2017

Sub for More

Chelsea Lee

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SUB FOR MORE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Richmond, Virginia
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To Grace for showing me her boobs and so much more.
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And to Rebecca, for your vibrant love. We’ll all meet back up on the moon.
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Abstract

SUB FOR MORE

By Chelsea Lee, M.F.A

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017
Major Director: Andrèa Keys Connell Professor, Craft/Material Studies

This written thesis unpacks the thoughts and motivations behind the decisions I have made in my artistic practice that have ultimately culminated in my M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition: SUB FOR MORE. By merging images of my own work as well as internet sourced images of the culture that drives my work, I have created a platform to begin to understand my experience during graduate school. This text examines and explores my belief in the inherent power in pop culture, my obsession with fame, celebrity, and my self-identity as a participant in current pop-culture.
I've looked at her face a lot, I know it as intimately as my face. After pouring over portraits of her likeness day in and day out. Permanently capturing it in clay. Testing its recognizability in fabric. After spending hours drawing, photoshop collaging it, and adorning the artifacts of my life in her portrait, I could close my eyes and still see the subtle curves and details that form her image. The afterburn of her form. As I was enshrining portraits of her in clay, I would go to sleep and see her face. Her image seems to be etched behind my eyes. My obsession with her seeping into my artwork, my artwork becoming a way to feed my fixation. Blurring the line between obsession and unconscious becoming. Kim Kardashian is said to have one of the most symmetrical faces of any female celebrity. Symmetry is perceived as beauty, but it is also reveals a lack of variation or points of interest. The symmetricality of her face makes it exceedingly difficult to sculpt a recognizable portrait of her. How do you create a likeness of someone who is on a mathematical level, perfect?

The more I attempted to compete with this perfection, the more I realized, this perfection and symmetry is how she derives her power. She appeals to the part inside all of us that strives for perfection. In some way, everyone wants to be perfect. Whether we admit it to ourselves or not, we all want to feel what it’s like to be a
perfect version of our species, like the versions of people we see in the media, despite the fact we know it isn’t real. Being a fan of someone like Kim Kardashian has a lot to do with trying that perfection or myth, on. Imagining how it would feel to be that glamorous and physically exquisite. I know most of it is artificial. I know that Kim Kardashian’s exterior beauty doesn’t translate to actual perfection. Perfection is as much of a myth as celebrity. But for now I’m buying it.

I embrace the fact that I am susceptible to the specific myth and narrative of reality TV. I want to believe reality stars are authentic. I want to believe in the genius of Kanye West as much as I want to believe Kim Kardashian’s ass is real. I want to believe in the fantasy that I can be wonderful, fully and uncompromisingly perfect, but I know it’s a lie I’ve told myself so much that it only feels real. Despite this, when I roll over in bed, and see the way the sheet clings to the curve of my hip, I see her in myself, and I crave the lie.

WHY HER?

I’ve been asked a lot why I love Kim Kardashian so much. The truth is, I don’t really, not really. I like her because I know that others do not. My fierce contrarianism spurs me to recklessly enjoy the things that others despise. This may seem childish but it’s a strategy I’ve found it has worked in my favor. By embracing things that others hate, I feel like they become all mine. I’m left feeling like I’m one of the few, a small and elite team of individuals who truly understand. Of course this is an exaggeration. The amount of followers on Kardashian’s social media proves I’m not the only member on the pro team, but in many of my daily conversations it seems like I’m the only one who gets it. All this resistance only adds to my dedication. It may seem like a crazy thing to say but I see Kim Kardashian as the underdog. Like Kim needs me to be on her side, like I can help quell some of the hate by being a fan.
WHY JUST HER?

I love celebrities, but there is a certain type I’m into most. A survivor, a bit of mess, with a sex appeal I don’t often admit out loud I want. I’m looking for all of that, and I want to share it. Some of the celebs I’m most drawn to are those that help me to connect with other people.

In my previous work I’ve used the images and identities of a wider range of celebrities. Miley Cyrus, Justin Bieber, and Kim Kardashian are celebrities that have enabled me to foster actual relationships in my life. These relationships were fostered in part with the help of a shared interest in a particular celebrity.

Miley Cyrus will forever be a symbol of the connection I feel to three friends I attended her concert with in Minneapolis. It was the Bangerz tour in 2014. The set was created by Es Devlin, and featured a huge head of Cyrus with a huge pink slide as the tongue. It was life altering. We now send images of Miley and follow Miley news through group texts with each other. Even if we are unable to see each other in real life, I know I can always send an image of Miley and feel a connection to them. It’s similar to the way I feel connected with Miley herself. Bangers 4 Life. Bangers 4 KFC.

Justin Bieber represents my relationship with Kelli Sinner. We were in the audience of a documentary/fan movie together shortly after my graduation from the BFA program at Minnesota State University Moorhead while she was my professor for four years. Going to see that movie together represented a transition for us from a teacher-student relationship enabling us to cross the threshold into friendship. Every now and again we share email links to Bieber interviews and news keeping up a connection that is very important to me.

1 Devlin, Es MILEY CYRUS BANGERZ WORLD ARENA TOUR Director / Video Content Director: Diane Martel Choreographers: Rich and Tone Tauega
I loved utilizing my obsession with these celebrities in my work, but my ideas of fame and celebrity kept getting muddled with the wide range of famous people I was pulling from. For this particular body of work, I decided to focus solely on Kim in order to gain the clarity I was looking for. Kim Kardashian is the most recognizable, the most well known, and to be honest the one I see the most of myself in.
KIM THE MIMIC

“Well, a bear can juggle and stand on a ball and he’s talented, but he’s not famous. Do you know what I mean?” Kim Kardashian.

For Kardashian being famous is a skill and talent. Her ability to retain relevance in a climate of over saturation fascinates me. She takes control of her image with the use of social media. She is a master of Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter, maintaining relevance and adding to the glut of imagery for our consumption.

I often wonder what she looks like in real life. Paper Magazine’s Amanda Fortini described her as having “doll like” small features. Tiny ears and small almost childlike hands. I would give anything to see those hands.

“Unlike most people, she looks exactly the same in person as she does in photographs or on television, with one exception: she is smaller than she appears in images, with tiny, almost doll-like ears and feet and hands. Everything else about her seems amplified, tumescent. Her black hair is thicker than any you have ever seen, her lips fuller, her giant Bambi-eyes larger, their whites whiter, and the lashes that frame them longer. If some of this is the result of artificial enhancement -- does anyone else have eyelashes that resemble miniature feather dusters? -- none of it seems obviously ersatz. But that’s not to say it looks real, either. She is like a beautiful anime character.” Fortini.

Her perfection makes her into a living doll, and she allows us to play with her. In Weaving Women and Cybernetics Sadie Plant unpacks her theory of the how women can create power through “the very possibility of mimesis, the one who weaves her own disguise.” Plant.

After reading this essay I began to investigate the celebrity of Kim Kardashian and the Kardashian empire through the lens of mimicry as power. Demonstrating the possibility for celebrities like Kardashian to gain worth and power as the creators of their own image, becoming what we want them to be.

As an artist who uses the image of Kim Kardashian and researches the ideas behind celebrity, fan culture, and obsession I am deeply interested in Plant’s concepts of mimesis as a way to create power. My use of the image of a woman that many regard as vapid, worthless and nothing more than a sex object is not meant to continue or glorify problematic stereotypes. I am looking to get to larger issues with my references to Kardashian and the type of celebrity she represents.

Kim Kardashian is in control. She allows herself to be what we want her to be. Often becoming simultaneously different things to different people. She is the embodiment of mimic because she is constantly evolving. Her strength is an ability to adapt, constantly changing and evolving her image to meet our needs. In the creation of her continued and growing fame since 2007 she embodies mimesis as power.

She can be Marilyn Monroe or Audrey Hepburn allowing us to translate her beauty into something timeless, instantly iconic. She can be Paris Hilton’s best friend, a socialite, and party girl. Kim Kardashian is our naughty indulgence. She is the stand in for our desires to be rich, carefree, and popular while simultaneously being a scapegoat for our our desire to hate those who are.
She’s been the celebrity face of selfies. Her creation of two entire books of self made images, Kim Kardashian West: Selfish and Kim Kardashian West: Selfish, More Me! Her short marriage to basketball player Kris Humphries, and her pregnancy weight gain have made her a national joke. Finding a flaw in her perfection vindicates the individuals who hate her. The imperfection allow us to make jokes at her expense. Despite the cruelty of these jokes, I know she’s laughing along. Kim Kardashian knows jokes like these only add to her continued notoriety.

Kim Kardashian’s real power is her willingness to be hated, really truly hated by strangers. Allowing herself to be the vessel we can pour our anger, jealousy, and misogyny into. This is an incredible strategy because it is easier to let people hate you than it is to make them like you. Kardashian is well aware of the hatred and controversy surrounding her image. Yet she is able to present herself as being clueless enough to rise above it. All of this has fueled her ability to translate fame into a recognizable brand.
She may have started as a Carl's Junior spokeswoman, and Sketchers commercial fodder, but the Kardashians now have perfumes, clothing lines for adults and children, boutique locations in several major cities, and apps and websites with monthly subscription prices.

She has been able to maintain a celebrity built on sex tape scandal and directly translate that into profit. She has even made her own life into one of the most profitable mobile games of all time. The game made $85 million in the first three weeks it was released. Glu Mobile chief executive Niccolo De Masi explained “Getting her 20, 30 million Instagram, Twitter and Facebook followers to be able to effectively interact with her world whenever they want as opposed to just watch her show is something that obviously has had a tremendous appeal. People feel they can participate in Kim’s world whenever they want.” Her Kimoji app has been downloaded more than half a million times at two dollars a pop. It has made $1.7 million since its December 2015 release.  

Impressive numbers for someone who is often described as being famous for being famous. Kim Kardashian remains interesting to me because she continues to be one of the most famous people in the world. She is freakishly beautiful. Her image is hard to avoid. She seems to be able to stay famous for way longer then anyone would have believed. It’s fairly amazing. She is so controversial, but it seems that people either hate her so so much, or love her, worshipping her and copying every move she makes. Will Kim Kardashian ever stop being fascinating? I don’t think so.

HOW DID I GET HERE?

There was a month in undergrad, maybe my junior year when I got my first smartphone, a Blackberry and a new MacBook pro from the MSUM book store. It came with an ipod Touch, the newest gadget from Apple at the time. I could often be seen (hilariously I thought) using both devices at the same time. My friends were amused, but horrified. What had I become? They never realized this is who I was the whole time. I dubbed that year “the year of the douchebag.” I had decided that I no longer wanted to feel ashamed of the things I was interested in. I was going to dive glutinously into the the gold coin pit of excess, of trash tv, trash movies, trash magazines, mass consumption, and social media.

The year of the douchebag never really ended. Now I try to be very honest about liking bad things. Do I actually watch the Kardashians? Yes. Did I just buy that OK! Magazine? Well, it’s a steal at $2.99 so yes. I can’t stand people who feel like they need to be constantly telling me how above it they are, so I make sure to be the opposite of that, focussing instead on the guilty pleasures of life. Announcing them to the world in order to make them no longer guilty.

WHO DO I THINK I AM?

This attitude brought me to the themes I’ve been exploring within my work. My BFA thesis show was comprised of portraits of the top ten active and followed Twitter celebrities at the time (fall 2010). Each was in the style of a Wedgwood portrait medallion but on a larger scale. The portraits were made from profile pictures of each celebrity Twitter account and were screen-printed with black slip to indicate the flatness of digital imagery. The porcelain birds were meant to represent tweets and were scattered around the portraits.

This installation helped me to jell some of my ideas around celebrity while maintaining a connection to the history of clay. After graduation I started making pieces in fabric for an alumni show at MSUM. I’ve always been interested in mediums other than ceramics and was surrounded by donated fabric at local museum I worked at at the time. With it I recreated images from the Vanity Fair spread of Kim and Kanye wedding pictures as well as their first baby pictures of their child North West. I was interested in the media attention the images were getting and the way people were recreating the images as parody. It was this work that led me to Virginia Commonwealth University. I wanted a graduate program where I could work in an interdisciplinary way and was correct in my assumption that the Craft/Material Studies department at VCU would be a place to learn and branch out into different mediums and styles of making.
My first year at VCU was a time for me to explore a variety of ideas and mediums. From masks based on internet meme imagery to a bust of now president, Donald Trump’s bloated orange head, complete with interchangeable toupees.

I was honestly taken aback by the lack of recognition of meme images and celebrities I considered popular culture from those around me at VCU. I’ve been challenged not only to examine where my real passions lie, but also to legitimize my use of popular culture figures. After focusing my attention on fan culture and the Kardashian/West’s I was able to build a more coherent body of work.
Our obsession with the Kardashians is like picking a scab because it feels good, not caring that it keeps the wound open and unhealed. These obsessive feelings led me to create a portrait of her as an inanimate object you would have, and sleep with in your home. It is made to measurements taken from websites dedicated to compiling personal information about celebrities. This first pillow I made had a fully embroidered face.

The feedback it received seemed to focus on recognition more than I wanted so with the second installment I decided to use a digitally printed.

This small room filled with these Kim objects created a surreal environment for the pillow to inhabit. It’s in many ways a shrine, an embodiment of my and our fascination with a type of celebrity that is created from a constant flow of information. We create Kim Kardashian with our interest, disdain, worship, but mainly by creating an unending need to see more. It’s a curiosity fueled by an almost unwanted fascination. Kim Kardashian is to most people more of a recognizable brand than an actually human being.
Whether you want to admit her influence on your life or not I believe she is a huge part of our culture. I consider her one of our largest national exports. She is the Marilyn Monroe of our time. A recognizable symbol of American culture and celebrity culture. With this piece I aimed to portray her as a commodity while at the same time have her take up space in our world to remind us of her humanity. This installation was one of two that became my candidacy show.

The other half is a four by eight foot room housing three dimensional ceramic tiles depicting Kim Kardashian’s butt. I knew I could use these press molded tiles of Kim Kardashian’s butt to create a feeling of overwhelming over-saturation. I feel the room represented the pull and influence of Kim Kardashian. You’re at the same time drawn to stand in the room but timid to enter. It’s sexually tantalizing, embarrassing, and funny, which is much what it feels like to be a “fan” of the Kardashian brand.
I'M A FAN

In the summer between my first and second year of graduate school I began a Youtube channel depicting the unboxing of porcelain shoes that mimic Yeezy 350 Boost sneakers, and makeup tutorials of Kylie Jenner Lip Kits also made in porcelain. I'm fascinated by the language and culture these internet communities create, by becoming part of the conversation I am able to research in a more comprehensive way than in my previous work. In many ways the creation of these products shows how deep the desire to have a piece of the celebrity can go. I wanted these products and a connection to the fame they represent so badly, that I made them by hand.

Fig. 13
This work has taken me fully out of the closet as I declare myself a fan. With its creation I’ve become a small part of the culture I’m interested in, becoming part of the dialogue as a way to continue my research and find my place in it more thoroughly. I continued this work with a Kardashian fan art Instagram. Fan pages like this follow the moves and details of celebrities lives. I love how indulgent these pages are, I follow many of them and genuinely enjoy the daily shots of Kardashian/Jenner sisters on their way to and from workouts, parties, kids birthdays, and out of Starbucks across the world. That indulgence in ‘low culture’ or populous desire is what I’m trying to achieve in my own work.

With that in mind I began a page of drawings of images of the Kardashian’s that captivate me. I believe that drawings are the most elemental way of creating something that you want, of having something or someone you can’t have or be by creating it yourself.

The page evolved as I became more confident in this new medium. What started as tame mimicry of the ran sites I look at turned into something more saturated with my personality and point of view.
Of course I’m not the only artist using Instagram. In Richard Prince’s “New Portraits” series, he finds photographs from different accounts on Instagram leaving a comment to insert himself into the dialogue. Prince screenshots the image and prints them on large-scale canvases pulling the interactions from the internet to a gallery setting. This series has created controversy, many feel that he is stealing images while others take offense to the often sexually direct comments he leaves on the posts. I see the work as an interesting way to become part of world that is clearly captivating for Prince. I think his work has a biting humor and stance of taking Instagram out of context in order to recontextualize it and bring to our attention the way we interact and communicate on the internet.
The videos that populate my Youtube channel have also grown and changed as I’ve added more content. I began the channel with video mimicking an unboxing of a pair of Yeezy 350 Boosts by Adidas. In my interpretation the shoes were made entirely of porcelain. They videos have morphed since then, getting more abstract creating more of a feeling then a copy catting of Youtube videos I’m consuming.
This video and internet medium based work has been inspired by Signe Pierce. Her practice ranges widely from performance, video, gifs and other web based art. Her most well known work is a short film collaboration with Alli Coates. In American Reflexxx, Pierce is shown in a reflective mask, barely there dress and bright yellow high heels. She walks down a crowded sidewalk in Myrtle Beach, inciting a crowd that follows her and becomes increasingly dangerous until she is pushed down from behind.

“I had done a few “reality performances” before so I expected some gawking, but the violence was startling.” Pierce,

Pierce’s visual language is similar to that of my most recent videos. I too am drawn to creating a surreal world of vivid colors with almost manic quick cuts and psychedelic imagery. There is an absence of pretension to this internet based art that creates another layer of accessibility. A layer I am adding to my the pop culture themes and craft mediums in my work.

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The feeling of not being good enough is suffocating. The reality of not being one of the great minds of our generation or as wonderful as the people we see in media is hard to swallow. Somehow you find yourself wholly and completely average, it is defining. I know I feel this because of tv, and the media I consume. America and it’s culture tell us that we can be anything. We are the most special. It’s all a lie. But it’s the kind of lie I’m desperate to believe.

I cling to this culture, this fluff, and as it hits the spaces between my fingers I realize it’s nothing. Just as much as I am. Nothing. Never good enough. I teeter between this feeling and the possibility that I’m actually the best. That I could be the greatest ever. And I’m hit with the knowledge that this must be what it’s like to be Kanye West and Kim Kardashian.
“Hope is such a constant companion” is a lyric from Patient Zero off Aimee Mann’s latest album. As I finished my thesis installation and as I’m finishing this paper I’ve been listening to that song on a loop.

“In the hills where hope is such a constant companion. Life is grand and wouldn’t you like to have it go as planned. Doesn’t count as a job well done. The suckers pay and pay. You paid your respects like a ransom to a moment that was doomed from the start.”

Each of these works is made in dedication to that feeling. Hope as a constant companion, the need to believe that we can always be better. That we could be the best. I need to not care, to fill my head with media, distract, and then I care so much it’s crippling. This popular culture gives me all of this, everything I need as well as the things I definitely don’t need.

These ceramic amplifiers are sounding chambers for audio I’ve mashed together.

I decided to record the vocals of the entire Pablo album by Kanye West. It’s embarrassing, a little sad, and pretty funny. If you listen to the entire piece as it comes out of the three headed ceramic amplifier you can hear my voice wavering, a few coughs and some truly bad rapping.

From another speaker the first episode of the Keeping up with the Kardashian’s plays followed by an episode from the current season entitled Paris that details the robbery that occurred during 2016 Paris Fashion week. The audio from these episodes plays on a loop. I love the way these episodes capture the movement of time.

The third sculpture plays a beat I made with spliced audio of clips of Kim crying with clips of me laughing from one of my youtube videos. The sound from these pieces is meant to fill the space with action and noise activating it in ways I’m always driving to create with my work. The are three projected videos in the space that also add to movement and action.

The largest is one refer to as mega video. In it we travel from screen captured images as and unseen person directs their mouse through Kim Kardashian’s Instagram and website. They click of videos of my Youtube channel and scroll through comments on my Kardashian fan Instagram. As they do text to speech voices read the captions and comments as the mouse hovers over the Instagram pages.

In another video I call Two Kim’s I’m seen in my long Kim Kardashian black wig trying to pose the way she does. To become her in an attempt to be better. To be perfect. The image is distorted and mirrored, giving way to the beauty of symmetry and oddness of imperfection.
The third video plays from a ceramic tube placed on the floor. It shows my transformation into Kim uncut. Fifty minutes of makeup that end with me dawning the same black wig and posing for the camera for quite some time before taking it off, wiping off my face and stepping away from the camera.
Sub for More is a culmination of all these influences and past work. This thesis installation stems from my work for the Instagram and Youtube pages that have been evolving this year. This piece of the installation is a cell phone charging station situated at the one end of the created space. It’s nestled next to the pink drawings of the fan Instagram wallpapering a far corner.

I make work in dedication to the things I want to believe in. I want to believe that the modern pop culture isn’t completely harmful, I want to believe that Kanye is a genius and I want to believe that Kim Kardashian’s ass is real. Hope is such a constant companion. Belief is the next step. I want to believe that hope can become real.
Bibliography

Devlin, Es MILEY CYRUS BANGERZ WORLD ARENA TOUR Director / Video Content Director: Diane Martel Choreographers: Rich and Tone Taluega


Fortini Amanda NO FILTER: AN AFTERNOON WITH KIM KARDASHIAN 11/12/14 at 02:30PM


Prince, Richard, http://www.richardprince.com/exhibitions/new-portraits_1/#/detail/14/


Vita

Education
Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, Degree Candidate, Anticipated completion 2017

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Minnesota State University Moorhead Minnesota

Work Experience
Graduate Assistantship with Virginia Commonwealth University and Visual Art Center of Richmond spring semester 2017

Graduate Teaching Assistant to Blair Clemo, Advanced Wheel throwing spring and fall semesters 2016

Senior Visitors Services Associate & Teaching Artist, Plains Art Museum, 2010-2015

Instructor of Ceramics Class for the College for Kids Summer Camp, Minnesota State University Moorhead, – 2011-2012

Colloquium assistant, Minnesota State University Moorhead – 2009-2010

Ceramic Studio Assistant, Minnesota State University Moorhead -2007-2010

Archivist for the MSUM Slide Library, Minnesota State University Moorhead -2009-2010

Exhibitions
2016
/Material, FAB Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

2016
Virginia Commonwealth University, Craft/Material Studies Candidacy Exhibition, Artspace, Richmond, Virginia

2016
Art on the Plains, Plains Art Museum, Fargo, North Dakota
2015
This Just In: First Year MFA Students The Depot, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

2014
MSUM Alumni Exhibition: New Works Minnesota State University Moorhead, Moorhead, Minnesota

Happy Birthday, James Rosenquist! Plains Art Museum, Fargo, North Dakota

Red River Reciprocity: Contemporary Ceramics in Minnesota and North Dakota Plains Art Museum, Fargo, North Dakota

FMVA Annual Constraint Show Hjemkomst Center, Moorhead, Minnesota

2013
Meet the Artist: An Exhibition by the Museum’s Teaching Artists Plains Art Museum, Fargo, North Dakota

FMVA Annual Constraint Show North Dakota State University Renaissance Hall, Fargo, North Dakota

FMVA Annual Big Show Hjemkomst Center, Moorhead, Minnesota

Plains Art Museum Annual Spring Gala Auction Fargo, North Dakota

2012
Plains Art Museum annual Spring Gala Auction Fargo, North Dakota