

Gentle Agitation

by Elizabeth Chapin

Jennifer Ling Datchuk's exhibit *Truth Before Flowers* at Women and Their Work is a generous invitation to sit, both literally and figuratively, and to talk about and ponder the nuanced landscape of being a woman. One is met, upon entering the gallery, by three hanging macrame planters made of bright red fake hair, overflowing with ferns and strung with porcelain beads reminiscent of prayer beads and inscribed with affirmations that Datchuk has collected on social media and in her travels. These affirmations recur mantra-like throughout Datchuk's work. The beads serve as offerings to the mundane task of watering the plant—the ritual expanded, a secret gift within the domestic chore.



Objects of Womanhood, mixed media.

Datchuk's art is steeped in the history of macrame, porcelain and textiles and the ways in which women have been taught to keep their hands busy in the home, keeping us out of the public sphere and conjuring up Sheila Heti's observation in her recent book *Motherhood*, "There's something threatening

about a woman who is not occupied...what sort of trouble will she make?” Datchuk makes trouble in the gentlest of ways. As we walk away from the bright hair planters, she tells me that the one next to the gallery assistant’s desk is her favorite, because it is the companion of what she considers a lonely job—layering nurture within the inherent nurture of the work itself. Central to Datchuk’s work is the desire to take care of us all.

The show is laid out like a map of Datchuk’s rites of passage as the American daughter of Chinese and Russian immigrants. We arrive first at a grouping entitled “Objects of Girlhood,” presided over by a white porcelain laughing Buddha playing with children, a common figurine in the Chinese household for bringing good luck, and one that the artist had in her home growing up. Datchuk later realized that there are no Buddhas with girl children climbing on them—an example of the many realizations girls wake up to over a lifetime, some early, some late, some gradually, some with shock, gurgling up and reforming from the waters of our normalized patriarchal systems and symbols. In the spirit of a common saying from her childhood, “Girls Hold Up Half the Sky,” Datchuk asked the porcelain factory’s permission to create a Buddha with girl children and then adorned their hair in gold.



Golden Girls, 2018.
porcelain from Jingdezhen, China, gold luster. 12" x 10" x 7"

Hanging next to the Buddha and across the room are two “truth” flags based on alphabet samplers used for the education of girls in 18th and 19th century America. Assumptions of patience and a woman’s place of quiet industry in the home were woven into the reading lessons. Datchuk reimagines the samplers of two girls, Emily Beal and Fanny Hill, as an honorarium to all the girls who made these samplers and the truths they chose to embroider into them.

Bamboo as a motif is used repeatedly. In “Objects of Girlhood” a white glazed porcelain cluster curls in a “lucky” purse and a vintage “lucky” brand bamboo motif plate is overlain with happy faces. Datchuk says the bamboo is “accommodating yet evasive,” symbolizing her journey of trying to be a “best quality daughter” (a commonly used phrase in China and one painted in glaze on her work) while also trying to be as “American” as possible, curling and re-

growing in the direction required at the moment, while also clinging to the chance to be carefree in a time that is fleeting and precious.



Don't Play Nice, 2019.
slip cast porcelain, cobalt pencil decoration. 4" x 5.5" x 5.5"

Another “object of girlhood” is a classically blue and white painted porcelain tea cup and saucer entitled “Don't Play Nice.” Upon closer inspection, one realizes that it is a megaphone, poetically synchronizing the civility and daintiness of tea and the fragility and whiteness of porcelain with feminist activism and empowerment—holding the nuance of our complex desires to be girls, to be beautiful, to embrace our rich heritage, while simultaneously pushing boundaries, taking up space and re-imagining a broader landscape that holds and honors all of these often conflictual desires.

Leaving “Girlhood” we encounter (along a taped-over seam in the wall of the gallery) a large photograph of the artist's abdomen covered in delicate porcelain shards edged in gold, referencing the Japanese tradition of Kintsugi, the art of embracing brokenness. The shards perfectly align with the curves and dips of her abdomen, a location of trauma and pain for women and, in her case, the site of scars from multiple abdominal surgeries. Her goal is to make

an entire replica of her body in Kinsugi shards—a complete body yet a broken one.

Mirroring “Objects of Girlhood” is another cluster of works entitled “Objects of Womanhood,” where a porcelain bamboo ladder rises before a figurine mother and child, beckoning them to climb with supposed promise at the top. This poignantly hangs next to a delicately wrought porcelain bamboo coat hanger, the symbol of both our maintenance of appearance and beauty and our dangerous attempts to protect the freedom to define for ourselves what life, in all of its forms, means.



G.O.A.T Girls, 2019.
slip cast Laguna porcelain for dolls, varied dimensions.

A large cluster of porcelain trophy ribbons entitled “G.O.A.T. Girls” hangs on the final wall, coated with various skin-tone glazes from a porcelain doll

factory. The names of the glazes have recently been changed by the manufacturer from “Oriental” to “Asian,” “Cameroon” to “African American,” and “Indian” to “Native American,” making them simultaneously more culturally sensitive but also more America-centric. The glazes coat the ribbons, some in a solid single color and some mixed together or pooled next to each other on a single piece. Datchuk says that it is a reminder that “we are all winners,” but it is a prize that is often hard-won and hard to discern. We both agreed that our conversations around the construct of race and the complexities of gender are ones that we muddle through, but her hope is that this is a space for us to do just that.



Babe Cave, 2019.
porcelain beads, fake hair, hair clips, wood, paracord rope, cheerleader pom poms. 96” x 96” x 120”

At the center of the room, Datchuk invites us into a tent made of blue hair (notably not a “red tent”), hair being a commodified extension of the female

body. Within the tent is a porcelain table decorated in blue gestural images of uteruses, juicy peach halves and chrysanthemums, flowers traditionally used in Chinese ceramics, because they withstand the first frost, hardy yet filigreed. We are asked to sit, enclosed and protected, but also challenged to speak, no matter how awkwardly or painfully, so that we can more deeply claim the beaded affirmations for ourselves, the women in our lives and the world we live in.

Truth Before Flowers is on exhibit at [Women & Their Work](#) through July 25th.

Aether reviewed writer Elizabeth Chapin's 2014 show at Wally Workman Gallery, that article can be found [here](#).



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