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Art as a Weapon: A Call to Arms Against Unjust Beauty Standards

Over the last few years, Margaret Bowland has taken the art world by storm with her enthralling, thought provoking paintings. Bowland bravely and boldly uses her art to address social issues such as race, beauty standards, and society's effect on the perception and self-confidence of young women. Frequently Bowland's muse, a young, African American girl appears throughout Bowland's works. Bowland depicts her in beautiful, but sometimes disturbing—sometimes macabre—scenes that act as a window into the psyche of America's female youth. There is something enchanting about the girl; one gets the sense that there is a terrible presence about her. Bowland's muse lingers in your thoughts, and she haunts your mind. This girl gives Bowland's paintings a life of their own. Within her art, Margaret Bowland has created *a presence* that challenges your perceptions of beauty and forces you to think.

Two paintings that use this mysterious, young girl to aptly portray Bowland's views and beliefs on social issues are *Doubt* and *Painting the Roses Red*. Each of these paintings deals with race and social standards of beauty in a unique and provocative way, and together, they work to create a powerful narrative of society's psychological impact on all women struggling to feel beautiful.

When I first encountered these two works, I was struck by them. The paintings do not come out and blatantly state their purpose, but nevertheless, they impacted me with their intrinsic, unavoidable emotion. The image of the young girl in Margaret Bowland's *Doubt,* who I

discovered to be named Janasia Smith, or JJ, is stunningly beautiful and emotionally intriguing (Kenoyer). One of the very first things I was forced to notice was JJ's wide, sad eyes. The emotion depicted is not an obvious, intense sorrow but rather a subtle hinting of deep, under-the-surface sadness and a fear of being inadequate. So powerful is the imagery, I immediately became invested in JJ without ever knowing what was behind her sadness. On her left side, slightly to the front, is the shoulder of another girl with white skin and blonde hair, but the image cuts off before you can see her face. And there it was—the reason for JJ's doubts. Sharply contrasting JJ's tight, dark cornrows, the flowing, blonde hair barely spills into the picture, but I get the impression that it weighs heavy in JJ's thoughts. The blonde hair represents social beauty standards, the weight of which is crushing JJ.

White skin and blonde hair has long been Western society's gold standard for beauty. Flashback to the 1950s—Marilyn Monroe is the biggest beauty icon since Cleopatra. Patt Morrison describes her impact on society's standards of beauty: "Monroe's visage is locked in our collective consciousness as the original youthful beauty ideal of a blonde bombshell." To this day, Americans—Caucasian and African alike—idolize Monroe as the epitome of female beauty. Nicki Minaj, of pop music fame, has a song titled *Marilyn Monroe* and often imitates Monroe in the way that she dresses and the wigs that she wears. Minaj can often be found with straight, blonde hair and pink lipstick. The catch? Minaj is an African celebrity, and in front of the entire world, she is idolizing the "age-old American beauty standards that largely exclude black women" (Penrice).

Monroe's only competition as America's standard for female beauty is an inanimate one: the Barbie doll. Since 1959, Mattel's Barbie doll has been—for lack of a better term—brainwashing the youth of America. With unattainable body proportions, blonde hair, and blue

eyes, the Barbie doll standard is a difficult one to meet—especially for an African girl. So many

millions of Barbie dolls have been sold that young girls are very often faced with this

unattainable standard on a daily basis. Unbeknownst to themselves, young women are slowly

being taught that *this* is beautiful.

You may not think Barbie has a long history of racial exclusion since there have been

"African" Barbie dolls since 1969, but they might not be what you would expect (Bellis). Until

2009, the African versions of the dolls had Caucasian facial features. Only recently has Mattel

introduced dolls with realistic African facial features such as fuller lips and noses (AP).

Leaving no beauty icon left out, Nicki Minaj has also imitated the Barbie doll in her on

stage attire. In 2011, Minaj went so far as to have a Barbie doll made in her likeness, the

proceeds of which were donated to charity (Hampp). A good cause to be sure, but what Minaj

might not be realizing is that she is "flaunting her internalized white American standards of

beauty" (Penrice). And she is doing it in front of 17,000,000 teenage Twitter followers. While

she may not know she is doing it, Minaj is advertising that there is *this* standard of beauty, and,

like her, you should try your hardest to attain it.

Unfortunately, not only does Minaj idolize the Eurocentric ideal for beauty, but she

insults and degrades the African American norm in her lyrics: "These little nappy headed hoes

need a perminator." By suggesting that "nappy" hair needs to be treated because it looks bad,

Minaj is no longer just suggesting that the white-European look is appealing, but also the African

American look is naturally bad. Not intentionally racist or consciously influenced, Minaj is a

byproduct of generations of mass media forming nation wide social beauty standards.

Minaj is not alone in her adoption of these standards. Other popular, non-white

celebrities who have made multiple appearances with blonde hair include Beyonce and Rhianna.

Still other celebrities like Halle Berry, Kim Kardashian, and Lil Kim have all gone so far as to have multiple facial surgeries to slim their noses down to more white-European sizes (Martinez).

The problem is the prominence one has as a celebrity and youth icon. Young people see these iconic women on the television, the covers of magazines, and hear them on the radio. The fame these women have gives them immense power over the youth of America. Their attempts to imitate Marilyn Monroe, the Barbie doll, and white European women reinforce young girls' preconceived, misguided notions of beauty. Social psychologists have found that an individual's self-esteem is created because of the individual's own short comings and accomplishments, but also from the status and accomplishments of the social groups that they belong to (Gilovich 422). So what is to happen to the collective self-esteem of our society's children when they do not meet these standards, but the celebrities and icons from their social groups are endorsing and promoting them? They begin to believe, like young JJ from *Doubt*, that they are not as beautiful as they should be.

But the reenforcement of the European beauty standard does not just come from our celebrities. Walk into any store in America and you will find "many advertisements . . . [that] attempt to sell products that might facilitate, or at least help, in accomplishing the European standard of beauty" (Ethnic Studies 147). The pressures to be beautiful as the media sees it are everywhere, and they are *intense*.

The extent that the European standard of beauty has permeated our multi-cultural society is staggering—and that is what Margaret Bowland sets out to combat with her work (Kenoyer). The cultural knowledge of what society considers beautiful is ingrained in children at a young age, and JJ, our small, African American protagonist, would surely be familiar with what our world considers beautiful. In *Doubt*, the flowing, blonde hair serves as a reminder to

her of all that she is not—and, because of society, thinks she *should* be. In the unchanging stare

of a scared little girl, *Doubt* captures all of the 21st century's issues of social standards and the

feelings of fear, inadequacy, and low self-esteem imposed by an impossible standard.

   Painting the Roses Red addresses very similar issues as *Doubt*. Again, we have JJ as

the centerpiece of the painting. Here, however, she is older than in *Doubt*—perhaps ten or twelve

years of age. The main difference between the two paintings is that in *Painting the Roses Red*,

JJ's face is painted white—a twisted reflection of the blackface theater from the second half of

the 19th century. She maintains a similar hairstyle as in *Doubt*: with a flower at the end of each,

tight braids hang haphazardly around her head. JJ is wearing a white dress with ornate white

roses garnishing each shoulder. Above her head is what appears to be a small, red boot, and it is

dripping red paint all over JJ's face, hair, and dress.

   My initial experience with the painting was perplexing. I felt that the painting had a

fantasy and horror flare to it. I was captivated by the painting's provocative imagery and could

not look away for a while. Of the two paintings, this is the one that makes you feel most uneasy.

It catches you off guard, commands your attention, and makes you nervous. JJ's braids, each

punctuated with a white rose at the end, sit on her head like the belled hat of a classic harlequin

jester. Combined with her white face make-up and the slapdash red splashes of paint, JJ's hair

makes her appear clown-like. Not a happy-go-lucky circus clown, but a scary clown that one

would find in a haunted house on Halloween or in one of today's modern horror films.

Reinforcing my feelings of terror, on the wall in the background there are helter-skelter slashes

of red paint that resemble the etches and claw marks one would find in the deepest dungeons of a

medieval castle.

Despite the myriad details and emotional responses, I could not grasp an obvious message from the painting. Researching and understanding *Doubt,* however, opened my eyes to the powerful call to arms that is *Painting the Roses Red*. Looking at these two paintings as a pair creates a powerful narrative about the social standards of beauty that exist in our culture and their effect on young girls: *Doubt* points a finger at the existence of biased standards and our youth's unconscious acceptance of them, and *Painting the Roses Red* exposes their psychological effect on our nation's maturing children.

Let us first explore the title of the painting, because the title is the title for a reason. *Painting the Roses Red* is the title of a song from Disney's 1951 *Alice in Wonderland*. In the film, Alice—who is a dainty, white girl with blonde hair and blue eyes—meets the minions of the Queen of Wonderland who are painting her roses red because they had accidentally planted white roses—and the Queen likes them red. In the film, the minions explain to Alice why they are painting the roses red:

> The queen
> She likes them red
> If she saw white instead
> She'd raise a fuss
> And each of us would quickly lose his head

This discovery explains the small, red boot above JJ in the painting: it is the foot of one of the Queen's minions, and he is painting JJ's decorative, white roses blood red.

This fantasy scene reflects realities from our American culture that Bowland wants to bring to light in *Painting the Roses Red*. The first of which is the idea of a majority group controlling a minority group. A minority group is not necessarily always a matter of the quantity of group members. A group can be a minority based on economic or social disadvantage (Agatstein). The important concept in regards to interpreting *Painting the Roses Red* is that

African Americans are still a social minority despite the massive improvements in civil rights, and because of that, their internal idea of beauty is controlled by the European standard—and, like the Queen's minions, they, as they are expected to, often act accordingly.

Let us pretend that JJ is the Queen's minion, and America's Eurocentric standard of beauty is the Queen. By depicting JJ with her face painted white, Bowland is suggesting that JJ is afraid of "the Queen" and is painting the roses—her face—to conform to the social expectation.

The reason I found *Painting the Roses Red* is so engrossing is its unnaturalness. JJ may be clown-like, but she is frightening and ghastly. We know that JJ is trying to conform, but Bowland has made her appear out of place and scary. This is a warning from Bowland that if you try to be something you are not, you will only succeed in looking strange and outlandish. Bowland encourages people to appreciate their own beauty and reject what is unnatural.

Bowland's narrative, then, is that at a young age, girls are exposed to a plethora of examples of what society thinks beautiful should be. These girls are real girls, not one-in-a-million models, and the pressures of societies' expectations are incredible. These girls, who JJ represents in *Doubt*, are aware of these standards, and they are afraid. As the narrative continues in *Painting the Roses Red*, JJ is older and has become more aware of her appearance, and she is attempting to change herself—and failing. Painting her face white to imitate European models is a white flag of surrender. JJ is conforming to social pressure, rejecting herself, and attempting an unnatural metamorphosis.

Not limited to Bowland's paintings, this self rejection and adaptation happens in real life. One of the most perverse examples is the $9 billion industry of artificial hair extensions, which make use of manmade and real human hair. In Chris Rock's 2009 comedy-documentary, *Good Hair*, Rock explores the desire for African American women to have "good" hair. Rock

explains that African women in America are not happy with their natural hairstyles; they desire long, straight hair (Stilsen). Rock discovers that, like JJ, African American women across America are overwhelmed and manipulated by our culture's European concept of beauty, and they reject their natural state and attempt to change themselves into something they are not. In their own way, they are painting their own roses red. And in Bowland's eyes, this is unnatural and bad.

Margaret Bowland's paintings are not mere aesthetic pieces. The artistic mastery is undeniable, of course, but what makes Bowland shine is her ability to integrate into her paintings a narrative with important social themes, conflicts, and warnings. In Bowland's work, JJ's character draws you in, and she makes you nervous. She demands attention, and the depth of emotion she possesses is impossible to ignore. In her essay, "Margaret Bowland's Theatrum Mundi," Siri Hustvedt agrees with me: "The artist's immense skill has rendered a personality, a *being* . . . a defiant personage who shines through the riddle texts and myriad cultural signs . . . that surround her." JJ represents centuries of history, innumerable examples of cultural and media influences on modern concepts of female beauty, the psychological effect thereof, and the real world reaction of actual girls. Bowland's cannon of work is a call to arms to become aware of these unjust standards and begin to combat them. *Doubt* and *Painting the Roses Red* work together perfectly to capture JJ's main purpose and Bowland's important message to women everywhere: Despite what society may try to force you to believe, you are beautiful just the way you are.

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