Add, subtract, and multiply: paintings

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ADD, SUBTRACT, AND MULTIPLY: PAINTINGS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

In

The School of Art

by
Elizabeth Lorena Noble
B.A., University of Central Arkansas, 2005
December, 2008
This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father, and in loving memory of:

Tim Jordan II, Frannie Kelly, and Marie Briggs.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis chronicles the daily rituals involved in personal grooming, adornment, and cosmetic use. As a woman and a painter, I appropriate the female figure in my work and use the body to provoke thought and conversation about the concept of the body as a workable surface. I see the body surface similarly to how I see the painting surface. In my work, the figure becomes her own artist, owning her own body, and manipulating it however she pleases in a series of up-close, private moments within intimate spaces.

The body, it seems, has always been viewed as a surface. There is a wealth of history surrounding the plastic manipulation of the physical body which informs my work as I trace grooming, adornment, and cosmetic usage across time and various Western cultures in this thesis. The image that contemporary mass media projects of the ideal female body and appearance sparks my interest to seek historical information that can explain the evolution of cultural aesthetics and ideologies that aids in understanding why we do what we do to our bodies. I then appropriate the “pressures” felt by women to alter their appearances by owning the idea of the body as a surface onto which one may add, subtract, or multiply.
ADD, SUBTRACT, AND MULTIPLY: PAINTINGS

The concept of the body as a surface resounds throughout history. The earliest known prehistorical uses of body adornment and cosmetics were probably for ritualistic and ceremonial purposes. The artistic representations of prehistoric female forms seem to suggest that even then physical adornment was coming to be used culturally, no longer limited to ritualistic and ceremonial usage.\(^1\) This idea translates to the contemporary artists’ concept of surface as something to be manipulated, controlled, colored, created upon, and expressed upon. In this series of paintings I suggest that the same judgment and critique given by artist to work is expressed by person to body surface. I have chosen to see both the negative and the positive themes historically and contemporaneously associated with cosmetic, grooming, and adornment discourses. In a series called *Add, Subtract, and Multiply*, I use painting and collage as mediums to chronicle the contemporary Western woman’s ritual of grooming, personal adornment, and cosmetic use.

When searching for evidence of how cosmetics and personal adornment practices evolved through time and varied by culture, researchers must rely on artists’ representations, archaeological excavations, and whatever written evidence remains.\(^2\) Red ocher in Cro-Magnon graves and the host of stone cosmetic containers in ancient Egyptian burial sites\(^3\) are some of the oldest known artifacts suggesting the use of cosmetics in both societies.\(^4\) The ancient Egyptians are among the earliest of whom it is believed that cosmetic use was a part of their daily life. In 5000 B.C. eye makeup and designs in Egyptian face painting weren’t restricted to age, sex, or class, as wearing paste around one’s eyes for protection from the sun was culturally acceptable.\(^5\) It was Egypt that so influenced the Classical Greek and Roman cultures from which we have inherited many of our ideas about personal grooming and adornment.\(^6\) The so-called Frankfurt
Acorn (Fig. 1), c. 420-400 B.C., is a Classical Greek lekythos that was most likely used as a container for perfumed oils. It gives insight into the leisure activity of personal adornment in the toilette by the representation of a seated young woman holding a looking glass. Through this representation, the artist unknowingly provided the twenty-first century with an image not foreign at all. People have been painting their body surfaces for centuries, and arguments vary as to why, in most cases, women have been the main users of cosmetics and other body adornment—whether it was a personal choice, a cultural norm, a device used by men to control women, or, in the modern world, a result of advertisement schemes. In fact, all of these reasons may be true, or may have been true, at one time or another. It is ritual, ceremony, vanity, oppression, empowerment, status, humor, deception, beauty, and the unattractive that I am chronicling through my paintings. Instead of the final “product,” which generally means the sort of images of women to which we are exposed in film, advertisement, and even art, I show a series of process-oriented images which penetrate the closed doors that contain the private, often strange tools and procedures used during these rituals.

Until the 1920s, when the modern-day twist-up lipstick case was invented, it had been taboo to publicly apply makeup. Traditionally, privacy has been a theme attached to painting the body, and that privacy is what my paintings invade. The element of privacy is deeply rooted in Western culture, where the virtues and morals of a woman were historically of the utmost importance, and since makeup had long been associated with actresses, courtesans, and prostitutes, as well as the grand aristocracy, most “average” women who desired to paint their faces did so behind closed doors. The images I present in this body of work are private moments that occur before the final “product” has been achieved. Fume Room (Fig. 2) exemplifies such a moment. This cool blue painting shows the figure in a small space, sitting atop a toilet seat while
Figure 1

Frankfort Acorn, Oil jar, c. 420-400 B.C.
Figure 2

awkwardly reaching forth to paint her toenails. The red paint in the mostly blue setting calls attention to the center of the painting, towards which all movement proceeds. Red is a color that has historically been associated with women, makeup, and vanity, but here it is balanced by a cool setting that is intense, quiet, and meditative. A private room, a private action, and a moment of creation are observed on the canvas. Has the figure become less important than the objects about her? Is she unaware of anything but the monotonous action she is engaged in? Whichever, she is perhaps at this moment seeing her body just as the artist sees a canvas.

In further discussion of my work, I wish to call attention to the motif that underlies each painting. The linear patterns and typed script are printed on manufactured dress patterns. This thin paper manipulates the oil paints in such a way that the image appears more “matte” and two-dimensional, an effect which, along with the repetition of decorative elements throughout the series, I would partially attribute to the influence of Art Nouveau. Its connotation, however, conjures up ideas of measurement, tradition, the stereotypically feminine, cutting indicators for plastic surgery, and above all, modernity. The Butterick company, a well-known dress pattern company that exists to this day, released a book in 1890 entitled Beauty, Its Attainment and Preservation. Here a chapter is dedicated to a prescribed beauty routine for the proper lady, which advocates “a thorough inspection of [one’s] facial defects and also… a proper application of remedies and cosmetics.”\textsuperscript{10} This method of thinking suggests that something is wrong with the female reader’s face, and it paved the way for the cosmetic and grooming advertisements of the twentieth century, when more and more products were increasingly aimed at a market in which women were made to feel aware and ashamed of their imperfect bodies.\textsuperscript{11} It is important, however, to look backward and forward again on the matter. In varying societies, at various points in time, heterosexual and homosexual men had subscribed to face painting; at other times,
though, it was harlots and members of royal court. And however strange it may seem, it is a great contradiction in social history that the outcast harlots were imitated by some of the most famous women in Western history, such as Elizabeth I of England, Marie Antoinette of France, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Madame de Pompadour, to name a few. All of this helps to make sense of the fact that the character of women who artificially beautified themselves was often called into question—at least those who were not, say, the queen of England.

During the reign of Elizabeth I, a woman who altered her appearance with false hair, makeup, high-heeled shoes, or any other means of plastic manipulation in order to fool a lover into marriage could be punished under the same penalties handed down to those practicing witchcraft. A direct link was seen between cosmetics and deceit. Interestingly enough, Elizabeth I became an icon for youth and beauty in her day, as many painted portraits represent her with an ageless, plastic-looking face. Some felt that her outward body had become an “emblem for female virtue,” flawless and pure. Some in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the application of cosmetics and other beautifying agents as a form of playing God. Some criticized it as vain, others as superficial. Some thought it enhanced sexuality and led both sexes off a virtuous path, while a more modern criticism sees cosmetic use as a tool for promoting conformity. Cosmetic use, however, has also become a symbol of freedom for women in more recent times.

The twentieth century brought drastic changes in the West. After World War I the advertising industry began to grow, as did the film industry in Hollywood. These growths affected the world of many women. The nineteenth century had already seen the beginning of the general store that brought cosmetics to almost any woman in Europe or the American frontier. These cosmetics, however, were very different from those of today. Most of them included little
pigment, as even at the turn of the twentieth century actresses were still the only “normal”
women who wore a lot of makeup. After the First World War, the suffrage movement gave
women a sort of emancipation in the U.S., and for some, bright red lipstick became a symbol of
this new freedom. Like many suppressed peoples throughout time, women all over the
Western world seem to have appropriated ideas of cosmetics and grooming that had such a long
history of negative implications, and made the use of makeup to complement their newly won
rights. They “bobbed their hair, donned short skirts, smoked in public, and wore heavy makeup
that had formerly been the attribute of the harlot.” The booming film industry brought images
of fashion and cosmetic trends to women like never before. During the Second World War, the
morale of American women was boosted by the small luxury of patriotic red lipstick, and even
when the U.S. War Production Board enforced the rationing of goods, certain cosmetics were
omitted from the list of restricted articles. At the same time, cosmetic advertisements included
endorsements of women’s wartime work with imagery conveying the idea that they should still
look “feminine” despite the circumstances—an idea that seemed to be rather cumbersome and
put more pressure on hard-working women.

As mentioned before, cosmetics have a long history of denunciation in the Western
world. It seems that the changes that transpired after both world wars caused the social pressures
concerning cosmetics to change dramatically. In an increasingly consumerist society, it is
argued that makeup advertising began to appeal to women as subjects while treating them as
objects. This argument is addressed in my paintings, where time and again the subject is
treating herself as an object. She dries her hair, applies makeup, adds a few inches to her height,
and so on. The body, during this possibly daily ritual of redundant gestures and applications,
becomes a surface not very much unlike the surface of the painting itself. According to Murray Wax’s “plastic theme” in his 1957 essay on “Themes in Cosmetics and Grooming,”

the typical American woman… tends to view her body as a craftsmen or artist views his raw material. This is the matter which she can shape, color, and arrange to produce an object which, hopefully, will be at once attractive, fashionable, and expressive of her own individuality. Devices which increase her ability to mold her body are received much as the avant-garde artist receives new techniques and modalities for his own work.

Wax compares the painting artist to the painting woman. This concept is addressed in my paintings. The objects, or “tools”, used by the figure to alter her appearance by applying color and texture, also conceal or remove what are deemed flaws. The eraser is the scissors, the razor, and the tweezers. The paint is the powder, the lipstick, and the mascara. The varnish is the lotion and cream. The “makeup colors” of pinks, baby blues, reds, and flesh tones are referenced by the oil and acrylic paints on these canvases. The woman in the paintings treats her body as I treat the canvas. Thus, I have empathy, both as a woman who engages in these cosmetic and grooming rituals, and in my own work as a painter, not only for this madness to translate the image that exists in one’s mind to “reality” on a surface, but also for the psychological and emotional highs and lows that accompany both endeavors, given the seemingly never-ending criticism from oneself as well as others—the inspection, judgments, and unmet goals of perfection.

The theme of “making up” depends on different variables. One has been described as “an internalized concept of a unique self, [which] exploits the insecurities that arise when this private self has to acquire an external visible form which others will interpret.”23 On the other hand, this world of “beauty” is one where imagination lives. The desired self can become a reality, and what is hidden in the private self can be displayed and expressed on the physical body. This is perhaps a more modern idea concerning the use of cosmetics, and also a more artful way of viewing the theme. Add, Subtract and Multiply is a series that, on the surface, focuses mostly on
the latter. Mostly, it is a series that chronicles each moment, movement, and gesture of the grooming, cosmetic, and adornment rituals. The colors in the paintings reference makeup colors, and the contour outlines that flatten the forms negate realism. Fragile dress patterns not only create a more flesh-like surface to paint on, but the occasional rippling of the paper surface almost literally suggests flesh. It is fragile, and the wrinkles allude to age, time, and the end of youthful beauty. Notice the figure in Blackout (Fig. 3) as she leans in to the mirror to apply mascara to her lashes. Her face makes a less than attractive gesture, and the applied paper wrinkles across her face and foreshadows the inevitable effect of time.

The colors used in these paintings reinforce stereotypically feminine associations. Pastel and saturated colors are used in cosmetics, little girls’ toys, fabrics, advertisements, and grooming materials. Just as my paintings reflect the makeup colors and grooming tools of the contemporary toilette, one may look to paintings of the past to see the face “painting” habits of earlier times. John Singer Sargent was a prolific portrait painter to the wealthy, that is, those who could afford pricey cosmetics and for whom it was acceptable to use them. The white faces and the rosy cheeks and lips of his late nineteenth-century sitters provide a glimpse of the upper-class cosmetic techniques of the time (see Fig. 4). At the other end of the cosmetic spectrum, the Czech artist František Kupka did some paintings of prostitutes in heavy makeup in the early twentieth century. His Red Lipstick I (Fig. 5) of 1908 (Paris, Musée National d’Art Moderne) is closely related in subject and gesture to my painting Perfect Form (Fig. 6).

Kupka’s white faces probably reflect the use of egg white paste, though it could perhaps have been ceruse, a cosmetic of white lead that returned to popular use in sixteenth-century Europe since its last bit of popularity in ancient Rome. Though poisonous and causing skin
Figure 3

Figure 4

John Singer Sargent, *Ena and Betty, Daughters of Asher and Mrs. Wertheimer*, Oil on canvas, 73 x 51.5 in., 1901.
Figure 5

damage as well as a host of other health problems, ceruse was favored as a whitener because it clung better to the skin than other options (such as egg whites) without heavy application. Ironically, this expensive cosmetic, once used by some of the wealthiest and most “glamorous” women in the world, also ruined the surface of their skin. In fact, cosmetics are notorious for having contained hazardous materials such as lead, mercury, copper, and arsenic. Cosmetic materials containing these elements are infamous for causing premature aging, tooth decay, baldness, and even, in some accounts, death. It is curious that some of the toxic ingredients in the mediums that I use as an artist have been used in makeup of the past, and remarkable that some are still willing to risk their health in a quest for ideal physical beauty.

Patricia Phillipy writes of “the exhilaration of self-definition, the defiant power in appropriating one’s own image, that becomes possible as the mirror transforms into the canvas or the page.” She also argues that in defiance of the male gaze, which has dominated figurative paintings for centuries, the woman (as a cosmetic user and one who adorns) takes her body into her own hands and makes her body a work of art. This argument resonates with the work I do, as I too embrace the concept of the body as a surface in my own life. I have tattooed skin, I have a semi-daily routine of using makeup, and I am interested in fashion. Then of course, as an artist, why would I not explore why I do what I do? Why do I do this to my body? These thoughts are catalysts for the research and the visual imagery I am presenting.

I have appropriated these feminine stereotypes and made them into a powerful and visually exciting, yet evocative, body of work. On the surface these are light, easy, and “pretty” paintings, but there is so much calculation that lies beneath them, which speaks of me, the artist, as well as the body image discourse. The image is preconceived. Then the main color palette is chosen, again preconceived. Next the dress patterns (whose shape and size I have searched for)
are cautiously and delicately applied, with a clear gel medium, in the appropriate location that (if I have done my visual analyzing correctly) corresponds to the shape, space, and/or direction of the subject matter. Then the delicate drawing that never leaves the pictorial surface is executed, and then come the laborious hours of looking. Yes, looking for where the color will be laid and which color will be laid. The delicate paper of the patterns soaks up the oil’s pigment, which is why I refer to the “looking” process as laborious, because once the paint touches the paper, there is no going back on that surface. In my mind, this elaborate, time-consuming process of premeditation, precise application of texture, color and line, and long looking, corresponds with imagery of “getting ready” in my paintings.

If one feels I have been rather passive concerning the cosmetic, beauty, and adornment discourse, then that is a correct assumption. I both celebrate and feel bothered by the “world of beauty.” The beauty/cosmetic/adornment discourse empowers and restrains, enhances and deceives, is narcissistic and boosts self-esteem. What I do refute is the idealized imagery of the female body, as though there is a standard of “perfection” that should exist and be emulated. This popular concept is what spurs me to never show the “final product,” but instead the “work in progress.” After all, when in the pursuit of idealized plastic perfection of the outer surface, it is not without toil or without artifice from which the final product transpires. For the toil and artifice I depict is an endless routine of “add, subtract, and multiply,” both on the body and upon the canvas.
END NOTES


2 Ibid., p. ix.

3 Ibid., p. 17.


6 Pointer 2005, 10.


8 Pointer 2005, 158.


10 Pointer 2005, 140-141.


12 Ibid., p. 45.


15 Wax 1957, 589.

16 Pointer 2005, 140.


18 Pointer 2005, 156.

20 Ibid., 41, 43.


23 Ibid., 160.

24 Pointer 2005, 92-93.

25 Angloglou 1970, 75.

26 Phillippy 2006, 198.
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APPENDIX: PAINTINGS

Elizabeth L. Noble, Maquillage IV, Makeup and facial wipes, 33 x 23 in., 2008.
VITA

Elizabeth L. Noble was born and raised, the younger of two children, in Little Rock, Arkansas. Her parents are small business owners, and their hard work always influenced Elizabeth to work diligently at whatever she chose to do. Early in her life she was introduced to classical music by her father, who had studied music all his life, and playing the trumpet became Elizabeth’s first introduction to the arts. Painting and drawing were consistent throughout Elizabeth’s formative years but she chose to use these skills more objectively when she decided to pursue Interior Design when she entered college as an undergraduate. However, she found that her art classes were far more exciting, and with the encouragement of certain professors and friends, she chose to study fine art. Elizabeth decided to move from Arkansas to study at Memphis College of Art in Tennessee but soon returned to Arkansas, where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Central Arkansas in 2005, and where she graduated *summa cum laude* with honors. She enrolled at Louisiana State University for graduate school in the fall of 2006 and received her Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art in the fall of 2008. Elizabeth L. Noble currently resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she is a working artist.