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*ON THE RELATION OF FASHION TO ART:
AN INTERVIEW WITH ALI HVAL*

Ali Hval is a visual artist currently living and working in Iowa City, Iowa. She is currently a Lecturer in Painting and Drawing at the University of Iowa. The following interview was recently conducted by Ariadne Dubus and Madeleine Taylor.

What has been your journey as an artist up to now?

“I always knew I wanted to be an artist, so much that my mom painted clouds in my closet just so I could draw on the wall with colored pencils. I consider myself lucky that my parents have always been supportive of me being an artist, even during times when I was feeling hesitant about my major or career choice.

I received my BFA in Painting from the University of Alabama in 2015, where my work evolved from paintings of organic shapes on gessoed paper to more sculptural fabric pieces. In these soft sculptures, I cut, scrunched, lined, and draped large fabric shapes to create varying marks and volumes. I created pieces that cascaded from the walls to the floors and held a relationship to the space they were in, and it was with these that I began thinking about installation as an option for my work.

After undergrad, I received the Windgate Fellowship from the Center of Craft, Creativity, and Design. This \$15,000 craft grant allowed me the funding to take workshops for sewing and beading, acquire higher-quality fabrics and materials, and produce larger work for my portfolio to graduate school. That year felt like a lot of uncertainty, but the time I had and was able

to spend just working on my art was invaluable. It was essentially a self-guided residency; my studio was at my parents' house in a spare bedroom they cleared of furniture for me.

I was accepted to graduate school at the University of Iowa in 2017. There my work started incorporating unglazed ceramics alongside fabric. I enjoy the symbolism behind the fragility of ceramics and the quickness which with an idea can develop with clay. I also like how I am able to visually smooth a rough ceramic surface by painting it and dotting it with rhinestones. It was at Iowa when I started thinking about my work being similar to oversized pieces of jewelry, though not too overtly. I made replicas of earrings I had on my jewelry stand and other organic forms that resembled symmetrical, oversized brooches.

It was also during graduate school when I began installing my work on murals that I painted. During summers I worked to paint murals for local communities, and painted backdrops seeped into my studio work.

After graduate school, I adjuncted at a few different community colleges in Iowa. Though the pay was minimal, working as an adjunct gave me more teaching experience and allowed me to continue making ceramic work. I was also doing more public art and began travelling to paint murals in other cities around the United States. The Covid-19 pandemic delayed some exhibition opportunities for a few years, as it did for many artists.

Now in 2023, I have finally settled into a position as Lecturer of Painting and Drawing at my graduate school alma mater, the University of Iowa. I have been exhibiting my work nationally in places such as Ceysson y Benetiere in New York, the Gadsden Museum of Art, and Woman Made Gallery in Chicago. I also continue my work as a muralist and paint a handful of murals during the summer across the United States. I feel that the scale and intense physical work in mural projects has informed my studio work.

How do you see fashion's relationship to art?

Fashion does a fantastic job of challenging what we are societally expected to wear, just as art constantly redefines itself.

It's funny that the challenging questions regarding people's appearances (Why are men wearing dresses and high heels all of a sudden in the twenty-first century? Why are women deciding to wear corsets as tops?) are fashion trends that have already happened and are just resurfacing in new ways. There was a time when ornate heels were popular with men, when emphasizing body parts with clothing (decorative codpiece, anyone?), and when women wore corsets as a part of fashion. Now, those corsets are just without layers of heavy clothing underneath. Now, men wear heels beyond the French royal court. Societal standards and hierarchy changes fashion trends. We see what happened in history for those clothing pieces to exist; it is reflective of the times.

One thing I have been thinking about in regards to all this is the history and timeline of the high heel. The first high heel recorded was a product of war made for Persian soldiers (in Nishapur, what is now modern-day Iran) as far back as the 10th century. War, as we know it, is "super manly." Heels, as we know them, are "super girly." Crazy how the two could exist in tandem with one another! Men would wear these high heels to retain a stable position in their stirrups on horseback during war when they stood up to fire a bow.

Centuries later in France, King Louis XIV wore a colorful variety of heels, as seen in full-body oil painted portraits of him. He also encouraged noblemen in his court to wear them. For the king, the higher heel just meant a more powerful wearer. As soon as the 18th century rolled around, men and women were both wearing iterations of the high heels we think of today with a block near the wearer's heel. And in due course, men wanted to separate themselves from what women wore, and there became a divide in heels for each gender: women's heels were narrower and more decorative, and men's more utilitarian. Eventually, society deemed heels as purely decorative and solely reserved for women.

Of course, now we see contemporary examples of men wearing heels: David Bowie, for instance, broke a lot of boundaries in gendered fashion. I'm sure we will cycle through it time and time again, and people will continue to be puzzled seeing the opposite gender wearing a version of something long ago.

There is much more to the trajectory of high heels than the above, but it is so intriguing to me how social hierarchies, gender constructs, and adornment altered this one object in the eyes of many. My work feels like a similar conversation to how a person's body can alter the context of a worn object."

What drew you specifically to female sexuality and femme aesthetics as a central theme in your work? How has this theme evolved throughout your career?

The themes of my work focus on my own experiences as a woman on a day-to-day basis. As is the case with other artists, my sculptures are self-portraits of myself, or vignettes of my experiences. I have shared these experiences with other women which I learn through everyday conversations with female friends and their interactions with my work.

My experience growing up in the Southern United States is not so different from that of other women's. I quickly learned there was a certain expectation of how to "properly" be a woman: dress a certain way, don't be "too much," don't argue with others, always keep the peace, don't have sex too soon or too late, and don't be overly emotional or dramatic. Even though these were not certain expectations my family put on me, they were still pervasive in school, society, and the general atmosphere of the south. It existed in the echoes and insinuations of the social structures around me.

These expectations have influenced my work greatly as has speaking to other women while we reflect on our relatable pasts. With my work, I challenge this stereotypical definition of a woman. To state the obvious: being a woman is different for everyone and how you physically present yourself as a woman will be different. Coming to terms with the repercussions of that and doing what you want anyway is the challenging part,

especially at a young age that is more susceptible to judgement and influence.

There must be room to be more than one thing as a woman. If there is anything Greta Gerwig's *Barbie: The Movie* taught us, it is that we should wholeheartedly embrace contradiction. You can wear frilly dresses and still be intelligent and career-driven, or be a feminist who wants to be a stay-at-home mom.

I personally embrace the pink, the excessive, and the bedazzled in both my wardrobe and studio practice. I opt for bright colors and sparkling rhinestones in my outfits, and this naturally percolates into the materials in my sculptures as well.

The act of dressing up is one way to perform femininity. The excessiveness of my work performs the above concepts for me, using a stereotype against itself. My sculptures prove themselves to be more than their stereotypical exteriors. I use this performed femininity as a tool to reveal the critiques and politicization of the female body.

This idea of performed femininity interests me especially as I do not want to actually perform anything myself. I did attempt a few performative pieces in undergrad and graduate school which involved highly detailed costuming and elaborate rituals in public spaces, but it didn't feel quite right. However, I still wanted to create work which felt performative, and was able to relay these experiences—hence the materials I use. Rhinestones, gleaming holographic fabrics, and other beauty products have a flashiness which draws people in just because of their appearance.

Rhinestones specifically became one of the top materials I use, as they are able to accomplish many things. Beyond performing an idea, they can also be used to highlight, enhance, or even distract from something else. They're a material that, as a young girl, we have on nearly everything we owned that was considered "girly" or "feminine": clear glittery Disney princess shoes, giant plastic gemstone rings, T-shirts bedazzled with butterflies, and more. The colors saturating my work are similar to those within the

Barbie toy isle – pink, lavender, yellows, aqua blues, and every other candy-like color.

What is interesting to me about rhinestones specifically is how this innocent, playful material can become something which indicates maturity or sexuality given the context. I ask how a material can change context based on the body it is on. As girls mature into women, we see the same materials and colors on iPhone cases, fishnet tights, stripper heels, and even nipple tassels.

My work itself walks a similar line. As oversized pieces of jewelry, they imply how they adorn bodies or are stand-ins for bodies. Some of the objects in a lot of my pieces seem like everyday objects, like massive matchsticks or lock-and-key charms. Once adorned with glistening rhinestones, pink feather boas, and fringe, they feel performative and sensual. The addition of these materials changes an everyday object's meaning. It also gives these objects underlying conceptual significance which move beyond their pink, frilly forms, exhibiting just how fully-rounded they are."

The use of chains in your work speaks to an interesting duality of adornment and entrapment, while also serving as a sign of connection. What is your process of exploring and developing symbolism in your art?

"I draw my motifs from jewelry, clothing items, and everyday items, which are oftentimes quirky things I come across while scrolling through jewelry online or thrifting. An interesting pair of earrings, a unique charm on a bracelet, or even a sensual looking pair of candlestick holders can all become fodder for my studio work. Even when I'm not intentionally looking for artwork inspiration, my studio practice always seems to present itself.

Recently I have delved into creating pieces inspired by charm bracelets. Across history, charm bracelets have evolved from being good luck charms to ward off evil to being a playful thing which signifies someone's interests in teeny-tiny physical charm form, such as a paint palette or a music note. I have been

thinking about what the placement of certain tiny charms next to one another could signify. Symbolically, a lock can be helpful to keep things protected, but is also impossible to escape from without a key. A clothes hanger is a helpful tool to keeping one's wardrobe organized, but also a reminder of women's historical struggle with abortion rights.

This duality presents itself in many parts of my work. I frequently use chains in my pieces not only to connect parts of my pieces, but also for the layered symbolism. Chains are such a neutral, functional thing but can also feel gendered or sexualized depending on context. They also have the duality of masculine and feminine energy. Not only can a chain be a fine weaving of gold meant to adorn, but also a strong harness that can hoist vehicles in an oil-slicked auto body shop. In this way, I like playing with the scale of these chains as well as considering the material they are covered in: rhinestones and shimmering fabrics alter the way the viewer perceives them.

My work tends to walk a line between one thing and another. A few years ago, I started making pieces that resembled my own earrings. Adding a chain motif, rhinestones, and other beauty supplies materials to these pieces presents them as a pair of nipple tassels. It is that line between just fun and playful and possibly sexual that interests me. I search for these things which are a balancing act in themselves. They are not outright obvious at first, but slowly come to mind with the addition of rhinestones and other beauty supplies materials on top of them."

How do you find a balance between representing femininity and inclusive representation?

"One of my pieces, *Pink Pony Club*, is titled after a Chappell Roan song. In the accompanying music video, the singer dances on a strip club stage in a glittering, tassel-trimmed outfit, beginning almost timidly wearing a hat and jacket. As the song progresses, drag queens and men in leather harnesses join her, and even the most conservative looking men in the bar shift from looking irritated to enthralled. By the end, Roan is dancing without a care in the world of what anyone else thinks. She has removed her hat

and jacket. She moves fluidly through a journey of self-discovery, a metaphor which anyone can embrace.

This video feels like a metaphor of the work I am trying to create – the pieces are the performers which are coming to terms with their potential as they discover themselves, all while involving a range of viewers in this journey. Although my experiences are from my very specific (and very feminine) point of view, I hope they can parallel experiences that women of all races, ethnicities, and body shapes can relate to. I don't want to force inclusion in my work as I am only able to speak for my own experiences.

I have always been interested in jewelry and clothing as a form of self-expression. Growing up, what I wore made me feel as if I could shape who I was and alter the image I wanted to project into the world. Even now, I collect clothing, makeup, and jewelry to curate my appearance, which is especially helpful on days when I feel like the body I am in isn't reflective of who I am.

As women, we go through a lot of discomfoting stages in our bodies. Dealing with puberty, worrying about bras and body hair at a young age, gaining and losing weight, and even getting a period are all events which can unite us. I remember specifically feeling like my body was “weird” in grade school because parts of it grew at different rates. What I wore would help to counteract this strange bodily disconnect. I'm sure clothing and jewelry helps others define themselves when their body feels separate from who they are, too.

Jewelry isn't reserved for one gender and never has been. Across the centuries, figures of all genders have worn some type of jewelry. Egyptians were skilled at crafting jewelry from turquoise, and men would adorn themselves with talismans of carved scarabs which served to protect them. In Japan, intricately carved buckles adorned kimono sashes and *inro*, or decorative carrying cases which tied to the sash. Maharajahs of India embraced Art Deco, and one even commissioned Cartier for a custom festoon necklace with a massive yellow diamond. “

How has the current political climate affected or influenced your work?

“I feel the current political climate has affected my work in two ways. One, I now make work with more representational objects. Two, I make work which encourages more play in the studio.

Two years ago, my work was more abstract. The forms that I used then would allude to wearable fashions, like earrings or a brooch, but were a stretch from their real-life counterparts. Now, they contain more recognizable objects within them, namely on my charm bracelet pieces where I replicate something like a cherry, matchstick, deviled egg, or even a rabbit vibrator. Regardless of how recognizable these individual elements are, the work still feels abstract enough to be interpreted in various ways.

Most of the recognizable objects in these pieces have multiple meanings: a matchstick can be something that destroys, but also brings new possibilities by burning old bridges. An eggplant is an edible nightshade vegetable, but in cartoon emoji form becomes more phallic and sexual. With the current political climate, some of the objects I use, such as birth control devices and hangers, are flooded with more meaning than ever.

One of my pieces, titled *Prim and Proper (Power Bracelet)*, clashes politicized objects like an IUD and birth control pill pack with everyday items like a deviled egg and a hairbrush. This combination of items brings another layer of complexity to my work, questioning the contexts of what is deemed taboo versus the ordinary. I could not ask this question with the pure abstraction of my previous work. Adding representation to my work has brought more realism to my work and grounded it in twenty-first century conversations. It feels more specific and honest, which is necessary in times when so much of the news surrounding women’s bodily autonomy is incredibly disheartening.

Subconsciously, I think this negativity in the political climate has caused me to rebel with more saturated colors and fun materials than I did before. Now, the work doesn’t care what the viewers thinks of its appearance. Before the pandemic, I used a color palette that resembled an eveningwear eyeshadow compact:

dusty pinks, soft golds, and muted lavender. Now, the gleaming gold paint I use is quite literally named “24-karat gold extreme” and the pinks and purples are Barbie’s Dreamhouse-worthy. Using new materials like pom-pom hair ties and chainette fringe has been exponential to this new, vivid color experience.”

Do you often have a social/political message you want to portray through a piece or does personal interpretation seem more important?

Oftentimes when I am creating work, I am thinking about certain political themes – while women’s bodily autonomy is in my web of interests, sometimes I’m also thinking about more unassuming topics such as the pervasive feeling of needing to perform perfectly in all areas of life or the act of putting on an outfit. However, many pieces don’t have a specific message I want to convey.

For example, my piece *Charlotte’s Web* feels more fraught with political meaning than some of my other pieces due to the symbols in it. A soft, golden web formed from pliable fabric chainmail forms the main structure of the piece. The soft chainmail web is teeming with various forms of bedazzled birth control: an IUD, two shapes of pill boxes, the shot, and the ring. All of these are caught within this web-like structure.

Another piece, titled *Tiffany’s Blues*, is a more abstract sculpture which resembles a turquoise shoe blanketed in small orbs. From each toe tip dangles an orb-covered sphere. The entire piece is scintillating with lagoon-blue rhinestones. For a while, I have been making these cumbersome pairs of shoes that would be impossible to walk in. Since the piece is more abstract, it leans into this love of material and adornment over concept.

These abstract pieces celebrate being a woman regardless of the circumstances which surround them. The work acknowledges women know how they want to present themselves. For me, that means genuinely embracing all things pink and glittery while also being able to feel like loving those things won’t limit how people see me or what I can do.

I participated in a group exhibition at Ceysson y Bénétière in June 2022 called *The Ecstasy of Saint Britney* which heralded the excessive, pink and decorative. Rather than seeing these things as a weakness, the exhibition pinned them as a power to be reckoned with. It isn't dumb or frivolous to dress up or love the overly decorative, and being that shouldn't make others think that there is nothing else beyond your exterior.

My pieces are also just tactile and fun to make. The process is meditative, and I relish the way my work ends up looking. I enjoy slowly studding a ceramic component with rhinestones one by one until it transforms the object. I like how the shine of nail polish on more detailed areas of a sculpture resembles lacquer. I enjoy the texture and dimensionality of a pom-pom. It oftentimes feels like I'm dressing up a sculpture the same way I would pick an outfit for myself. The behind-the-scenes work of getting ready in the morning comes into full view. I often move parts and pieces of a sculpture around until its "outfit" feels right. The end product's appearance and lively materiality of my work is important to me. Even if a viewer only sees these as whimsical sculptures, that's okay, too, because I feel that way quite a lot during their making.

What message do you hope people take away from your art? In what ways do you want your art to challenge audiences?

"While I believe anyone can enjoy my art, the audience I specifically think about challenging is women themselves. These could be the women who don't see themselves as feminist, the women who don't think femme women can be feminist, or the women who don't see supporting other women as a necessity.

I think many people are off-put by the word "feminist" even though they enjoy the benefits of the feminist movement, like equal opportunities for education and access to birth control. I want them to know the reason they have many of the rights they do is a direct result of the actions of feminism. It is backwards for anyone to say feminism isn't necessary anymore, or that it has done its job when many of the rights women once held are now breaking away.

That being said, I hope people see my work not only as a political statement, but also as acceptance for how to be whatever kind of person you want to be. But perhaps that is a political statement in itself.

With my materials, I am also challenging a conversation with contemporary ceramics. Often, I feel my work doesn't fit into one space as it is so interdisciplinary. It brushes with mediums of painting, ceramics, sculpture, and installation. Ceramics is responsible for the structure and base of my work, and the delicacy of clay is symbolically integral. The clay components couldn't simply be replaced with another material and be the same work. This fragility speaks to the importance of the symbols in the work.

My work is also not conventionally glazed in the sense that I make something with clay, fire it, and add layers of glaze. Rather, the surfaces go through a variety of treatments, like being painted, covered in fabric, or bedazzled."

Has the current conversation surrounding gender binary and fluidity challenged your own ideas surrounding sexuality and femininity as represented in your work? What is the relationship between the aspects of your work that are representational of your own gender identity and the aspects that serve as a larger social commentary?

"My work embraces stereotypically femme aesthetics and female sexuality. I make theatrical sculptures which embrace all aspects of womanhood. The trans movement is incredibly important as people deserve to not feel they must jump through hoops based on how others perceive their appearance, gender, or sexuality. However, my sculptures are self-portraits of myself and of my own experiences that I can personally speak to. These are the experiences I can portray accurately because I have lived them. I don't want to speak for someone else's experience when I have not lived their life.

I also don't want to lose sight of the fact that being super feminine is one of the options on that spectrum. That is where I exist. A film which speaks to this feminine experience is none

other than *Legally Blonde*. This movie speaks more to feminism, but still parallels to recognize people's potential regardless of their appearances.

Elle Woods, played by Reese Witherspoon, faces constant scrutiny and must overcome hurdles that her other peers do not. Even as a fictional character, her struggles can extend to reality and be shared by others. Over the course of the film, Elle Woods slowly discredits the stereotype of a "dumb blonde," even using it to her advantage. Her score on the LSAT weighs in at 179, one point away from a perfect 180. She makes a video of herself in a sequin bikini talking about her accomplishments to apply to Harvard, which is reviewed by a group of men. She successfully enters. At the end of the film, Elle wins a court case as a result of her scrupulous attention to detail.

My sculptures dream to hold this duality of depth and femininity for themselves, too. Although I can only speak candidly about my own life hurdles, I want to leave the conversation open for others to enter where they have had paralleling experiences in their life."

What projects can we look forward to seeing from you in the future?

"I have a show opening in November at the Gadsden Museum of Art titled "Barbie's Dreamhouse." This series of work will question whether or not the objects within the space of the Dreamhouse are actually dreamy, or if they represent something more sinister beyond their frilly, pink exteriors – which they often do!

Recently I have been exploring different forms, like oversized charm bracelets, and want to begin thinking about merging some of my jewelry forms with household items: think rugs with tassels and gloves woven into them, candlesticks dripping in chains, and mirrors with charm bracelets circling their exterior. Furniture forms with a jewelry association will round out the space of the Dreamhouse. The show will run through February, but the concept will live on past that.

I am also one of three curators for an exhibition at the National Council on Education for the Ceramics Arts, or NCECA. The show will be called, "Ephemeral Alters." It will feature a handful of artists who primarily work in ceramics but also integrate other materials. The works in the exhibition will focus on 1) craft-based materials besides glaze added to a ceramic surface and 2) the temporality of other materials alongside the ceramic pieces. The exhibition aims to reshape the viewing of a contemporary gallery space.

Each artist in the show will bring a static, ceramic object. By using permanent ceramic works combined with a wall drawing, vinyl, or mural created in the gallery, the space's environment will be temporarily altered. Each participating artist will engage with the space to produce a site-specific component to their ceramic piece. This exhibition will spark a conversation with craft, ceramics, and painting. Ceramics is traditionally a medium which solely involves ceramics, glaze, and kiln firing and techniques, but has been transitioning to include nontraditional materials. Each of the artists in this exhibition merges ceramics with other new media to question this hierarchical standard of ceramics and craft."