

The Venus Collection



Drawing upon the connotations of a varsity letterman jacket and the Venus of Willendorf, this collection awards the wearer with membership in Team Venus and cultivates a new language of womanhood using feminist cultural icons.

an auto-ethnography by Lucille Crelli
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Introduction

The story of my quarter-life crisis

I have to say, I've learned a thing or two this year at RISD. Yes, I now know how to line a jacket and I'm sure about where I stand with the overlock machine (damn you, overlock machine), but this year has mainly been about my identity as an activist artist. This year has gotten personal, *real* personal, and I still don't feel entirely comfortable with how my work and passions are interpreted by others. The Venus Collection's progression was punctuated with my struggle to best serve my message through the medium. Developing this project was surprisingly soul-searching as I had to evaluate my own position on the subject to then figure out how to convey those thoughts while still balancing a profile in the community. How you perceive yourself versus how others perceive you is a hard thing to reconcile. This semester was the first time I have ever encountered a clash between my own goals and my public persona. I had to confront what was expected of me, both inside of the classroom and out, and pinpoint exactly where my actions and beliefs diverged.

This semester I've received a bit of backlash against my work, and I am still unsure about the degree to which my own feelings about it are clouded by the feedback I've received that may or may not also be affected by unpleasant feelings. This is more significant than one may think, because it affects how I regard my own identity as a feminist artist, my future within or outside the fashion industry, how I present myself as a female leader to the world, and the motivations behind future projects. Nonetheless, I expect that the reception I received this year is only the tip of the iceberg as I venture outside of the RISD bubble ready to *change the world* (naive, yes, I know).

It is extremely difficult to enter an industry that is oftentimes linked to sexism scandals and inundated with precedential rules and expectations, ones that originated long before the women's movement. I entered the Apparel Design program two years ago with the intent of using it to promote gender rights. Fashion is an art form that is often in the mainstream media (and thus has the potential to reach a large demographic), has commercial and monetary benefits should I need it, and directly deals with the female body, which is often the platform from which many gender inequalities arise. But the unspoken rules of what's quality fashion and what's not do not even reach the perimeters of social issues in a meaningful way. A designer might call themselves a feminist in a magazine interview or a brand may draw boobs on their camisoles one collection, but nothing ever leaves a tangible impression. Right now, the industry only has the capacity for work by artists who reflect on gender for one season only to move on to another inspiration the next. Where is the consistent advocacy and real solutions? Art can do so much more than emotional catharsis.

I've found that whenever apparel is used to convey a feminist (or woman-targeted) message, it nearly always has to do with the female anatomy. Which makes sense, some might argue, because apparel is for and about the body. This is true, but extremely limiting. I am still fascinated with the idea of apparel design and how garments can shape a narrative and reclaim an identity, but I feel restricted in the range of feminist issues that I can talk about when it always seems to come back to sexuality. Yes, much of gender inequality stems from how our bodies are perceived in society, but it's a more complex issue than that. I want to talk about a range of feminist issues from the gender wage gap to intersectionality to gendered marketing to female role models, but time and time again I'm brought back to earth with the suggestion that I focus

on the female form. Last semester's project, The Trophy Collection, was "*a comment on female bodily empowerment, a reclaiming of power via emasculated phalluses and glorified vaginas, and a critique of the backlash directed towards so-called 'radical' feminists.*" I spent an entire semester exploring how sexuality can be reclaimed and expressed through fabric. But I couldn't even escape the subject when I delved into the entirely unrelated concept of membership. As a feminist artist, it's expected that I talk about vaginas all the time. But I've been there, done that. I love my vagina, but I'm more than my sexuality!

The purpose of this auto-ethnography is for me to reconcile with myself the struggle to convey feminist messages through apparel. Much of the concept criticizes unrealistic expectations of women, and I can draw a few parallels from my own battle with expectations in fashion, academia, and activism. I want to learn how to project my voice beyond a twenty-something page essay and into the physical medium. I want to use apparel as a tool for gender justice, and I want to decide if I should just accept that the issues regarding female sexuality are inescapable. I want to take control of my attitude regarding my art and my role within my department and the RISD community at large. I want this auto-ethnography to serve as a documentation of the intense intellectual and soul-searching process I underwent in order to produce The Venus Collection. I want to draw attention to cultural connotations and societal expectations that still persist. And, above all, I want to recruit for Team Venus.

On the Jacket Itself

The story of Harvard interfering with teenage relationships since 1865

The origins of The Venus Collection came about in the dusty basement of a local antiques shop. Inspired by an authentic vintage fireman's jacket, I started envisioning the merits of a

utilitarian jacket in my mission of gender rights. Utilitarian jackets, such as firemen, policemen, militia, etc. always have a very specific look to them, almost like following a rulebook. These fluorescent stripes are here for this purpose, this button means this thing, those patches mean another thing. Interestingly enough, each class of utilitarian jacket has its own language within their encapsulation. Just like that Girl Scouts sash you had when you were a child, every adornment on the jacket adds up to say something about the person wearing it. This means one thing in the military (with all of their patches and ribbons signifying their rank and achievements), but what could it mean in the context of the fashion industry? How can ready-to-wear proclaim a feminist statement that is both personal to the wearer and uniting of all women everywhere?

Another connecting thread between all of these utilitarian jackets is the idea of membership. Because each garment is designed by a set of guidelines, presumably this makes all of the recipients of the garment (i.e., a police force) look the same and assume the same identity. Such are the merits of a uniform. However, great lengths are taken to ensure that there is a stratification within the group and thus was born the collection of buttons, patches, ribbons, pins, embroidery, beading, and the like in order to categorize the wearer. This nearly always invokes a sense of pride, loyalty, and belonging between the wearer and their group. Everyone loves to talk about themselves, and this was an avenue for them to express themselves in a setting that did not allow alternative deviances from the uniform. Through the cobbling together of various decorations, the wearer can decide what they want to share about themselves to the world and what they don't. In perhaps one of the few outlets for such a goal, the wearer can finally take control of their own narrative and image.

All of this led me to consider the varsity letterman jacket in my reflection. The varsity jacket follows a set of design rules, is literally about team membership, and oftentimes is personalized according to the achievements of the team member. Either the letters or the jacket itself will be awarded to a participant of a certain activity, be it sports, performing arts, or even academia. The gift is not usually given until either a minimum performance requirement is met or the awardee displays extraordinary achievements in their field. Not only does this system emphasize accomplishment, it also prizes character, commitment, and teamwork. Indicating that the wearer spent years working alongside others to achieve a common goal says that the community values team players and dedication of time. Essentially being granted this jacket is your (and the public's) way of knowing that your community considers you a well-rounded person worthy of recognition.

The tradition can be traced back to Harvard University's 1865 baseball team¹ who pioneered the jacket's ancestor "letter sweaters"². The letter would always be right in the middle of the chest but varied in the number of stripes on the sleeve. These stripes indicated the number of letters won and a star could also be thrown into the mix, indicating team captainship. This immediately made me think about the Jewish star's role in World War II. In that case, the star was a badge of shame, one that provoked discrimination. It's fascinating to think about the connotations and conclusions drawn from a little innocuous patch and the world of difference between the two contexts. But that goes to show the power that apparel has to shape a narrative - in this case, to save a life or condemn one.

¹ "Letterman (sports)." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 22 May 2016. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letterman_\(sports\)#History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letterman_(sports)#History)>.

² Yes, I did just cite Wikipedia. Everyone uses it, but no one likes to admit it.

The stars aren't the only important adornments, though. There is, of course, the chenille moss-stitched letter that is traditionally placed on the left chest of the varsity jacket³. This letter can signify the team, the individual, or the individual's accomplishments⁴. The surname or the nickname of the owner is emblazoned on the back (either embroidered or chenille-ed), the year of graduation could be sewn on the right sleeve or above the right pocket, and sometimes championship patches or medals will be attached. There might even be a patch of the school mascot⁵.

The jacket's history and connotations bring to the table interesting conjectures about gender, class, ownership, commitment, and so much more. In the 1960's it was tradition for a high school male athlete to give his letterman jacket to his girlfriend. This was all the rage, but it was essentially the equivalent of a dog peeing on a tree; it's a marking of property. Since the back of the jacket has the athlete's name in huge letters, this girl can walk around in the jacket and immediately let everyone know who her boyfriend is (and the various adornments also share how accomplished her boyfriend is). It's the equivalent of someone writing their name on a Post-It note for their Tupperware lunch container so that no one else will eat it. The metaphors are endless, but case in point: it's a sign of possession. And once again, fashion has a significant role in the shaping of narratives.

So, why doesn't the boyfriend wear his girlfriend's jacket? Would his girlfriend even have a jacket? He understands the value of his own jacket because after all, he worked hard for

³ "Varsity Letter." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 22 May 2016. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varsity_letter>.

⁴ I mean, come on, Wiki isn't young and naive anymore. They have teams of experts monitoring and editing!

⁵ Shoutout to Scrotie. (Sorry, I'm done with the excessive footnotes now.)

it. So why is he willing to give it away? Is it more important that his girlfriend feels the warmth of his triumphs? Or is it more important that people know this particular girl chose him as well? What about this girl warrants the receipt of the jacket?

On the Cool Girl

The story of my 20-something bitterness

My questions are ones of values: what does the typical teenage male want in a partner? And subsequently, what does the typical 20-something male want in a partner? In order to investigate this question, I had to figure out what my goals were with the Venus Collection. Since I continue to be fascinated with the idea of subliminal messaging via apparel design, I wanted to create a varsity jacket with my own language. But what did I want to say? I have found that the best way for me to organize my thoughts is to actually write them all down in a stream-of-consciousness exercise. What follows is a copy of a sketchbook page I wrote early on in the design process.

I want to create a new language of femininity but first I have to figure out what the current language is. What speaks to the human experience in a female body? This links back to trans-issues again, but I just really don't want to deal with that in another piece right after the first one. And I want to stray from sexuality pieces.

To create a new language of women I need to first expand on the subject of women and what the current language is. Do I mean what society TELLS us to be like (demure, no sex drive, pure)? Do I mean what women SHOULD be like should we disregard societal expectations of us or even the history of patriarchal oppression? (the ideal?) Or should I mean "what women actually are" as a walking paradox? But then that would mean there are negative things on their jackets so why would they want to wear that? The letterman shows symbols of achievement. If I have many "symbols" or emblems or whatever I am speaking code and saying something about the wearer.

[...]

How can clothes fill a political agenda? Are the clothes patriarchal? How are clothes a conduit of power? The top layer represents a smothering of expectations upon us. What is the ideal woman? Using the form of a varsity jacket already conjures the

connotations of ownership and “young love” and football. I can use the tell-tale signs of that jacket but twist it to reflect reality. What is the ideal modern woman today? Smart (but not opinionated), tall, slim, big butt and breasts, white, into football...

I would like to follow that up with a quote from the movie *Gone Girl*:

“Men always say that as the defining compliment, don’t they? She’s a cool girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she’s hosting the world’s biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don’t mind, I’m the Cool Girl.

Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they’re fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl. For a long time Cool Girl offended me. I used to see men – friends, coworkers, strangers – giddy over these awful pretender women, and I’d want to sit these men down and calmly say: You are not dating a woman, you are dating a woman who has watched too many movies written by socially awkward men who’d like to believe that this kind of woman exists and might kiss them. I’d want to grab the poor guy by his lapels or messenger bag and say: The bitch doesn’t really love chili dogs that much – no one loves chili dogs that much! And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They’re not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they’re pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be. Oh, and if you’re not a Cool Girl, I beg you not to believe that your man doesn’t want the Cool Girl. It may be a slightly different version – maybe he’s a vegetarian, so Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he’s a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics. There are variations to the window dressing, but believe me, he wants Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn’t ever complain. (How do you know you’re not Cool Girl? Because he says things like: “I like strong women.” If he says that to you, he will at some point fuck someone else. Because “I like strong women” is code for “I hate strong women.”)”⁶

These are all pressures that women face today whether or not we notice it. But, chances are if you consume any form of media you probably receive some variation of not-so-subliminal messages making clear what the ideal woman would be. Or, maybe you don’t watch *Girls* but you do use Tinder. You see it in the sexual harassment in your inbox or listed in your match’s bio

⁶ "Gone Girl Quotes." By Gillian Flynn. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 May 2016.

section. Similar to the high hopes men have when signing up for dating apps, guys seem to think that they truly can find someone who fits all of the criteria just from the comfort of their own iPhone. Some other examples of illogical demands: being expected to put on a cheerful face at all times (“Smile, sweetheart, you’re too pretty to look so sad”); to have loads of sexual knowhow and experience but to not sleep with too many guys because then you’re like a used tissue; to pretend that you’re into the game on TV and playing Edward Fortyhands; to throw around macho phrases like “don’t be a pussy” because “you’re not like other girls” or sensitive or whatever; to not act like a know-it-all or to downplay your own accomplishments because it’s not hot to study; to not want a relationship and to limit romantic interactions to the 2 am text of “u up?” every weekend.

Few things get me more fired up than the phrase “not like other girls”. Honey, what are you trying to prove? Do you really need to find a new angle to set you apart from the pack? I mean, if chick flicks have taught us anything it is that the girl-next-door will get the guy in the end. But that’s not the *point*. The patriarchy is deeply entrenched in the girls who chorus that phrase when they just can’t see the degree to which the decisions about their likes and dislikes has been taken out of their hands. Another thing commonly heard in conjunction with the above phrase is “I’m a guys’ girl. I’m not really friends with a lot of girls. There’s just too much drama with them. I hate drama.” Certainly most people don’t like fighting with others, but why bring it up as the reason you’re not friends with girls? The fact that you’re singling out girls rather than boys is evidence of trying to appeal to the boys. If attempting to appeal to the opposite sex, you’d want to cater to their preferences. And what did we learn from *Gone Girl*? Guys like girls who

are “hot and understanding [...] and let their men do whatever they want”⁷⁷. Meaning, there is no resistance to whatever they do, aka no “drama”. Proclaiming that you’re not like other girls is your way of telling guys that you can be as involved or uninvolved in the relationship as they want. If you really do just want a sexual relationship, that is totally cool, but it’s not cool to advertise yourself by shaming the sexual choices of other women.

“Not like other girls” also reminds me of the well-worn phrase “not all men”. It’s interesting that here are two phrases that are both defensive and accusatory of women. “Not all men” is a phrase frequently trotted out in the context of sexual assault or harassment. Women will share their stories of stalking, molestation, harassment, and assault in the subway, school, bar, and every other imaginable location. They will tell their narratives so that collectively it exposes a culture of systematic sexual discrimination where women can be made to feel uncomfortable in literally *any* situation. And yet, despite the myriad of stories the number of which are still growing, men will find a way to dodge the blame. “Not all men are rapists! I personally would never do that to a woman- she’s someone’s sister for Chrissake!” First of all, she is *someone*, not someone else’s whatever. Second of all, no, not all men are rapists. But yes, all women have experienced some form of harassment or more from men. Do you see the difference? The experience is universal, but the perpetrators aren’t. That is still enough to signify a widespread issue.

Street harassment has been on my mind lately. It’s gotten to the point when I’m starting to question myself: *am* I dressing like I’m asking for it? I look traditionally feminine, and I generally adhere to societal standards of beauty in that I wear short shorts, use makeup, have

⁷⁷ "Gone Girl Quotes." By Gillian Flynn. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 May 2016.

boobs, am a woman walking alone in public. I actually started to panic the other day about going to the grocery store. I knew that what I was wearing was a little more revealing than usual (sue me; it was 91° out), and I knew what happened to me when I stepped out of the house. I guess I just *really* wasn't feelin' it that day, because I had to calm down by reminding myself of the ridiculousness of the source of my anxiety. Of course I can wear whatever I want, and ain't no man keepin' me inside my house if I don't want to. So I put on my headphones, went to the grocery store, whisked through the lines with my heart pounding, and sped-walked back home. That was the most extreme manifestation of the problem in my own personal life, but it's a frequently recurring experience for women everywhere.

Last week I was walking to campus with a male friend, and I crossed the street when I spotted a construction site (the first of many) further down the road. Following me, he complained about my "strange" behavior, but quickly shut up when I informed him that I always cross the street when I find construction sites to avoid close-range harassment. Chagrined, he commented on how crazy it is that women have to think about that stuff all of the time. Yes, it is fucking crazy, and it's crazy that it will never be something that is familiar to men:

Our male friends don't read our Twitter mentions. And the catcalls don't come when we're with them, because the men who disrespect women enough to call out to us on the street do respect the men we're with enough not to infringe on their "property." And sure, we still feel The Eyes, but the men we love don't know about The Eyes. They don't know what it feels like to have your body scanned by a person who passes by you, prompting you to close your sweater and cross your arms. They don't know that that happens more often than it doesn't, and that the sum of each tiny eye-scan means women feel like we're under constant surveillance, always reminded that our ultimate worth still lies in the perceived attractiveness of our bodies.⁸

⁸ Samakow, Jessica. "What I Wish Men Knew About That Creepy Guy At Starbucks." HuffPost Women. The Huffington Post, 24 May 2016. Web. 29 May 2016.

The Eyes are the *worst*. So much so that I am never more hyperaware of my body than I am on public transportation. So much so that while I'm now used to cars slowing down as they pass me at the bus stop, I was actually surprised when someone also turned on their high beams to check me out. So much so that I purposefully wear sunglasses and headphones when I'm alone in public so that even if that doesn't deter a catcaller I can at least pretend that I didn't hear him. So much so that I'm propositioned even whilst I'm on the long bus ride to volunteer at a domestic violence shelter. So much so that I'm "jokingly" told to not use the pepper spray dangling off my keys by the large cashier at the fast food restaurant. So much so that I was taught to confuse harassment with compliments at a young age. So much so that my dad had to retaliate against predators who dared call out to me during a family vacation in North Dakota. So much so that the only reason I can think of for not having been assaulted is that *I'm lucky*.

Am I lucky? I don't even feel safe on my own sidewalk. What other daily restrictions are there in my life that I unconsciously obey in order to protect myself? Unfortunately, the constant barrage from men is experienced by all women and conveys a very clear idea of what the expectations are. The values listed above by the enlightening *Gone Girl* quote are all surface-level, and the messages I receive really do enforce the idea that my desirability is solely from my body. When my value inherently lies in something tangible (but aging - beauty has an expiration date), it's easy to disassociate and treat me as an object. There's nothing wrong with calling out to an object on the street because she doesn't have feelings. Street harassment is just another manifestation of male entitlement to add to the list: I should fuck this girl because she's hot and I deserve to. And the sexual entitlement isn't just limited to the street! It can even establish itself in our own relationships, Tinder-borne or not.

Thinking about this issue always becomes a battle with my sex positivity. Sex positivity means an open acceptance of all sexual choices and desires and to avoid sexually-related shame in all forms, except when it crosses the boundaries of consent and power dynamics. In theory, being sex-positive means that you should be okay with the 2 am “u up?” text because it demonstrates your sexual freedom. You don’t have to conform to society’s expectations of sexual purity! You can fuck whomever whenever, and no one has any right to challenge you! But then this sets up this expectation that made me question my own feminist standpoint on sex. Does being uncomfortable with the idea of friends with benefits mean that I’m not actually a sexually-liberated woman? Do I really feel the need to be in a committed relationship in order to enjoy sex? Logically, no, I don’t, but my hesitation made me question this.

Eventually I came to terms with the fact that I associated a certain intimacy with sex, one that I didn’t feel was fulfilled with the relationship of no-relationship. But then I was hesitant to ever put my foot down and demand a commitment from my then-partner because I didn’t want to lose my own personal version of the Cool Girl. I stayed discontented for months before I finally ended it (which was horrible in and of itself). The point is, I have personally felt the unspoken pressures of the Cool Girl, and I have seen it affect my own relationships and values. These patriarchal values are lodged in me and can emerge even when I’m thinking I’m a liberated feminist. And what is the patriarchy if not outrageous? - “The Cool Girl is not a person. It is an unattainable standard that women believe they are expected to meet in order to have some sort of chance at finding love”.⁹ But I tried The Cool Girl... and I didn’t find love. So then, if wearing the varsity jacket is a visible indication that you have the male stamp of approval, does being

⁹ Quindlen, Kim. "10 Reasons Why The “Cool Girl” Does Not Exist." Thought Catalog. N.p., 02 Mar. 2015. Web. 22 May 2016.

given a varsity jacket mean that you're a Cool Girl? If you round up all the girls wearing their varsity jackets, does that make a team of Cool Girls? Fuck that.

What if I went back to the idea of a team and made the jacket representative of a certain "trait" of women. Not trait, but optimal personality pairing. The woman to be, the modern woman, the role model, the ICON! Then I can keep my original inspir images and the idea of the pairing together of utilitarian and varsity jackets and cultural icons. What if I was pointing out what the ideal woman looked like in the 60's when the jackets first started? The idea of ownership...what in these women prompted the reward of the jacket? The awardees of achievements are having the tables turned on them. No longer is the focus on them; they're merely conduits for fame now. But the granting of the jacket is still an unsettling thing when its BESTOWED upon a woman yet oftentimes received with glee?

Team Woman. I, as a wearer of this jacket, am representing my team. My team is my identity. My team is woman. In defining myself in as this type of woman, I am not discrediting other definitions of woman. These are the expectations imposed upon me, and these are the ideals that I strive to be, but are hidden by the expectations placed upon me. The varsity jacket is given to me via society, the patriarchy, man, etc. It is awarded to me and bestowed upon me because of my vagina, because of the role I am expected to fill. What is underneath is what I am to be, but what is smothered with the expectations. This is what it means to be on Team Woman. You juggle two hats. You are owned by the patriarchy.

It was time for me to create my own version of the Cool Girl. I am the one making the jacket, after all. So what does it mean if I earn the jacket myself and give the jacket to myself? If I'm the one making it, it's going to be on my own terms. I want it to be representative of a team that I am fiercely proud of - Team Woman. What makes a cool girl cool in my book; what would I consider a female role model; and how can I convey that using personalized decorations? This brought me to the best choice for a feminist icon - an actual icon, one of the first artworks known to man. The Venus of Willendorf.

On the Lack of a Feminist Icon

The story of how my collection is actually not named after my dead hamster

I guess I'm playing into the trope of the feminist artist after all, choosing a fertility figure as my visual inspiration. But let me explain how I got there. During my initial research on tailored jackets, I came across a small¹⁰ trend¹¹ of jackets bearing handmade portraits of so-called cultural icons. The advertisements usually included a scantily-clad woman wearing David Bowie or John Waters on her back. I loved the idea that an artist could place a representation of a figure that is so-well known that everyone will instantly recognize it and all the connotations that come along. But why choose these white men, and what is that saying about our cultural values? What makes them a cultural icon? What makes them worthy of worship? And if I were to want a jacket with my own icon on it, who would I choose to represent me?

I use my artwork to send a message about what I value. Fashion has a unique presence in our communication in that our clothes send the first impression. If we have control over what we say in that split second, then we have real power over our own narrative. That's part of what I find the most promising about applying this concept towards trauma recovery for sexual assault and domestic violence survivors to try out. You can address your past and move on from it in whatever manner you find best. It can no longer be a part of your identity with every new introduction you make. Instead, who would you be? Gloria Steinem. Maya Angelou. Madame Curie. Beyoncé? Each character brings with it a unique history and amazing achievements, and

¹⁰ "Alice Lancaster X VEDA." VEDA. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 May 2016. <<http://www.thisisveda.com/collections/alice-lancaster-x-veda>>.

¹¹ "Caine London." CAINE LONDON. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 May 2016. <<http://www.cainelondon.com/>>.

wearing their face on your own body invites an association between the two. Who you choose to promote speaks to your own character, as well.

None of the potential feminist icons listed above really resonate with me, though. I also considered Rosie the Riveter, bell hooks, Yoko Ono, Barbara Walters, Coretta Scott King, Oprah Winfrey, Madonna, Sheryl Sandberg, Malala Yousafzai, and Hillary Clinton. All of these women are amazing role models, but they all have very specific followers. The supporters of Clinton are not necessarily the same supporters of Madonna. That's not a bad thing; that alone is evidence of the breadth of feminist personalities. But what figure could potentially be supported by all women, regardless of differences or definitions? That begs the question of what traits are universal to women, which brings me back, once again, to the female body.

I want to note here that while not all definitions of women include the associated genitalia, a large percentage of women do associate with the gendered experience that comes with owning a vagina. But even though I was talking about the physical body, that didn't mean I had to be limited in the definition of "woman". Or "icon", for that matter. For me, the word "icon" conjures up images of Renaissance art and women lounging in the nude. I received a solid education in art history during my (four year) stint at a single sex high school, and I had a very close relationship with my teachers and mentors in the Visual Arts Department. As a result I've cultivated a special softness in my heart for the subject, and I find it endless in terms of inspiration. I thought that approaching the term "icon" from an art historical standpoint would open up a whole new range of possibilities.

The Venus di Milo. Botticelli's Venus. Titian's Venus. Giorgione's Venus. Bronzino's Venus. The Venus's in history are endless. But I'm especially fond of the Venus of Willendorf,

one of the oldest and most famous works of art discovered in 1908 in Vienna.¹² Only 4.4” high, the Venus is a small limestone figurine said to date back to 25,000 BCE. Her body nestles perfectly inside your palm and her reproductive areas are especially emphasized and pleasantly textured, so it is clear that she was meant to be held.¹³ Although dubbing her “Venus” is more of a twentieth century idea based off of the Roman goddess of love and beauty, this little woman is powerful in her representation as fertility goddess. The fact that she was made to be held indicates that she was created to be mobile, so perhaps by and for a nomadic people. Nomads are constantly on the move in search of food without really setting down roots in one place, which meant that Venus was considered to be important enough to justify her extra burden. Her use was purely spiritual and, to some extent, decorative rather than utilitarian, thus marking the beginning of the inexplicable affinity mankind has for the arts.

Since she is the first known representation of a woman, Venus has a unique reputation:

Although she was already being included in books devoted to Stone Age art published in the 1920s, it is not until the 1960s that the statuette begins to appear in the introductory art history books where she quickly displaced other previously used examples of Paleolithic art. Being both female and nude, she fitted perfectly into the patriarchal construction of the history of art that has tended to emphasize the more derogatory depictions of women in art through the ages.

As the earliest known representation, she became the "first" woman, acquiring an Ur-Eve identity that focused suitably, from a patriarchal point of view, on the fascinating yet grotesque reality of the female body and its bulging vegetable nature; an impersonal composition of sexually-charged swollen shapes; an embodiment of overflowing fertility, of mindless fecundity, of eternal sex, the woman from which all women descend.¹⁴

¹² "The Venus of Willendorf." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 30 May 2016.

¹³ Harris, Beth, and Steven Zucker. "Nude Woman (Venus of Willendorf)." Khan Academy. Khan Academy, n.d. Web. 30 May 2016.

¹⁴ Witcombe, Christopher. "Women in Prehistory: The "Venus" of Willendorf." Arizona State University. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 May 2016.

I thought that quote was funny because it's rare to come across such a blatantly biased description of an art historical object, especially from a man. But, I also understand his point and appreciate the notion that she is "the first woman". The Venus was made to be a fertility figure, which has always been linked to the idea of the feminine. If the Venus *was* meant to be a spiritual object, then this little figurine shows reverence to the female form. One could unfortunately argue that because Venus does not have any facial features, then it's an objectification in itself. I'd prefer to think of that to mean that the Venus is meant to be regarded as universal; someone who you could see yourself in. Her lack of a face invites relatability and solidarity in womanhood. Owning a Venus is just like (I'm kidding, it's better than) the various letters on your boyfriend's jacket. Using a Venus is a proclamation of respect to the power of the sacred feminine. Sharing a Venus is a sign of harmony, not ownership.

So, if I'm trying to stop talking about sexuality in my pieces, why did I use a *literal sex object* as my inspiration? Well, I don't know. I guess sexuality is too intertwined with feminist issues to ignore it. How can I talk about the gender wage gap without talking about sexual harassment in the workplace? How can I talk about intersectionality without noting the visible and invisible diversity in women's presentations of their bodies? How can I talk about gendered marketing when there isn't a toiletries product for women that hasn't been produced in a pink color at some point (and there's actually a "feminine products" aisle)? How can I talk about female role models without having to choose something that could be considered universal for women?

I can talk about the Venus of Willendorf being a female role model and universal for women in the same breath. She is inclusive in her exclusivity. She is a celebration of fertility; she

is a celebration of life. She truly holds your hand. The Venus is a perfect feminist icon because she is all that is feminine. And, because she is universal and un-defining, the Venus's form is malleable. I designed my entire collection starting from her signature build and then prodded them into different body shapes. I have some with long torsos, some with high breasts, and some with no vulva at all. But even though no two jackets look the same in The Venus Collection, it doesn't mean that one is a Venus and one isn't. The Venus is an all-encompassing concept of powerful solidarity in whatever it means to be a woman, physicality be damned.

As far as I can tell, there isn't one feminist icon. Who is so well known for her advancement of women that her face would conjure equal amounts of recognition and nuance as Bowie's would? You know, as I'm writing this at 6:46 pm on a Tuesday evening with very somber opera music blasting in my room and my roommate on my bed laughing at me, Malala comes to mind. I think with the amount of press and international acknowledgement that she received through our 21st century means of communication, she might be a feminist icon elevated to the status of cultural icon. That's great! Go Malala! But, the Venus was already a cultural icon, due to her being a physical icon and her status in the fields of art history, anthropology, and archaeology. And, to top it all off, the design of the varsity jacket is also iconic. It's reception, status, and reverence throughout history has granted it some sort of proverbial role in the worlds of both academic institutions and the fashion industry. The rulebook it swears by is well-read nationally, so this is an opportunity for me to create a space for viewers to be introduced to whatever issue I am advocating comforted by their predetermined feelings and connotations regarding the varsity jacket. So, I laser cut her into a 4" leather figurine and sewed her to my left chest. I earned this letterman jacket.

On Recruiting for Team Venus

The story of being a bad bitch

This is the part where it gets hard. I got all excited and made a team jacket, but now I don't know how to recruit. How do I define what it means to be a Venus? How could I limit anyone in that way? The thing is, my education would say that my jacket isn't something that's meant to be awarded. It's meant to be bought (online, after a few glasses of wine). RISD is teaching me industry standards of production, and so I'm instructed to approach my design exercises with the consumer in mind. If my Venus were bought by some rando in South Carolina, though, that would ruin my concept!

No, that only ruins the concept of the letterman jacket. That jacket is representative of all that is exclusive because it prides itself on its difficulty. That makes it impossible to be open to all consumers. Fortunately, that idea would only apply if I made my jacket look more traditional. But, I didn't. I mean, I designed it based off of a Paleolithic stone, not a group of sweaty teenagers glorified because they throw balls down fields. Since this is not your iconic varsity jacket, my jacket is open to everyone and anyone. I'd be happy to make one for that rando in South Carolina because maybe he's an archaeologist instructor at a local high school, and he really loves the Stone Ages. I'd be happy to make one for my friend who spent four years in the art history trenches at my side and who was very encouraging of my Venus (hey, Aveeka). I'd be happy to make one for the editorialist who doesn't confine to a gender and likes gold fabric, or the small child who thinks his mom is a Venus, or the retired war vet because who cares! Team Venus is for everyone to celebrate all that is womanhood, and you don't even need a pair (of ovaries, of course) to do it.

I can, however, tell you what kind of Venus I strive to be. This is my own personal definition of the Cool Girl, and this Cool Girl is cool for herself, not a boy. Boys are fine, whatever; this isn't their time. If I were The Cool Girl, I would wear tops that cut as low as I want without giving a fuck about the oglers on the bus. If I were The Cool Girl, I would flip off the cars who treat me like a roadside attraction. If I were The Cool Girl, I would lower my sunglasses and look right back at the catcaller scanning my body from his car until *he* feels uncomfortable. If I were The Cool Girl, I'd give the eager middle-aged man on the bus the number to the line that spams phones with bell hooks quotes. If I were The Cool Girl, I would spray that pepper on my gyro and take a huge bite out of it while still maintaining eye contact with that cashier. If I were The Cool Girl, I would tell the seventh-grade classmate who informed me that he liked my ass in the middle of a Social Studies lesson that in the United States a woman is beaten every 9 seconds, making domestic violence the greatest cause of injury to women with 304 million battered each year¹⁵. If I were The Cool Girl I'd be throwing dirt clods at the men on the porch even before my dad could open his mouth. If I were The Cool Girl I wouldn't be surprised that I've been (physically) safe my entire life.

Unfortunately, I can't be this kind of Cool Girl. I need to be safe instead. The above portrayal is very tempting, but it's also unrealistic. If I were that kind of Cool Girl, soon I wouldn't be so lucky anymore. And that's the unfortunate reality of the world I live in right now, and that's why I strive to be a different kind of Cool Girl: a Venus. Venus is a practical handbook to being a feminist in the big technology age. Venus is very loud, and brings up social justice in daily conversations. Venus is passionate about something, anything, and has high ambitions to go

¹⁵ "Myths & Facts about Domestic Violence." Domestic Violence Intervention Program. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 May 2016.

far in life. Venus loves traveling, learning, and eating, and she demands to get off in the bedroom. She stands in solidarity with those who share her identities and those who don't. She isn't defined by her sex life or her body, and she's tough as nails. She's just a boss ass bitch, okay. That's how it is to be a feminist today - to do whatever you want unencumbered by societal pressures; to own your body and your sexuality; to be inclusive and accepting to all decisions and lifestyles; to elevate other women; to not shy away from power; and to use that power to empower others. That's what I find to be inspiring, and that's the Cool Girl I strive to be.

The jacket that you see in those photos was made specifically for myself. Since I wanted the vibe of an exclusive inclusive club membership, The Venus Collection is offered in seven different body shapes but leaves the sleeves open to adornment. The back of the jacket is already emblazoned with "VENUS", and a little fertility icon is already taking the place of a letter. But I wanted the sleeves (intentionally made seductive via shiny gold fabric) to be a space for personalization. It's for you to create your own language. The grunge culture of patches and pins was definitely an inspiration, because all it takes is one look at a punk boi's messenger bag to get a pretty clear idea about who he is and what he values. When I first started thinking about how to send a feminist message via apparel, I naturally thought of patches immediately. I could make my own patches and write whatever I wanted on them - a literal feminist message! What was one thing I wanted to say to the world? No pressure. Here are a few snazzy things I considered: "homosexequality"; "I don't give blow jobs, I give blow careers"¹⁶; "stay bad, stay a bitch"; and "chit chat before the frick frack".

¹⁶ Lin, Elaine. "Illustration/Design/Comics/Seattle." Elaine Lin. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 May 2016. <<http://elainelin.com/>>.

Classy. Instead, I sewed on whatever I found from rummaging through my drawers that could lie flat (damn you, cute button with the dog on it). This jacket was to induct me into Team Venus, and I have only just started to adorn my jacket because I have only just started my membership. In making my jacket, I chose the form that most closely resembles the Venus of Willendorf because of my fondness for her. As for the sleeves, here's what is sewn on so far in its 30-day life (aka what you see in the photos):

- a (probably fake) turquoise shell pendant that I bought at an annual childhood trip to Idlewild, the low-key version of Kennywood, that one amusement park where they filmed *Adventureland*. I remember wearing it on a black cord whenever I went to an 8:00 am mass with my grandma because she would always take me to a bakery afterwards.
- a button displaying the extra-large forehead of a smiling man and a button with ocean waves because I made those whilst working a station at the annual *Youth Invasion* event at The Warhol Museum. I did a lot of really fun programs at The Warhol Museum in high school, and it was whilst sitting at their back door waiting to go visit my suddenly-hospitalized mother that I found out I had been accepted to my dream school (RISD, duh).
- a pin commemorating my status as Junior Handler for the American Kennel Club. Yes, I used to be a dog handler in dog shows. Yes, like the one on Thanksgiving. I own a Bichon Frisé named Leonardo da Vinci, but I used to show his auntie Katie instead.
- a large RISD logo button that I picked up at the cash register during one of my countless trips to the RISD store, essentially handing back my hard-earned paychecks. I think I intended to give it to my mom.

- a baby pin saluting my middle-school academic achievement from Mr. President's Office. I probably was given it during the excruciating but annual awards ceremony where I never failed to win "best artist" every year. Once, though, I got "most creative"... oh, the irony.
- an American flag pin and a little button featuring quotation marks. Honestly, I do not remember where these came from. That flag pin is so generic, I could have gotten it literally anywhere, and I just don't know about those quotes. They're at least from before my sophomore year in college because I remember pinning it on an olive-green knapsack I used a lot that summer.

Looking at the sleeves, would you know that it's a timeline of my life? The little memories on my jacket range from 2002 to 2015. Can you see thirteen years of my life on my jacket? Now, because it's so personal, it's even more impossible for me to hand off my jacket to someone else. I have more than one "letter" even though only two out of my nine adornments are actually congratulating me on something that I achieved. But this makes it another deviation from the iconic varsity jacket. I can't just give it to a boyfriend to wear, nor would I be fine with giving this one to a friend for longer than absolutely necessary. It just doesn't feel right. Yes, I earned it in that I spent half of a semester and innumerable sleepless nights making it, but it's representative of more than what I can produce. It's ideological. It's my own language - one of womanhood and one of my own story. But because I am only one small poor college student, and because I want to welcome every member with open arms, it's fitting that I have to produce any orders by hand. At least then you'll know that it's made with blood and love (that one's for you, Weeks).

Conclusion

The story of trying not to burn bridges

Just like any typical Venus, I too have expectations weighing me down. As I mentioned in the introduction, this year has been the year of My Identity as an Activist Artist; the first time I felt like I had a public role to fill. There are expectations coming at me from all aspects of my life - in Apparel, in my extracurriculars, in my social life. Of course, we all have these expectations placed upon us (see: my entire Venus paper), and people are either conscious of them or not. Ignorance is bliss, and I was “blissful” until this year. But because I am now aware of the public role I’m expected to fill, I now also have to be conscious about the messages I’m putting out. Is this what it means to be an adult? I don’t think that I become a different person depending on which community I’m in, but it’s hard to convince myself of that when I challenge assumptions that I didn’t even know were placed upon me until it’s too late. It was an odd mix between my rising to the challenge and shying away from conflict, mostly for fear of ruining relationships or negative retribution professionally.

In Apparel, I’m expected to not challenge authority. I don’t wish to go into detail about that due to a) not burning bridges and b) not challenging authority. Again, as I mentioned in the introduction, that affected how I regarded my own work. Like any good art student, I’m using my time in school to experiment and figure out my own process and strengths. This semester will only be my third year studying Apparel Design, and I am certainly still learning how to unite it with my passion for social justice. The feedback I receive during this time in my life (only one year left in school!) is crucial to how I proceed in my final year and beyond. So, how do I know that the critique I received was not tainted by feelings about *me* and my challenging authority? I

am by no means invalidating the feedback that I received about my work this semester, and I am by no means being presumptuous enough to assume that I know more about fashion than my critics do. I am simply questioning the motives, because how can I solve the problem if I don't know the source? I know that I am taking an unusual path in this department, but I am still bewildered about where to go from here because I don't know how much I should take their opinions to heart.

Because I have a passion for gender rights, I frequently tie it to everything that I do. Aside from my messy bun, I'm known for my feminism. So it's natural that I would make my work investigate gender rights further. Whenever I received the Room of Silence, aka no critical feedback about my concept from my professor or my peers, I assumed that people were getting tired of me and my obsession with feminism, and I even briefly considered stopping. In my mind, I was getting written off as a crazy feminist (see: *The Trophy Collection* auto-ethnography)! But, I believe in my vision, and I ignored the little voice in my head and the frustration after my crits. It wasn't until protests started to spark around campus that I realized that the Room of Silence was a common thing at RISD. Students aren't being taught how to effectively critique a work without focusing solely on the visual aspects, and we certainly aren't being taught the cross-cultural competency or sensitivity required to discuss issues of identity.

The Not Your Token protests is a whole other story, one that I've already written about separately and one that I don't want to delve into again here. Let's just say that the expectations placed upon me in Apparel were contradictory to the impassioned calls for change on campus. The role that I was perceived to fill within my department was shifting and changing, and I no longer fit into that mold. Interestingly enough, the role that I was assuming, the one that wasn't

entirely acceptable within my major, was closer to who I was expected to be by the members of the RISD community. I do a lot of community-building work with student organizations on campus, and as my hours spent in meetings outnumbered my hours spent in studio I realized that I was more interested in this work than being a traditional fashion student. Since my extracurricular work focuses on changing the culture at RISD and addressing problems locally and globally, I've become fairly well-known on campus by staff and students alike (and now, infamously I assume, by faculty in Apparel). And then, because I am tied to my social activism on campus, people assume certain things about me.

What are some assumptions one has about activists? Feminists? Student feminist activists? I don't really know either, but apparently I was lacking in someone's definition of me. Someone asked my best friend if I was actually a good person, aka if I practice what I preach. I don't know who asked this (they know who they are), so I can't evaluate my interactions with any one person. I was forced to question my general presentation, what I do in public, and how I look to people who don't know me very well. Outraged, I asked him how I'm supposed to act, and he speculated that it maybe it was because I don't party very much. That is madness. I used to be far more social than I am now, but that was back when everyone wanted to be friends with each other, I was in a new place with new people, and I wasn't as much of an introvert back then. Then my time at RISD changed after a distressing turn of events, and I stopped being as "traditionally" (re: college students getting black out drunk at strangers' houses) social.

But surely my peers don't place *that* much value on how often I show up on the weekends to say hi before drunkenly walking home? Maybe they do, and if they do, I'm sorry. But there is still the very open possibility that it wasn't due to how many parties I attend, which

forced me to consider what else it is that could be the reason. I do have a resting bitch face. I'm not mad; it's just my face. People have told me that they thought I hated them until we were actually friends...cause of my face. It's a problem. I'm sure that's some of it, but not everything.

What else is there? This coincides with the expectations placed on me by the student life community. I have many wonderful close friends who work with me on my campus activism, and in some aspects I prefer them to my friends from studio or just the random friends that I would only see at parties (I guess they are mad). But I serve as a leader for many of these friends, and many others come from being in similar leadership positions. They are my friends, but now I have to balance the role of friend with the role of leader. Being a leader comes with expectations, and some of those I am conscious of. I'm aware when I don't meet my expectations in my activism because you can see when the work doesn't get finished. But those are expectations regarding work, so what about personality? The suspicious question from an outsider means that I could have breached assumptions within my activist community or from my peers.

As I enter the summer, before starting my Maharam Fellowship with Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island, I am reflecting almost too much on what it means to reconcile people's perceptions of you with how you perceive yourself. Visually, I do not look how I feel. I don't mean that in a gender-questioning type of way, I just mean that if I saw myself on the street, I wouldn't identify with her. I might not even recognize her. My appearance doesn't necessarily reflect how I regard myself or my identity. I thought about that a bit last year, but this year was about my actions rather than my appearance. Nonetheless, this summer will bring to light the importance of my actions *and* words. I will be working at a local organization that resettles refugees and immigrants, and I will be working with a handful of female clients to investigate

the role of the arts as a tool of resettlement. The people I will spend the summer interacting with do not come from America and are not accustomed to our nonverbal communication skills. Working at a resettlement agency makes me one of the first introductions to an American, especially significant because I am younger than the entire DIIRI staff. Now my troubles with my RISD persona are nothing compared to the weight of the responsibility of knowing that whatever I say or do will reflect on me as a person and on America as a country.

This grants me freedom with how I convey my ideas about gender and how that relates to our local and global communities, but I also have to be constantly on alert to make sure my values are clear in my words and actions. At DIIRI, the women will take in what may be their first exposure to a young, female American artist and draw conclusions based on what I present. Are they going to disapprove of American female sexuality if I wear shorts that are too short, despite what I share about my values of sex positivity and female empowerment? Or are they going to take what I say about my work with Title IX or the artwork that I present (especially last semester's penis opera coat and vagina evening gown) as an indication that attitudes towards women's bodies are constantly evolving, both in their native culture and their new home?

This auto-ethnography is just a handful of the thoughts that are constantly running through my mind and how they relate to my artwork. I have never really had to balance others' perceptions with my own identity before, but now I'm aware of the true weight in the interpersonal relationships we engage with on a daily basis, ones that carry values, ambitions, visions, and morals. I had already learned this the hard way on campus, and I'm still learning more about the expectations others have for me. But now, the new environment of scrutiny at DIIRI has the potential for real change within my larger community of Providence, Rhode

Island, and moving forward I just need to be absolutely certain that my words, actions, values, and goals all align. This is something to serve me well at RISD, as well. Nonetheless, all I need to remember is to “stay bad, stay a bitch”. Welcome to Team Venus!

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