

“Allyson Mitchell: Desire and dissent”
Maria Elena Buszek

I find the coincidence of—and contrast between—Allyson Mitchell’s plush, curvy pin-ups and the recent and much-discussed “Dove Girls” ad campaign interesting. Ostensibly created in response to women’s palpable weariness with supermodel-led beauty industry, Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty” in North America and the United Kingdom is responsible for dotting fashion layouts and urban landscapes with images of their Dove Girls—ordinary women from a range of professions, regions, and races, with a range of healthy body types, chosen to represent the company’s cellulite-reducing “Intense Firming” body cream. It is startling, and a tremendous pleasure for me to see the campaign’s images of these beautiful, plus-sized women, standing in nothing but plain, white cotton underwear, peeking out between the reams of anorexic waifs in popular magazines, or on a billboard marking the highest visible point of the plastic-body ad-landscape over Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. As Dove’s own campaign argues: “Women have surrendered to diets and insane eating habits to live up to social stereotypes for too long. It’s time that all women felt beautiful in their own skin.” Yet, as *Salon* commentator Rebecca Traister counters, in response to the cream-shilling subtext of this entire, feel-good campaign, “let’s hope that skin doesn’t have any cellulite. Because no one wants to look at a cottage-cheesy ass.”¹

Flipping the script on this desire-through-dissatisfaction, Allyson Mitchell’s women revel in their dimpled, rippling textures, which the artist has in fact emphasized through her construction of their bodies with thick-napped fun-fur. On the one hand, like the Dove Girls campaign, Mitchell’s use of the pin-up takes this convention of representing the sexualized woman—in Mitchell’s case, derived directly from images appropriated from ads, magazine layouts, and even soft-core photography and illustration from “gentlemen’s magazines” like

Playboy—and subverts the limited beauty ideals that the pin-up traditionally represents by offering a range of sexy-but-real alternatives. On the other hand, Mitchell's women are not “selling” creams, potions, or stays, but rather pure pleasure as a feminist-activist statement; indeed, she offers the pleasures derived from every one of her big, bold pin-up grrrls to cultivate a different kind of dissatisfaction in her audience.

Contrary to the popular belief—held by many within, outside of, and even against the women's movement—that a “feminist pin-up” is an oxymoron, it is no more so than “feminist painting” or “feminist sculpture,” or “feminist porn” for that matter: these are all media/genres historically used and appreciated primarily by men, about which nothing is inherently sexist, but which have all been both kept from women and used to create images that inscribe, normalize, or bolster notions of women as inferior to men. As a genre associated almost exclusively with women—due, of course, to its creation and prominence in cultures where women's rather than men's sexuality is considered acceptable for scrutiny—the pin-up has, no less than (indeed, perhaps more than) any other cultural representation of women, reflected women's roles in the cultures and subcultures in which it is created. And, because the pin-up is always a sexualized woman whose image is not only mass-reproduced, but mass-reproduced because intended for wide display, the genre is an interesting test-strip for Western cultural responses to women's sexuality in popular arts since the Industrial Revolution, as well as feminist responses to the same. Indeed, precisely because of its history of isolating the sexualized woman in an all-female universe, it has been a favorite not just for critique but appropriation—broadly, by feminist artists, but specifically by lesbian artists, whose work reveals moments in which the pin-up has presented women with models for expressing and finding pleasure in their beauty and sexuality.

But, the pin-up genre that Mitchell references is a slippery one: it doesn't represent sex so much as suggest it, and these politely suggestive qualities have as a result always lent it to a commercial culture of which feminists have justifiably been wary for its need to cultivate the kind of desire and dissatisfaction that lead to consumption. But, the feminist movement itself has historically been dedicated to the cultivation of desire and dissatisfaction—in its own case, leading to dissent. By using this popular signifier for desirable womanhood toward a feminist expression of subversive sexualities, the feminist pin-up not only has the potential to image and provoke desire, but, by penetrating and influencing the cultures of fashion and consumption, succeed in the feminist aim of changing the rigid, patriarchal terms by which desire has historically been framed. As such, we should be unsurprised that both the visibility and persuasiveness of the pin-up might be used by a feminist movement that has always sought to inspire broad cultural change. Indeed, in Mitchell's writing as well as her artwork, she has been consistently dedicated to exploring the possibilities as well as the problems of popular visibility.²

Fueled by the Do-It-Yourself activism of feminism's third wave (as exemplified by the brief-but-fierce riot grrrl movement), Mitchell grew up in the midst of tremendous shifts in feminist practice, which is reflected in her appropriation of popular imagery. Women of Mitchell's (and my) generation, who came to adulthood in the '80s and '90s, inherited a range of radical feminist and queer readings of media imagery as a veritable second language. Yet, though those who came of age in our contemporary, third wave of the feminist movement have an outrageous array of and access to media that their mothers could have hardly imagined—photocopy machines, personal computers, and the Internet—they nonetheless instinctively recognize its propagandistic value in ways similar to their predecessors. Popular media are viewed as both unavoidable and strategic; as Germaine Greer recently asserted, like their

foremothers younger feminists today know the value of “cheap publishing and mass propaganda...[which] insists upon communication, accessibility, and immediate, tangible relevance to the everyday lives of women.”³

But, unlike the “feminine mystique” with which previous generations were saddled and had to battle against on their road to feminist consciousness, both women and men growing up in the years after the women’s liberation movement (or feminist “second wave”) were raised in a culture saturated with the movement’s influence: the frank and sympathetic novels of feminist writer Judy Blume; celebrities ranging from *That Girl* Marlo Thomas to All-Pro defensive lineman Rosie Greer guiding them toward the notion that “You and me are *Free to be... You and Me*” in the wildly popular 1970s TV special, record and book of the same name; and powerful and ingenious (if jiggly) TV-heroines like *Charlie’s Angels* and *Wonder Woman*. As teenagers, whereas some took advantage of new, equal-opportunity laws that affected their school programs, many others discovered underground or “alternative” art and music communities—rock, punk, and later indie rock artists and performers—where women were increasingly likely to be visible participants.⁴ And, as young adults they entered professions and institutions of higher education shaped by decades of recent and wildly diverse feminist theory, often taught as part of the newly-ubiquitous women’s studies programs now part of university curricula across the Western world.

As a result, younger feminists tend to feel far less cause for immediate suspicion about what pop culture is “telling” them, as well as empowered to manipulate those messages to suit their purposes. Their DIY approach to feminist activism is aided by this sense of agency that the youngest women of the third wave took for granted in their upbringing—not just as consumers but makers of cultural meaning—fulfilling what feminist art-activist Kathleen Hanna argued was

the need for not only artists “who are unwilling to commodify themselves, [but also] audiences who will actively participate instead of just consuming.”⁵ Allyson Mitchell’s work is rooted in a similar goal, driven as it is by her own question/assertion: “can you will a movement into happening with art and ideas?”⁶

One finds roots of the myriad layers of appropriated imagery in Mitchell’s current work (not to mention her dissertation-in-progress on body issues) in her collaborative ‘zine work for the fat-activist group Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, of which she was a founder. Before the growth of the World Wide Web, the small, cheaply Xeroxed ‘zine was the primary medium through which third-wave feminist groups like riot grrrl expressed themselves and connected participants with one another, blurring the line between maker and consumer that many contemporary feminists seek to erase. Like the indie-rock, anti-nukes, and alternative comix circles in which they originated, these ‘zines often focused upon recycled and recontextualized imagery taken directly from mass culture—often from commercial sources marketed toward heterosexual men and young girls—resulting in a visual culture in which Guerilla Girls posters, girl-band flyers, MTV hip-hop divas, and Calvin Klein ads live in peaceful coexistence. The PPPO *Double Double* ‘zine exemplifies such strategies, reclaiming both unflattering images of large women from popular magazines and beautiful nudes from commercial “plumper-fetish” porn, which is juxtaposed with fat-lib, queer, and feminist essays and agit-prop slogans that communicate the group’s belief that “From XXL to Super Size, we want to spread the word that everyBODY is a good body.”⁷

In works like this, Mitchell demonstrates her unique strategy for pairing a traditional feminist critique of the “acceptably” sexual female body from pop culture with lovingly-represented images of feminist alternatives from that same realm. In this, the artist bravely

attempts to tackle the conundrum perhaps best articulated by scholar bell hooks in her appropriately-titled tome *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*: “It has been a simple task for women to describe and criticize negative aspects of sexuality as it has been socially constructed in sexist society; to expose male objectification and dehumanization of women; to denounce rape, pornography, sexualized violence, incest, etc. It has been a far more difficult task for women to envision new sexual paradigms, to change the norms of sexuality.”⁸

Mitchell’s more recent work has gone further, if subtly, in her desire to both disrupt the patriarchal subjugation of women, and retain the right to utilize familiar conventions of representing women’s beauty and desirability to make this disruption more accessible as a “new paradigm.” Moreover, in addition to expanding her visual vocabulary of feminist pin-ups, Mitchell has grown interested in expanding her media to inscribe further politicized meanings into her images. Beginning with her multi-media artwork and installation derived from craft stores and thrift-store purchases as part of the duo (with Lex Vaughan) Bucky and Fluff, Mitchell began exploring the socio-historical associations of domestic arts. As such, it is easy to read the artist’s recent fun-fur tableaux—constructed of found and cheap, commercially-produced textiles, with compositions derived from the popular press—as what the Mitchell herself has articulated as “a simultaneous homage to fiber art and craft kits and a critique on the restrictions of relationships, domesticity and manic denial” with which the works’ creators often imbued their “craft projects.”⁹

But this critique is shot through with a palpable sense of the pleasure that Mitchell clearly derives from her manipulation of these media, techniques, imagery, and even historical associations—whether embellishing upon the original imagery by adding wide bellies and a rainbow array of skin tones, or turning cuddly centerfolds into bestial “Shebacas,” Mitchell

approaches her furry creations with a genuine, playful sense of affection. And the artist's pleasure in her plushy pin-ups is catchy—arguably, even primal. In Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, the writer/namesake of modern “masochism” famously associated fur with the powerful, even cruel sexuality of women—at once a contrast to the relatively smooth skin of the female body and a parallel to the pleasurable, furry bits generally kept from view.¹⁰ (Sigmund Freud concurred, arguing in his typically misogynistic way that the subconscious associates fur and velvet with women's public hair, the first sight of which the young male child believes to be “lacking” a penis.)¹¹ In Sacher-Masoch's private life, the feeling and scent of his wife's furs allegedly drove him to fantasize of plunging his face into them—a fantasy, interestingly, divulged by critic Sally McKay in a recent article on Mitchell's work when she confessed: “I resisted the temptation to rub my face on the art, but it was a struggle.”¹²

This joyful pleasure that Mitchell's work inspires in viewers ultimately reflects her larger goal—not just as an artist, but as an activist, writer, and teacher—to suggest that “the persuasiveness of radical feminism...can be magical and titillating.”¹³ Forget the Dove Girls—take Lady Sasquatch by the hand, and let her lead you to the velvet-quilted forest.

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¹ Rebecca Traister, “Real beauty—or really smart marketing?” *Salon.com* (22 July 2005) <<http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2005/07/22/dove/index.html?sid=1369300>>, 22 July 2005.

² See, for example, Allyson Mitchell, “The Writing's on the Wall: Feminist and Lesbian Graffiti as Cultural Production,” in Mitchell, Lisa Bryn Rundle, and Lara Karaian (eds.), *Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms* (Toronto:Sumach Press, 2001): 221-232.

³ Germaine Greer, “Foreword” to Liz McQuiston, *Suffragettes to She-Devils: The Graphics of Women's Liberation and Beyond* (San Francisco: Phaidon Press, 1997): 7.

⁴ For firsthand accounts of this phenomenon for third-wave feminists, see Maria Elena Buszek, “Oh! Dogma (Up Yours!),” *Thirdspace: A Third Wave Feminist Journal* 1, no.1 (July 2001):

<http://www.thirdspace.ca>; and Ann Powers, *Weird Like Us: My Bohemian America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁵ Kathleen Hanna, "On Not Playing Dead," in *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*, edited by Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell (New York: New York University Press, 1999): 123.

⁶ Chelsey Lichtman, "Deeply Lez: Allyson Mitchell," *Trade* (Winter 2004): 22.

⁷ "Pretty Porky and Pissed Off" publishers' statement, *Double Double* #1 (n.d.): 1.

⁸ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000): 150.

⁹ Allyson Mitchell, "Artist Statement (latch-hook rugs)," undated.

¹⁰ For more thorough synopses and analyses of Sacher-Masoch's fur fetishism, see Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Brazillier, 1971); and Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹¹ See Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis with Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*, trans. F.J. Rebman (1886; New York: Physicians and Surgeons Book Company, 1906, 1934): 270-272.

¹² Sally McKay, "Allyson Mitchell: The Fluff Stands Alone," *Canadian Art* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 46.

¹³ Chelsey Lichtman, "Deeply Lez: Allyson Mitchell," *Trade* (Winter 2004): 23.