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## Provocative Subversion in the Art of Colleen Wolstenholme

Al Gore isn't the only one delivering inconvenient truths. Despite the current shift of much of the Western world's art scene towards spectacle and novelty, fueled by a voracious market with truly staggering amounts of cash, many artists are still honing their critical barbs, cutting deeper and deeper into the walls of smug complacency that cushion us from our consciences. Social criticism may seem an odd choice in the current climate (in a market-driven milieu, who wants to bite the hand that feeds her?) but it has always played a role in the art world. The market doesn't mind a little back-talk after all, it just makes the eventual capitulation all the more sweet. We think we can assimilate anything into the commercial gallery/collector /museum nexus; that much at least has been clear since the canonization of Duchamp's ready-mades, never mind the 80 years since of more and more outrageous attempts to find something, anything, that the maw of the art market will choke on, maybe even spit back out. No, our teeth grind fine, and there has been little that we can't digest. But there is still gristle to be found in our steak.

We in the urban West need our outsiders, with their inconvenient stabs and darts that bite deeper than our own ineffectual pricks of conscience, numbed as they are by the opiates of money, possessions, status and the comfortable convenience of our self-images. We want them, yes, but packageable, ironic, and otherwise coded so as to let us be on the right side of the issue. Somehow we need to make ourselves feel comfortable with such work, to pull its sting, at least insofar as it threatens to sting us.

If we can't get comfortable, than we tend to make less of the work. Can an artist pick a surer path to obscurity than to persist, Ahab-like, in refusing to let us comfortably assimilate them into the system? In throwing those darts, an artist risks Ahab's fate, that of becoming inextricably tangled in their issue and submerged under its very weight. It's easy to think that we already *know* what such an artist has to say, that we've heard it – or seen it – all before.

Colleen Wolstenholme's studio is in Hantsport, a small town on Nova Scotia's Bay of Fundy coast, about an hour's drive from Halifax. Wolstenholme has been living there for the past eight years. A graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the State University of New York at New Paltz, Wolstenholme followed the familiar path of the art school graduate to New York, living there for several years until moving to Vancouver. It was while living on the West Coast that Wolstenholme received her first brush with art-world celebrity. Always an artist with a hybrid practice, Wolstenholme then, and still, worked in sculpture and jewelry, with the techniques and histories of each media cross-pollinating the other in her practice. In the mid-1990s Wolstenholme began making casts in sterling silver of anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications such as Zoloft, Paxil, Valium and Dexedrine. These were made into pendants, earrings and bracelets, bringing what Wolstenholme saw as the increasing, though secretive, use of such medications amongst her female friends and acquaintances to the fore. The pill jewelry served, as one wearer was quoted as saying, "As a kind of badge of honour." That that wearer was the musician Sarah McLachlan was the spark for a spate of welcome mainstream media attention to Wolstenholme and her work, as well as a series of very unwelcome letters from law firms ordering her to cease and desist in her use of trademarked imagery. Newspapers in London, Los Angeles, New York and other major cities featured articles about prescription drug dependency, its statistical weighting towards women, and the various cultural responses to the phenomenon, particularly Wolstenholme's aggressive, highly critical work. Threats of law suits and other legal actions from large multi-nationals gave her work a certain outlaw credibility – though it made for a very stressful time for the artist.

Those threats never manifested in court action, the use of trademarked images by artists being such a grey area in both Canadian and US laws. The letters just stopped coming a few years ago, and they never had the desired effect of regulating her behaviour – Wolstenholme has been making, and selling, silver and gold "pill" jewelry for the past ten years.

The apex of her pill work though, was the series of large carved plaster works made in the late 1990s, including the work that has become iconic for Wolstenholme, the "Valium, 2mg," now in the collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The pill sculptures (comprising "Xanax," "Dexedrine," "Buspar," "Paxil," "Valium" and others), began as a pointed criticism of a certain tendency in contemporary sculpture. In particular, the over-heated macho culture of art school sculpture departments. Her carved pills, originally exhibited at Vancouver's Grunt Gallery, cut straight to the heart of her issue: the portrayal of women in contemporary culture, the oppressions engendered by

those portrayals and, more importantly, the systems that support them, and strategies of critically addressing the issues with an eye to provoking the established orders. Her pills, pristine, clean, beautiful, were also carefully calculated affronts to certain ideas about sculpture – to the minimalist-conceptual school of NSCAD sculpture in particular. However, pills, as subjects, were never the aim of these works. As with General Idea’s pill works from the early 90s (such as “Placebo” and “Pharmacopeia”), or Damian Hirst’s “Pharmacy” from the mid-90s and later works using pills as imagery, Wolstenholme’s use of pills was politically motivated. These charged objects were chosen for representation because of their power to provoke. Each specific provocation, the particular political point, was different for these artists, but the familiar forms of medication served for them all. The object of Wolstenholme’s critically engaged probing was and is, the oppression of women (both by exterior systems and inner habituations). Despite what may appear to be a wide-ranging sphere of interest and media (jewelry, sculpture, painting, collage, fabric), her focus is always intensely narrowed. The objects she uses for her thinking change, but the subject of that thought is the same.

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Wolstenholme’s hybrid objects don’t fit easily into categories such as sculpture, painting, or goldsmithing. A visit to her studio finds several works on the go – paintings, large-scale bronze works, large-figurative sculptures, paper collage works in varying stages of completion, and the ever-present jewelry. A recent exhibition, *Iconophobia*, at the Cambridge Galleries, included works in many of these media. What they all share is an intense engagement in the process and a root in appropriated images that speak to Wolstenholme’s concerns.

Perhaps her most overtly provocative works to date have been her series of “shrouded figures.” These works, in varying scales and material, depict women dressed in various versions of the burqa, the full-body veil favoured for women by many conservative Muslims. In *Iconophobia* there were three plaster casts of these figures, done at a scale of three-quarters of life-size to reflect what Wolstenholme considers an ongoing devaluation of women. These figures, identical in every way, stand facing in different directions, mimicking one of Western art histories painterly and sculptural conventions: the depiction of the “Three Graces” in such a way as to reveal all aspects of the human figure in one, frontal, view. That these figures reveal nothing of the human form, from any angle, is, of course, the point. Not for any reason of religion, of course, but because these figures have become ciphers, there may literally be nothing underneath. The one hint of a figure are the tips of shoes peeking out from beneath the burqa. At the same time that Wolstenholme has done these figures she has also made other figures that

depict ways of hiding women: other uniforms, such as those of a nun, of a Victorian matron complete with hat, gloves and bustle, and the various costumes imposed by fashion. “This and That,” for instance pairs a burqa-clad woman with a Catholic nun in full habit. Each figure is wearing clothing based on actual styles, but Wolstenholme has modeled each so as to ensure anonymity (the Nun, for instance, has the same kind of insipidly blank face one finds on porcelain figurines). The small figures (about nine inches tall), are painted with a camouflage pattern. Other pieces in this series use “dazzle” camouflage, a World War One innovation used to hide ships at sea in pre-radar days, and patterns constructed using the outlines of military camouflage, but with colours and imagery drawn from corporate logos.

In Wolstenholme’s world, camouflage isn’t designed to hide us in the landscape. Instead, she is interested in the concealment practiced in the social sphere. Fashion, uniforms, gendered roles and positions, are all cut of the same cloth. These conventions disguise by subsuming the individual underneath a collective identity. Wolstenholme is interested in the ways that our identities, our personal world views, have been packaged and promoted, offered to us as consumer goods. These varied costumes are worn by women and dictated by men, or at least by the male-centered societies. Designed to either mask the body or to present it in a stereotypical, sexualized manner (another form of masking, Wolstenholme would say) these are costumes eroticized by men. Who’s hiding what, her work asks, and what does it mean that so many of us are so eager to be hidden? As with any work that questions our popular culture, the work, the sculptor, and the viewer – are all implicated in the object of critique.

Wolstenholme’s recent paintings also use the camouflage motif, combining images pulled from the internet of soft or hard core pornography with, again, corporate logos, and other imagery derived from banknotes, fashion and advertising. The surfaces of these paintings, which at first glance seem decorative patterns, break up into their constituent parts upon closer inspection, off-balancing the viewer as we try to figure out what we are seeing, and how we should be responding. This awkwardness keeps the work from being pigeon-holed, as does Wolstenholme’s insistence that no one is free from implication in the issues she is raising. Gender, power, desire, repression and release: this heady mix is part and parcel of adult experience in any culture, but perhaps none more so than in our own.

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I own a small piece of jewelry by Wolstenholme, a silver lapel pin made of six cast valium tablets surrounding a central pill, which has the Playboy bunny logo stamped into it (it’s an Ecstasy tablet,

produced by the Hell's Angels). The implications of this cocktail are pretty apparent once one put's one's mind to it: Valium, prescribed primarily to women in order to help control, at least in part, emotions and overly emotional behaviour, circling around an illicit drug used to free inhibitions. That that drug also bears the symbol of the 1960s sexual revolution and all that that implied for women is the critical icing on the cultural cake. But try explaining that, as I repeatedly do, to women (men never ask about it) at art openings, on airplanes, in reception rooms, at the grocery store – anywhere and everywhere, basically. A man wearing the Playboy logo, at least in the art world, is a suspect thing – something must be going on. And of course, something is. As with her critical depiction of the veiling of women by conservative Muslims (whether forced or voluntary), as with her appropriation of corporate logos and brand names, and her use of pornography, Wolstenholme's use of the Playboy bunny symbol, and her fashioning of it for me, specifically, to wear, is a provocative and subversive act that can make everyone involved uncomfortable.

For Wolstenholme feminism is a necessary form of humanism – the issues of power and oppression are too complex, too intractable, to be easily relegated to gender, race, equality of opportunity or anything else. No dour separatist or cultural relativist, Wolstenholme's work aims to provoke us all, no matter where we fall on any side of any issue. Her issue is the oppression and the subjugation of women, her stance is that everyone is implicated, her strategy is to keep digging away at the historical roots and current manifestations of the fear of women and their sexuality through her seductive, challenging, beautiful, and, most of all, provocative work. I, for one, am glad of it, not least because of all the interesting conversations I have landed in as a result of that work. Wolstenholme's persistence in uttering inconvenient truths is important. She may risk Ahab's fate of being pulled under by her obsessions, but she is no Don Quixote – she is not tilting at windmills. No, the giant is out there, and she's intent on us all bringing him down.