

Andrea Cooper
Artist's Statement

During the past few years, I have produced a series of pieces about work (labor, repetition, oppression) and play (creativity, experimentation, jouissance). This work has combined dish towels—a significant although ambiguous object—as a subject matter with issues concerning marginality and gender. With this current project, I wish to expand my frame of reference to include class.

The dish towel, commonly associated with the domestic or "feminine" sphere, is a petri dish for cultivating associations with oppression and degradation. My investigation until now has led me to recontextualize the dish towel into a formalistic object associated with the repetition, multiples, and geometry of the grid. By sewing soft works and thereby performing "woman's work," my labor places importance upon the feminization of material and process, which contrasts with the allure of hardware in the industrial, male-dominated minimalist movement of the 1960's. By doing this, I have had an opportunity to explore modernist ideology and reexamine the patriarchal discourse of labor and creativity.

I have taken this investigation one step further by exploring aesthetics as a condition of class. The dish towel, like many other domestic items that really need not be made of anything other than natural cloth, has been overtly aestheticized. Dressing up the utilitarian—linking work with play—is a common device for marketing utilitarian objects and driving capital. Indeed, there are many items that occupy the domestic realm that are made of fabric. However, there is really no need for any object to be made of anything other than natural cloth for utilitarian purposes. Why, then, are fabrics dyed, printed, woven, and embroidered?

The discourse of the aestheticization of household objects is fully integrated with the concept of class, which is directly associated with labor and the distribution of wealth. The idea of class is visible in virtually all aspects of domestic decoration, and can be seen with clarity in the dish towel. For example, there are clearly-defined class strata which can be confirmed by examining the dish towels sold at dollar stores, Big KMart, and other discount stores, mid-range department stores such as Macy's, mass-market kitchen stores such as Bed, Bath and Beyond, "upscale" department stores such as Bloomingdale's, "design-conscious" catalogs such as Williams-Sonoma and Crate and Barrel, and elite stores such as Nieman Marcus, home stores such as Portico and Ad Hoc Softwares, as well as designer lines such as Calvin Klein.

The concept of "class" is one of power and oppression. Classification—as man or woman, straight or gay, adult or child, white or nonwhite, human or animal—creates a system of relationships, built upon the hierarchical domination of class within society. In fact, the concept of class suggests that each group cannot be thought about apart from one another because they are tied together by hegemonic relationships.

Given this objective analysis, as a woman and an artist, I have always been concerned with determining my own mode of labor. The studio, which is a space not unlike the kitchen, is the perfect laboratory for investigating labor and creativity, since it is a neutral space that is tangential to all other locations of labor within the marketplace. Because of this neutrality in this space I am able to control my own destiny, and blur the lines between work and play in an organic way, which is determined to a great degree by the work itself. The more I work the more I want to play, and the more I play the more I want to work. Within this self-imposed, regenerative space, I have created a self-perpetuating utopia. However, like the domesticplace, the artisticplace generates little wage, but requires tremendous upkeep.

My work is produced in this way: first, I go shopping to see what is available in dish towels. This requires "class" hopping, or shopping across boundaries. As I climb the class ladder, I am very self-conscious about what I am wearing, my hair, and my weight, as well as the differences between elements such as display, marketing, service, comfort and intimidation. I am rarely allowed to buy exactly what I want or need, because dish towels are sold in "sets," and I invariably have to overbuy in order to purchase the exact number of colors or patterns that I need for a given piece. As I think about sets, I think about multiples, mass-production, and consumption, which are inherently imbedded within commodification. By displacing the dish towel from the context of utility (all the sales people keep telling me how absorbent their dish towels are, and I just nod, which, of course, displaces me further from mainstream discourse) I have an opportunity to recontextualize this item, thereby assigning a new meaning to this object. By unfolding the dish towel, and fully disclosing the aesthetic appearance—ordinarily they are never in full display as they are either folded up on racks, or looped through a refrigerator door handle—I lay them out flat in repetitive patterns, sew them together with simple reinforcing seams, and retool them into paintings. Many of the motifs that I use are borrowed geometric gestures that cite historical moments (mostly male-generated formalisms) within "high art." The finished product finally elevates the "exchange value" of the dish towel. While deemphasizing utility and reemphasizing aesthetics, my work attempts to level the playing field in terms of class.

There is also a semblance of humanization attached to this work, which goes back to the question about why these items are aestheticized in the first place. Often dressing up the dish towel, or other fabrics in the home have to do with matching, or creating a uniform "unblemished" environment, or creating a safe space. In the end, though, it is important to keep in mind that dish towels are real objects that are selected and acquired by real people with individual desires and aspirations, sited in real kitchens, intended to wipe up real messes. The aestheticization of the dish towel is an interactive process formed between industry and individuals, and the difference between fuzzy kittens and unbleached waffle weave is determined by commodification, power, agency, and desire.

-End-