



Loving and Leaking: Katie Bethune-Leamen's Cute Blobs

In her wonderful book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard UP, 2012), Sianne Ngai argues that, despite their apparently minor status, these are the three categories best suited for “grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism” (1). The cute, zany, and interesting, she argues, are intimately tied up with “the system’s most socially binding processes” (production, consumption, and circulation) and so help us grasp the underlying social dynamics of contemporary life in a way that other, more prestigious categories such as the beautiful or sublime cannot.

It is important for Ngai that the zany, cute, and interesting are as ubiquitous in pop culture as they are in literature and the fine arts, since these categories are *about* the weakening of the traditional border between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic. In her art, Katie Bethune-Leamen often reflects on the porousness of this border as well. Many of her works are about vernacular ornament, or about the symbiotic exchange of forms between high art, folk art, and mass culture. At various moments, her sculptures, prints, videos, and performances can be cute, zany, interesting, or all three. However, given that Ngai identifies cuteness as the category “best suited for the analysis of art as it develops in dialectical relation to commodity culture over the 20th century,” (58) I want to focus here on what is cute about Bethune-Leamen’s work.

From her very earliest works with the colour palette of neon ground-effect lights for sports cars, with silicone butt implants, corny bar furniture and fake Louis Vuitton textiles, Bethune-Leamen has demonstrated a sympathy for kitsch, camp, and ersatz products: abject items like trinkets, souvenirs, and accessories that nonetheless seem to fulfill someone’s emotional needs. Her persistent use of shiny, iridescent, and phosphorescent materials testifies not only to her personal tendencies as a magpie collector, but to the question of what *attracts* us to objects generally, what draws us to manifest our identity through things and stimulates our desire to be *like* certain things. In part, her work is about fetishism, about how desire promotes the proliferation and replication of cultural objects, dislodged from their original contexts in order to be copied, iterated, and substituted (fake for real, miniature for big).

Due in part to a series of residencies in Iceland, Greenland, and Fogo Island as well as her immersion in ceramic technique over the last several years, Bethune-Leamen’s work has grown less dependent on cultural reference and commodity aesthetics and shifted into a more elemental and abstract direction. The ceramic sculptures and neon and fabric works that she has produced since around 2012 have a biomorphic or geological look, engaging more directly with the generation of form and the “thinginess” of things rather than their sign-value within the sphere of circulation. As Ngai writes, “The cute thing is the most reified or thinglike of things” (105). The increasing intimacy of her objects also highlights their cuteness: they are more anthropomorphic than ever.

It may seem contradictory that the aesthetic of cuteness calls for the personification of inanimate objects while also epitomizing objectification and thing-likeness. Ngai explains this by virtue of how cuteness gives form to power relations. “Since cuteness is an aestheticization of powerlessness,” she writes, “and since soft contours suggest pliancy or responsiveness to the will of others, the less formally articulated the commodity, the cuter” (65). Moreover, she argues that aestheticization itself is a process of objectification by which we impose our subjective feelings on something or someone. The cutest object is the most objectified – that is, most receptive to being imposed upon. To exaggerate an object’s vulnerability (and hence increase the viewer’s sense of mastery) is to enhance its cuteness.

The shelf-mounted and floor-based ceramic sculptures that Bethune-Leamen has been producing since 2014 are perhaps the most concrete embodiment of the anthropomorphism that she has previously explored with hoods and masks. These small, roughly phallic shapes (sometimes with the suggestion of eyes or facial features) neatly match Ngai’s description of the epitome of cuteness: “an undifferentiated blob of soft, doughy matter” (64). They meet the minimum requirements for arousing the sympathetic identification of the viewer, while also treading the borderline of

disgust that always hovers around cuteness' aesthetic of powerlessness. Embodying only the most elementary of forms, shaped just enough to differentiate them from an unworked lump of raw material, these works remain in a state of pure potential, soliciting both tender attention and obscene pleasure (given their resemblance to both dildos and turds). Of course, they are also made of porcelain – a precious, fragile material – touched with shiny, delicate glaze and, in some cases, studded with pearls or daubed with gold luster.

In their mingling of luxury and abjection, it is hard not to see them as little allegories for the plight of art objects in general: helplessly dependent on the subjective response of a viewer, with no agency other than their own allure. Likewise, Ngai sees cuteness, especially as it was employed by modernist poets, as in William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara's short poems about everyday objects, as a way of grappling with the social powerlessness of avant-garde art in a world where aesthetic experience is monopolized by mass spectacle and media technology. *

Crucially, for Ngai, our desire for the cute does not simply equate to a passive surrender to commodity fetishization – our desire for a simpler, more sensuous relationship to objects is paradoxically complex. As Marx explained, the essence of commodification is the equalization of objects through the medium of their exchange value. Commodities only participate in capitalism by virtue of exchange, which renders them abstract, as interchangeable signs. Use value is only realized at the moment of consumption, which takes the object out of capital circulation. What cuteness represents, then, is the fantasy of "rescuing" the individual commodity, in all its physicality and particularity, from the process of commodification itself. Cuteness establishes a relationship of personal intimacy in which our desire for the commodity is reciprocated by its apparent need or desire for us. In personifying the cute object, taking ownership of it, we are able to *enjoy* it. Fondling, squeezing, or even eating the cute thing – the ultimate index of an object's cuteness, Ngai notes, may be its edibility – we partake in the purposiveness of its use value that exchange suppresses.

Katie Bethune-Leamen's cuteness similarly seems to recover (or at least to reimagine) some of the use value of art objects. She has made sculptures of edibles (see her recent appropriation of the perversely "autophagic" Hausbrandt coffee logo, or the packaging of No Frills-brand chocolate pudding), wearables (hoods, masks, costumes), bath products (her various works based on Dr. Bronner's soap), and accessories (her edition of handkerchiefs, or her numerous recent sculptures that incorporate "bangles" or pearls). Other of her recent sculptures include components that act as supports or "companions" to their other parts, such as her various *Farnese Hercules* sculptures or other works like *Chocolate Covered Raisin with Stick Friend* and *Untitled Beige Blob with Chutes and Another Blob Buddy*. Bethune-Leamen's art is about why we like things: they bring us pleasure, satisfy our appetites, and keep us company. In her titles, references, and formal choices, Bethune-Leamen herself is funny, generous, and accessible: she knows what we need (and what we want). Accordingly, her objects are eminently likeable. In being about wanting, they make us want them.

* Curiously enough, one of Ngai's key literary examples is Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, a work that another writer recently cited in her own text on Katie Bethune-Leamen. See Jen Hutton, "Magpie Aesthetics," in the exhibition brochure for *YOU WIN! (february)* at Beleveln, Toronto, April 9-27, 2015.

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