





# RACHEL LACHOWICZ

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MAKEUP ON THE  
FACE OF THE FATHER:  
RECENT WORK BY RACHEL LACHOWICZ



*"I am so amazed by what that woman can do."*

~ Eva Heese on Lee Bontecou<sup>1</sup>

RACHEL LACHOWICZ is primarily recognized for appropriating canonical works by modern and contemporary male artists, such as Yves Klein and Carl Andre, and re-creating them using red lipstick. Since the 1980s, such appropriations have articulated a feminist position on the exclusion of women from art history and the continued inequities that women experience in the art world today.<sup>2</sup> In reviewing the critical literature on the artist, I have found that most authors focus on the appropriation strategies in Lachowicz's work. Yet, her practice raises questions that exceed the purview of appropriation, as her complex use of materials and rigorous techniques process push a wide range of established boundaries. Her art complicates neat divisions between abstraction and the body, appropriation and homage,

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the cosmetic and the artistic, commodities and crafts, subjectivity and objectification.

In this essay, I identify the critical practices, ideas, and methods Lachowicz has developed and argue that her minimalist aesthetic performs feminist work by making over the face of the "father"—the patriarchal, capitalist, and militarist father that art historian Anna C. Chave found cloaked in the work of minimalist artists such as Richard Serra. In "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," Chave posited that the objects of minimalist art—in their aggressive occupation of space and their cold, dangerous, antagonistic position toward viewers—signified and reified dominant power structures. In discussing the negative reception of minimalist artworks by the general public, Chave notes:

That very loathing could be construed as a sign of this art at work, however, for what disturbs viewers most about minimalist art may be what disturbs them about their own lives and times, as the face it projects is society's blankest, steeliest face; the impersonal face of technology, industry, and commerce; the unyielding face of the father: a face that is usually far more attractively masked (1990, 55).

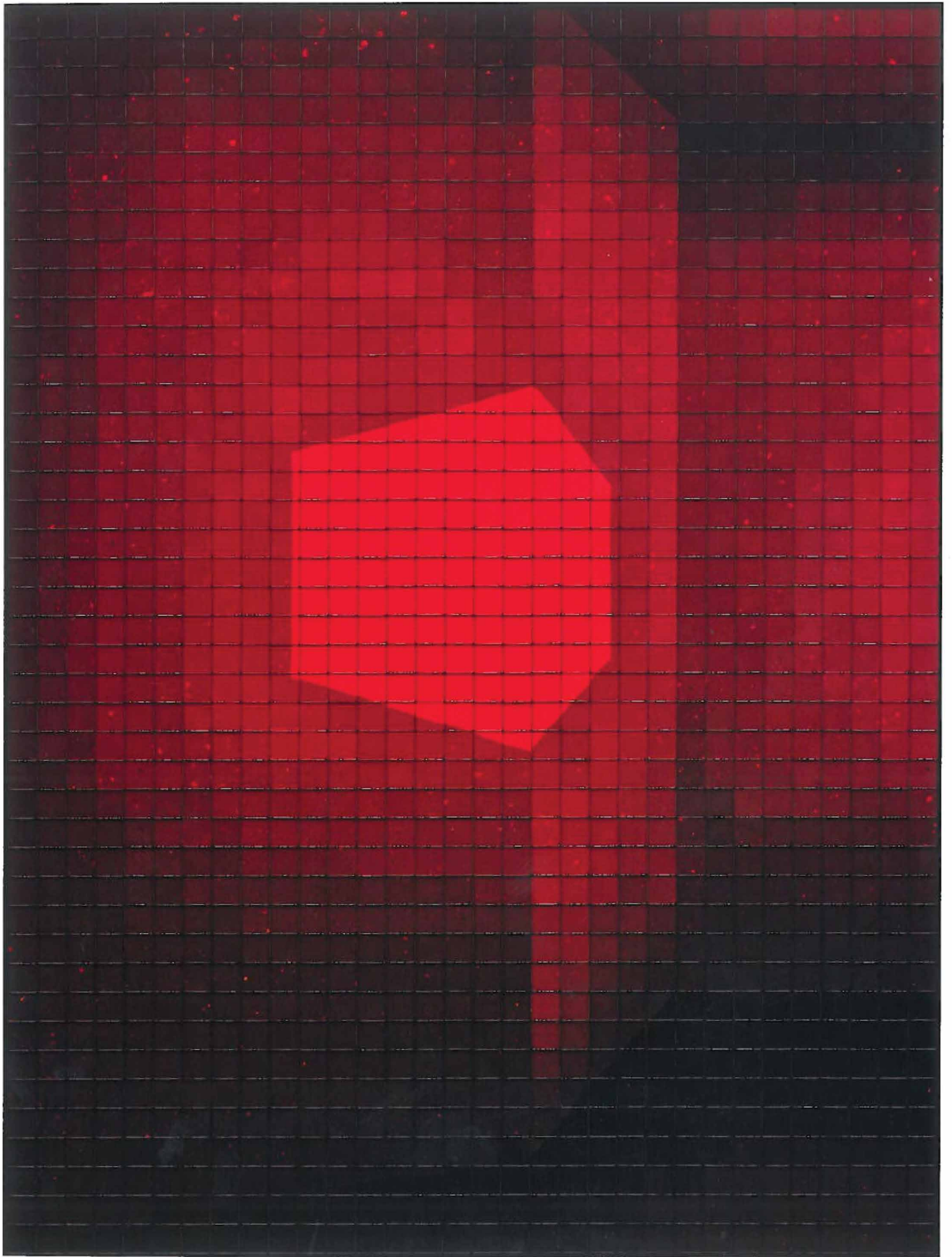
Lachowicz conducts a subtle and forceful effacing of patriarchal power by soiling it with the red, sticky, slimy stuff of femininity. Her cosmetic work on patriarchal ideology does not mask it, or even make it more attractive, however, but rather playfully portrays how power structures can be unmade and "made over." This is true of the work she created for the exhibition *Rachel Lachowicz*, which was on view at the Shoshana Wayne Gallery from November 6 through December 24, 2010, and showcased the artist's most recent projects.



**PARALLEL LINES, 2010**  
 PRESSED EYESHADOW, ALUMINUM, GLASS  
 49 X 49 INCHES  
 COLLECTION OF EILEEN HARRIS NORTON,  
 SANTA MONICA, CA

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Chave, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Saltz, "When the Girls Aren't, Art and Apartheid, the prime real estate is still a men's club" (September 19, 2006); *The Village Voice*, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-09-19/art/when-the-girls-aren-t/>, accessed April 2011.



## Cosmetic Politics

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*All of us (men and women) compete through a lens of objectification. It runs through every aspect of our being. But for women an object relationship is part of our construct and remains a central factor of our sense of self. Our mind, body, work, grooming, and leisure all are related to the ways we are seen as a product or as a container. Previously, my work focused on reconfiguring known works and ideas in order to subvert or create new ones. I now am also looking at the housing, packaging, packing, and unpacking of ideas. ~ Rachel Lachowicz*

Lachowicz works against the grain of the once radical but now rote contemporary art practice of authorship denial and ironic appropriation. For how can an artist gendered “woman” deny an authorship that has for so long been denied to her in art history? And why should she reject the power afforded to her name if her legacy is not the enlightenment regime of knowledge/power that the poststructuralists critiqued?<sup>4</sup> As Chave observes, “The erasure of artistic subjectivity that seemed such a radical prospect to certain male artists in the 1960s could hardly portend the same for their female contemporaries, for whom erasure was almost a given” (2000, 154). I find Lachowicz’s homages and assertions of authorship some of the most inspired, inspiring, and critical aspects of her art. For it is important to recognize the artists, male and female, who have made your work possible and to ensure—especially if you are a woman—that your work is documented in history.

Claiming authorship is also a crucial strategy for Lachowicz because the cosmetic materials she employs are artistically undervalued, if not demonized, through their association with feminine consumption, fakery, deceit, low self-esteem, and hypersexualization, even by some feminists. Lachowicz’s minimalist work, although deceptively void of volatile social content, takes enormous risks through its use of cosmetics, as not even the minimalist “rhetoric of power” she employs is strong enough to shift classist, sexist, and racist attitudes toward the uses and abuses of makeup. A dominant aesthetic tenet for women is to use makeup with enough skill so that it seems they are not wearing any. Women who exceed the parameters of taste with makeup are often mocked and derided (Hernandez 2009).

The feminized devaluations of makeup find parallels in the trope of prostitution that informs certain discourses on the value of art. In “Tricks of the Trade: Pop Art and the Rhetoric of Prostitution” visual-culture scholar Jennifer Doyle interrogates the mobilization of the rhetoric of prostitution in the critical reception of the work of Andy Warhol, which, like that of Lachowicz, openly cites signifiers of femininity. Warhol’s work has been viewed as failing to articulate social critique, as colluding too closely with corporate and popular culture. Lachowicz’s work risks similar devaluations because of its use of makeup. Doyle advances,

Inssofar as it points out the absence of a solid apparatus for making distinctions between high art and mass culture or between the art object and the commodity, Warhol’s work is a magnet for this rhetorical deployment of sex. When art critics mobilize this discourse to evaluate an artist’s work, they map the anxieties of prostitution onto the vicissitudes of the category of art itself. The end product is a profoundly tautological rhetoric that backs up the assertion “I know art when I see it” with the accusation “I know a whore when I see one.”

<sup>4</sup> Art’s Jurisdiction for Rachel Lachowicz exhibition at Shagbans Wayne Gallery, 2010.

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PRODUCTION IMAGES FROM  
**POUR: TRANSITIONAL STATES**, 2010  
DIGITAL PRINTS  
12 3/4 X 18 3/4 INCHES EACH

So when Warhol the artist is outed as a fraud, it is by referencing a language of fraudulent, phony, imitation, or failed sex (2006, 48).

To varying degrees makeup and pop art are associated with fakeness, the hypersexual, social climbing, and lack of authenticity. Despite its established postmodern paradigm, the contemporary art world continues to valorize innovation and authenticity.

Narrow readings of Lachowicz's practice could frame her use of cosmetics and appropriation as a shtick. I am not interested in countering these real and imagined critiques of her work with arguments about how her practice "really" is unique and how makeup does not have to index the fake. What is critically significant about her practice and what its minimalist style enables is the open-ended opportunity for the viewer to reinterpret and reevaluate "makeup" and "art" in all of their varied significations. Lachowicz's work, like Warhol's, poses aesthetic questions that make the cultural ground upon which high art rests glamorously unstable. If, as Doyle points out, "aesthetic value is derived from the transcendence of processes of objectification (Ibid. 59)" in the art historical canon, Lachowicz's emphasis on the rigorous aesthetic work of cosmetic grooming, and her assertions that these practices of objectification are not always exploitative or deny women's agency,<sup>5</sup> generates a new paradigm for thinking "art" through the quotidian realm of makeup, and vice versa.

### Revealing and Concealing the Artist's Hand and Body

*"In order to gain control of my practice I had to learn how to make everything."* ~ Rachel Lachowicz

In our discussions, Lachowicz mentioned how sometimes viewers assume the cosmetics in her work are bought from a store and then assembled. Because the artist has become so adept at learning how to fabricate makeup in her studio, it is often mistaken for commercial products. In this sense, her works contain the secret of their making. Her painstaking process of generating the materials for her work is not evident on the surface. Although she has photographs documenting her painting process in *Pour: Transitional States* (2010), there are no images showing the artist making eyeshadow works. Lachowicz uses a press to produce eyeshadow powder from specialized pigments and bonding agents that are forged with twenty tons of pressure. The artist custom orders the powder's tins from cosmetic companies. When she started employing the medium, she would fill each container with only one color. As her practice has developed, she has learned various techniques to incorporate lines and gradations of color within each small container in order to generate patterns and shading that result in complex, large-scale compositions.

When citing Karl Marx, feminist literary theorist Emily Apter notes that, "In his discussion of commodity fetishism, Karl Marx spoke of an object's hidden value—its fetish character—as a 'secret': 'Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic





(Apter 1991, 1).” Rachel Lachowicz’s work resignifies the social hieroglyphics of makeup in ways that prompt viewers to imagine its possibilities beyond the body. Her art troubles our relationship to eyeshadows and lipsticks, materials that we only come into contact with through the mediation of the market. In Lachowicz’s hands, lipstick becomes sumptuous paint and eyeshadow pigment transforms into abstract line. In the Agnes Martin-inspired piece *Parallel Lines* (2010), white eyeshadow containers form a grid that is traversed horizontally by soft and virtually invisible thin black lines of eyeshadow. This work is one example among many of how Lachowicz renders the materials that make female bodies hypercorporeal, or hypermaterial, into abstract, minimal objects. The feminized stuff of compacts, mirrors, and purses comes to bear the vestiges and do the aesthetic work of high art.

The invisibility of Lachowicz’s hand in most of her work keeps it from entering the realm of craft. At the same time, the specialized and time-consuming nature of her practice is not the standardized, mechanized labor that produces most makeup commodities. The artist states, “My interest is oppositional to showing labor; it is in capturing a kind of morphing, flickering slew of signifiers which coalesces to something sensuous and strong, profiling the unconscious space of femininity, which includes seeing ourselves in things factory made and corporate produced.”<sup>6</sup> Lachowicz is interested in how objectification and commodification shape female subjectivity. We discussed how contemporary women construct their bodies to achieve entry and success in the business world through such practices as grooming, diet, exercise, and formalized dress. These practices stem from the limited modes of embodiment and personhood available to women, who need to market their bodies as commodities, or products.

The manner by which women strive to improve their social standing through bodily modifications is a topic cogently examined by literary theorist Lauren Berlant in her essay “National Brands, National Body.” Berlant specifically analyzes the novel and films *Imitation of Life* to explore the politics of female embodiment and citizenship in America. The novel (1933) and films (1934/1959) tell the story of a white widowed woman who works to support herself as a single mother along with a black female companion who is also a single mother. Berlant examines the

5. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from my conversation with Lachowicz in January 2011.

6. E-mail correspondence with author, April 2011.



various ways these women negotiate their embodiment in order to gain access to the privileges of normative (white male) citizenship in the different iterations of the text. The women in these stories become trademarks and sexualized commodities in order to achieve social mobility—strategies that continue to provide the few avenues of publicity available for women. Berlant’s position is worth quoting here at length, as it helps frame the critical work performed by Lachowicz’s creation of cosmetic “commodities”:

I have argued that, by designating certain forms of legitimacy in abstract personhood and not the flesh, in American culture legitimacy derives from the privilege to suppress and protect the body; the fetishization of the abstract or artificial “person” is constitutional law and is also the means by which whiteness and maleness were established simultaneously as “nothing” and “everything.” . . . One of the main ways a woman mimes the prophylaxis of citizenship is to do what we might call “code-crossing.” This involves borrowing the corporal logic of an other, or a fantasy of that logic, and adopting it as a prosthesis. . . . This is how racial passing, religion, bourgeois style, capitalism, and sexual camp have served the woman; indeed, in *Imitation of Life* this ameliorative strategy has become the “trademark” of female existence across race and class and sexual preference. . . . We have seen that in the modern United States, the artificial legitimacy of the citizen has merged with the commodity form: its autonomy, its phantasmatic freedom from its own history, seem to invest it with the power to transmit its aura, its “body,” to consumers (2008, 141).

Berlant shows how the valuation of abstraction has marked women as hypermaterial bodies vulnerable to multiple forms of oppression, prompting the development of survival strategies such as code-crossing.

By using the nonrepresentational visual codes of abstraction and minimalism—codes that are read as masculine—Lachowicz keeps her own body from becoming commodified in the art world. Her work diverges from embodied feminist art practices by employing the visual language of abstraction and minimalism to question constructs of femininity and the art historical valorization of masculine art. In fact, of the few bodies Lachowicz has featured in her practice the most visible are male. In the performance *Red Not Blue* of 1992, the bodies of muscular men parody the work of Yves Klein and Man Ray, who framed female bodies as passive objects. What Lachowicz performed was not an inversion of the phallogentric gaze, as she did not treat her assistants as lowly objects; rather, her male assistants were respected collaborators in the artistic process. Throughout the performance, she looked them in the eye and smiled warmly as she guided them through their actions, which included creating silhouettes by pressing their lipstick-smearing, nude bodies against white sheets of paper. In *Red Not Blue*, the legitimacy of the abstract personhood of the father is undone through marking him with makeup, making him a “body.”

### Feminism Under Construction: The Indeterminacy of Making and Consuming

Lachowicz dresses up art in the things that female gendered bodies are dressed in. Her use of materials that melt and smudge makes masculine, minimal art vulnerable. Conversely, she makes feminized commodity fetish objects—such as the shoeboxes in her piece *Untitled (Box Under Construction With Liner)*, 2010—sturdy, out of metal. Through these juxtapositions, Lachowicz blends pop art’s mining of commodity culture, minimalist and abstract style, and feminist methods of resignification to make cosmetic practice and feminine consumption unfamiliar and strange and unknowable to us in visually alluring ways that are productive for rethinking gender, art, body, and power. If makeup can make art, can we view made up female bodies as similarly valued artifacts of culture?

*Untitled (Box Under Construction With Liner)* is a large sculpture consisting of black rectangular forms that resemble sleek, high-fashion shoeboxes. The stable, grid-like composition is offset by the pieces of crumpled white lining paper that emerge from the boxes and resemble the scraps that scatter the floors of women’s shoe stores. The signature of the artist is printed on the liner in a way that resembles a fashion designer’s logo. The sculpture mimics shoeboxes so well that they seem light; in fact, they are made of heavy sheet metal. Here, Lachowicz employs sculpture and drawing to literally give “weight” to women’s consumer practices and to the construction of their bodies, recognizing that these practices play a significant part in shaping contemporary social relations.

Following Berlant, the high-heeled shoes that one can imagine are contained in these boxes can be read as a prosthesis that enables women to successfully perform commodified femininity by changing their height and appearance. In recent years, the high-fashion woman’s shoe, glorified in the television show *Sex in the City*, has come to represent postfeminist buying power as female liberation (Arthurs 2003). Instead of depleting her bank account to purchase Manolo Blahniks, however, the trademark “Rachel Lachowicz” is a product for consumption that provides a living for the artist, and asserts the value of her name—not of her body.





UNTITLED 3D SKETCH, 2010  
 CARDBOARD, PAPER  
 144 X 125 X 53 INCHES

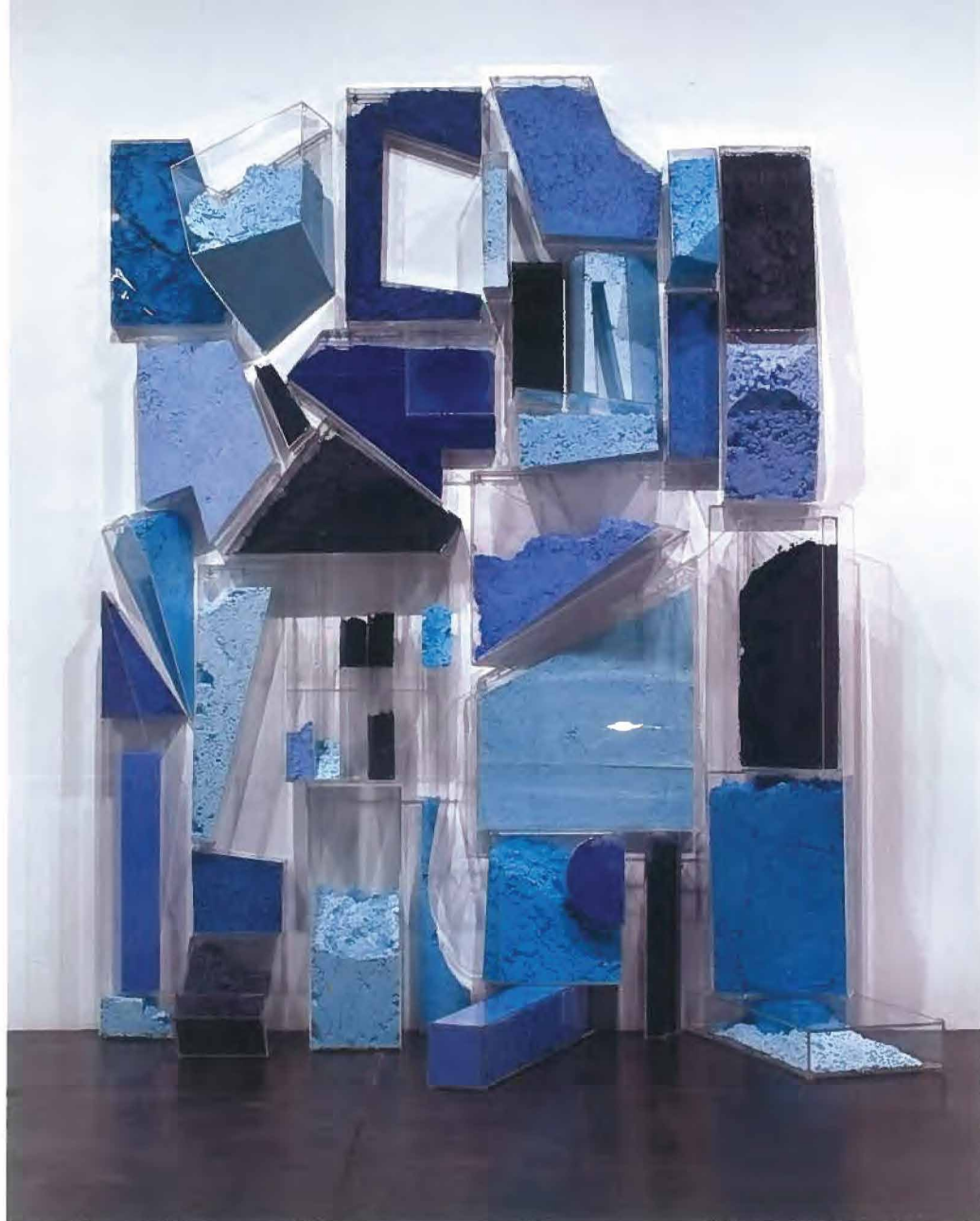
Although Lachowicz and I discussed the pleasures and powers that can attend being a sexualized feminine object and of making up the body, what I want to underscore is the way that her production process and open-ended citations of feminized objects paves complicated paths for theorizing the nexus of gender, consumption, and body practices. How we buy and how we make our bodies consumable are complicated processes that cannot be adequately interpreted using mind/body, feminist/consumerist binaries, as these are multifaceted and indeterminate processes that Lachowicz's work uniquely provokes us to consider in their complexity.

Take, for example, the dynamics of interiority and exteriority that she explores in the large-scale works *Untitled 3D Sketch* (2010) and *Interlocking Construction* (2010). *Untitled 3D Sketch* is the model for *Interlocking Construction*, and both pieces were included in the *Rachel Lachowicz* exhibition at the Shoshana Wayne Gallery.

Lachowicz produced the three-dimensional sketch by creating abstract shapes out of cardboard and placing them over the surface of a ten-foot paper reproduction of Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* that was affixed to her studio wall. The objects Lachowicz crafted were inspired by images of Schwitters's forms but did not replicate them.

Sharing space with this three-dimensional sketch is an intense physical experience. Your body wants to come near it to examine its contours, seams, and hollow spaces, and is simultaneously provoked to move back and appreciate its harmonies of line and shadow, and receding and advancing forms. The eyes move uncontrollably as they survey the work's multifaceted surface. The artist described the process of creating *Untitled 3D Sketch* as follows, "I am building with Kurt Schwitters thinking of Nevelson and Lee Bontecou." The compositionally poetic and commanding large-scale work reveals the measurements the artist used for fabricating the objects that comprise *Interlocking Construction*. The numbers and arrows inscribed on the cardboard pieces to aide in the creation of *Interlocking Construction* become oblique signs and aesthetic marks in the context of the gallery space, evidencing the precarious slippage between the aesthetic and the functional.

In *Interlocking Construction*, transparent, abstract Plexiglas shapes drawn from *Untitled 3D Sketch* are filled with varying shades of blue eyeshadow pigment. Here, the makeup gives "form" to the sculpture, functioning not as decoration



CELL: INTERLOCKING CONSTRUCTION,  
2010  
PIGMENT—COSMETIC COMPOUND,  
PLEXIGLAS  
144 X 125 X 53 INCHES

or adornment, but as the work's central interior element, its core. Lachowicz's approach challenges the higher value placed on interiority and "authenticity" over surface, as there is no clear demarcation in the pieces between sketch and finished artwork, and in *Interlocking Construction*, the "substance" of the interior consists only of makeup.

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#### A Monument for "Mothers"

Lachowicz's method of drawing from the work of other artists in creating such pieces as *Untitled 3D Sketch* reveals the significant role homage plays in her practice. She distinguishes her mode of homage from the ironic stances of contemporary methods of appropriation. In our discussion, the artist playfully referred to the homages in her recent works as "drive-bys." In contrast to the connotations of violence and thievery that attend

the term "drive-by," for Lachowicz this Los Angeles slang signifies proximity, not appropriation, theft, or replication. In describing her approach to referencing the work of such artists as Schwitters, Nevelson, and Bontecou, the artist asserted, "I want to come near things, but I want these things to mutate to become their own hybrid that recognizes its interlocking relationships." Lachowicz explores the poetics of intimate relationships in her homage to Mary Cassatt.

Female bodies are signified through pink bergamot soap in Lachowicz's sculpture *Untitled (Homage to Mary Cassatt)*, 2010). The soap references Cassatt's feminine domestic scenes, such as *The Bath* (ca. 1892), which is the specific inspiration for Lachowicz's piece. In the painting, a woman holds her daughter on her lap as she washes her feet in a basin, both figures serenely focused on the intimate task. Cassatt seems like an unlikely influence for Lachowicz, who does not embrace a representational style, but Lachowicz's desire to honor Cassatt stems from her role as a pioneering artist who provided a feminine perspective on the world. In discussing this work, the artist stated,

I have always liked that painting. It is firmly planted in my mind. I think I saw it physically for the first time with my mother in that giant impressionist show which toured, possibly in the '70s. My mother is an artist and my art education started at a very young age. The communication between the figures is familiar. I have been single



UNTITLED (HOMAGE TO  
MARY CASSATT), 2010  
SOAP, BERGAMOT ESSENCE  
51 1/2 X 97 INCHES (DIAMETER)

for most of my career. I now have a family and care for three children. Bath time is indescribably important, something Cassatt's painting shows, worthy of a monument. . . . I chose a circular structure for the work in an attempt to avoid a patriarchal gesture. It acts more like an installation than a sculptural object because it interacts with its surroundings in profound ways. Firstly, the obvious scent of the soap, scented soaps being an index of femininity. Secondly, upon entering the gallery the scent gives reference to the body without it being present. The work is an homage to a woman, but there is leeway for men to find it applicable. The scented soap is a way to talk about the act of bathing and habitual rituals of femininity, which have been almost invariably represented by voyeuristically presented female nudity.<sup>7</sup>

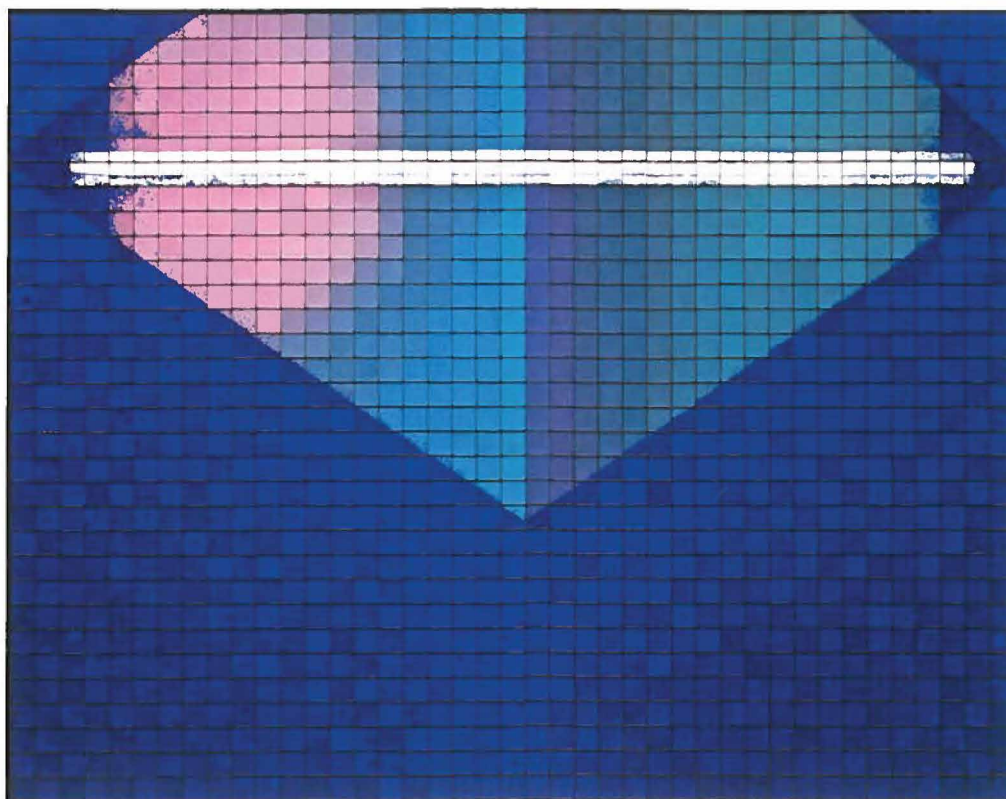
Discarded Styrofoam packaging from Apple computers were replicated in soap for Lachowicz's sculpture. In describing their production, the artist recalls,

I made giant molds of the packaging and each morning in our garage we cooked two thirty-plus-gallon batches of bergamot pink soap and poured them into the molds to be cast before going to the studio to work all day. It ended up being important to the homage that the whole family was involved in its manifestation. The kids, Walter, and I made all these soap blocks together. So ironically, I have become the insulation or the packaging between the kids and the boyfriend and the art object in this relationship.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> E-mail correspondence with author, April 2011.

<sup>8</sup> E-mail correspondence with author, April 2011.

CORNER CONVERGENCE FIRING BLUE, PINK AND GREEN, 2010  
 PRESSED EYESHADOW, ALUMINUM, GLASS  
 29 X 62 INCHES



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Packaging here for Lachowicz indexes the product of her relationships, not the façade of a commodity. Like Cassatt, Lachowicz is not a biological mother, but mothers and female guidance play a critical part in her life—from the mother who taught her about art and feminism to the caregiving relationships she has established with her boyfriend's three young daughters. *Untitled (Homage to Mary Cassatt)* is a "sculpture to be sensed" (Applin citing Lippard 2006, 495). The nonrepresentational art object references the absent female body through scent, evoking the hypermaterial from the immaterial. The sculpture's welcoming appeal to our senses provides a feminist alternative to the detached cool of minimalist art that Chave critiqued. Rachel Lachowicz's work provokes us to view, smell, and feel our bodies (ourselves) as valuable packages encasing carefully crafted and beautifully volatile products (Grosz 1994). This work also facilitates our recognition of the artist mothers who for so long have been eclipsed by the face of the father. |