

Woman's Work: A Conversation with Misty Gamble on Decade



Blue Sunday by Misty Gamble. Ceramic, pearls, rhinestones, beads. Image courtesy of the artist.

The invitation to peer inside women's underwear is hard to resist. Strwn across the gallery wall, the ceramic artist Misty Gamble's confrontational "Blue Sunday" stimulates a reaction of curiosity and repulsion. Shaped like they were just removed and left crumpled on the floor, the ceramic panties expose a strip of fabric rarely glimpsed in a public setting, sparkling and colorful with costume rhinestones pasted to the private interior. The installation suggests a body, and the inner functions of a body, without introducing the figure herself. A simultaneous desire to approach and avoid means "Blue Sunday" successfully interfaces with our own sexual desire, since we are not looking at newly shed intimates, but baked clay in disguise as lingerie. We find ourselves in the physical Uncanny Valley where the subjects of "Decade," ten years of Misty Gamble's agitated feminine expressions, become real enough to raise questions.



Forevermore by Misty Gamble. Ceramic, flocking, Ralph Lauren gold metallic paint. Photo credit: E.G. Schempf

Our meeting at YJ's offers an interestingly contextual view of bright white BRIDE text in the window across the street, a falsely angelic glow advertising wifehood like a sought-after brand in the dark evening. It's an appropriate backdrop for a conversation with an artist who spent her life thinking about desire, traditions, and what it means to be female. Across the small table, Gamble recounts the creation of her huge wall installation, "Forevermore." "This was finished in 2016, but it took a year and a half and a lot of hands to make. 'Forevermore' is only a fraction of what we actually produced in the studio," she lays her hand on the image of the lilac ceramic wedding cakes between snaking gold ribbons, installed vertically on the Leedy-Voukos main gallery wall. "I did these in the symbolic colors of bridesmaids: lavender and white. I criticize conventional ideas of what makes people happy, such as being a bride, having glamorous weddings, the notion that more is always better."

More is better in the case of the installation. Almost every piece in the show employs the use of multiples to overwhelm an idea and drive the viewer to consider what limits we will go to to have excessive wealth and status. At a distance, "Forevermore" becomes an illusion of wallpaper that has sprung up out of the second dimension. The gold material woven between the lilac cakes outlines an unmissable vulvar shape, locking in the inseparable bond between societal decadence and primal desire. Ceramic wedding cakes direct the conversation to a ravenous hunger for social authority, and one of the means of acquiring it.

Excessively adorned hairdos and desserts exude a passion for wealth, status, and sexual parading. Figures are grotesque and out of proportion, but still decked out in facsimiles of the finer things. Gamble's unflinching criticism is rooted in her formative years. Rather than damn outright the norms of wealthy Palm Beach and Los Angeles trophy wives, Gamble adopts the role of cultural anthropologist to observe the ways consumerism and lifestyle are inextricably linked by status, which changes color and shape in each location. Palm Beach is garish and bright. LA is fashionable and severe. "I used the Kardashians for some of my research to find out what women of a certain status want from the world. But it's odd to be commenting on it, and to come from it, make work about it, satirize it, and want to sell it," she considers. "I always knew I would make the work I wanted to make, and nobody was going to stop me, because the only thing I want to be is authentic." Authenticity itself is under the cultural microscope of Gamble's studio. The disheveled piles of pastel pumps borrow imagery from every women's department store in the nation. The artist's name in a Kate Spade-esque font inscribed on the inner arch denotes factory-processed shoes at an affordable price. As style consumers, we too can wear cheap and reasonable heels out into the world, provided we don't mind them coming apart after their factory set sturdiness has worn off. Lucky for us, fashion is easy to replace.



Tan Hands by Misty Gamble. Ceramic, resin. Photo credit: Dan Wayne

The same fascination with the lifestyle of the rich and vapid amplify "Tan Hands," a series of nineteen hands sticking out of the wall, showcasing gaudy faux diamond rings, in a manner a woman with such a rock might exhibit to her friends. Prim and dainty, fingers stiff and angled down to give the admirer a better look at the towering stone atop a gold band, "Tan Hands" explores the culture

of pride that comes with following convention. But even with a rotation of studio assistants through the years, Gamble cast her own hands for the piece, uncovering another layer of personal history in the procession of wives-to-be. "I've been one of them," she says, flexing her retired piano hands. "I've come from these worlds, but I was always the outsider." As an outside observer, Gamble's comments could be misconstrued into bitchiness if one neglects to consider the intellectual analysis the artist subjects herself and her topics to. None of us are really outside the reach of pretty things, of being liked by our peers. "Tan Hands," like other work in the show, examines a type of *solution* to our cultural insecurities in a personal manner.



Betsy After School by Misty Gamble. Ceramic. Image courtesy of the artist.

Misty Gamble grew up in Los Angeles, where the lines between culture, class, and kitsch are more blurred than in the Midwest. While she was pursuing her MFA in San Francisco, she earned the reputation as a troublemaker in the male dominated ceramic program. "I did different things to antagonize my professors. I set out to make work that was so beautiful and terrible in its horrendousness, that it couldn't be avoided. Women are told throughout their lives: be pretty, be smart, get educated. But for god's sake don't make any waves." The figures in "Decade" evoke a visual puppetry without the strings, but the gesture of her subhuman figures recall the unsettling weightlessness that animates a marionette. Metaphorical strings attached to each woman and woman-like caricature are socially imposed by the greedy clamoring of society to have more, to prove more with frivolity. "Sweet Terror" came out of this drive to challenge what society expected

of women and women artists. The childlike figures in "Sweet Terror" are at once humorous and terrifying, like demonic waifs escaped from a personified version of daily insecurities. The green teen on roller skates, "Betsy After School," reacts to her environment by messily eating dessert in the middle of the floor, one hand stuffed underneath the folds of her pleated skirt. All the figures in "Sweet Terror" linger somewhere between real and imagined, on the cusp of becoming human, but denied by their desires and the imposing expectations of the environment they were born into.

Gamble's ten year retrospective is presented at the perfect time, and every piece in the show is worth seeing. Today, femininity is continuing to be redefined by strength and courage, and the bold figurative work in "Decade" is a reprieve from the enigmatic conceptualism that dominates a male-driven scene. "People are so scared and fearful, and that's the last thing we should be right now. I'm going to keep making this work because I won't be bullied," Gamble says of recent political events and the timeliness of the show. I nod in agreement, recalling the stoic busts "Decadence" and "Luxuriant," two perfectly styled figures whose hair denies each a chance to speak or listen.

Misty Gamble "Decade: Selected works from 2006-2016" is on view through April 1st at Leedy-Voulikos Main Gallery (2012 Baltimore Ave, KCMO Hours: Thurs-Sat 11-5)

[The Empress's New Clothes](#)



As the opening date of All is Fair approaches, the new business started by Peregrine Honig in the Bauer building on West 18th Street in Kansas City, the usual media and Honig's own following have little to criticize. Initial reviews, soft announcements of the shop opening, served to entice Kansas City with the promise of new territory being explored in an effort to relieve some of the oppression the trans community faces. [The first article](#), written by Huffington Post writer Kayti Doolittle, spouted some of the usual uplifting predictions for the shop (and at one point even compared her own desire for non-lacey underwear to the trans experience—no I'm not kidding). The lack of critical voices on the matter make it more important than ever to deconstruct the implications of a prominent artist opening up a transgender lingerie shop—separate from her existing lingerie shop—and using the store as a reason to call herself an activist.

Let's start with the obvious: a privileged white woman of a dominant social class is using her business skills and local connections to profit off a product that is marketed to an oppressed minority. Not only that, she is controlling the image on the product itself, injecting her own voice and her work on each garment. What seems like harmless business smarts at first can still be peeled back to reveal a cycle of gender oppression, misinformation, and misrepresentation of a vibrant community by someone who doesn't belong to it. In my now seven-month long journey to understand this issue from as many sides as possible, I've discovered a lot of different ways to approach this issue—ranging from [our culture's problem of appointing Hollywood cis-genders to play trans roles](#), [why high-profile organizations like SAGA believe straight allies accomplish things LGBTQ individuals simply cannot](#), and perhaps most important of all, how the wide umbrella of Transgender is in a constant state of flux. Everyone I've informally interviewed about this endeavor had something to

say, most with a mixture of mild curiosity or indifference, some with enthusiasm for the product, others altogether enraged by the venture. One of the strangest things I've come across was that most of the straight, cis-gender individuals I chatted with seemed to have no problem at all with the store. What strikes many as support strikes me as an ignorance to the extreme inequality the transgender community faces *all the time*. It was much easier for the cis-gender straight population to show support and excitement because none of the issues affect them directly. Vehement non-supporters were quick to point out the ways in which this store directly insults or mistreats them/the LGBTQ community they belong to. Same goes for mild supporters, who displayed brief curiosity and a tentative plan to someday visit the store and see what it's about. The only excited supporters in the LGBTQ community I talked to fell into the drag queen/performance artist category, an interesting point I feel needs to be made.

These were all one-on-one conversations. Hardly any of these opinions have made it into any of the major media articles thus far. Every other article I come across is an exclusive interview with Peregrine herself—obviously tooting her own horn for the sake of the business, as business owners do—and so far it seems none of these reporters are actually reaching out to the LGBTQ community for their opinions. Maybe they're afraid of finding what I found in my journey: groups of people who either don't care or are only mildly interested. Heading into a community that is always fighting against some injustice in one way or another, it is perilous to discuss something as material as what kind of underwear they would prefer to wear. *Perhaps these reporters are content with one person's opinion—the person who has the most to gain from a positive public appearance.*

Maybe they just don't want to put in the legwork.

Most likely, I imagine, each individual who has reported on All Is Fair and has put [some major positive spin on the piece is of this cis-gender privileged class](#)—the ones who talk about the shop most favorably. My biggest question to Honig, to Kansas City, and to anyone who is watching this story develop: *Where are the voices that matter most?* Why do the loudest, most supportive voices come from the privileged class? If the trans community is the last to speak up about this, will we still be listening, or will our attentions have drifted again to the next artist using social buzz words to fill their pockets?

Without the essential voices that are missing from this conversation, all I can hear is Honig using her media influence to open a new bank account. I can't prevent that from happening, but I can offer you another side of the issue that is deeper and more sinister than you will hear from other media outlets.

I want to break this down so we can examine the ways injustice is hidden beneath an assertion of understanding. Keep in mind, neither I nor my correspondents are authoritative voices in the media, LGBTQ culture, or Kansas City's art scene. Together, we have simply contributed our voices to navigate this complex and mutable issue in a way that allows for a deeper and more productive conversation to occur.

It seems Honig believes a new store front will be more inclusive than it is excluded from Birdies, the existing shop. This simplified model leaves the critical thinkers with more questions than answers. In her unique social position—in society and in Kansas City's who's who club—it might not occur to her that what *she* wants from a store may not be what the trans community seeks in their efforts to become more visible and incorporated into daily life. As Cy Lauz expressed in a written piece [about the shop on KCUR](#): “If you are a trans woman who is not particularly ‘passable’ and are shopping at a store or public venue, you face the possibility of being harassed, judged and even physically hurt.” Although the quote was inserted as a promotion for All Is Fair within the context of that particular write-up, the concerns expressed are dangerously real. Ignoring what Lauz is saying, or worse,

spinning it around to support Honig's crusade, is just one more example of how local media is working to control our opinions while the [Cream Club](#) gets their backs scratched. The dangers of opening a separated store—in an alley, remember—that is targeted to gain the business (and trust) of the trans community are real and present. Even in the liberal 18th Street district of the Crossroads, nobody is prevented from bringing their narrow-minded hatred for non-binary individuals to a violent head. It sickens us to think it could ever happen, but [it happens all the time](#). It appears the move reflects Honig's real intentions with the store and does not prioritize the safety of her customers. I wonder if Birdies couldn't work on rebuilding their brand for inclusiveness and encouragement, rather than detaching other aspects of human sexuality and the spectrum areas between gender expressions in order to remain relevant. All Is Fair is a new segregation, a definitive line between "our" lingerie and "their" lingerie, literally separated by a one-way street that could represent our passing interest in social politics. The trans community might prefer to walk into Birdies and be treated like any other customer, but that might involve changing the overwhelming feminine aspects of the store itself. Simply re-branding Birdies would eliminate a crucial aspect of this project for Honig: the hype-generating click-bait the media will clamber over to report on—an element that Honig has always depended on for each new venture to succeed.

The notion that human sexuality and the gender spectrum should be divided into different lanes for purchasing different wares is a dangerous one; one I don't think Honig has considered from the perspective of the LGBTQ community. Sure, the shape and size of the lingerie will be different, but an eclectic mix of undergarments in an existing store might be more warm and inclusive. In talking with [Sandra Meade](#) and Una Nowling, each expressed a similar concern for the concept of stores that might be seen as supporting the notion that transgender people are fundamentally different, and should shop in their own spaces. Both prefer to shop at places for women, like Dillards and Nordstrom, or anywhere else that carries women's underwear. When we talked about unique proportions to consider, Una made a scientific observation:

"It's inarguable that a transgender woman with XY chromosomes will likely have a different body shape and proportions than an XX woman. If this clothing line takes that into account, along the lines of how good shoes made for transgender women will be built upon a 'male shoe' last, then that would be useful."

The prefix to *woman* or *man* shouldn't matter, but as the trend of talking about transgender and transsexual issues continues, more people are choosing to create stores especially for "them". Thus, the harmful idea of "the other" continues to exist and to profit. Both women, who I want to remind you are not the authorities of trans culture (although their activism is admirable—and they were kind enough to meet with me and have a discussion) said they believe there is a niche market for this brick-and-mortar shop, including among cross-dressers and others who are not yet comfortable in mainstream stores, especially among those with a steady and reliable income, since such specialty shops may be expensive. We talked about the depressing transgender economic status, and that many individuals under the transgender umbrella would simply be unable to afford such material goods.

When you think of custom made underwear—made by a prominent artist whose work is collected nationwide—and you think of the details that must be paid regarding each individual's unique curves and surfaces, the dollar signs start to add up. Factor in high-quality material and manual labor and we're looking at some pricy undies. (Anyone who has shopped at Birdies can relate, as Honig's choice of garments hardly ever falls below the \$30 mark.) Marketing an expensive product to a community that [faces a high rate of job displacement and income disparity](#) based on their identity seems uninformed at best. Paying straight, privileged designers of the upper social class to create these products, only to sell them to a traditionally lower income class, seems stranger still. My correspondent, Vian May—who has helped me understand the issue from an individual perspective—

had some things to say:

“At the same time, inclusiveness helps create an environment of acceptance almost as much as out living does. But this is an environment that we are still in the process of creating. And the backlash can be disheartening. I’m not sure if I can express the thoughts of other trans guys, much less those of trans women, but I have a legitimate concern over violence in my life due to being a trans man. That violence is a threat to trans women in an exponentially larger set of circumstances and exponentially more violent altercations, up to and including murder.

I think it’s easy to say ‘what should be’ when ‘what should be’ doesn’t affect you. Of course my underclothes should be easily available, there shouldn’t be a question of what changing room or bathroom I use, there should be no concern about me losing my job or my clients over my trans status. How things should be is rarely how they are.”

As a trans male, Vian’s approach to safety issues and concerns is not unique. An inclusive environment is completely necessary if trans people want to shop for their clothes and materials freely, but that inclusiveness is still in the process of being obtained. The idea that inclusiveness can be reached most effectively by separating “ours” from “their” material goods, rather than educating the public that might nay-say all-gender stores, is not inclusive. It is the exact opposite.

Fads are a problem in the art world. The more artists latch on to the hip new socio-political trends, the more they reduce them to their own voice and interpretation. Trans issues are all over the news these days, and although most of this exposure comes from a place of positive empowerment, a lot of it reinforces our existing ideas about the community. The rise of trans roles, often played by cis-male actors like Eddie Redmayne and Jeffrey Tambor, fill our curiosities of “what it means to be trans”, except for when they don’t. More producers, artists, writers, and subcultures are lifting the trans identity and applying it to their own pursuits. I didn’t think about this until just after I saw “Unicorn”—Honig’s first solo exhibition in years. When I got wind of what the new shop was about, something was off in the way “Unicorn” was off. In the middle of the gallery, surrounded by the Cream Club of Kansas City, I tried to put my finger on the growing discomfort I felt while watching people experience the work. Honig’s main representation of the trans community was a [large image of the fabled “Unicorn”](#): a young woman with a penis between her legs/a young man with small breasts and engorged nipples. A young trans, essentially. This “slashie” of the sexes disturbed me—not because of the hermaphroditic genitalia—but that now, in the middle of a large gallery filled with the privileged majority, this was the take-away image of transgender. The rest of the subject matter was overwhelmingly female oriented: [foxes, bunnies, women’s legs, little lambs](#)—and I was left confused as to how that was representative to the other half of a culture that walk the delicate lines around what society wants them to be: “masculine” or “feminine”. Where were the traditionally male oriented images? Or better yet, where were the genderless creatures—the easily transformed and unhindered symbols that more accurately represent a culture and lifestyle of non-fixed gender organisms, like slugs and worms? Why was the female role so heavily portrayed while the male role was completely absent? It appeared Honig was oblivious to how one-sided her portrayal of the trans culture was, not only because the images seemed heavily influenced by her own feminine experiences, but the crowd itself seemed to lack representation.

We often make the mistake of equating popularity with influence, positivity with justice, and agreeability with righteousness. In fact, “activism” in the art world is often nothing more than a minority voice being refracted through a majority person’s prism. This happens over and over again in the Kansas City art scene: we assign the faces we see most frequently to the progression of social change. Those who control the media control the images and the descriptions, and mislabeling artists who appropriate culture as activists is one of their most damaging and pervasive qualities. In reality, it appears these are just the same people showing up to the same parties, riding on the

coattails of a buzzword or movement, using their privilege to move between their world and another under the title of “activist”. Artists somehow get away with this all the time. Start seeing it. [Start calling it out.](#)

This is not to say there are not real activists in the art world. The late, great Steven Metzler was one of them. The community’s loss of his kindness and humility is large, but as someone who moved between the art and activist world, he was a shining example of what it means to be a wonderful person. There are others like him who have the heart and the means to do real good in this world, but they are often the silent do-gooders, not normally in the spotlight.

It must be difficult for a celebrity to distance themselves from the face of their own brand, but that is what Peregrine must do if we are expected to take her “activism” seriously. [I have criticized actions like this in the past](#), and it’s no surprise Peregrine brought her youngest sister, Esther, on board for a photo shoot that appropriates the trans identity. You can [see it on Facebook](#), the image of Peregrine and Esther side by side dressed in casual “boy” clothes with their hair pulled back and feminine features downplayed. Under #brothers, this image is evocative of modern-day blackface—a theatrical performance that does nothing to drive political or social activism towards a more equal world, but serves to feed the privileged majority an image of a culture they will accept. Like blackface, this image implies that we no longer live in a gendered world, which is highly incorrect. With the hashtag “brothers”, the Honig sisters have assigned a pronoun to a people who are, in part, trying to dismantle this aspect of language and identity. The very idea belittles anyone struggling against gender inequality, dwindling reproductive rights, lack of fair pay and housing, and sexual discrimination. Esther’s inclusion in the shoot may be the most perfect analogy of a privileged class kowtowing to the famous for seconds of internet share-ability without understanding the greater implications of their support and actions. Sister or not, her agreeability to engage in such a display is a telling sign of the veil of advantage she lives under. Esther is now probably best known for [playing this kind of dress up before](#)—a project that succeeded in feeding the beast that creates and perpetuates gender and beauty norms—so [I was not surprised](#) to see her continue to treat identity like a costume. The powers that decide what is manly and what is feminine have so much control, it seems the Honig sisters are just as normative as they are. This unaware state of privilege is so glaring, it hurts to look at. The image shadows the idea that maybe Peregrine and Esther are struggling within their heteronormative, privileged lifestyles and that this action is an expression of their truer personhoods. Sadly, like blackface, I think the two are so far removed from what the experience is actually like, they succeeded only in embarrassing themselves to those who face the struggles they pretend to understand. It is simply disrespectful.

Appropriation typically involves an exploitation or assimilation into a minority/oppressed culture by a majority/dominant culture. In this case, the dominant—two privileged women who enjoy their class and celebrity status—are laying claim to the identity of a marginalized community they do not belong to. [Julia Serano breaks this kind of appropriation](#) of the LGBTQ lifestyle into three motivations:

Erasure: Marginalized/minority groups have little power or voice in society. Therefore, when the dominant/majority group takes up their identities, ideas, and other cultural creations, it tends to undermine or erase the context in which they were created, and the original meanings and symbolism that underlie them. In other words, the dominant/majority typically takes up the marginalized/minority group’s creations while disregarding their perspective.

Exploitation: Sometimes members of the dominant/majority group will materially profit from aspects or acts that they have appropriated from a marginalized/minority group without ever giving anything back to that community. This tends to further exacerbate economic disparities that may already exist between the two groups.

Denigration: This can refer to a couple different things. Denigration can mean “to treat or represent as lacking in value or importance; belittle,” which applies to instances where important or sacred aspects of the marginalized/minority group’s identity or culture are appropriated by the dominant/majority group in an irreverent or disrespectful manner. Denigration can also mean “to speak damagingly of; criticize in a derogatory manner; sully; defame: to denigrate someone’s character,” which applies to instances where the dominant/majority group appropriates some aspect of the marginalized/minority group’s identity or culture in order to purposefully ridicule, parody, or insult members of that group.

These three motivations are not obvious to Peregrine if she is enjoying her dominance without respecting or relating to the culture she is borrowing. It is social colonialism, identity gentrification, and it is responsible for some deep seated misinformation that manifests into small or large injustices.

I’m not forgetting the point of this store: to provide unique, custom made underclothes to individuals who struggle with the annoyances of connecting their body to their mind. I can’t really imagine what that’s like, as my underwear is about as low maintenance as it gets and my sexual and gender identity fall under a different umbrella, but I can imagine there is something people will want, will benefit from, and will pay for that All Is Fair can provide. But Honig is creating a brand that neglects to imagine a body that does not embrace the cute, frilly aspects of underwear. Handmade garments with her own paintings on them reflects a one-sided understanding of how lingerie works. Has she considered the fact that many trans individuals would rather not draw attention to the parts of them they must alter in order to feel normal? As I was researching and asking about the differences in what trans people want from their underwear, my correspondent provided this:

“Why would celebrating the fact that I have to bind, which in our culture, makes me supposedly less of a man, be any different? If they actually manage to make a reasonably priced binder that doesn’t ride up or break your ribs and don’t paint it like it’s goddamned lingerie they may get my business yet, via mail order. It just seems like they still regard trans men as women who want pretty things to celebrate their body, and that offends me. While the wearing of bras and other female undergarments may be a celebration of femininity for trans women, I do not find the daily recognition that my body is not a reflection of myself any type of celebration at all.”

This was something I hadn’t considered before. The very act of covering ones body in an ongoing attempt to bring it closer to one’s true identity is something I don’t experience on such an extreme level. Of course, we all attempt to dress in a way that reflects who we are, but we can control and change our clothes whenever and however we want. We’re mostly stuck with our bodies, and trans individuals who do not seek or cannot afford operation must find ways to live with the body they were assigned without the constant reminder that they are not living in the correct body. Some people buy lingerie to celebrate their figures because they want, or want other people, to pay attention to it. It seems there is a great disconnect between the business model of hand-painted, delicate, meticulously created garments and some individuals’ need to just throw something on and not think about it as much as possible. I’m also not the target audience for this store, so I need to recognize there are many different preferences and lifestyles that would find some products in All Is Fair beneficial. Given my experiences at Birdies, with Honig’s “Unicorn” show, and as a viewer of her art on a more general level, I am curious to see if she is able to create a product that is not saturated in femininity.

I want to make one thing clear about myself: I do not speak for the transgender community in any way. I do not speak for a population that has a voice of their own. I do not claim to understand more than anyone else, or in a better way. I have not been asked to stand in for another voice, nor have I been assigned the role of reviewer by anyone. I am doing this because I want to say something

nobody else has said yet. I am doing this because I have the ability to contribute to the conversation using my own tools. I am doing this because I am afraid we will repeat the past with a new vocabulary, steeped in altruism and communal interest but really guiding the movement in the wrong direction. I am doing this because I am not afraid of Peregrine Honig, her followers, or other people who may not like what I have to say. I am doing this because when a community is being appropriated by the privileged majority—when their lives and identities are being borrowed and used by the profiteering dominant—I want to stand on the side that is fighting for a greater and more equal world.