may have been original once, but now has become part of a highly encoded system. Furthermore, the boot zips up the leg and contains the body. Conversely, the lichen moves freely, a true individual, creating unique forms.

This constraint continues with the stainless-steel (and rubber) chastity belts, which echo kitchenware and indicate the suffering they deliver to the wearer. In this context, however, they are presented as stylish goods. With an Art Nouveau pattern cut into the surface, they touch on the decorative, venturing into the desirable. Rice cakes, which are already nutritionally light food common in many Asian cuisines and popularized in the West as a diet staple in the 1980s, are rendered in glass. The glass of the rice cakes gleams and shines, solid and inedible now as elegant objects achieving another state of allure. The ceramic tableware—spoons, knives, forks—suggest humorous bodily performances one imagines if they were put to use. Awkward and oddly shaped, the utensils are eccentrically formed to ease the movement of food from hand to mouth. Again, they are attractive objects that posit a readjustment and repositioning of the habitual relationships between the body and things.

The strife referred to in Hamilton’s exhibition is both internal and external to the object. There is allusion to known and unknown events set into motion once desire has been aroused, while the objects themselves are in a sort of crisis. Since the advent of original sin and the discovery of tools, we have surrounded ourselves with things that come with unknowable costs, commodities that can just as easily imprison as liberate.

1 For more information on “poor doors” in New York City, see: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/21/nyregion/poor-door-building-draws-8600-applicants-for-55-rental-units.html?_r=0
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1st Guimard Chastity Belt (Leather Twist), 2015
Stainless steel, galvanized steel, PVC, leather
16 x 7 x 14 inches
(40.6 x 17.8 x 35.6 cm)

2nd Guimard Chastity Belt (Metal Twist), 2015
Stainless steel, galvanized steel, PVC, leather
16 x 7 x 14 inches
(40.6 x 17.8 x 35.6 cm)

Big Pants Chastity Belt, 2015
Rubber, steel
13 x 10 x 12 inches
(33 x 25.4 x 30.5 cm)

Brick Suit, 2010
Wool, lining
22 x 5 x 46 inches
(55.9 x 12.7 x 116.8 cm)

Cigarette Kimono, 2015
Nylon lycra, machete
Medium

Cigarette Pipes, 2015
PVC, vinyl
Dimensions variable

Daisy Hakama Pants, 2015
Velvet, cotton, silk, machete
Medium

Herbed Garden, 2015
Glazed porcelain, stoneware, stainless steel, PVC
Dimensions variable

Holistic Towel Platform Boot A/W, 2015
Cotton towel, leather, PVC, wood, lichen
9 x 4 x 19 inches
(22.9 x 10.2 x 48.26 cm)

Holistic Towel Platform Boot S/S, 2015
Cotton towel, leather, PVC, wood, silk
9 x 4 x 17 ¾ inches
(22.8 x 10.2 x 45.1 cm)

Natural Livin’ Boot, 2015
Leather, lichen, cauliflower, resin, ceramic
9 x 12 x 18 inches
(22.9 x 30.5 x 45.8 cm)

Project for door (After Gaetano Pesce), 2015
Foam, epoxy, vinyl, wood, latex, paint
364 x 72 x 216 inches
(924.6 x 182.9 x 548.6 cm)

Red Heel Boots Hakama Pants, 2015
Velvet, cotton, silk
Medium

Rice Cakes, 2015
Glass, birch, walnut
4 x 4 x ½ inches each
(10.2 x 10.2 x 1.9 cm each)

Wavy Alabaster Boot, 2015
Alabaster
8 ½ x 3 x 23 ¾ inches
(21.6 x 7.6 x 60.3 cm)

Wavy Walnut Boot, 2015
Walnut wood and Burr walnut veneer
9 x 2 ¼ x 23 ¾ inches
(22.9 x 5.7 x 60.3 cm)

Video, sound
14:26 minutes, loop

All works courtesy the artist.