

Demystifying the 'feminine'

Seven artists explore femininity and domesticity in At Home at the Rollo Gallery. Itala Attieh has more

Thanks to a friend who suggested we go, I celebrated International Women's Day by seeing the At Home exhibition (23 February-23 April) at the [Rollo Gallery](#).

The exhibition, which is housed in a tiny contemporary gallery, presents the art of seven women, whose works all explore the 'feminine' and the 'domestic'. It is the first in a series by the Rollo Gallery, which allows private collectors to show works from their own collections. I was personally impressed that the first of these projects would be showcasing the work of female artists and above all, that they were dealing with feminist issues.



When I first walked into the gallery, I was struck by the sparseness of the space. This was partly due to the subtle and understated curatorial choices, and partly because it was the opening day and they were still setting up the exhibition! I was immediately faced with a transparent sack, hanging from the ceiling; its contents of pink and yellow body moisturiser almost glowed under the harsh spotlights of the gallery (see right). The work, 'Forget About Faces' by Karla Black, suggests the sensory recollection of domesticity. Black often works with cosmetic materials such as nail varnish and lipstick, which have distinct associations with the 'feminine' and are evocative of the female body. The sculptural installation, which is bound in

cling film and sticky tape, connotes the skincare processes and private rituals of packaging and sanitising the female body, within a bedroom environment.

Liquid toiletries, which are malleable, formless and prone to deterioration, are preserved and manipulated by Black as a metaphor for the fragile, feminine, female body within domestic space. Black makes a note of mundane, feminine occupations within the home, through material experience and the tactile minimalism of her work, echoing the sculptural exploits of [Eva Hesse](#), who she cites as her inspiration. This indirect self-portrait or mission of self-discovery also bares relevance and profound meaning to all modern women, who are affected by traditional conventions regarding femininity and domesticity.

Nearly all of the artists showing work in the exhibition employ the use of the body in their art, as a means to discuss the subjects of femininity and space. The artists use various mediums and styles to acknowledge the ways in which modern women respond to the



traditional notion of domesticity. Women's bodies are often seen crammed, even imprisoned, into the domestic spaces designated for them and their femininity is exaggerated to highlight the pressure of expectations forced upon the female body. The theme of the female body and notions of femininity within domestic space is predominant in the exhibition and this is further heightened by the sickly pink, peach and pastel colour scheme. The stereotypically feminine tones parallel the conventions considered obligatory for women and the traditions of domestic paraphernalia which decorate their bodies and their homes. This is an idea that artist Natalie Gale captures most effectively with her 'Oh Deer Velvet' wall hangings (see left).

The works I particularly enjoyed and believed contributed the most to my understanding of the exhibition were the large scale paintings of female form. Whether it is the highly worked and almost classically finished illustrations of the vast expanse of female flesh by Angela Reilly (see below right), or the contrastingly looser, more unfinished handling of paint,

depicting teenage girls by Sarah Lederman, these monumental female figures were extremely effective in shaping my perspective on femininity and domesticity.



Angela Reilly explores landscapes of the human body, by beautifully painting recumbent female nudes in intimate domestic spaces. However, these are not the classical nudes we are used to seeing. Reilly's figures are faceless and their bodies are cut off at the edges of the canvas. Their abundant forms spill over the picture frame, consequently implying that they are bound by their confining domestic spaces, in the same way that they are restricted by the size of the canvas.

Unlike Reilly's nudes, Lederman's teenage girls are thin and elongated. This is emphasised by the slim, narrow canvases, or wooden panels the figures are painted on, which stress that their adolescent bodies are on the verge of womanhood. The figures stand in their domestic space; their bedrooms. They are awkward, uncertain and bare to the viewer's gaze, in all their vulnerability. There is a sense of nostalgia and loss of innocence that shrouds the works. We cannot but help to feel sympathy for the figures that are confined to their bedrooms, where they experience and express the pressures, struggles, desires, expectations, anxieties and angst of teenage emotion. The girls in the paintings are gendered and therefore made feminine by the adult underwear their pubescent frames are dressed in. Lederman has mentioned her own endeavours to make her teenage body do things it could not, or was not ready to do; a poignant matter which relates to the containment of the female body, applicable for many modern girls. The faded, blurry forms that grow faint into the background are reminiscent of the ephemeral and transient nature of youth. Yet the size and imposing monumentality of the paintings are an indication of the importance of this stage in life, of the moment when a girl is on the cusp of juvenility and maturity, and an interesting topic when taking femininity and domesticity into account.

Other than painting and sculpture, the exhibition also consists of photographic and illustrative works by Paula Rae Gibson, Angela A. Nitecka and Michelle Souter, which unapologetically consider the importance of feminist issues. Despite this, the At Home exhibition is not necessarily the most comprehensive, nor does it show the best work I have ever seen (though it isn't half bad either!)

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The importance of this exhibition lies in the intention and spirit behind the work, in addition to the valuable efforts the gallery made, to hold such a pioneering show, on such a significant day. The exhibition not only helps to increase the visibility of emerging female talents, moreover, it seeks to provide a space for feminist discourse, through artistic expression. The works of art do not show women rebelling against conventions, or resisting the oppressive, gendered stereotypes which are continuously designed to control them. Conversely, it shows us the negative effects of forced femininity and domesticity upon the female mind and body.

There is a clear distinction to be made on the topic of showing women merely rebelling against the home and gendered stereotypes, and giving women who feel that they have to submit to these patriarchal traditions a voice of their own. The artists are raising awareness and consciousness about a much more complex problem which deals with peer pressure and expectations. The intimate nature of the Rollo Gallery and the At Home exhibition, alongside the intentional aims and meanings of the works, give us an almost voyeuristic view on what it may be like for women to undergo feeling that they must fulfil traditional feminine and domestic roles. The works of art being shown at the exhibition makes visible the different ways in which women respond to artificial femininity. Additionally, the impact domesticity has on the body is also made apparent.

The At Home exhibition is really quite pivotal in terms of the issues it raises and could potentially be the start of something greater to come. It is definitely worth going to see and I would seriously recommend visiting the exhibition, not just to enjoy and appreciate the work, but also to show your support.

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