Spring 2020

[P]lace: Reinterpreting the Feminine

Nicole D. James

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ABSTRACT

This body of work, [P]lace: Reinterpreting the Feminine, explores the ideas of gender and the common associations materials, colors, values, and so on have in relationship to accepted notions of the feminine and masculine. Armed with knowledge of these assumptions, my lace sculpture and installation work aims to draw attention to the complications surrounding what we understand as feminine through material transformation. By changing select qualities of the material, I create analogies for assumptions commonly made about women. My ultimate goal is not only material manipulation, but to question some of the fundamental elements we associate with gender itself. I create to both demonstrate that lace can embody traits typically associated with being masculine, (strong, structural, dominant, etc.) as well as to show that these “feminine” aspects of the material are not inherently such. I believe it is important to let the lace be soft and delicate at times, to exalt these “feminine” qualities, as well as structural and dominant.
[P]LACE: REINTERPRETING THE FEMININE

by

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B.F.A., University of North Florida, 2015

M.F.A., Georgia Southern University, 2020

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
[P]LACE: REINTERPRETING THE FEMININE

by

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INTRODUCTION

When glancing upon a lace garment, curtain, or tablecloth, take a moment to consider its situation. Perhaps it is protecting something, covering something, accentuating something. Perhaps it appears delicate. Soft, white, light maybe. Perhaps it can tear easily. Perhaps it is torn. As a material, no matter what the use, lace is typically associated with the feminine, as are these very characteristics. However, many of them are too often seen as negative. Too soft. Too fragile. Too delicate. Consider that anything done “like a girl” is not considered done well.

In my work, I aim to challenge these ideas by presenting lace in a powerful and triumphant manner. I create work to both demonstrate that lace, as an analogy for women, can embody traits typically associated with being masculine (strong, structural, dominant, etc.) as well as to show that these “feminine” aspects of the material are not inherently feminine. I believe it’s important to let the lace be soft and delicate at times, as well as structural and dominant. The more I can embody both, the closer the lace becomes to my own truthful identity.

Starting with ideas about gender, I consider the range of characteristics one might associate with being either masculine and feminine. Since, as later discussed, I argue that these traits are learned rather than innate, I make sure to choose from both boxes when constructing my work. Adding in my own personal experiences as well as influences from other female identifying people, I begin to address some of the many issues surrounding the supposed “gentler sex.”
CHAPTER 2
GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Whether it is apparent or not, the gender associations we instinctively place upon things as basic as textures, values, shapes, etc. influence how we view and experience much of our daily lives. As my work aims to highlight and dismantle these associations, it is imperative to first dissect exactly what they are, and how they are formed, reinforced, and enforced. I will start by stating that we do, in fact, tend to gender certain materials, colors, textures, values, behaviors, sounds, etc.—i.e. soft, pink cloth tangled in delicate curves—yet in reality, most of these “feminine” things are not intrinsically such.

What many still accept as innate characteristics of gender—the masculine and feminine—are just an emergent feature of social situations in a continuous, self-reinforcing, cycle. Through these social situations, learned behaviors, associations, and human love of pattern recognition, boundaries are formed. These boundaries limit what is considered acceptable or appropriate, and condition us to behave a certain way to fit within them. In order to open up a greater realm of acceptance, they must first be acknowledged and broken down.

As art continues to push boundaries in a multitude of directions, it becomes a concern not only to address the potential future, but to first deconstruct the nature of the boundary itself. Specifically, that of which we commonly associate with femininity and masculinity. When armed with knowledge of these common assumptions, we can potentially draw attention to the complications surrounding what we consider masculine and feminine, and further expose the existence of these cultural conventions and expand their inclusiveness.
As gender is defined as being differentiated by social and cultural roles and behavior, it seems simple enough to imply that one could just stop performing their assigned role. Yet societally, this is something that has not been entirely integrated into the accepted, and a strong push for the binary norm still exists. It is important for the sake of understanding—both the nature of this cultural construction as well as how it can be used as a tool to unravel itself—to think of gender not as an innate and natural fact of humanity, but rather a convention that is discursively constructed and sustained.

To start, I will split it into two categories: The idea of gender—the learned and accepted social meaning, and the act of gender—the continually performed and reenacted gender. As the act of gender is observed, it reinforces the idea of gender, which reinforces the performance of gender, which creates a self-referencing, self reinforcing loop. To use the words of Judith Butler, gender is a “construction that conceals its genesis;” the construction compels belief and the belief compels the construction. This cycle continually builds upon itself as a “historical situation rather than a natural fact” indicative of current societal norms.

To further reinforce these feminine and masculine norms is the ongoing tool of pattern recognition and (mis)use of inductive reasoning. Many humans assume they each possess an “essential nature” that can be discerned through “natural signs given off or exposed,” otherwise known as pattern recognition. These gender-categorized expressions are portrayed thought conventionalized acts (and thus are technically optional performances.) Rather than portraying an innate sexual nature, humans portray what they believe is appropriate or simply what they choose to express about these natures, through the use of socially accepted gestures and expressions. Yet because this is a repeated performance that renders explicit social laws that are
governed by social conventions, the norms are constantly reestablished. (Consider Cindy Sherman’s film stills, as well as many later portrayals, as literal examples of acting out these notions of femininity.)

Figure 1. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #3, 1977*

Now we land upon another flaw in the construction—pattern recognition is limited to personal experience, and subject to misuse of inductive reasoning. If a relatively sheltered group gaining limited exposure starts making general conclusions from specific instances, we end up with very narrow norms. And since we are continually using norms to predict human behavior, many experience a loss of security (or control, for that matter) when faced with those behaving
counter normatively. Since gender is a cycle of learning how we should behave and reinforcing those behaviors, this leads to the problem of social control. To again quote Judith Butler “those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished.”

Informal social control, that is, the societal push to rectify all that breaches social norms, is expended in the form of falsely innocuous shaming, ridicule, criticism, exclusion, and discrimination, as well as more extreme examples of violence or death. It is a societal attempt to regulate the conduct of its members. Although, if the counter normative behavior is considered a performative act, it still exists behind a normalcy veil of theatrical conventions. However, the closer the behavior gets to reality, to the edge of the veil, and no existing gender conventions are followed, social control kicks in. In other words, as soon as one is even remotely outside the gendered norm, there is a loss of predictability as the recognizable pattern is broken, which elicits fear and loss of control. Suddenly one cannot maintain a sense of reality when faced with a challenge to existing assumptions about gender, and may react negatively. A common example of this is people being bullied for behaving or looking differently. Those doing the bullying are exhibiting a form of social control over those who lie outside their narrow norm.

To further the societal push for gender norms, is the internal control, as Foucault describes discipline. Society maintains this control by educating and moulding the minds of its members to continually conform, even when not confronted or observed by a potential punishing authority. Since we are living within this cultural context, we learn and internalize these norms as well as through regulated cycles of repetition (think school days, work weeks, etc). Our actions are learned, performative, and through discipline we continue the charade indefinitely—to the point that it is so well hidden we associate it with a necessary and factual aspect of identity.
I will now return to the “simple” thought that we may just stop performing these roles. We are publicly compliant for fear of rejection, we conform through identification with other performers, and internalize and accept the belief that we should behave this way. When we dare to behave counter normatively, to challenge the construct or transgress the walls, we are faced with the effects of social control. Yet, as norms are continually reestablished through pattern recognition, the more the pattern is breached the further the norm will theoretically expand.

However, our gender norms and associations, all that is societally accepted—the discursive construction of gender—includes much more than our actions and symbolic activities. It is also every color, texture, material, sound, emotion, taste, etc. that we categorize into the binary masculine and feminine, and we are regulated to use, view, and accept these in largely the same way. It is logical, then, that we view, experience, and make art through the lens of accepted gender norms. When we see things that are soft, light, curvy, delicate, floral, we often make these assumptions of femininity in contrast with the rigid, strong, dirty, heavy, and rough, whether they form a body of work or a component within a single piece. Think broadly to the belief of the masculine formalism and feminine craft.

Imagine then, what happens when work breaks these accepted norms? Art does this in many ways already—if it lies too far outside one’s bubble of normalcy, it elicits a negative response. It can, however, also draw attention to the fact that a problem exists in the first place to those who have accepted an expanded norm. In this way, art can work to further expand and expose the existence of these cultural constructions. Take, for example, Angela Strassheim’s work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Jacksonville—a seemingly innocuous installation of photographs which caused an uproar when the city council president insisted one [Untitled
(Janine Eight Months Pregnant) was pornographic and threatened to undo a $233,000 grant given to the museum. The museum received a tremendous amount of support from the community, protest against the city council president, and ultimately added the photograph to their permanent collection.

Figure 2. Angela Strassheim, *Untitled (Janine Eight Months Pregnant)*, 2013

This, of course, is not the first or last example of a work hitting the social control signal to outrage or call the masses to action, but one that illustrates the situation of our current societal norms. We are in constant flux, at a place of transition—from one strata to the next—where we are pushing a greater expanse. As many artists in the past have sought to unveil and deconstruct femininity, we must now continue to push the boundaries of what we accept into the idea itself.
To bend it, stretch it, tear it apart and redefine it as something that is more inclusive and accepting.

Art has the power to present, morph, juxtapose, skew, eviscerate, and dissect pre-established gender icons and use them counter normatively to inhibit and expand the feedback cycle of the socially accepted feminine and masculine. It can purposefully trigger social control and manipulate the gender discourse to draw attention to and expand its existence. In many ways, simple pairings of unexpected materials and gender icons is enough, while for others more forceful manipulations are successful. What happens when something soft and elegant like pink lace is portrayed as hard and structural? or grotesque? At what point does it lose its feminine connotation? Does it? Should it?

Another typical association these “feminine” characteristics carry is a negative one. If you are too soft, light, fragile, it is often not a positive thing, even for women. Yet just as false as it is to align these properties with the strictly feminine, it is also a false belief to call them inherently negative. For that very reason I aim to exalt these properties alongside the stereotypically masculine strength, structure, support, stability, power, etc. by elevating and transforming traditionally feminine materials.

My work does not aim to solve these issues, but rather draw attention to them. I alone cannot solve everything, but bringing issues to the masses can become a force. I use lace to serve as a stand in for what we acknowledge as femininity, and question it. By transforming the material in select ways—to hard and structural, soft and structural, delicate and strong, dominant and delicate, etc.—I challenge ideas about women still imbedded in belief systems today. By changing select qualities of a material, I create analogies for assumptions commonly made about
women. My ultimate goal is not only material manipulation, but to question some of the fundamental elements we associate with gender itself.

I fully believe this research into gender issues is necessary to explore before delving into the realm of feminism today. A stronger fight for women, or against issues women commonly face, can be held after questioning what it means to be one. When examining common societal beliefs about “a woman's place” or “role,” it is easy to dismantle any supposed necessity to their existence as real or natural, once realizing they are being performed as learned behaviors. For example, a woman carrying the responsibility of being the caring, soft, sweet member of the family is a learned expectation. That is not to say that she shouldn’t be soft and sweet, only that it should not always be expected. This gendered belief system can also involve even more extreme and horrific family situations.

In my work, I am influenced by these issues to construct an analogy for women, as well as my self as a woman, and challenge its expected behaviors. Lace is fascinating specifically for its ability to convey feminine qualities, as well as its organic fluidity and formal balance of positive and negative space. The lace functions as an ideal conduit to express the unspoken gender associations represented in basic items or materials. Can it advance beyond an often negative feminine connotation? I aim to highlight these connotations in a new and triumphant manner, which separates that which we consider feminine from the negative that often follows.
Figure 3. Nicole James, *Untitled Lace Wall No. 1*, 2019
Because of these typical gender associations, I consistently chose lace as my primary material, and embrace it in forms both soft and structured. But what is lace, really? How is it defined and where did it come from? The noun, lace, is defined as “a fine open fabric, typically one of cotton or silk, made by looping, twisting, or knitting thread in patterns and used especially for trimming garments.” As a verb it means to fasten or tighten (a shoe or garment) or entwine or tangle (things, especially fingers) together. It can also mean “to add an ingredient to (lace with alcohol, etc.)” Lace is also generalized as a decorative and openwork web. As far as types, there are 2: Needle lace, which is made from a single thread, and bobbin lace, which has multiple.

I have been challenged in the past that lace may have “masculine” origins as men would go out on ships collecting and re-creating knot work to bring home. However in actuality, early lace involved the talents of three specialists: An artist/designer, who would design lace patterns on paper, a pattern maker, who transferred designs to parchment, and a lace maker, who followed the pattern to make lace. Several old photos depict groups of industry lace makers who were all female.

Now, this type of handmade lace was associated with wealth, but the popularity of handmade lace ended with two important events: The French revolution, the destruction of the French court and its luxury industries, where people would have their heads chopped off just for wearing the stuff, and the industrial revolution. In 1809, a machine was invented that could create the mesh ground, which was the most tedious element of lacemaking. In the mid 1800’s,
they began using bobbin appliqué on machine made net, which expedited the process, and made it a lot cheaper.

However, with the rise of machine-made lace and collapse of hand-made lace industries, the demand for hand-made lace still existed. The solution? Have women at home do it! Women’s periodicals started heavily encouraging these “domestic techniques” such as crochet and tatting to make lace at home. Since then, most handmade lace is made this way—by women at home. Everything else is typically machine-made and not nearly associated with the expense it was in the past.

The fashion industry has always driven lace production, and it was only an indicator of social status until the French/Industrial revolution, after which it typically wasn’t handmade. As far as how it is used, as lace cycles in and out of popularity in fashion, it never disappears from the women-centered industries of lingerie and bridal wear. Because of this, lace is still seen as feminine, associated with women’s clothing, and not limited to the wealth of the upper class since the industrial revolution.
My studio practice involves the manipulation of lace materials and forms to provide a glimpse of a more truthful identity, free from the constraints of gender norms and expectations and less aligned to a specific stereotype. To do this, I work with lace as an analogy for the accepted feminine, and combine its extant characteristics with ideas commonly associated with masculinity: strength, structure, stability, etc. and present this soft material in a dominant matter, commanding, controlling, or reconstructing the space it’s in. Additionally, I consider beauty as a trojan horse: a tool to attract the viewer into a work with meaning beyond just that, while the lace itself may structure the space or control how the viewer interacts with it.

I’d first like to address my consistent “masculine” additives, and what they are. Strength: The quality or state of being physically strong. Or, “The capability of an object or substance to withstand great force or pressure (durability, stability, toughness, solidity, soundness).” Stability —The state of being stable or sturdy. Right angles, like those in a cube, building, walls, etc., are associated with stability. This may be, in part, because of how commonly we see and exist within right angles (since technically the triangle is the most stable shape).

I often render a cube with the lace, to depict some of these characteristics, and the cube is made up of right angles and associated with structure. In building construction, the wall must be plumb, at a right angle with the ground, to be safe. This ensures gravity will not cause it to fall over. Early builders also realized walls and beams should be parallel to one another because it was more efficient to cut materials at a uniform length. If they were not at right angles or askew,
it would need more measurements and would be harder to cut. Especially with old stone
cutting other angles would make corners fragile. Also, if we’re thinking about space, if you have four walls of the same length, a square would produce
the greatest possible floor area. Changing it to a parallelogram would yield less space the closer
in you pulled two corners. So, although the triangle is technically more stable, our repeated use
of the right angle, square, and cube lead to its overwhelming association with stability.

This is also true after researching the psychology of shapes. We associate squares and
rectangles with buildings as well as discipline, strength, courage, security, and reliability.
Because of this, 50% of the world’s most admired companies use rectangular/square logos. Who doesn't trust something with so many right angles? I want to challenge and re-define the architecture with lace. Add to corners, build walls, paths, ceilings, etc. I’m creating structures someone could easily push aside or walk through, but won’t. They are strong in a way that isn't limited to a traditional understanding of strength. They are beautiful and delicate. And powerful. Additionally, I combine this while using the intrinsic nature of the “art” to impose upon the viewer. Specifically, the way that in a gallery setting we typically interact with it, or rather, avoid touching it. I combine this with the lace to include more literal control, that suggests how the viewer should move around, through, aside, or interact with it.

This manipulation of space leads to a strong level of interaction with the viewer. Whether they realize it immediately or not, I specifically design and install works so the viewer’s choices —how they initially see it, move around it, touch it (or not)—are either restricted or encouraged in some manner. I believe the amplification of experience to one that includes at least some level of participation is crucial to the impact of certain works. For example, I have had a significantly more meaningful experience walking through a work by artist Do Ho Suh than I did looking at one that was roped off, and I believe the artist’s intent was more fully realized in that manner.

In my own work, I have explored how simple I can go with the lace material, yet still maintain a structure that impacts the viewer’s movement. Additionally, In regards the adjectives I have already been combining with the lace (strong, structural, supportive, etc.) I am adding ones like assertive, or even dominance. I am very aware of the potential of my earlier work as it is to be viewed in an assertive or dominant matter, but I aimed to include more literal control, again, that suggests how the viewer should move.
I started by creating a single vertical line with lace (one that I’ve specifically sewn to have the elegance and “beauty” I love to use as both a counterpoint to my adjectives and trojan horse) that either bisects or forms a hallway. By doing this, the lace not only transforms into “pillars” that appear to support the building itself, but by moving that single vertical slightly to the left, it will dictate that when viewers move around it, they’ll choose to walk to the right. I later created and tested the first iteration of my carpet-like work “I’m Sorry,” designed to be placed at the entrance to a gallery. The lace takes on an open cross-woven pattern backed by black fabric. Nothing is sewn together, however, so as viewers step on or across the work, it gradually gets destroyed, while still apologizing for being in the way. By the end of the exhibition opening, not only was the pattern gone, but lace was strewn throughout the gallery.

This practice has also revealed itself as part of my installation tactics. When placing a work, for example a large lace cube, the experience changes significantly depending on whether it is obstructive to one’s path, or sitting in a corner. This extends to the work’s relationship to the environment it’s in as well. My works are sized to a specific space, so a wall-like lace structure that controls movement mat be entirely ineffective if not altered to fit a new space. Beyond this control, there are also the demonstrative aspects of my work, that is to say, the way the work exemplifies the “feminine” lace behaving atypically to, in a way, demonstrate its capability. This coincides with its relationship to the space not only in how assertive and strong it behaves, but with specific influences from the space.

In both the pillars and walls, the work is demonstrating its ability to maintain architectural angles, as well as portray strength and support. In my work Pipes, however, the lace specifically mimics the pipes on the ceiling as if to say “I can do this too.” Additionally, while
actual pipes have hardware and bolts that hold the pieces together, the soft lace and thread pipes are supporting the weight of the nuts and bolts between each section, anchored from wall to wall.

Figure 5. Nicole James, *Untitled: Lace pipes*, 2020

My latest development has been including more personal aspects along with the lace, structure, and support. As I have been using the lace as an analogy for the complexities of women, I wanted to take specific influence from my own experiences. I began with a used lace tablecloth, that at the time, was relatively close to how I felt, and made several tears, never breaking the edge boundary. As women are constantly challenged with the emotional weight of healing and caring for others, A tablecloth is something that carries dirt and damage in protecting
the table, yet is discarded if too damaged or overused. I used crochet to piece it back together, leaving thick red “scars” as well as not necessarily matching up every tear to its opposing place. As it once was, it never will be. The second iteration included a tablecloth that I handed out to others to tear, which ended up in several pieces. I crocheted open chain “bridges” connecting them together, yet still not in a manner in which it may be functional as a tablecloth again. I have plans for a similar third iteration.

![Image of lace tablecloth]

Figure 6. Nicole James, *Lace tablecloth No.1-3*, 2019

This process has later translated into 3D, where the lace and crochet “scars” start to grow symbiotically. As I accepted the challenge to incorporate of my personal experiences in the work, I realized the depth and lasting impact of the “scars” needed more recognition. It’s been a bit of a conversation starter, and the more I do the more I meet women struggling with their own
problems and expectations. Throughout the conversations, however, the consistent theme has been the idea that many of these problems stem from gender issues, and these issues need to be resolved at their roots, not just plucking off small branches. Because of this, all of the research, whether visualized in the work or not, is so very important.
CHAPTER 5

[P]LACE: THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition itself showcased the recent development of my work. Beginning with my use of the cube, as mentioned previously, my piece Heavy showcased the visual weight of the lace cube, and the tensile strength of the soft lace column supporting it. Falling into the “exemplary” category of my work, Heavy is a demonstration of the versatility of the material.

I also included two other smaller lace cubes in the exhibition, as well as a blue lace cube that was stitched and stuffed. Together they played the balance between soft and hard, rectilinear and curvilinear.

Figure 7. Nicole James, Heavy, 2020
From there I transitioned to the works *Untitled: Lace Pillars* and *I’m Sorry*. As mentioned earlier, I re-created work *I’m sorry* so the size of the carpet matched the size of the gallery entrance. Continuing with my interest in controlling the way the viewer moves through the space, I designed the exhibition to specifically guide each guest as they enter. With *I’m Sorry*, as one approaches the gallery entrance, they are faced with the initial conundrum of how to go about stepping on the art. From there they are immediately guided straight by four lace pillars, the small blue and pink cube in between on each side. At this point, *Heavy* is on their right, lit with a spot light that does not unnecessarily flood the remaining space. They may stop to look, but are ultimately ushered forward to view the largest work in the exhibition: [P]lace.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 8. Nicole James, Installation view of *I’m sorry*, 2020
[P]lace combines the ideas surrounding the aforementioned table cloths with the grandness of a created space. Made from many previously used tablecloths and red crochet webbing, [P]lace defines an interior within the gallery space. For this reason, it is only lit from the inside, like the space a tablecloth would traditionally be found in. It is meant to convey both comfort and unease, strength and delicacy. Additionally, several of the tablecloths were used and torn by women who volunteered as participants. In this respect, it was not just my own frustrations tearing into the traditional table coverings. They were all connected with the red crochet mesh, and extended to the 12ft tall ceiling, creating an ovular space viewers could walk through. As I mentioned previously, I have always found the experience of interacting with a work in this way to be far more lasting than something further removed.

Figure 9. Nicole James, [P]lace, 2020
As the light and space draws viewers inside through the main “door,” the exit leads them directly to the three works in the earlier table cloth series. The first, in direct eyesight from the exit of [P]lace, is the original tablecloth with thick, red scars. This serves as a point of reference for viewers looking to further understand the other works involving tablecloths. The other two line the gallery walls, leading back to the original point of entry. As a whole, the layout, lighting, and work in the exhibition take the viewers on a journey through some of the challenges and gender issues women face. The strong, yet delicate lace challenges assumptions and demonstrates its versatility.

Figure 10. Nicole James, *Untitled Tablecloth No. 1*, 2019
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

I aim to push material transformation to an understanding where the overall qualities rise above their corresponding gender associations, yet simultaneously highlight the existence of such associations. It is a balance—one of truth, and one of what society regards as truth. My work is continually evolving, and is still in a place of growth. In its evolution, I aim to further encourage interaction as well as form connections, just as the newly formed bridges within my work. The more people that connect and understand the gender issues my work questions, the stronger the force is to combat them.

Now, reconsider a lace garment, curtain, or tablecloth. Perhaps it is protecting something, covering something, accentuating something. Perhaps it appears delicate. Soft, white, light maybe. Perhaps it can tear easily. Perhaps it is torn. As a material, no matter what the use, lace is typically associated with the feminine, as are these very characteristics. But is it, really? The questions my work raises challenge theses assumptions, and, in turn, asks viewers to do the same. Lace is strong, powerful, and, just as importantly, delicate, soft. And, no matter the manner in which it is seen, valid.
WORKS CITED


