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Darken the Beauty Spots

Jillian Ellis

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Abstract

Darken the Beauty Spots uses images gathered from sources such as *Vogue*, *Good Housekeeping*, and action movies to discuss whether images of truly empowered women exist in the media. The project examines six different and specific patterns of imagery found in the media that could potentially be seen as either empowering or repressive. Each pattern occupies its own 35" x 40" canvas that contains between four and eight found images taken out of their original contexts, cropped into fragments, and strategically placed on the canvas in order to create relationships between the images. The work is meant to remain slightly ambiguous, forcing the viewer to use his or her own opinions and experiences to interpret the images. Additionally, all of the titles come directly from advertisements and are meant to allude to the theme of each piece. The first canvas, entitled "Black-lace Thoughts" contains images of women experiencing sexual pleasure. The piece is designed to question whether these images are empowering because they recognize that women are sexual beings, or whether they are objectifying because they reduce the models to nothing more than their sexuality. Following this canvas is a piece that is one of two in this project to discuss female characters in action films. This canvas, entitled "Successories," consists of four film stills from action movies featuring female characters. The physical strength and violent actions of these characters make them appear empowered, however, these female characters are almost always highly sexualized sidekicks who exist to provide a love interest for the male lead character. The third canvas, "Female as a Silken Cat", discusses whether images of women posed with or dressed as wild animals are meant to depict women as wild and free sexual beings or whether such images are actually dehumanizing. The next piece, entitled "I Dreamed I Was a Living Doll", comments on the pressure that is placed on women to achieve the beauty perfection that dolls represent. However, dolls also represent passive and silent behavior, an ideal aligned with society's desire to stifle women's voices. "Fixing Supper Fast as Lightning" is the fifth canvas and the second to discuss female characters in action movies. This canvas focuses on three action films, which feature a female lead who uses her physical strength and intelligence to battle the antagonist. In each film, the female character is allowed this strength because she is a mother fighting to protect or avenge her child. This canvas aims to question whether only mothers can be strong women. The final canvas, entitled "The New Age of Grace", contains images depicting a strong woman's dominance over a weaker, more passive woman. The piece not only discusses whether such images are playing into the sexual fantasies of heterosexual men, but also comments on privilege. If a woman gains power at the expense of another woman, is anyone being truly empowered? While these six canvases represent only a fraction of the problematic images that occur in the media, they will hopefully encourage the viewer to think more critically about the images they are consuming and to question what it means to be truly empowered as a women.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude primarily to Doug Dubois, who over the past four years has acted as my Academic Advisor, my Capstone Advisor, and my professor. Over the course of the past semester, when I was struggling to find what I wanted to say with my work, Doug constantly pushed me to make my thesis complex and interesting; and most importantly, he never lost confidence in me even when I had lost confidence in myself. Secondly, I would like to thank Yasser Aggour, who agreed to be my reader. Yasser's advice to limit the source material from which I was appropriating was a major factor in the creation of my final project. Finally, I would like to thank Laura Heyman, who kept me from panicking by reminding me that this project is the beginning, not the end.

I. Black-lace Thoughts

II. Successories

III. Female as a Silken Cat

IV. I Dreamed I Was a Living Doll

V. Fixing Supper Fast as Lightning

VI. The New Age of Grace

Reflective Essay

Since the beginning of the women's movement in the nineteenth century, women have gained more political and economic rights and exercised more social and sexual freedoms with every passing generation. Some say that the fight is over, that women are now "empowered." But what does it really mean to be empowered? And furthermore, what does empowerment look like? The media is saturated with images of women, so how can we decide which, if any, display true empowerment and which images are constructed for patriarchal consumption? There is a fine line between a woman expressing herself as a sexual being and objectifying herself for the male gaze. In my project *Darken the Beauty Spots*, I employed images of female models or characters that are presented as strong and empowered found in magazines, advertisements, and films from 1940 to the present to question whether these images illustrate true empowerment or whether they are merely an expression of our patriarchal culture that continues to objectify and repress women.

This is not the project that I started out doing at the beginning of my senior year. Initially, I was making photographs with layers of saran wrap over the lens of the camera. The images created with this effect were blurry and unrecognizable and were made with the intent of recognizing that the meaning of a photograph, is based less on content and more on how, when, where, and by whom the image is seen. My goal in this first project was to question what a photograph has the ability to tell us and to challenge the viewer to question his or her own perception of images. Despite working on this project for an entire semester, the concept was never fully formed. I never figured out exactly what

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~~I should have been photographing. The images were aesthetically pleasing, but there was no logic behind the places or objects that I chose to photograph. I was never able to successfully tie the images to the concept, and thus I abandoned this project at the start of the spring semester.~~

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After doing a lot of reading and research, I began to feel that the best way to use photography to talk about photography itself was through appropriation. In this case, the term appropriation refers to the act of recontextualizing found images or objects in order to create new work. Appropriation is a well-established method of art-making. Throughout the course of art history, both student and professional artists have learned and enhanced their practice by borrowing from or copying other artists. One of the first instances of appropriation in modern art occurred around 1912, when Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque began using found objects such as newspaper clippings and oilcloth in their cubist collages (Tate Glossary). In 1917, Marcel Duchamp used the fake name “R. Mutt” to enter a piece entitled *Fountain* in The American Society of Independent Artists Exhibition. For this piece, Duchamp selected a common object (in this case a urinal), and recontextualized it as a piece of art. The piece became a source of great controversy, calling into question whether this “unmentionable object” that is signed and dated like a piece of art could be considered art. The work was hidden during the exhibition, and although the original no longer exists, the piece is regarded as one of the most influential works of art in the 20th century (Schneider, 2003, 220).

Deleted: From there, I worked for a few weeks on manipulating my photographs to discuss what a photograph can and cannot be. During this time, I used Photoshop to take an image that a typical viewer would recognize and label as a photograph and transform that image into something different, something less recognizable. I ended up with a variety of images, some of which were interesting and some of which were not, however I still had nothing that could even be the base of a cohesive body of work.¶

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The Dada movement, which occurred around World War I and with which Marcel Duchamp was associated, continued the appropriation of found objects in art. However, Dada artists did not necessarily want to place found objects on a pedestal and label them as “high” art. Dada was based on the notion of rejecting the prevailing standards of art by creating anti-art cultural works. Such works included collages and 3-D “assemblages” that used common objects to create irrational and meaningless works (Marien, 2010, 242-243).

Beginning in the 1950s, Pop artists such as Andy Warhol appropriated images from popular culture for their work. For one of Warhol’s most well known works, the *Campbell’s Soup Can* series, he appropriates the exact label of a real soup can. By duplicating the image over and over, Warhol alluded to themes of consumerism, commercialism, big business, and middle class values (Warhola.com, 2009). Warhol also appropriated popular photographs of celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. His silkscreen painting *Marilyn Diptych* was made in 1962 shortly after Marilyn Monroe’s death. By duplicating a widely known photograph of Monroe, Warhol makes this iconic celebrity into an infinitely reproducible image (Patterson, 1997).

By the 1970s and 1980s, the term ‘appropriation art’ was widely known and used. Richard Prince began doing appropriation work during this time period. He often cuts up, rephotographs, and rearranges images he finds in magazines to comment on advertising, consumerism, and desire. One of his most famous projects involves s appropriating images of cowboys from

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Marlboro advertisements and removing any text in order to question materialism and the way that masculinity is portrayed as part of the advertising campaign (Marien, 2010, 443).

For Sherrie Levine, the act of appropriation itself has become the subject of some of her work. For her piece *After Walker Evans*, Levine rephotographed Evans' famous portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs. This work's blunt challenge to authorship and to the authenticity and uniqueness of a work of art made it controversial. Working in this fashion, Levine questions the concepts of ownership and reproducibility in photography while also pointing out that the artists who gain the most recognition are predominantly male (Enwezor, 2008, 43).

My first attempt at appropriation was inspired in part by the work of Christopher Williams, an artist whose work aims to sever the meaning of a photograph from the meaning of the subject depicted in the photograph. Williams does not appropriate photographs, however he does appropriate various styles of photography. When he needs to make a photograph of a car lying on its side, he hires a professional photographer who specializes in photographing cars to make the image (Belcove, 2011). Williams' photographs resist interpretation by the viewer in part because the way that he juxtaposes his images often appears random. In fact, all of Williams' work and the way that he displays it for an exhibition is incredibly deliberate, and deliberately difficult for the viewer to comprehend (Wyse, 2008, 93). Williams uses the camera to play with the idea that meaning is not transparent

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in photography. He prefers for his images to provoke more questions than they provide answers (Godfrey, 2007, 366). An image of a vintage Michelin tire seems unrelated to an image of a Vietnamese cultural center, unless you know that “Michelin tires, so near and dear to our fantasies of Paris in the 1960s, were nearly all composed of rubber from Vietnam” (Burton, 2008, 367).

Reading about Christopher Williams helped me to realize that meaning can be obscured in an image without the image itself being obscured or details being blurred out. It is possible to make images in which the subject of the image is not the same as the meaning of the image. I started a new project for which I chose four different years between 1960 and the present, and appropriated lesser-known images by famous art photographers that were made during those specific years. The idea behind this was that photographs are almost always understood within the context of other photographs as a series or body of work. If that is the case, then removing an image from its original context and placing it into a series of apparently unrelated images should change how the viewer interprets the photograph. For each year that I chose, I displayed a sequence of roughly five images, all from different artists, as if they were part of the same series. I hoped that the viewer would automatically search for connections between the images, possibly making up a narrative for the sequence or projecting their own memories onto the images, not realizing that the images were only connected to each other by the year in which they were made. While this work was probably the most conceptually sound work I had done all year, it failed to really say something new and interesting about

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photography and was not deliberate enough in process. The years I had chosen were random and needed to have some significance if I were going to make any kind of statement about photography in relation to history. I decided that I would continue to do appropriation but that the project needed to evolve into something deeper.

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The first step was to limit the source material from which I would be pulling my images. Attempting a project about every style of art photography over the course of photographic history is fairly overwhelming, and I still did not know exactly what my 'thesis statement' was going to be. After much deliberating, I realized that all this time I had been resisting the opportunity to use my work to talk about my passion for feminism. I think I have always been a feminist, at least since I learned about the suffragettes in third or fourth grade, however my passion for feminism and social justice did not fully blossom until my second year of college. Since coming to Syracuse, I have performed in *The Vagina Monologues* three times, I have been an active member and for the past year have served as vice president of the student organization Students Advocating Sexual Safety and Empowerment (SASSE), and I have volunteered at the R.A.P.E. Center. These extracurricular activities have been highly instrumental in shaping my identity and my worldview.

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Finally, a month before my B.F.A. show, I decided that for my thesis project, I would pull shoe advertisements from women's magazines such as *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping* to discuss how backwards our society still is in terms of its views and treatment of women. I chose shoe advertisements

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because of the highly visible evolution of the ads over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Shoe advertisements in the early 1900s stress the price and quality of the product itself with maybe a simple drawing of the shoe (not worn by a model). By the year 2000, many shoe ads no longer had any words included at all (except maybe the brand name) and consisted of full-page color photographs of scantily clad female models with more emphasis on the models' sex appeal than on the shoes themselves. This evolution points to the sexual freedom that women have gained over the past hundred years. However most of the modern ads feature models positioned in ways that make them appear passive, vulnerable, and sexually available. One might expect images of women found in advertisements to appear more empowering over time to reflect the advancement of the women's movement, but instead I saw images of women that were more sexualized and more objectified. I was interested in this visual progression, and while the

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magazines were good source materials, using only shoe advertisements and not really altering the ads in any way was still too obvious, too academic.

From there, I began to think about the concept of empowerment—what it means to be an empowered woman, and how images in the media work to either empower or disempower women. Advertisements sometimes portray their female models as strong, sexy women in hopes that women will buy a product so that they too can become strong and sexy. However, it is important to further analyze such images to discern whether the strong sexiness that the models are embodying is actually a sign of empowerment, or whether such

images are instead encouraging women to become highly sexualized objects that are attractive to heterosexual men. Similarly, many young women today prefer to express their sexuality by dressing in a way that is flattering to their body and makes them feel attractive. This is a concept that I struggle with in my own feminist ideology. On one hand, women now have the freedom to be sexual and to dress however they want to. However, it is difficult to say whether, when a woman dresses herself specifically with the intent of appearing 'sexy', she is truly empowered or whether she is merely responding to a patriarchal society that throughout her entire life has told her that she must look and act a certain way because she is female and must be attractive to men (Valenti, 2010, 62).

Keeping these ideas in mind, I began to search through issues of *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping* dating from 1940 to the present, this time looking for themes or patterns in advertising images that related back to the broader idea of questioning what it means to be empowered, and, what being empowered looks like. I decided to also include content about female characters in films, specifically action movies. Female characters in action movies are portrayed as physically and mentally strong women fighting alongside men and helping to save the world. Offhand, it seems reasonable to guess that these characters represent strong women acting outside of their traditional gender roles. However, once again further analysis proves that such an assumption may be way off base. Recent research conducted by Katy Gilpatric at Kaplan University entitled "Violent Female Action Characters in Contemporary

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American Cinema” concludes that female characters in action films are often written into the script to provide support for the male hero’s goals and act as his love interest. Rarely is a female character the lead in an action movie (Gilpatric, 2010, 734).

Under the overarching theme of empowerment, I came up with six distinct patterns of images found in the media. For each pattern, I collected images from films and advertisements, grabbing screenshots from DVDs and photographing advertisements out of the magazine archives at Syracuse University’s library. Each pattern became its own 35”x40” canvas with between four and eight images per canvas. Using complete images from the advertisements and full frames from the films became too didactic and too distracting. To combat this problem, I experimented with cropping the images and removing all text from the advertisements to make interpreting the images more difficult for the viewer. This strategy, along with the idea of having many images on a single canvas can be attributed to the appropriation work of Richard Prince. Prince often has used a single canvas to contain several images as a single idea, however he often organizes the images in a grid-like fashion (Prince, 1989, 7), which I tried with my work but eventually decided against doing. Because my images come from different sources and consequently are different sizes, making all of the images the same size would have resulted in lower quality images in some cases. Additionally, varying the sizes and spacing of the images gave me the freedom to create disjointed groupings within a single canvas.

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The title of the project itself, *Darken the Beauty Spots*, along with the titles for each individual piece were taken directly from advertising copy found in *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*. Each title alludes to the idea behind the individual canvas while also referring back to the overarching theme of the entire project. Out of all the advertising copy that I read throughout the creation of this project, I chose the title *Darken the Beauty Spots* to represent the project as a whole for several reasons. Found in a 1967 issue of *Vogue*, the phrase itself is encouraging women to make themselves more beautiful, enhance their femininity. But does such an act give women power or is this advertisement just reinforcing traditional gender roles and the patriarchal hierarchy? Additionally, the presence of the word ‘Darken’ refers back to the fact that of the six patterns which I discuss in this project, I personally do not believe that any of them are truly empowering.

I. “Black-lace Thoughts”

This first canvas contains eight images found in issues of *Vogue* dating from 1954 to 2009 that depict women [appearing to be] experiencing sexual pleasure. The female orgasm is still a fairly taboo subject even today, largely due to the stigma against women who are sexually active. When taught about sex, teenage girls often are not even told that sex is supposed to be pleasurable for them, that it is natural for them to desire sex. Our patriarchal society would much rather lead women to believe that they do not enjoy sex, thus encouraging them to remain “pure” until they are ready to have intercourse solely for the purpose of procreation (Valenti, 2010, 196). Because there is

such a stigma against recognizing women as sexual beings, it seems that having images in magazines that depict women enjoying sexual pleasure would be progressive and empowering. However, it also is important to consider whether all of these images of sexy open-mouthed women are objectifying rather than empowering. Are the women in these photographs really in control of how their sexuality is being portrayed? Or are the advertising campaigns simply pumping out images of hypersexualized women that seem geared towards heterosexual men so that real women will believe the product will make them sexually attractive to men? The advertisers are using the models' sex appeal as a tool to sell products, rendering these women little more than objects (Gaddo, 2009).

II. "Successories"

Out of the 300 action films analyzed in the previously mentioned study conducted by Katy Gilpatric, only 37% of the films even had a female action character in them. And out of those female characters, 93% were sidekicks to a male lead character. Not only do these characters operate under the guidance of a male lead, they also exist largely to serve as the male lead's love interest (Gilpatric, 2010, 735). These women are highly sexualized and often clad in very revealing outfits that seem to have little practicality considering the amount of physical activity that these women engage in throughout the film. It seems as though female characters in action movies must be hyper-sexualized in order to counteract the fact that they exhibit the ~~stereotypically~~ masculine characteristics of ~~physical strength and violent tendencies~~. One might expect

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female characters who are physically strong and fighting alongside male characters to break out of their traditional gender role. However, it appears that because these female characters are highly sexualized and forced to play only a supporting role, they remain trapped within the confines of traditional gender stereotypes (Silverstein, 2010). For this canvas, I chose film stills from the movies *The Matrix* (1999), *King Arthur* (2004), *Die Another Day* (2002), and *Get Smart* (2008) that highlight the hyper-sexualized nature of these violent female action characters. The title of this piece was taken from an advertisement for purses in *Vogue* that claimed that accessories are the key to success. Unfortunately, rather than being strong, empowered women, these female characters remain the accessories—helpful to the male lead, but most importantly, pretty to look at.

III. “Female as a Silken Cat”

This piece consists of images of women dressed as or posed with wild animals found in *Vogue* between 1965 and 2001. I decided to use these images because it seems that the advertisements may be trying to convince women that they are wild and free like a cheetah or a wild mustang. This notion, this recognition that women do have a desire to run free, that women do have primal (sexual) needs feels somewhat powerful. Or, are these images subtly telling us that women are animals, not real people at all? It is also very important to note that, aside from the image of Halle Berry from *Die Another Day* in the previous piece and one image in the sixth piece, this canvas contains the only other image of a woman of color found in this project. Images of white

women dominate the fashion and film industries, rendering women of color almost invisible. One of the only ways in which women of color are seen in these settings is through exoticism. They are portrayed as an exotic, hypersexualized, animalistic other that can appeal to men in a way that pure white women cannot (Valenti, 2010, 45).

IV. “I Dreamed I Was a Living Doll”

The advertisement that inspired this canvas and also gave me ~~was found in an~~ issue of *Vogue* from 1954. The ad was for Maidenform Bras and read “I dreamed I was a living doll in my Maidenform Bra.” The image depicted a girl wearing a bra and tutu dancing on stage with a bunch of puppets. I found this advertisement quite striking mostly because I cannot think of any reason why I would ever want to be a living doll. In previous generations, for a woman being called a ‘doll’ by her husband or boyfriend was a compliment. Dolls, after all, represent perfection. However, portraying women as dolls or dolls as better than women seems to be aligned with the desire to stifle women’s voices. A doll is passive and silent, and, in the case of the highly realistic sex dolls known as “Real Dolls” (top left and middle right), willing to have sex at any time (Valenti, 2010, 89).

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V. “Fixing Supper Fast as Lightning”

This canvas is based around three film stills: one from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), one from *Aliens* (1986), and one from *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (2004). All three of these action movies feature strong female lead characters. The norms of our patriarchal society dictate that women should be gentle, nurturing, and

caring, so in theory the female lead characters in these action movies should break that gender stereotype. However, closer examination reveals that these characters are ‘allowed’ to be strong and engage in violent behavior because they are protecting or avenging their child (Kearns, 2010). While it seems reassuring to discover that female characters can be the star of an action film, can a woman really only be strong if she is a mother? These film stills, which were chosen to depict the female action heroine as a maternal figure, are juxtaposed with images taken from advertisements in *Good Housekeeping* from 1945 to 1970. The ads that these images were derived from were geared directly at mothers, saying that good mothers protect their children with a certain product. The title for this piece came from an ad for Chef Boyardee that depicted a little girl saying, “My mom can do anything! She’s fixing supper fast as lightning!”

VI. “The New Age of Grace”

The final piece depicts images of women dominating women taken from advertisements in *Vogue* dating from 1954 to 2008. Each image contains one woman who is establishing power over a second passive woman who is often lying on the ground. In some images there is definitely suggestion of a sexual relationship between the two women, something which in theory seems fairly progressive. LGBT relationships are very rarely depicted in popular culture. However, these images seem to play much more into the realm of acting out the fantasies of some heterosexual men. Again, these women are not in control of how their sexuality is being portrayed in the image, thus turning them into

sex objects controlled by the male gaze (Gaddo, 2009). Additionally, these images speak to the capitalistic inequalities that exist between women in our society. Some privileged women in our society have risen to the top, but often at the expense, whether directly or indirectly, of underprivileged women (McRobbie, 1999, 41). If one woman gains power by exploiting or putting down another woman, is anyone being truly empowered?

One of the questions that people have asked me after seeing this project is, do empowering images of women exist? When differentiating between empowerment and objectification, I agree with Christina Gaddo, who says that the “difference is control: who is doing the controlling and who is being controlled. It’s the difference between someone expressing their sexuality and someone else exploiting it” (Gaddo, 2009). When looking at these images, it is important to remember that fashion models in advertisements and actresses in movies are not the ones controlling how their sexuality is being portrayed. They are being controlled by directors, photographers, and clients, who are doing their best to sell a product in a patriarchal capitalistic society that thrives on degrading and objectifying images of women. This problem, combined with an image’s inherent inability to present a subject as more than its outward appearance, forces me to question whether there is such a thing as an empowering image or an image of an empowered woman. For me, being empowered is about having control and having choices. Being empowered means expressing oneself as and being understood as a complex being. A someone who has been photographed does not have control over how that

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image is viewed, they cannot be understood and respected as a complex person because the image contains only their outward appearance.

While creating this project, I searched for images that I might consider to be empowering or to accurately display empowerment. I failed to find any such images. Because a photograph automatically reduces the subject to their outward appearance, it seems almost impossible to create an image that captures and conveys true empowerment. It is easy to make an image of a woman who appears to be strong or sexy, but appearing strong or sexy is not the same as being empowered. For these reasons, it is important for everyone to view images found in the media through a critical lens. Because images and advertisements are heavily integrated into our society, it would be foolhardy to believe that we can eliminate every image that is objectifying. However, we do have a choice of what images and products we consume. We can still reject images that hypersexualize, exoticize, or dehumanize women.

It took a long time for me to finally arrive at this project. For that reason, and because the subject addressed here is one about which I am very passionate, I do not necessarily consider the project finished. This work is more like the first version, the foundation for other future bodies of work. In creating this project, I have discovered ways to talk about feminism through art, which is something I hope to be doing for a long time.

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Summary

How the media portrays women is critical to defining our perceptions of what it means to be a woman, offering an outward appearance from which we delve inward to establish and create the prototypical female. It is through these images that we construct and invent the norms through which the “empowered woman” is defined. For me, an important part of feminism is questioning this norm. Why do these images exist in this way, why are they so prevalent, and what are they trying to tell us? Are the women in these images really empowered or are they tools of the patriarchy? If a photograph really can only represent the subject’s outward appearance, does that mean that all images inherently objectify their subjects? For this project, entitled *Darken the Beauty Spots*, I used images gathered from sources such as *Vogue*, *Good Housekeeping*, and various action movies to discuss whether images of truly empowered women exist in the media.

Under the overarching theme of empowerment, I came up with six distinct patterns of images found in the media, each of which became its own 35”x40” canvas with between four and eight images per canvas. At first I tried using complete images from the advertisements and full frames from the films, but this method was too didactic and distracting. I began cropping the images, removing all text from the advertisements, and creating disjointed groupings on the canvases to make interpreting the images more difficult for the viewer. The title of the project itself, *Darken the Beauty Spots*, along with the titles for each individual piece were taken directly from ad copy. Each title alludes to

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the idea behind the individual canvas while also referring back to the overarching theme of the entire project.

The first canvas, entitled “Black-lace Thoughts” contains eight images of women [appearing to be] experiencing sexual pleasure. The female orgasm remains a fairly taboo subject, largely due to the stigma against women who are sexually active. Because of this stigma, it seems that publicizing these images that recognize women as sexual beings would be progressive and empowering. However, we must ask why these images are appearing in popular magazines. Are the models in control of their images or are the photographers and directors manipulating them so that they become hypersexualized objects of the male gaze? The piece is designed to question whether these images are empowering because they recognize that women are sexual beings, or whether they are objectifying because they reduce the models to nothing more than their sexuality.

This next canvas, entitled “Successories,” is one of two pieces in this project to discuss female characters in action films. Because these female characters are physically strong and fight alongside male characters, it is easy to assume that they are breaking out of their traditional gender roles. However, the vast majority of female characters in action films act as sidekicks to the male lead. They are written into the script to support the male character and to act as a potential love interest. These characters are almost always hypersexualized in appearance, which perhaps is supposed to counteract the fact that

they exhibit stereotypically masculine characteristics such as physical strength and violent tendencies.

The third canvas, "Female as a Silken Cat", features images of women posed with or dressed as wild animals, perhaps as an attempt to convince women that they are wild and free creatures. This notion, this recognition that women do have a desire to run free, that women do have primal (sexual) needs feels somewhat powerful. But on the other hand, are these images telling us that women are animals, not real people at all? It is also important to note that this canvas contains one of only three images of women of color found in this project. Images of white women dominate the fashion and film industries, rendering women of color almost invisible. One of the only ways in which women of color are seen in these settings is through exoticism. They are portrayed as an exotic, hyper-sexualized, animalistic other that can appeal to men in a way that pure white women cannot.

The next piece, entitled "I Dreamed I Was a Living Doll", comments on the pressure that is placed on women to achieve the beauty and perfection that dolls represent. An advertisement for Maidenform Bras inspired this canvas and its title. The ad pictured a girl dancing on stage surrounded by puppets with the caption "I dreamed I was a living doll in my Maidenform Bra." In previous generations, for a woman, being called a 'doll' by her husband or boyfriend was a compliment. Dolls, after all represent perfection. However, dolls also represent passive, silent behavior and portraying women

as dolls or dolls as better than women seems to be aligned with society's desire to stifle women's voices.

“Fixing Supper Fast as Lightning” is the fifth canvas and the second to discuss female characters in action movies. This canvas focuses on three action films, which feature a female lead who uses her physical strength and intelligence to battle the antagonist. The norms of our patriarchal society dictate that women should be gentle, nurturing, and caring, so in theory the female lead characters in these action movies should break that gender stereotype. However, closer examination reveals that these characters are ‘allowed’ to be strong and engage in violent behavior because they are protecting or avenging their child. The film stills are accompanied by images from advertisements encouraging mothers to protect their children (by using a specific product). This juxtaposition is meant to question whether a woman can really only be strong if she is a mother.

The final canvas, entitled “The New Age of Grace”, contains images depicting a strong woman's dominance over a weaker, more passive woman. Some of the images suggest a sexual relationship between the two models, which in theory may seem progressive. However, these images seem much more like attempts to fulfill a stereotypical heterosexual male fantasy. Again, these women are not in control of how their sexuality is being portrayed in the image, thus turning them into sex objects controlled by the male gaze. The piece not only discusses whether such images are playing into these fantasies, but also comments on privilege. Some women in our society have risen to the

top, but how many have done so by directly or indirectly exploiting other women? If a woman gains power at the expense of or by putting down another woman, is anyone being truly empowered?

While creating this project, I searched for images that I might consider to be empowering or to accurately display empowerment. I failed to find any such images. Because a photograph automatically reduces the subject to their outward appearance, it seems almost impossible to create an image that captures and conveys true empowerment. It is easy to make an image of a woman who appears to be strong or sexy, but appearing strong or sexy is not the same as being empowered. For these reasons, it is important for everyone to view images found in the media through a critical lens. Although these six canvases represent only a fraction of the problematic images that occur in the media, they will hopefully encourage the viewer to think more critically about the images they are consuming and to question what it means to be truly empowered, and whether we really know what that actually looks like. Or perhaps most importantly, does a photograph even have the capability to express empowerment or does the one-dimensional nature of an image render it incapable of anything more than appearance-based objectification?