‘Shoplifting from Woolworths and Other Acts of Material Disobedience’, an exhibition of work by Paula Chambers

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The first artworks I encounter in ‘Shoplifting from Woolworths and Other Acts of Material Disobedience’ are Kitchen Shanks, a wall-based installation of objects, and the voiceover narrative from the video Folding Chair for the Feminist Resistance. The combination of these two works introduces a key methodology in Paula Chambers’ practice: domestic objects are ‘regressed’ to a feral state that transforms or obliterates their original use value and gives them a different function. In this process of transformation, the objects appear to gain an unpredictable agency of their own. Some of the artworks imply that the objects will provide their user with a will to act(ivism). This brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s idea that by changing the social value of commodities consumers are able to inhabit the objects and make them act abnormally. Benjamin writes that the use and social values that commodities seem to contain are arbitrary and not inherent to the commodities, and that, furthermore, these values are often problematic, reductive
and reinforce the status quo. In Chambers’ work, for example, domestic objects symbolise entrapment and a loss of power for women. By disrupting the value attributed to commodities, Benjamin said consumers can appropriate commodities as emancipatory wish images:

if the social value (hence the meaning) of commodities is their price, this does not prevent them from being appropriated by consumers as wish images within the emblem books of their private dreamworld… once the initial hollowing out of meaning has occurred and a new signification has been arbitrarily inserted into it, this meaning ‘can at any time be removed in favor of any other.’

According to Benjamin, consumers have the power to assign to commodities values that are beneficial to the consumer. In ‘Shoplifting from Woolworths’, familiar objects were ‘presented back to us as a reclamation of the detritus of the domestic, a protest against domestication’, which ‘disrupts our understanding of the stability of domestication as a one-way process’. Symbols of domestication are hollowed out and given new meanings. For example, Balls (for Girls) repurposes the visual language of snooker hall and mob violence to produce feminised sculptures that retain the dangerous quality of the objects they are modelled on. Large marbles and snooker balls dangle at the end of the legs of brightly-coloured pairs of tights, or pantyhose. These are minimalis sculptures, but with a splash of colour and a menacing undertone that brings to mind Annette Messager’s Les Piques sculptures rather than the formal minimalism of Martin Creed.

Paula Chambers, Balls (for girls), 2020, tights, glass marbles, powder coated steel, 125 x 375 x 25cm, photo courtesy of the artist

In a continuation of inferred violence, *Kitchen Shanks* resembles a display of confiscated weapons fashioned by prisoners from the materials they have at hand. These objects are displayed in prison offices to inform the guards about the potential inventiveness and cunning of prisoners who transform seemingly innocent materials into lethal weapons. Chambers’ *Kitchen Shanks* are similarly educational, but they function as a ‘how to’ guide for making weapons and not what to look for in order to impede their construction.

![Image of Kitchen Shanks](image)

The *Kitchen Shanks* also resemble fetish objects. From the early fifteenth century, European merchants had to enter into fetishist transactions when purchasing (and colonising) African goods. In order to swap beads and other ‘trinkets’ for gold, the merchants had to appear to believe in the fetish properties of the objects they were exchanging: they profited from the vastly different market values of the objects by agreeing to their equal value as fetishes. The fetish enabled them to ‘translate and transvalue objects between radically different social systems… triangulated among Christian feudal, African lineage, and merchant capitalist social systems’. It was an object with radically different meanings, dependent on the value system of the person who owned it. For example, a piece of gold had sexual, social and religious value for the fetish worshipper, and monetary exchange value for a European merchant. When prison shanks are displayed for prison guards to study, the guards are taught to imbue domestic objects with violent potential, and enter into the prisoners’ value system for objects.

The term ‘fetish’ originates from Latin and Portuguese words meaning human-made, artificial and fraudulent and was used in a derogatory manner. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard defines

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fetishism as ‘a fabrication, an artefact, a labor of appearances and signs’. In this sense, traditional aspects of femininity that require a ‘labour of appearances’, such as applying make-up or hair-dressing, turn the female body into a fetish. According to the accounts of European traders, the fetish had a dual meaning – it was revered as a deity and esteemed as an ornament. This duality inscribed the fetish with an erotic character. The English slave trader John Atkins describes African women decorating their bodies with paint: ‘the Women are fondest of what they call fetishing, setting themselves out to attract the good Graces of the Men’. To the female fetish worshipper, the fetish appears to bestow sexual desirability upon the body; to the European traders, it connoted the dangers of seduction. In Kitchen Shanks, this duality is produced by combining incongruent materials: corkscrews, pickle forks and scissors are wrapped in tights (pantyhose) and hairbands that may bear traces of a previous owner. These fetishes can be carried on the body like a protective talisman; however, their defensive function is not founded on faith, but on the actual potential of the object. Blades that are designed to slice fruit now threaten to harm other types of flesh. In this juxtaposition of materials, the culinary and hair-dressing uses of the domestic objects are removed and the objects are transformed into a conduit for violence. The Kitchen Shanks are human-made fabrications and a labour of appearances, but in their masquerade as mystical good-luck charms they conceal a more dangerous intent.

While contemplating these aesthetically seductive and malevolent objects, I hear the words ‘folding chairs, like women, are mindful of the space they take up’. The video Folding Chair for the Feminist Resistance features a folding chair with the word ‘feminist’ stencilled on the backrest, equating the feminist’s chair with a director’s chair, an association that infers that both seated individuals are expected to orchestrate action. The feminist chair is digitally composited into a variety of scenes, from boardrooms to back alleys, and presented in the video as a slideshow. The voiceover describes the ubiquity and veracity of the folding chair, a piece of furniture often overlooked but also frequently called upon when additional seating is needed. The narrator describes an object that is multifunctional, adaptable and a little bit unpredictable; it can be equated with a social ideal of femininity that is inobtrusive and takes up little space, but also with feminist activism because it possesses ‘an autonomy… that cannot be forced to be what it is not’. Perhaps there is reference to recent feminist writings that lament the historicisation of second-wave feminism and the neoliberalisation of contemporary feminism, when the narrator states ‘time has not relegated the folding chair to quaint nostalgia… And like feminism, the folding chair will continue to serve a purpose whilst we still need it; supportive and ultimately portable the folding chair comes with us as we head up the feminist resistance’.

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4 Jean Baudrillard, For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, Charles Levin, trans, Telos Press, Missouri, 1981, p 91 (emphasis in the original)
6 J Atkins, A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West Indies, in His Majesty’s Ships the Swallow and Weymouth, Ward and Chandler, London, 1737, quoted in Pietz, ibid, p 111 (emphasis in the original)
In tandem with the discourses that relegate feminism to a moment in history, sexism has resurfaced as retro-sexism in advertising. Retro-sexism reproduces extremely objectifying and derogatory gender stereotypes from the past, using ‘vintage’ signifiers to create distance between the commodity and the advert’s sexist content. The adverts are quotations of sexism rather than overt sexism. As a quotation, sexism is safely contained, shielding the advertiser and complicit viewer from criticism and enabling sexism to be expressed through commodity culture. Sexism comes to be inscribed in the objects that surround us.

When viewing Unwelcome Gift and Domestic Front, I question the function of ‘vintage’ imagery and objects in the artworks. Do they historicise the ideas that they evoke – placing feminist struggles at a safe distance, while

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reassuring the viewer that times have changed and feminism has achieved some victories? I think there is a clue in the narrative voiceover of the *Folding Chair for the Feminist Resistance* video, which states that feminism will be around for as long as we need it. We do still need it. The vintage images are juxtaposed with images from across time periods and cultures to infer a global and continuous struggle. Furthermore, the doll-like cut-out women holding guns that inhabit the barricade in *Domestic Front* suggest that the small-scale barricade is a child’s toy: a doll’s house for future feminist activists. *Domestic Front* refers to feminist struggles of the past, and to the need to support future generations of feminists in an endeavour made increasingly difficult by retro-sexism and neoliberal feminism. It is a reminder that the fight continues, not only in the campaigns about political rights and gendered public spaces (such as the early 20th century suffrage arson campaigns and baby-changing spaces alluded to in *Fire Starters*), but also in the more private and personal spheres of the home and the playground.

![Image of guns in a room-sized installation](image.png)

Paula Chambers, *Unwelcome Gift*, 2020, paper, plywood, brass, 45 x 200 x 25 cm, courtesy of the artist

On the whole, the exhibition could have been read as a provocation and a call to arms. It playfully reminded the viewer that objects can be subverted, changing their potential from domestic utility (and entrapment of the user into a routine of cooking, cleaning, preening and caring) to the disruption of and resistance to those things. They remind that all sites of life are battlegrounds where political, social and sexual oppression must be fought.

Some of the objects are not functionally dangerous: they look aggressive and resemble objects of violence but they are made out of materials that are mostly harmless. For example, in *You and Whose Army*, guns are constructed out of old kitchen cupboards and cannot be fired. In this room-sized installation, net curtains initially obscure the wooden guns, producing a visceral shock when the guns come into view: suddenly I emerge from the (slightly crap) floaty, feminine space of fabric to face a firing squad. The guns are made out of repurposed furniture, suggesting the firing squad are inside rather than outside the house. However, rather than inferring domestic violence towards women, the installation suggests that a particular type of domestic environment might produce violent women.
Net curtains obscure the view out of the room as well as into it, producing partial privacy and concealment in both directions. They are also a screen surface for twee images of domestic life, such as gardens and vases of flowers. The net curtains are a type of framed view – a two-way distortion partially replacing the real interior and the real exterior with an idealised (albeit greatly reduced in detail and nauseatingly saccharine) scene of life. These net curtains might provoke a woman to build an arsenal from the materials she has to hand. The slumped red glass splatters on the gallery wall facing the guns look like the bloody consequences of this act.
Benjamin warned of the unwanted gifts the consumer could receive when relationships between people are transformed into relationships between things:

Warmth is ebbing from things. The objects of daily use gently but insistently repel us. Day to day, in overcoming the sum of secret resistances… that they put in our way, we have an immense labour to perform. We must compensate for their coldness with our warmth if they are not to freeze us to death, and handle their spines with infinite dexterity, if we are not to perish from bleeding.9

For Benjamin, the commoditisation of social life inflicts violence on the human body. However, for Chambers, objects that possess disruptive and destructive violent power are collaborators and allies. The guns offer a metaphoric warning shot and a rude awakening from a gauzy, floaty, distorted dream world. Benjamin writes that dialectical images (and objects) that demonstrate the inequalities of society can ‘jolt the dreaming collective into a political “awakening.” The presentation of the historical object within a charged force field of past and present… produces political electricity in a “lightning flash” of truth.’10 Chambers’ sculptures, and particularly the wooden guns in You and Whose Army, produce a jolt of recognition. These objects repel me but also draw me in, and challenge me to reject the constraints of domestic feminine ideals. The intention is that disobedient objects will produce disobedient women.


10 Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, op cit, p 219