

INTERVIEWS

EM ROONEY

December 15, 2020 • Em Rooney on finish and embodiment in “Women in Fiction”



View of “Em Rooney: Women in Fiction,” 2020 at François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo: Em Rooney and François Ghebaly.

*For her first solo show in Los Angeles—on view at François Ghebaly from December 12 to January 9—Em Rooney unveils a new body of sculpture alongside her photographs. While Rooney is known for creating sculptural framing devices for her photos, this marks her first exhibition of stand-alone sculptures, almost all of which assume the form of flowers. An emphasis on tactility and process has always been evident in Rooney’s photographic “containers,” which deftly merge two differently valued modes of knowledge acquisition: sight and touch. Focusing on sculptural forms allows Rooney to continue drawing connections between materiality, touch, and the ethics of care. The show also includes a new series of photographs inspired by Garry Winogrand’s 1975 book of street photography, *Women Are Beautiful*. The two bodies of work are united under the show’s title—“Women in Fiction.” There’s a small conceptual leap between women in fiction and woman as fiction. The title nudges us to consider this construction, but also gives us permission to take pleasure in it. Rooney nimbly employs symbolic containers that are all too easily overdetermined—woman, flower—without allowing them to get backed into theoretical dead-ends.*

MAKING A FLOWER SCULPTURE felt like a huge leap from other sculptures that I'd made, which had never really been representational. The flower shape was like a doorway to beginning to work with form outside of a semantic relationship to its frame or container. Its morphology proved to be complicated enough that I could use it as a structure from which to make other sculptures. I love that they are vaginal or feminine, but that wasn't the starting place.

Also, I have spent two and a half years in the woods in Western Mass, growing things. That experience is not not there in my flower sculptures, but I don't think it's crucial to their reception. For example, you wouldn't know that *Lady Macbeth*, 2020, looks like a ghost pipe plant unless you live in a hemlock forest or are a botanist or something.

The materials of the sculptures include plaster, linen, velvet, tulle, rice paper, and a heat blanket, and refer to a lineage of artists like Ree Morton, Elizabeth Murray, and Lee Bontecou. There's something in their work that one might call an earnestness and an awkwardness. The first sculpture was the hardest, and after that they were all made with different processes and materials. I switched from polystyrene to plaster because working with foam is disgusting and plaster is beautiful and amazing. I tried to focus on being able to enjoy and connect with the thing that I was making, to have some sort of loving relationship with it.

I've been thinking a lot about materials and their relationship to the body. Metal has this rigidity, malleability, and—especially with steel and pewter—fallibility within the chemical structure. I love how touch is also connected to darkroom photography, as the silver paper is a physical trace of a body or a thing in real space-time. Even though I don't like making frames, I can't ever hire it out because it's so conceptually important to me that I handle the photograph and create its container. Showing up for my work, standing with it or over it, touching the fronts and the backs, sanding and waxing carefully, has been an act of kindness to myself.



Em Rooney, *Lady Macbeth*, 2020, blackened and welded steel, glass, linen, paste wax, yarn, 85 x 24 x 12".

This way of working—the “to touch is to know” approach, to paraphrase Amy Sillman—has to do with embodiment. And it has been feminized, queered, re-masculinized, and re-feminized over the past century and a half. Without getting too deep into a history of making, we can see how care and touch can morph into material and finish fetish. At the same time, there are so many sculptural processes that, in their emphasis on surface relationships, disrupt a binary of handmade/fabricated. I am thinking about Anne Truitt sanding her layers and layers of paint, creating pristine surfaces on hard wooded columns. Vincent Fecteau and the gorgeous insides and outsides of his sculptures. Or Martin Puryear, who maybe operates more like an architect but has the deep material knowledge of a carpenter. And Vaginal Davis’s paintings and drawings with cosmetics, where the idea of finish is conceptual in the sense that makeup is a finishing touch. And Louise Bourgeois, who dominates finish. Or Simone Leigh’s High Line sculpture up against the New York skyline.

Of course, there would also be things that I hadn’t even imagined, and those moments are, to me, where the magic happens. It isn’t spill-, or mistake-, or accident-fetish. Rather, it is the strangeness of translation. Like in the English subtitles of Chris Marker’s *La Jetee* where a park is referred to as a garden, or like the ways Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei’s line “evening light slipping through trees” has been expressed as “slanting sun,” “piercing rays,” “a reaching reflection,” “motley patterns,” or simply “sunset” by his various modern translators.

I’m also interested in life-cycles with all of their baseness, abstraction, messiness. But also their clarity. And there is something in all that that is hard and maybe unfashionable to describe, which is my own subjectivity, my own life, my own mortality. I am thirty-seven, nearing the end of my reproductive years, with no children (an ending of a cycle within cycles). I have lived the experience of girlhood, and womanhood, and felt outside from it. I have loved women and been in love with women, been heart-broken by them, and I have pined for their hard-to-access parts. I am married to and in love with a man. I am white and have had the experience, many times throughout my life, of having my whiteness and my femininity grant me access, approval, and safety. I am queer and sometimes boyish and have been gay-bashed and excluded and loved wholesomely by community. So when I look at women and girls there is awe and shame. When I look at our natural world with all of its industriousness, when I think about our political structures and their nefarious roots and blossoms, there is the same.



Em Rooney, *Rineke Dijkstra's Girls at the Rijksmuseum*, 2020, silver gelatin print in artist's frame of poplar, pewter and museum glass, 10 x 13.5 x 1" (framed).

The starting point for the body of photographs in this show—titled “Women in Fiction”—was my idea to remake Garry Winogrand’s book *Women are Beautiful*. Right as I was really beginning to work on it, Covid happened and I thought I would never be able to make the book because I wouldn’t be able to ride around the subway taking photographs of women. But, in the summer, I went to protests and the beach. I took photographs of my friends and strangers in Washington, DC; Albany and Kingston in New York; and Atlantic City and Asbury Park in New Jersey. I thought about how I could make these photographs in a way that’s still totally complicated and problematic, but so much more nuanced than Winogrand’s relationship to his images.

While I started working on this show, I moved into this huge new studio—the first real studio I’ve ever had. Incidentally, I also got on a Virginia Woolf reading rampage in early pandemic. The original title of *A Room of One’s Own* was *Women and Fiction*. This show comes out of thinking about women and how people depict them in literature and on film. Women expansively, women in closed ways. The title “Women in Fiction” felt like exactly what the show was, but also something curious and open. In a way, my references to Winogrand or to the form of the flower are just helpful ways to materialize something that feels expansive.

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