

Becky Bivens
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Wouldn't it Be Nice to Live Like an Art Object?

"Oh, I've known happiness; intense happiness, exquisite happiness, here in the museum, beside these tiles, or across the room from those or, or over there, between these two. It's nice to feel alive. I'd like to live like an art object. Wouldn't it be nice to live like an art object."

These are the words of Jane Castleton, the fictional character played by Andrea Fraser in her 1991 performance "Museum Highlights." A docent at the Philadelphia Museum, Jane idolizes it as the very image of authority and sensuousness. Even the tiles on the wall are an occasion for "exquisite happiness." One cannot fail to notice that she is a thoroughly silly person, and her attempts at authority come across as pretentious. Upon entering the museum's cafeteria, for example, she informs the tour-group that the space "represents the heyday of colonial art in Philadelphia ...and must be regarded as one of the very finest of all American rooms." But the raw way that Jane continuously declares her unfulfilled needs--"*It's nice to feel alive. I'd like to live like an art object. Wouldn't it be nice to live like an art object*"--means that her pretenses are not very convincing. Despite her best efforts, she wears her heart on her sleeve.

What I like about Jane is that she sees her escape from the cycle of pretense and powerlessness in the form of artworks themselves. "I'd like to live like an art object," she muses. It makes me wonder: what if the art object stand for the very thing she lacks? Is it a picture of self-possession, so to speak? Virginia Woolf tells us what that autonomy looks like when she describes a woman with a room of her own. She has "the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what [she] think[s]." Freedom of expression requires getting beyond Jane Castleton's relentless other-directedness. Or, to borrow from Woolf again, it requires us to "escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality."

Are the art objects in this show art objects that we'd like to live like? Are they like Jane Castleton, or are they like a woman in a room of her own?

Jane is a performer, and we live in a "post-Jane age," which is to say that we aren't going to forget that our own expressions are performances of various scripts. The artificiality of gender is common-knowledge, and so too is the knowledge that profound other-directedness like Jane's is a sort of learned femininity. To be sure, it can be a skill just as much as it can be a restriction. Jane is much better at showing us the restrictions. She can't think for herself or grasp at reality directly--all she can manage is pretending to be an image of control. Still, the other side of performing for others, which is what we sometimes call "social skills," what Woolf refers to as a tiring attention to "human beings ... in their relation to each other," what Marxist sometimes call "the reproduction of the means of production," and what feminists sometimes call "the ethics of care"--all of these are foundational to pleasure and survival alike.

The artworks in this show are like Jane because they know they are performing gender, though some of them are louder about it than others. Artifice glows from hot pink pigment; collages announce that they are assembled; the body is thematized as a category open to manipulation through surface, form, and reference. All these artworks know that they are on display, and they know about the techniques of display that history and culture have given them. Some are more like young Jane insofar as they wear their artificiality on their surfaces like makeup on skin. Others are more like an older version of Jane, maybe once she's grown older and become a wisened mom. The older Jane knows that she is directing her expressions, that her communication is responsive and conditioned, but she has gotten pretty good at making her self-consciousness seem less cosmetic and more like her own skin.

And the works in the show definitely provide glimpses of Virginia Woolf in a room of her own, a room for freedom and self-identification, for saying exactly what she thinks. Of course, Woolf's modernist dream of freedom of mind may be a relic of the past. In "A Room of One's Own," she expounds on what it feels like to inhabit the body of a modern scholar strolling along the luscious green lawn of a university quadrangle. Her frame of reference is peculiarly aesthetic, as if she is telling us what it would be like to live like an art object. "The body," she writes, "seemed contained in a miraculous glass cabinet through which no sound could penetrate." To be see-through, to be thoroughly self-identified--yet to be opaque and bounded, to let no sound in. All of these concerns belong to modernist abstraction, with its techniques for turning inward *and* for reflecting on what the conditions of self-expression are. How do we state our desires transparently when our objects of desire seem so thin, like the mere image of power Jane Castleton wants so badly to become? Can our objects of desire have substance? Our latter day formalists--modernists after Jane, if you will--are not quite ready to let go of the search for substance.