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Cute As A Button

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CUTE AS A BUTTON

A Thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

CUTE AS A BUTTON

By Marta Rosalyn Finkelstein, MFA.

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015.

Major Director: Stephen Vitiello
Professor, Kinetic Imaging

Cute As A Button explores powerlessness, vulnerability, illness and addiction all wrapped up in tender buttons and a cute, cuddly creature. Using animation, sculpture, sound and an intimate space, I surround the viewer in a saccharine nightmare, one that references the dark underbelly of the cute and the sweet. The visual and aural elements are representative of the psychological and emotional states of powerlessness, which are overcome by the act of making and exploring a medium over which I can have complete control.
Chapter 1

Description

*Cute as a Button* is an immersive installation that includes sculpture, sound, and moving image. As the viewer enters a small room, they are surrounded by what looks like skin, stretched by a network of thread. Scattered on the ground and on the walls, the viewer sees giant red buttons, which are cracked and crumbling from inside. Above the viewer is a network of blue thread that connects clusters of paper buttons. The room smells of saccharine sweetness, and at a closer glance, the buttons are crumbling with sugar.

A low tone rumbles throughout the room: at some moments, it fluctuates from a purr that moves from the front of the room towards the back, to entice the viewer to move deeper into the space. The sound changes to a field recording of forest, and you see a cute creature on screen at the back of the room. As the animation progresses, the sound changes into a
bubbling frenzy: at some moments, it sounds like screaming, some moments it sounds like birds chirping.

Behind the viewer in the left corner is a mound of glowing fur, stretched to the walls and floor by buttons. In the middle of the mound, there is a transparent LCD screen framed by what looks like fleshy buttons and bits of fingers. On screen there is a video of a bruised hand petting the same fur. But when the image on the screen is white, you can peer through to an object behind the screen. The viewer can see the same creature from the animation tied up with blue thread, staring at them through the screen (figure 2).
Each visual and aural decision is created to express a personal power struggle that comes from both my interior and my exterior. A primary source of disempowerment comes directly from under my skin and in my cells. I have Sjögren's syndrome and fibromyalgia, two inflammatory diseases that cause chronic pain and fatigue. There is no known cure, and little research is being done on the causes of these diseases. Fibromyalgia is an inflammation of the joints and soft tissue. Sjögren's is a type of autoimmune disease that causes the immune system to be overactive, causing the system’s antibodies to confuse healthy connective tissue with pathogens. The antibodies attack connective tissue, which in my personal experience feels like the entire surface of my skin is bruised. During a flare-up, it is as if my skin has been pinched and pulled for hours and is left with that dull, tender burning sensation. In addition, my energy level is always below normal, fatigue is constant and lies deep in my muscles. This type of pain is a driving force behind the decision to coat the entire room in a pinkish-beige and add additional layers of blue, purple and red around the edges. The buttons and thread look as if they are stretching the room’s ‘skin.’ The buttons themselves are a personal symbol for these features that are driving this struggle with my own body. They also reference elements in my system and in my environment that cause flare-ups. Not only do the buttons reference the cells themselves, but also what fuels the cells to run rampant. Sugar, in my experience, is the single most powerful substance that aggravates a flare-up. It is basically a poison for my system; it gets into my blood and slowly makes everything ache. Yet it is a substance that is lurking in 80% of the American food market and is incredibly addictive, just as addictive as cocaine (Lustig).

The character in the animation and installation is a self-portrait. Not only does she go through a physical transformation as her eyes become darker and more fatigued, she looses her
power both in her stance and immediately when she looses her teeth (figure 4). She is attracted, and subsequently addicted, to buttons. In addition to her action referencing the physical disempowerment I feel from within my body, her aesthetic explores emotional and psychological disempowerment. She is small, she is non-threatening, and she is powerless. This is effectively a deep fear that runs throughout my mind as I battle the stereotypes of femininity. She is rendered using an exaggeration of the cute aesthetic. In the next chapter, will argue that cuteness is the most effective visual style for me to articulate concepts of power and control.
Chapter 2
The Animated Narrative: Playing out the Conditions of Cuteness

“Cuteness is a way of aestheticizing powerlessness. It hinges on a sentimental attitude toward the diminutive and/or weak, which is why cute objects—formally simple or noncomplex, and deeply associated with the infantile, the feminine, and the unthreatening—get even cuter when perceived as injured or disabled. So there’s a sadistic side to this tender emotion” (Jasper).

The narrative is told through an anthropomorphized beaver that is physically and emotionally broken down by buttons. Her aesthetic references that of cuteness: her paws are puffy like a newborn child’s, her eyes are enlarged and humanoid, and she appears soft and squishy to the eye. However, unlike the stereotypical cute object, this animal is not simplified in its form and detail: as Sianne Ngai writes, “Cuteness is a response to the ‘unformed’ look of infants, the amorphous and bloblike, as opposed to the articulated or well-defined” (Ngai, 30). Indeed, cute things tend to have less detail and softened edges, from the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man to Hello Kitty. However, I wanted to experiment with the rendering of this cute animal. What if I choose to over-articulate her infantile details in a somewhat realistic rendering, pushing the cute characteristics over the line? I hope to shed light on the close relationship between the cute and the grotesque.

Truly, cuteness creates a confusing set of dissonant emotions. We want to care for and nurture cute things, but we also want to squeeze them, maybe even a little too hard. Cute things are cuter when they are even more powerless. Take the kitty Internet sensation, Lil Bub
(figure 3). She was deemed the world’s cutest cat in 2013. She has no teeth, has trouble walking on her own because of stubby legs caused by dwarfism, and cannot survive on her own. Case in point: cute things are cuter when we see them as weaker. Maybe it’s a touch of Schadenfreude, or perhaps it’s the mere fact we find pleasure in feeling more powerful. While I would like to think humanity would only want to help the helpless, it is a dark, frightening fact of human nature we are much more complex creatures. A study done by Rebecca Dryer and Oriana Aragon of Yale University investigate the aggressive reaction to cuteness by showing a set of images to subjects and testing how many bubbles on a sheet of bubble wrap were popped. Images of cute animals caused much more popping than images of funny or neutral animals. Some argue this aggression may be a frustration with seeing images on a screen and not being able touch or interact with it (Pappas).

Figure 4

The animated beaver plays out this condition of cuteness. Throughout the animation, she is rendered more and more powerless through the consumption of other cute objects:
in this case, buttons. She starts out healthy and happy, surrounded by white buttons. She reaches down, sniffs one, and appears to enjoy the experience. She then bites down on a button, and suddenly its teeth melt and drip out of its mouth. Taking a few seconds to realize what happened, she screams in horror, toothless (figure 4). Later, we see her staring at the same button, sniffing it again.

Figure 5
With no teeth to chew, she rolls out her giant tongue and licks the button until it disintegrates (figure 5). Suddenly, all the other buttons scattered in the scene rush towards the beaver and completely surround her. Almost stupefied, the beaver tries to brush them away, and then it abruptly coughs up a red button that slides across the ground. After an animated sequence of crumbling and boiling buttons, we see the beaver once more, haggard, coughing up red button after red button. Her eyes are sickly, completely purple and exhausted (figure 6).

Figure 6
Through these set of actions, I create a set of questions for the viewer: Does the beaver become cuter when it is toothless, tired and unable to stand? Do you want to cuddle it until it is well again, or do you feel the urge to giggle at its misfortune? Perhaps it is both?
“The asymmetry of power that cuteness revolves around is another compelling reminder of how aesthetic categories register social conflict. There can be no experience of any person or object as cute that does not somehow call up the subject’s sense of power over those who are less powerful. But, as Lori Merish underscores, the fact that the cute object seems capable of making an affective demand on the subject—a demand for care that the subject is culturally as well as biologically compelled to fulfill—is already a sign that “cute” does not just denote a static power differential, but rather a dynamic and complex power struggle.” (Jasper).

While we seem to feel power over those things smaller and weaker than we are, is it those things that have power over us? We feel uncontrollable urges to give cute things care and attention. From our pets to our advertisements, we almost feel a need to care, and perhaps the aggression toward cute objects is seeded in the frustration that we subconsciously know we are being controlled.

A method of further expressing this idea of power and control can be found in symbolic representations in the buttons. I first investigate the colloquialism “Cute as a button,” which entered common parlance around the 1940’s. What makes buttons so cute? ‘Cute’ comes from the word ‘acute’ which is any angle smaller than 90 degrees. But why buttons? Maybe it is because they are small. Originally, they were finely handcrafted objects. They are referential to round little baby faces with two button eyes (Barrett). However, I am more interested in their physical function. They are a method of control, keeping our clothes...
on. They stretch fabric over our bodies and keep that fabric in place. They are tiny censors for our society to keep it buttoned up. In both the animation and the installation, I use buttons as a symbol for this forceful control. I wanted to literally deconstruct them in a multitude of ways in order to reveal a hidden truth. I make them crumble, I make them melt, I make them bubble up and disintegrate.

In the act of making them, they became cellular and referenced a physical reality that is happening in my own body as my immune system runs rampant and destroys my own healthy cells. They became a method of expressing autoimmunity. They became a method of commenting on severe problems within the 21st century diet. The large red porcelain buttons in the installation are all crumbling and revealing a sugary interior (figure 9). Sugar is a substance that runs in the blood of the American people and is slowly eroding our health as a whole, yet we have little to no control over how much goes into our food.
If cuteness could be consumed, sugar would be the main ingredient. It is sweet, it like cuteness, and seems non-threatening and harmless. However, according to Dr. Robert Lustig, UCSF Professor of Pediatrics in the Division of Endocrinology, it is a substance that is as addictive as cocaine and has a physiological control over our brain function. It is sweetness that drives us to want more. Sugar wets the appetite, even drives it, for further consumption. Refined sugars, or fructose, have only saturated the human diet within the past 200 years, and provide absolutely no nutritional benefit. In the 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} century, sugars were only added to our food supply for monetary gain, to drive us to buy more, to eat more. Plus, it is extremely cheap, especially with the advent of corn syrup. Sugar, I will argue, is the main ingredient of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, aimed at creating a powerless, sick society of consumers (Lustig).

My first job was at Cinnabon in a shopping mall in a small town in Northern Indiana. I was a junior in high school, trying to save up enough cash to buy a digital camera. At Cinnabon, there is absolutely nothing of nutritional value that could be peddled across the counter. Just soft drinks, smoothies and sticky mounds of sugar and carbohydrates. The Cinnabons had to be kept fresh throughout the day, so if no one would buy them within an hour of coming out of the oven, they would be thrown out. Most of the time for my lunch break, I’d save time and money by eating a leftover Cinnabon instead of going all the way to the other side of the mall to
buy real food. At the time, I thought nothing of it. Plus, those buns were absolutely delicious. Ten years later, I’ve been diagnosed with Sjogren’s syndrome and fibromyalgia, chronic inflammatory diseases that are painful and incredibly draining.

I recently looked up the ingredients in a classic Cinnabon, and my jaw dropped. Let it be noted that the American Heart Association recommends daily sugar intake not to exceed 24 grams. A classic cinnabon contains 58 grams of sugar. 200% of the recommended daily dose of sugar. Cinnabon’s *Strawberry Chillatta*, a smoothie drink of 24 ounces, contains 142 grams of sugar. This horrific phenomenon is not unique to Cinnabon: sugar is in *everything*, lurking with new names like high fructose corn syrup, brown rice syrup, sucralose, and aspartame, just to name a few. It is in things that aren’t even meant to be sweet, like hamburger buns (Sara Lee burger bun contains 4 grams) and yogurt (Yoplait 6 ounce original yogurt contains 26 grams).

Even here, the label attempts to quell consumer health concerns by stating there are *no artificial colors, flavors or sweeteners*. Not to mention the cute Trix rabbit with the bulging adorable yogurt eyes to make you feel at ease (in my head I’m hearing the slogan “Silly rabbit, Trix are for kids!”). Yet this single serving of yogurt contains over half the daily dose of sugar. It is the second ingredient.
Chapter 4
Making: An Act Of Personal Empowerment

A great deal of my personal experience comes from a place of powerlessness, from both external and internal sources. I am a young woman who stands less than 5 feet tall dealing with chronic illness. I’ve been marginalized and sidelined because of my height and gender many times in my life. Often, ‘compliments’ I receive from new acquaintances are demeaning, and often inadvertently geared towards making me feel smaller than I already am. I’ve been called cute more times than I can count, and more often than not, I am talked down to. My shoulders have been used as arm rests for others at social gatherings. Over my adult years I’ve turned inward and awkward, unable to feel comfortable in many social situations because I feel anxious and childish.

In addition to these external sources of slow disempowerment, my body has quickly turned against me in my adult life. As I mentioned before, three years ago I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. My own body has literally turned against itself. I’ve been prescribed pill after pill, but not one has made a significant difference, if anything has made it worse. Modern medicine has taken the approach of just slapping a band-aid on the problem, but no effort to actually cure anything. When I go to the doctor I feel like a customer rather than a patient, with free trials of medications thrown at me to get me hooked for life. It’s all about the treatment, not the cure. Nutrition and exercise is never a part of the therapeutic conversation,
yet all the personal research I have done points to that as the primary source of healing. Yet with all knowledge in nutrition, knowing that sugar is a main ingredient in the fuel to my inflammatory fire, I still have uncontrollable sugar cravings. I am constantly confronted with sweets, and despite my knowledge of how horrible the substance is, every once in a while I can’t control myself and stuff my face with delicious delectables. Exhibition openings are the worst: I feel anxious because of the crowd and there’s always a plate full of brownies or cookies… that I can’t help but nibble on to soothe the nerves.

Even taking a step backward and looking at the bigger picture, I feel totally lost and powerless to the vastness of the universe. I am a blip on the radar, a grain of sand on the beach. I am nothing. But this is part of being human, recognizing my own insignificance. But these aspects of my own feelings of powerlessness quickly pile up, and can be debilitating. The only way I overcome this overwhelming anxiety is to find power in creation. While my body might be hurting, my peers might see me as a little girl, my existential crisis is persisting, I find materials and media that I can have complete control over.

I chose a medium of making that can be entirely manipulated to the last keystroke. Artist Richard Williams said animating is like playing God. I get to control the way my characters and objects look, how they move, how they are lit, how they are timed and how they sound. Not only that, I get to control how the viewer sees the final animation and create an entirely manipulated environment. Hands touched every inch of the installation.
I also express this need to touch, the need to control reflexively in the animation with the use of my own hand. I reference Czech animator Jiri Trnka’s *The Hand* (1965) with the visual use of the puppeteer’s hand in order to comment on control. In Trnka’s work, he uses the symbol of the hand to express anxiety of Soviet control over artistic expression. Similarly, I hope to speak about control specifically with the use of the hand. However, I am using my hand to not only talk about my control over the piece as a whole, I hope to also reference the cute aesthetic and its relation to power struggles as stated by Sianne Ngai earlier in this paper: the simultaneous need to care tenderly—but also aggressively. I express this with sequences of tender petting that later turn to aggressive scratching, holding blood colored melting buttons, and finally sewing the fur with blue thread with a sharp needle. All these shots are intertwined with the sequences of the creature becoming more and more sick.
Figure 12
Chapter 5
The Process

As stated before, I wanted to control every aspect of this piece, from lighting to editing due to the lack of control in many other aspects of my existence. Call it neurotic; call it an artistic expression of the Napoleon Complex. But I find nothing more fulfilling than having my hands deep in creation and looking back at all that I am able to produce.

The method of creation is very physical. While I could have produced the animation using solely computer software, I needed to keep my body moving. The creature was the very first piece created. I ordered threaded balls and rod to create the puppet armature, hand sewed the faux fur, and modeled its features in polymer clay. Its details were hand painted in acrylic. The set was created with paper, masking tape, and pastels. Moving the puppet a millimeter at a time and taking a picture each time created the movement in the animation. Each image was first compiled in Dragonframe, then color-corrected and edited together with other sequences in Adobe After Effects.

I then began to obsessively create buttons of all sizes and materials. First, I began making over a hundred paper buttons that incrementally increased in size. On each of the buttons I drew and painted a frame of an animation of them crumbling away. I then lined up and shot each button under the camera. After shooting, I took them into Adobe After Effects and put them in a virtual 3D space, multiplied them, and animated them again digitally (figure 7).
I also made an animated series of 30 large porcelain buttons. I started their form by throwing them on the potter’s wheel like a plate, and then carving an animated sequence on them. After they were fired in a kiln to 2100 degrees Fahrenheit, they were painted with acrylic and actual sugar (figure 9).

The sequence of the singular flesh colored buttons that seems to wrinkle and disintegrate was created using a large unfired clay button painted with acrylic. It was set in a bath of water, as the clay particles expanded and the water was soaked under its surface, I took a time-lapse of the event. This sequence in real time took over 3 hours, which was reduced to 30 seconds in the final animation (figure 8).

My final series of buttons was made in red polymer clay, and shot frame by frame under the camera with my hand. Not only was their form carved and shaped by hand, my actual hand was painted with 4 layers of acrylic paint to add the look of bruising (figure 12).

The sound was the next step. The sound of purring that accompanied the sequences of my hand were created using a contact microphone that was pressed against my throat as I purred, then I added a layer of that same recording with the frequency shifted up. The sounds of the forest were taken with a parabolic microphone out on a hike at Pocahontas State Park, Virginia. I voiced all the foley for the creature as I watched the edited animation over and over, trying to match my inflections to its actions. I pitched up the final recording to match its cute aesthetic. The final sound generated was for the sequences of disintegrating buttons. It was recorded in my bathtub using a hydrophone and a block of plaster as it sucked up water.
Then, I spent hours of editing in Ableton Live, Adobe After Effects and Adobe Premier to create an interesting composition and sequence of visual and aural stimuli. I was able to create a mix of the sound that went to 6 channels and surrounds the viewer as they enter the space.

Finally, with only 4 days to install, I began immediately painting the space with a peachy beige, mounted all the technology, stretched pre-painted canvas and plastic all around the room to create the feeling of stretched skin (and to hide the media devices). I then installed the sculpture I had created with plywood, faux fur, and a transparent LCD screen to exhibit the puppet trapped inside the state of perpetual petting. I took the many buttons created earlier to fill the space: on the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. The goal was to create an environment in which the viewer could be surrounded and enveloped in the animation in a new and exciting way. The frames of the animation surround them, the sound surrounds them, and the moving image is in front and behind them. I wanted to expand the world that I created beyond the two-dimensionality of the screen.
Conclusion

Using my hands, technology, and time, I created an immersive installation that was an act of personal empowerment. I specifically used and subverted the cute aesthetic to enable a discussion about power and control both from within myself and from my environment. As I struggle with my health, I wanted to fight back in a creative way, exercising my mind and my body to express anxiety associated with my own power struggle. While I created an immersive experience that was deeply personal, it could relate to any individual struggling with addiction, illness or anxiety. It is my intention to create artwork that speaks from the inside and moves outward, into a broad context of humanity, to inspire others to empower themselves as I strive to do through creation.
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