

Ciaccia Levi

Zoe Williams

Petrolia

October 14 - November 30, 2024

Combustion

In an article published in 1908, titled « Passion érotique des étoffes chez la femme », psychiatrist Gaëtan Gatian de Clairambault, who also studied decorative arts, discusses the clitoral attraction of certain women to fabrics, particularly silk, which is valued for its tactile and acoustic qualities¹.

Clairambault met these patients, true materialists, at the psychiatric infirmary of the Paris police prefecture, where they were brought after stealing the precious material. He had to determine whether to release or intern them. The doctor's interest in the subjects was heightened by his own passion for fabrics. Since the 1910s, he had been studying drapery. In Morocco, women posed for him draped in fabrics. From 1923 to 1925, he gave a series of lectures on this topic at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

For him, these women are hyphophiliac, meaning they enter a state of delirium through contact with certain materials — a sensitivity he considered exclusively feminine. But all assert one peculiar thing: that for the material to be appreciated sexually, it must be new (still smelling of the store and industry) and stolen (that is, taken from the flow of money and goods). Marie D. recounts stealing a child's dress and masturbating with it in the store before attempting to return it to the aisle from which she took it.... She does not evoke luxury or its exclusivity. She is not interested in the circulation of flows, energy, its transformation, or possession. She simply enjoys consuming the material, which evidently possesses her. Her use of the commodity is destructive. It annihilates the time and labor of production, both among human and non-human animals for silk, the social and economic use of the object, and the psyche of the user. The energy, which materially underpins petro-fetishist capitalist exploitation, is thus dispersed. For me, this is one of the key points in the new series of bronzes and collages presented at Ciaccia Levi.

Zoe Williams is interested in the fetishistic nature of materials, their social uses, and their dimensions as relics of a culture of infinite pleasure. In 2017, she organized *Ceremony of the Void*, a performative banquet at the Roberts Institute of Art in London. Draped in latex and viscose, the participants, gathered around a table, consuming fruits, cakes and sausages, exercising their powers of pleasure through exchange, gluttony and ultimately destruction. In the middle of the table, there was a fountain bubbling with a yellow liquid, the color of urine and gold. Through *Liquid Currency* she pushes the analogy between monetary liquidity and the digestive system, creating from 2022, a temporary bar at the Kunstverein in Dortmund on the occasion of the exhibition *Wet Resistance*². For the opening event alongside her comrades, bedecked in greasy hair and latex dresses, she serves visitors yellow-gold liquids that also reveal, within the institution, the existing tensions between social consumption and monetary capitalization. Here, this energy is collectively absorbed

¹ Cf, Gaëtan Gatian de Clairambault « Passion érotique des étoffes chez la femme », in *La Passion des étoffes chez un neuropsychiatre : G.G. de Clérambault, 1872-1934*, Solin Editions, 1980.

² *Liquid Currency* is an installation created in collaboration with HYDRA (Anna Gloria Flores), Katie Shannon, and Susu Laroche, for the exhibition *Wet Resistance*, Dortmunder Kunstverein, August 13, 2022. The venue hosted a series of events until 2025, most of which were programmed by Williams in the year of its opening.

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in the warmth of bodies and the shine of the thick liquid. This shine, a metaphor for desire and its appetite, systematically covers the artist's glazed ceramics. She also uses silky or plush textiles to evoke our almost childish attractions to the soft and glossy surfaces of capitalism. The artist mentions her interest in the lubricants of our societies, produced from seemingly incompatible dynamics: the decomposition of matter and the energization of fluids - let's say the *petrolia* condition, or the fuel, of perpetual pleasure.

The collages that make up the *Petrolia Swab Series* (2024) focus on these oily textures and traces: those of petroleum (a fetishistic reflection of mechanical and economic power), viscose (a petro-artificial version of silk), metal, Vaseline, and cyprine (the fluid of feminine desire). The image of a crotch masturbating with rhinestones embedded into it is a figure of petro-femininity, that is, a fetishistic version of hormonal capitalism. In the new series of cast bronzes created during a residency at the Fonderia Battaglia in Milan, Williams creates a set of allegories that reveal our fetishistic relationships to these objects: for example, a votive-inspired wall breast (in reference to the severed breasts of Saint Agatha and a bronze statue of Juliet, the Shakespearean heroine; in Munich, of which it is said that caressing her breast brings good luck in love.) or an explicitly fleshy shoe (a form that Williams developed as a homage to the Turinese artist Carol Rama, which here refers to the absurdity of the formal expansions of contemporary design and fashion)... The sculptures are ornamented with the shape of a rondelle, resembling something between a perforated coin and an anus. This recurrent O motif punctuates Williams' practice and already proliferated the utensils of the *Ceremony of the Void*, intensifying the obscenity of the forms, the grotesque aspects of their representation, and the delirious performativity driven by the yellow fluid of expenditure, which also flows, I believe, in the veins of Clairambault's heroines. For the artist, the orifice is a symbol of the basest materialism, waste, and consumption. It is also beautiful she points out, attractive because it resembles a little inflamed rose. In the piece *The Bottoms Out (Oozing O)*, it becomes a mini fountain coloured blood-red with a yellow-gold liquid delicately flowing from it. It's leaking—that's obvious.

Marie Canet for Zoe Williams, October 3, 2024