

the creators project

January 26, 2016

South African Artist Explores Feminism Through Intimate Sculptures

By Alina Cohen



Frances Goodman, *Medusa* (detail), 2014. Acrylic nails, glue, polyurethane, 61 x 40.55 x 28.7 in. (155 x 103 x 73 cm). Courtesy Richard Taittinger Gallery, New York.

Artist Frances Goodman once spent hours at a time sitting in between naked women's legs, adorning their vaginas with individual stones (a process also known as "vajazzling"). She was photographing the vajazzled areas for a new series. Unsurprisingly, she says the process was "really intimate." What was surprising, however, was the women's response.

"The room became a confessional space," says Goodman. "People would share more than you'd expect from a complete stranger. When the vajazzling was done, these women had this sudden transformation. As they had their pictures taken, they were strutting around with different poses. Their faces weren't in the photos, and they could be quite playful." Instead of feeling exposed or violated, the women enjoyed a nurturing, liberating experience.



Frances Goodman, *Skin on Skin* (detail), 2012. Faux pearl earrings, found leather car seat, glue, 137 x 48.8 x 3.9 in. (137 x 124 x 10 cm). Courtesy Richard Taittinger Gallery, New York

Goodman also gained insight from the endeavor. For her, working with other people, especially women, is a way to grow as an artist. “The work becomes less selfish and about ego,” she says. “It’s more about the group.”

Her upcoming show at Richard Taittinger (which opens on February 26 and will be her first with the gallery) centers on similar feminist issues. The title, *Rapaciously Yours*, asks viewers to reconsider cultural ideas about women.

“Rapacious is a fantastic word,” says Goodman. “It means needy and greedy and assertive and aggressive, all these attributes we’re taught to be embarrassed about. We’re taught not to want. ‘Rapacious’ asserts these characteristics that are only criticized in women, not men.”

Goodman’s clear feminist message will be a welcome addition to Richard Taittinger, where she’s the first female artist on the roster. “I hope I’m the first of many as opposed to the only one,” she says. A South African native based in Johannesburg, Goodman expresses frustration about her country’s gender politics in relation to the art world. She says that 70 percent of South African art students are women, though 70 percent of artists with gallery representation are men. “There’s a skewing,” she says. “There’s still a need for feminism and a voice for what women have to contend with that men don’t.”

Goodman has also experienced inequality in the reception to her work. Her *The Dream* (2010), which will be shown at Taittinger, is a large-scale installation comprising women’s wedding dresses draped in the shape of a chandelier, from the ceiling to the floor. An accompanying soundtrack plays women’s voices speaking about societal pressure to marry. Making the work involved 40 women in addition to Goodman.



Frances Goodman, *Skin on Skin*, 2012. Faux pearl earrings, found leather car seat, glue, 137 x 48.8 x 3.9 in. (137 x 124 x 10 cm). Courtesy Richard Taittinger Gallery, New York

Viewers, especially in South Africa, where Goodman is best-known, asked personal questions that would have been inappropriate in other circumstances: Are you married? Did you have a bad breakup?

"I think women are asked more probing questions than men are," says Goodman. "There's an idea that women's work is more personal." Goodman's response? "I generally say that it's not an autobiographical work. It's not about me, and it's offensive to all the people involved in the work."

In addition to wedding dresses, Goodman has employed other nontraditional media that evoke the beauty industry: false eyelashes, fake nails, earrings, pearls, sequins, and beads. *Let Down Your Hair*, a site-specific sculptural installation, comprises tendrils composed of thousands of acrylic nails. Goodman's *Eyelash Drawings* forgo pen and ink in favor of the beauty store material.

"Women are often asked to make media-influenced choices about our bodies," says Goodman. "Fake nails and false eyelashes, though, go against that. You're able to become expressive, to become someone else. You don't become the idea of who a woman should be. You become the antithesis." She cites rap videos and the idea of the "sexy grotesque." The talon-like nails push the envelope of how a woman should look physically.

Goodman has long been interested in feminist discourse, thanks in part to her parents, who she says encouraged her to be a strong, independent woman. Yet, she wasn't always so outspoken about her ideas. "When I finished studying, there was a time when I felt people were telling me to calm down on the woman stuff, to make my topics broader, to talk about conditions that affected everyone. I shied away from it for a while. But the more people articulate how women should be and how they should behave, the more vocal I've wanted to become."



Frances Goodman, *Medusa*, 2014. Acrylic nails, glue, polyurethane, 61 x 40.55 x 28.7 in. (155 x 103 x 73 cm). Courtesy Richard Taittinger Gallery, New York



Frances Goodman, *Violaceous*, 2015. Acrylic nails, glue, polyurethane, 66.9 x 55.1 x 19.7 in. (170 x 140 x 50 cm). Courtesy Richard Taittinger Gallery, New York