

# RIOT MATERIAL

## Fay Ray: I AM THE HOUSE

April 23, 2018 By Emily Nimptsch

Teeming with traditionally feminine objects and symbols, including eggs, diamonds, chalices, flowers, feathers, and seashells, Los Angeles-based multimedia artist Fay Ray's current Shulamit Nazarian exhibition, *I AM THE HOUSE*, investigates issues of bodily objectification and the meaning of womanhood. The surrealism-inspired photo collages, dye-sublimation prints, and suspended sculptures seen here reveal the female form to be a vessel, carrying not only biological offspring but also memory, melancholy, joy, and the divine.

First introduced to surrealist art through her father, Ray has long been fascinated with Salvador Dalí and his playful, erotic, morose, menacing, and morbid body of work. He famously crafted his celebrated *Lobster Telephone* sculpture (1936) in the belief that fusing dissimilar objects could reveal subconscious desires and fears. Similarly, fellow surrealist Meret Oppenheim covered a teacup, saucer, and spoon in Chinese gazelle fur in the creation of her seminal sculpture, *Object* (1936). This simple modification significantly alters the cup's meaning: what was once sophisticated and glamorous is now suggestive and scandalous. Ray's amalgamation of various objects in her work operates much in the same way, offering a plethora of new connotations.



Fay Ray, *Cans Corn Clay*

As one of the most striking works in this collection, her multi-layered, black and white photomontage, *Cans Corn Clay* (2018) bears a strong resemblance to the work of another illustrious artist named Ray, surrealist photographer Man Ray. His camera-less photograms, aka Rayographs, also feature a range of everyday items such as coils of wire, scissors, light bulbs, and thumbtacks. While Man Ray arranged these objects on photosensitive paper and then exposed them to light, Fay Ray photographs her items with a camera, prints them out and then cuts and pastes the pieces in unexpected ways.



Fay Ray, *Desert Shore*



Fay Ray, *Dunes 2 Honeycomb*

Additionally, Man Ray's images are relatively straightforward and uncluttered, while Fay Ray's photo collage is far more complicated with its jumble of metal chains, glittery stars, beaded necklaces, crushed beer cans, leopard print, and corn cobs. With the chains and the necklace representing restraint and the leopard print and beer cans symbolizing freedom and indulgence, Ray here depicts two opposing elements of the female psyche. On top of these two conflicting necessities, *Cans Corn Clay* also references fertility, abundance, and sensuality through its phallic corn cob imagery.

Ray also includes metal chains and depictions of corn cobs in her *I AM THE HOUSE* sculptural works. Resembling an oversized dreamcatcher, *Desert Shore* (2018) alludes to notions of eroticism through its hanging charms, including metallic feathers, conch shells, and of course, corn cobs. Like objects plucked from a Dalí-esque dreamscape, here Ray transforms the perishable, delicate, and ephemeral, into the tangible, durable, and enduring.

Continuing with this unification of opposing ideas, Ray's other suspended work on display here, *Dunes 2 Honeycomb* (2018) centers upon ideas of serenity and

chaos. Reminiscent of a wind-chime, a feminine trinket designed to make soothing sounds out of the turbulent breeze, this arch-shaped sculpture features two sizable silver chains with a slab of honey onyx dangling at each end. This variety of mineral echoes the surface of Venus in color and swirling design. While this planet dedicated to the goddess of love may seem temperate and paradisiacal, the viewer knows that this is simply not true. Modern astronomy asserts that Venus's atmosphere is tumultuous, inhospitable, and rife of toxic greenhouse gases.



Fay Ray, *Egg Arch and Pearl Portal*

Meanwhile, this sculpture's middle chain boasts three zinc plated orbs, all resembling the surface of the moon. Here this heavenly body becomes synonymous with femininity, fertility, dreams, and tranquility. However, much like Venus, the moon is a hostile environment. One can witness evidence of this desert shore's violent history in its pock-marked surface as well *Dunes 2 Honeycomb's* scraped and discolored orbs. Through this thought-provoking and paradoxical work, Ray rejects the unattainable societal expectation that women should be gentle, poised, and ethereal at all times.

Expanding upon these cosmic motifs, Ray calls for the ascension and apotheosis of womankind in her mind-bending aluminum dye sublimation print, *Egg Arch*

and *Pearl Portal* (2018). With its galactic background and egg-shaped rocks adorning its edges in acknowledgment of Mother Earth, this metaphysically-inspired image depicts a gateway or wormhole. Shaped like a medieval altarpiece as well as the birth canal, *Egg Arch* celebrates the feminine divine and the miraculous ability to create life. The viewer will find a mosaic sphere symbolizing the ovum, a UFO, the sun, and a mandala near the top of this piece. The sphere emits a glorious ray of light downwards. A pearl emerges from a pair of sumptuously parted lips within this incandescent beam. Whether this allegorical work is depicting childbirth, the spread of light and pearls of wisdom, or an extraterrestrial mothership, the message is clear— we are beings astral beings made of stardust.

*I AM THE HOUSE* not only subverts the antiquated belief that a woman's sole purpose on Earth is to be a vessel, to deliver children, but also declares that both sexes possess the divine within. Through this highly evocative and metaphorical exhibition, Ray illustrates how women have historically been treated as relics or sacred objects. Much like the Holy Grail, they have been sought after and revered, but also objectified and considered hollow. Here the artist peers within the walls of this house and discovers multitudes, an entire universe of unbridled bliss, sorrow, and love, and passion.



*I AM THE HOUSE*, installation view

~

Emily Nimptsch is Los Angeles Art Critic for Riot Material magazine. Ms. Nimptsch is also a freelance arts and culture writer who has written for Flaunt, ArtSlant, Artillery, ArteFuse, and Time Out Los Angeles.