

My Fuzzy Valentine: Allyson Mitchell
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Is craft to the avant-garde as pornography is to cinema? Commonly dismissed as formulaic, repetitive, and cheaply made, craft and porn are often produced by amateurs at home. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, their denigration, interest in both craft and porn has soared over the past decade. In an apparent reversal of stereotypes, urban hipsters gather to stitch 'n bitch while suburbanites practice strip aerobics in their basements.

Allyson Mitchell's work straddles these worlds, fusing soft furnishings with soft porn to produce unlikely kinships between the two. The latest example of this provocative fusion is *Lady Sasquatch*, Mitchell's 2005 show at Toronto's Paul Petro gallery, which celebrated the she-beast absent from earlier accounts of the mythic primate and who, unlike the better-known American Big Foot, derives from a Canadian Aboriginal word. Mixing elements from natural history displays, sideshow or roadside sculptures, and seventies rec rooms, the installation's diorama housed nine-foot creatures with teddy bear's eyes and snouts, opulent curves, and multi-teeted breasts upholstered in faux fur, baring their incisors in mock scary poses. A fake fire and corner sofa, draped with homely fabrics and flanked by plastic ornamental trees, encouraged thoughts of lounging, snacking, and making-out. Heightening this cheesily illicit mood, a soundtrack mixed jungle noises, groovy beats, and a roar based on Mitchell's childhood experience of hiking in North Ontario and being terrified when her father growled from the woods.

This bad-ass basement continues in wall hangings made from artificial pelt and found shag – materials that trouble the boundaries between animal and human - depicting fanged, furry females in erotic situations. *It Won't Lick Itself* shows a

blonde going down on a larger, darker creature, whose paw rests bossily on her backside. Golden against a background of shocking pink, the self-pleasuring *Shebacca* luxuriates in blank-eyed reverie, while in *Three's a Crowd* a mixed-race couple looks back enticingly. Mitchell based these images on early seventies centerfolds from the *Playboy Golden Anthology of Cartoons* that she chanced upon as a teenager while babysitting. "They were the first sexually explicit pictures that I can remember and they colonized my sexual imagination, providing a kind of blueprint for my erotic tastes. I still consider actresses like Tatum O'Neal and Kristy McNichol, who were big then, incredibly hot" (Note1). Whereas the porn industry demands hairless bodies, with curves in only the right places, Mitchell performs what she calls reverse airbrushing, portraying abundantly buxom, bushy nudes. Recycling images that were intended for straight men for her dykey ends to reverse the typical flow of appropriation, Mitchell exemplifies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's account of "the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them." (Note2)

This concern with spiritual and literal sustenance underscores Mitchell's work in textiles, sculpture, and film, as well as fueling her PhD-in-progress at York University on the gender politics of size. In the film *My Life in Five Minutes* (2000) Mitchell draws on childhood memories, as she often does, to explore her early fraught relationships with food and body image alongside other episodes of youthful angst. Built around family photographs, which Mitchell doodles on so that her childish self sprouts cartoonish big eyes, the film includes naïve paintings with texts memorializing events like "grandma cancer", "white pant period", "bulimia", and later adult stresses like "scholarship denied" and "border cops". Scenes unfold against a discordant soundtrack, in which Mitchell sings forlornly of "my life, nothing big, nothing small." The concluding footage of her kissing women and posing theatrically for the camera suggests that coming out as lesbian paved the way for self-discovery and renewal.

Coming out as fat, as Mitchell did subsequently, was as important but more painful. As comedian Margaret Cho might ask, where was *her* parade? Wanting to confront compulsory slimness and create a festive language for female fatness, in 1996 Mitchell co-formed the performance/activist troupe Pretty Porky and Pissed Off. Donning fun-fur housecoats and feather boas, the posse handed out flyers and candy on Toronto's Queen Street, asking passersby "Do you think I'm fat? Because I can't buy clothes in any of these stores." (Note3) Mitchell's fear of provoking a backlash – she was worried that people would shout, "Go to Jenny Craig!" (note4) - proved unfounded, and the habit of "practicing self-acceptance in public" was born.

Drawing on Judith Butler's early ideas about subversive performances of gender, the collective editorialized: "We are attempting to do 'fat' drag ... to parody stereotypes about fat people – unveiling them as the lies that they are. Instead of accepting cultural standards about how greedy we are and how offensive our bodies appear, we wear tight, tantalizing clothes ... we prefer to treat our bodies with warmth instead of viewing ourselves as objects to be punished. **Pretty Porky and Pissed Off** is talking fat pride which means, 'of course you look fat in those pants, and damn fine too!' " (note5)

Mitchell found a further chance to develop fat activist aesthetics in 2001 when the Canadian Art Gallery Hop commissioned her to make a centerpiece for their charity dinner. *Big Trubs* – part bunny girl, part earth mother, with voluptuous curves covered in orange fake pelt - cheekily noted the campy aspects of feminist goddess-reverence while acting as a Trojan horse. At eleven feet, atop a ten-foot plinth, she soared over the mostly-male guests who dined beneath her ample breasts, butt, fuzzy armpits and vagina. And although the fabrication process needed work - with a rump too wide for the door, the sculpture was dismantled and reassembled on site – Mitchell relished the jump in scale.

Whereas her craftworks and films had a whimsical intimacy, *Big Trubs* was large and in-charge.

Given her affiliation with women who refuse norms that undermine their agency and power, it's no surprise that Mitchell worked for six summers at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Echoes of this lesbian separatist event emerge in *Faux Naturelle* (2005), Mitchell's transformation of Room 304 at Toronto's Gladstone Hotel, which includes a wall-sized vision of sapphic decadence in oh-so tactile textiles. Couples in hues ranging from chocolate to vanilla and pink, with wooly pubes and flowing locks, frolic in the landscape, watched by a half-human, cloven-hoofed female. Something like a cross between a Grecian frieze and Michigan's annual dyke fest, Mitchell's characters are having too much fun together to waste their energy fighting men. By pushing patriarchy to the sidelines, they enact a form of positive discrimination.

In giving the hotel suite a log cabin makeover with imitation fur, woodgrain, and appliqué stone, Mitchell acknowledges the fictional nature of this homecoming fantasy even as she savours it. For all its surface gaiety, *Faux Naturelle* has an elegiac undertone, expressing an unfashionable longing for the early days of women's liberation when the movement brimmed with utopian zeal and the "dream of a common language", as Adrienne Rich resonantly termed it. Mitchell calls this revisionism Deep Lez: "A lot of people are too dismissive of lesbian feminism. It becomes a joke and a cliché at best. At worst, people gag on the word lesbian, forget about being able to affiliate themselves with it. I think that there is a deep set misogyny in these sentiments." (Note6) Along with *Faux Naturelle*, *Lady Sasquatch* also presents a version of Deep Lez. Like the princess in fairy tales who escapes her father's incestuous advances in the shape of a bear (Note7), she represents a beastly form of femininity: smelly, dirty, receptive to vermin, and a far cry from the sleek gay women of *The L Word*. However, Mitchell departs from radical feminism's anti-male agenda: "I want to ...

tweak lesbian feminism into an inclusive contemporary urban context ... you don't have to be a hater". (Note8)

The combination of fun fur with serious themes typifies Mitchell's oscillation between celebration and loss, humour and revolt. In the film *If Anyone Should Happen To Get In My Way* (2003), made with Christina Zeidler, a woman in a series of animal masks broods on past and imagined slights: "if you betray me ... I might ignore you at a party ... or not say hi to you on the street ... if you should cruelly trick me ... I'm going to think about it for a very long time ... you're in big trouble." Shot with the cheap Soviet Lomo camera, the film's bright, out-of-focus images have a childlike quality that belies its darker mood. Other shorts like *Cup Cake* (1998) and *Candy Kisses* (1999) posit women as eye candy, good enough to eat and with insatiable sugar cravings, while also containing undercurrents of anger and violence. As Mitchell reminds us of her cuddly she-creatures, "Lady Sasquatch is your dream girl only bigger and hairier - and she might eat you if you don't look out." (Note9)

One important precursor to Mitchell is the Canadian artist Joyce Wieland whose experimental films of the 1960's were exuberantly playful, erotic, and political. Moreover, Wieland fused female sexuality with environmental and nationalist concerns – one example being her bottles of *Sweet Beaver: The Scent of Canadian Liberation* (1971) – as Mitchell does when she borrows taxidermal imagery and techniques to posit radical lesbianism as an endangered species. In addition to prefiguring Mitchell's interest in quotidian markers of Canadian identity, Wieland anticipated the feminist reclamation of craft, incorporating quilting, needlework, knitting and even cake-decoration into her art. Yet where Wieland sought a place for domestic forms within the avant-garde, Mitchell delights in craft's outsider status. With roots in the DIY ethos of Riot Grrrl, she mistrusts the mastery trumpeted by masterpieces, and for five years made low-cost editions, objects, and clothes with Lex Vaughn as Bucky and Fluff's Craft Factory.

This affection for cheap or discarded objects has little of the pomo irony that we might expect. In fact, Mitchell's attitude seems surprisingly heartfelt. Like a younger sister destined to wear hand-me-down clothes, Mitchell finds a tawdry glamour in her second-hand resources. And, like many women before her, she revels in faking it - from the simulated ecstasy of her onanistic playmates to her staple material of faux fur. She is fascinated by human efforts to render nature once removed through cuteness and kitsch. Recalling a childhood nightmare/fantasy of being mounted by a bear, she asks how our simultaneous love and fear of nature might parallel social attitudes to sexual and racial others.

Mitchell's embrace of the impure realms of textiles and porn is the obverse of her distaste for political or aesthetic correctness. Of course, American feminist Joyce Kozloff previously addressed the twin evils of eroticism and decoration in her watercolors *Pornament is Crime* (1987). And, more recently, New York-based Egyptian Ghada Amer raids pornographic magazines for pictures of women that she then embroiders onto canvas. But whereas Amer creates a screen through which we view scenes of women masturbating and having sex together by layering them with acrylic paint, Mitchell's nudes have nothing to hide. Voyeurism loses its sadistic sting and female exhibitionism becomes an antidote to the experience of denigration – the self-preservation instinct that Freud deemed central to narcissism and a flight from melancholia. (Note10) Based on photos of Mitchell in a bikini, *Lady Sasquatch* is a fuzzy Valentine to herself and other women.

Moreover, in making objects that cry out to be nuzzled, Mitchell evokes the haptic sense that, suggests Jennifer Fisher, "renders the surfaces of the body porous, being perceived at once inside, on the skin's surface, and in external space."

[Note11] Mitchell's career-wide effort to create a receptive audience, ready to "come to feminism", allies her with artist-activist troublemakers like Dyke Action Machine, General Idea, and The Lesbian Avengers, who guaranteed, "We

recruit". Like these queer precursors, but with her own mischievous spirit, Mitchell mingles pleasure with protest to generate the politically useful, and powerfully contagious, effects of laughter, empathy, and self-acceptance.

Defend the Sugarbush, Allyson Mitchell's two-person show with Andrew Harwood at the Harvey Levine Gallery in Culver City, CA, runs from September 8th – October 7th, 2006. Her work will also be included in the group exhibition *Fray* at the Textile Museum of Canada and The Koffler Gallery in Toronto from July 13 2006 - January 7, 2007.

Note 1, This and subsequent un-attributed quotations by Allyson Mitchell from a conversation in October 2005

Note 2, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You", in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C. and London, 2003, pp. 151-2

Note 3, "The Big Fat Revolutionary", *Saturday Night Magazine*, February 10, 2001

Note 4, *ibid*

Note 5, *Double Double*, Toronto, 2002

Note 6, "Deeply Lez", Chelsey Lichtman, *Trade*, Winter 2004, p. 22

Note 7, Marina Warner discusses some examples of these legends in chapter 21, "The Language of Hair: Donkeyskin III", in her marvelous book, *From the Beat to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1994

Note 8, "Deeply Lez", (*ibid*) p. 22 - 23

Note 9, Allyson Mitchell, Press Release, *Lady Sasquatch*, Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Toronto, September 9 – October 8, 2005

Note 10, Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *Standard Edition*, Volume 14, p. 258

Note 11, Jennifer Fisher, "Relational Sense: Towards A Haptic Aesthetics",
Parachute, #87, Summer 1997, p.6