

# HYPERALLERGIC

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## South African Artist Nails It with Sculptures Made from Thousands of Press-Ons

By Seph Rodney



Frances Goodman, *Rapaciously Yours* (2016), installation view (all photos courtesy of the artist and Richard Taittinger Gallery)

When Taraji P. Henson, in the character of Cookie on the TV show *Empire*, stalks into a room, juts out one voluptuous hip, puts her hand on it, looks a rival directly in the eye and says “What’s up, boo boo kitty?” a jolt of electricity runs through me. Cookie is completely alluring because she is a mix of savvy manipulator, cutthroat warrior, seductress, and carnivore. In addition to her considerable acting ability, Henson’s overall appearance – her shoes, dress, makeup, hair, and nails – helps convey this multifaceted persona. These appurtenances are essential devices in the toolkit used to wield and perform femininity.

As the sociologist Irving Goffman has pointed out, performance is enmeshed in everyday social interactions; we perform a version of ourselves for various audiences. Along these lines, South African artist Frances Goodman is interested in the relations between femininity, costuming, and role-playing. In her show *Rapaciously Yours*, at Richard Taittinger Gallery, by reworking the materials that typically signify her gender, she evokes models of femininity that are visually enticing but also strange, mythic, and untamable.

The best work in the exhibit evokes the motif of acrylic nails. With *Lick My Lollipop* (2016) and *That’s Hot! Pink* (2016), the martial quality of fake nails is brought forward: both pieces look like shellacked nails that have been tapered and elongated to form a ceremonial shield for a special contingent of Greek infantry. These works suggest the uneasy relationship between sex, power,

and desire that is brought to the surface by performed femininity. Goodman gets at the half-truth behind the claim some women make that getting glammed up is “just for myself.” The fastidious preparation this often entails is never strictly for the (feminine) self; it’s about seeing the self as powerful. To be able to induce desire for oneself in another person is a kind of power, one we often use to leverage other wants. The negotiations around desire, particularly between men and women, often and easily spill over into competition and hostilities. It’s no coincidence that makeup is often referred to as “war paint.”



Goodman, *Medusa* (2013-14), acrylic nails, foam, and metal, 63 x 39.4 x 27.6 in.

In *Violaceous* (2015), Goodman makes a mass of thousands of purple acrylic nails into a surging, rippling, mottled object that suggests a vagina but might be a version of the Charybdis that was encountered by Odysseus. Flailing toward the viewer from an adjacent wall, Goodman has fashioned another monster, *Medusa* (2013-14): an array of multicolored undulant tendrils also constructed from acrylic nails. This piece has an almost scaly quality that enhances its gruesomeness, but Goodman also shows the monster’s delectable side: a huge curling pink tongue, also made out of nails, that seemingly beckons you closer. Taken together, these pieces suggest that the feminine lies within the swirl of that which is luscious, ghastly, combative, and inscrutable.



Goodman, *Violaceous* (2015), acrylic nails, resin, and foam, 70 x 55 x 19.7 in.

Toward the back of the gallery, Goodman considers how individual agency affects all this complexity. *The Dream* (2010-16) starts out from the ceiling beautifully, like a Westernized version of a Mehndi wedding canopy, mostly in cream and tan colors, with particular phrases spelled out in beads attached to swathes of silk, lace, organza, and satin. As your eye travels down the piece, however, it devolves into a heap of dirty, tangled, old wedding dresses on the floor. *The dream* also includes sound: recordings of women talking about their negotiations with the fantasies, expectations, and difficulties of heterosexual romance, which serves to verbally dramatize the messiness of what it is to be a woman in the world, despite femininity's attempts to organize and maintain the roles we are to play.

Both the wedding dresses and vox populi conversations could be seen as somewhat hackneyed, but Goodman is not going for emotional payoff. She's getting at one of the questions Goffman raised regarding how individuals make decisions in relation to the social values and practices they inherit. Women are bequeathed the story of marriage being a fulfilling and "happy ever after" experience, but they must weigh that against the desire to prioritize personal accomplishment over making a family. The voices in *The Dream* say things like: "I was looking for a man who was going to save me," "It's about my partner knowing I'm special because I'm worth having," "Normal is fantasy," and "I don't buy into your heterosexual traditions." We know that last claim is a lie because in some ways we all do buy into these traditions – it's very difficult not to. Traditions give us the social codes that convey how to *be* men and women, and how to be recognized as such.



Frances Goodman, *The Dream* (2010-16), wedding dresses, beads, fabrics, and sound installation, dimensions variable

Yet Goodman, who has been working for some time with the question of how to be a woman who wields femininity and negotiates inherited roles tied to profound ideologies, wants to stay right here in our contradictions. She is telling us that artifice isn't nothing; it's trying to make sense of the world of gender roles, as well as one's place in it.

*Rapaciously Yours* continues at Richard Taittinger Gallery (154 Ludlow Street) through April 17.