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1. Misty Gamble's *Tan Hands*, 15 ft. 10 in. (4.8 m) installed, ceramic, resin, 2009. 2. *Tan Hands* (detail). 3. *Shoe Pile* (detail). 4. *Shoe Pile*, 8 ft. (2.4 m) in height, ceramic, molding, wallpaper, 2010. 5. *Chanel No. 11*, 3 ft. 4 in. (1 m) in height, ceramic, cast aluminum chair, 2008. 6. *Chanel No. 2*, 3 ft. 4 in. (1 m) in height ceramic, cast aluminum chair, 2008. 7. *Updo Stump*, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, ceramic, 2010. 8. *Chanel No. 9*, 3 ft. 4 in. (1 m) in height, ceramic, cast aluminum chair, 2008.

### Misty Gamble's Priming and the Currency of Worth by Stephanie Lanter

Women, clothes, hair, and shoes...sigh. What more can there possibly be to say? It takes a lot of nerve to address an issue this ubiquitous. Misty Gamble's recent exhibit at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art ([www.sherryleedy.com](http://www.sherryleedy.com)) in Kansas City, Missouri, is nervy both in intent and effect; an uncomfortable show about uncomfortable stuff.

On average, a Chanel suit costs about \$5000. Imelda Marcos had approximately 2700 pairs of shoes when she fled the Philippines in 1986. Chanel and Marcos share something far more complex than wealth, far less shallow than grocery store check-out-line domination; they represent power. Even in her ridicule, Marcos has been referred to as "The Steel Butterfly," and a classic tweed "power suit" emboldens many a female executive. In this installation, Gamble merges the contrasting elements of elegance and vulgarity, resulting in much more than another sermon on the evils of wealth and fashion.

Upon entering the installation, one feels cornered. Though the vintage floral print wallpaper evokes delicate feminine aristocracy, a sense of tacky decadence relieves one from any obligatory propriety. A pile of pretty pumps sucks you down to the lacquered wood veneer floor, revealing the cast off's designer labels. Bearing strong resemblance to a stage set, this faux boudoir corner is mysteriously messed up.

The dissatisfied dresser remains anonymous—an engaging tactic. Five other characters (one disembodied) that neatly punctuate the space have similarly ambiguous identities, despite the many clues their outfits and postures give to era and class. Chanel suits articulate three of the carefully caricatured ladies, and Coco's trademark colors also replace their flesh tones. Sitting with tight knees on ornate aluminum stools, they are primed, poised and amazingly coiffed. Are they housewives aided by "mama's little helpers" at a garden luncheon? Any conversation would require shouting across the broad distances between them—hardly likely decorum. Each one does seem actively involved in some dialog, indicated by Botox boosted eyebrows, alert chins and animated hand gestures. Their diminutive size and iris-less eyes render them contrarily passive. Seeming to "hold it all in," *Chanel No. 11* either

has her arms trapped in her sleeveless jacket or has no need for them, since (according to Gamble) "her cosmetically perfected bosom is so beautiful." Despite this and her impossibly tiny feet, she is strangely dignified; unapologetic, even proud—as are her cohorts. As we realize this, we are faced with our own roles in this performance.

Masterful clay rendering lends layers to these dichotomous creatures. Skin texture is mottled, in contrast with smooth, sleek garments. Oversized, clunky hands, stubby fingernails, and bellies bulging from cinched waistbands are confidently sculpted. These are sensitive, humorous hints of an inconspicuous, but vulnerable, humanity. Gamble explores obsession both through a meticulously researched making process and her subject matter. Perfectly vogue hairstyles are just as essential here as designer clothing; and the newest piece shown, *Updo Stump*, takes tresses over the top. Enveloped by luscious locks that twist over and around any identifying features, the hair has grown into a mask. While evoking pop artist Peter Vandenberg's primitive, elongated heads, or the iconic cartoon mother, Marge Simpson, *Updo Stump* is more creepily sensual, more powerfully narrative-free.

After greeting the ladies, we cannot avoid the confrontational row of *Tan Hands*. Reduced to her attention-demanding series of gestures, the owner of these bejeweled, manicured, fake-n-bake hands is left to our imagination. Showing off her "currency of worth," an oversized cut-glass rock of a ring adorning her left hand, we might be tempted to laugh her off as a grotesque stereotype. Her invisibility, however, suggests that this might be anyone. As in the best satire, we are provoked to self-reflect. Perhaps we are all subject to this use of commodities to signify our importance, this exchange of individuality for popularity.

Gamble is in the great company of other female ceramic sculptors examining the female figure and all its connotations. It is a broad conversation to be had, and she contributes a mature and witty voice.

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