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## Rachel Lachowicz: Feminine Man-Made

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# Rachel Lachowicz

## Feminine Man-Made

interview by **Leda Cempellini**\*

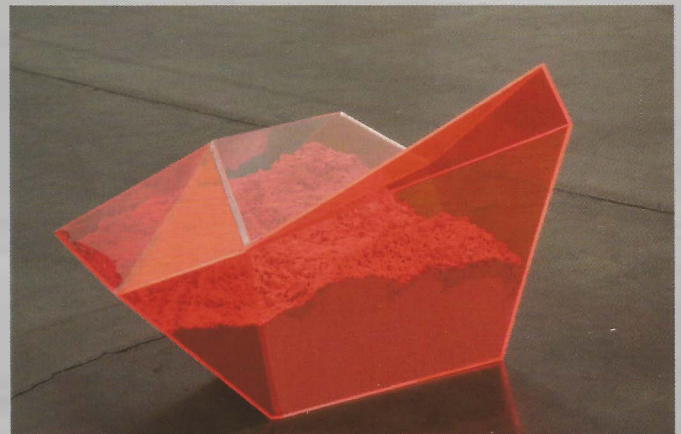
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**You consider yourself a feminist artist. How are your concerns similar to those of the 1970s feminism, how are they different?** In the Seventies feminism had a strategy, which worked for that time and accomplished many goals. When we look back, we may see some of these strategies as essentialist. Today we have a multiplicity of feminisms, there is not one single female experience. Often, women encounter largely what I call unconscious sexism. When I put together images for class lectures, I have to work very hard to level the playing field, because it is very easy to slide into a history that is predominantly male-based. There are multiple histories to look back on and whose history do we privilege? But there are also covert ways in which women are marginalized. I use cosmetic materials in my work to point that out. Lipstick is oil-based pigment, it's not much different from oil paint or encaustic. But when we talk about an artwork made of lipstick, it immediately becomes gendered and can be perceived as less important because cosmetics are associated with artifice. One way that we know that sexism in the art world is with the categorical difference in prices. There are female superstars and that is a credit to the progress we have made, but overall, there is also a huge disparity with solo exhibitions in major institutions that speaks to additional structural biases. One art dealer privately shared that they did not show as many women artists because they do not "pencil." So, if it is not as lucrative to sell women artists, that's going to keep re-entrenching this male hierarchy, because men get more representation, continue to make more money, and it's a slippery slope.

**What is the intrinsic motive that led to your decision to become an appropriation artist?** Appropriation wasn't an established avenue of production when I was in artschool in the late Eighties and the term was largely relegated to Sherry Levine. At Cal Arts, I was making work that used industrial materials and dealt with space—social, public and private. People often said to me that my work looked as if it was made by a man. That interested me. Why is that? If a woman walks in public and is whistled at or receives "cat calls", it must mean that public space is a location where men feel comfortable to dominate and own. If both craftsmanship and public space have historically belonged to masculine identities, how is one to make something that is outside of the masculine domain? These questions led me to pursue cosmetic materials as a medium for production: they are undeniably an index in our culture of the feminine and brought in an idea of feminism, whether you liked it or not. What happens when you make a minimalist cube out of lipstick? It instantly becomes political, and it is so because women are essentially marked, while men are free. That form and material ask questions in a way that no other material could. Rather than appropriation, I like to think of my work as translation.

**How did you have the idea that led to Particle Dispersion in 2012-2013?** Eye shadow is loose pigment that is put under compression with an oil binder into the defined space of a compact and I have been pressing my own eye shadow tins for over 20 years. Some time ago, I noticed that the green doesn't press the same, it bounces. I started looking at electron microscope images

"Particle Dispersion: Orange Vega" 2013, plexiglass case with eyeshadow, 22" x 40" x 32 3/4", courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery, ph credit: Gene Ogami



of these pigment particles and saw that they seemed to come in five basic shapes. For *Particle Dispersion*, I made enlarged abstracted versions of these shapes out of Plexiglas and then filled them with unpressed eye-shadow pigment. But it's not a one-to-one relationship between color and form: the toothpick shape happens to be yellow, but I am not trying to say that all yellow pigment particles have this shape. *Cell Interlocking Construction* is a large blue Plexiglas piece. The exoskeleton was formed by clear Plexiglas shapes and was loosely based on Bontecou, Nevelson and to some degree Schwitters. But if you just have the exoskeleton on the wall, without the pigment inside, it has no visual power; the cosmetics or the hyper material inside the Plexiglas boxes give it its shape and that enunciates what it is about. I like that much of my work plays with duality: making the feminine powerful while at the same time questioning our constructs of gender.

**As art faculty and Chair of the Art Department at Claremont Graduate University, you also have to juggle teaching and administrative responsibilities along with maintaining a high profile in the art world. How do you reconcile these two worlds?** I'm still learning. The balance of administrative responsibilities is a new skillset to me. I want to make sure as a professor, I can pose and answer as many questions as possible. How do you know what your philosophy is? We all have our inner mechanisms that make us who we are: we just have to pull them out, look at them and talk about them in order for the work to make more sense to us. I think that making a lot of work helps an artist to do that, and so I lean on my students to be extremely productive. As the head of the department, I have additional responsibilities to the institution and to the larger educational system. If art schools are filled with women and yet more of those that do well in the art world are men, we are doing something wrong. But if we continue to place women in roles of responsibility, helping to keep things fair, I think we can work towards a better world. I see my contribution as a professor and department chair in parallel with the goals of my artwork.

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