

Smart Girls Know Better

by

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Abstract

Smart Girls Know Better was inspired by a villain from the Oz Book Series, by L. Frank Baum. This character, a vain Princess, possesses a collection of 30 interchangeable heads. Her self-admiration engrosses her time to the detriment of her responsibilities as ruler. Her obsession with personal appearance and its perceived unserious nature inspired the subject matter for this work. However, in contrast to the book, this artwork is about the emotional perspective of the heads, rather than the actions of the headless body.

The viewpoint of the heads is one of isolation, helplessness, and inner-conflict. Societal views pit prettiness and intelligence at odds. Choosing between being taken seriously and looking pretty becomes a balancing act. This experience is one many people can relate to when making decisions about personal appearance. These decisions range from makeup, hairstyles, weight management, and even plastic surgery. Regardless of the choices, the results, like the heads, are inevitably on display for public judgment and critique.

Reminiscent of vintage advertisements, the large cartoonish bodies represent the traditional societal idyllic female standard. They are interwoven with sewing patterns that measure their perfection, while cloying cut-outs spread a lace-y pathogen, infecting the heads around them. Watercolor, gouache, pastel, and paper removal are all utilized in these works. Employing multiple media creates a dissonance between the figurative and figural, contrasting the realistic heads and the illusion of bodily perfection.

Art Nouveau, vintage advertisements, lace, sewing patterns, and children's book illustrations are the types of kitsch art forms I have chosen to embrace for this work because they are often viewed as pretty and therefore unserious, similar to the concept behind my work.

Smart Girls Know Better is ultimately a representation of the experience of both the private decision making on personal appearance and the resulting public exhibition. This thesis discusses the subject matter, concept, inspirations, and methods behind this artwork.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iv
Table of Figures	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Collection of Heads	3
The Artwork	4
Chapter 2: Kitsch Inspiration	8
Chapter 3: Technique and Process	13
Conclusion	16
Bibliography	17

Table of Figures

No table of figures entries found.

<u>Figure 1. John R. Neill, <i>Princess Langwidere Removing Head</i>, Ozma of Oz. 1907.....</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Figure 2. Keturie Hehn, <i>Smart Girls Know Better: Red Body</i>, Mixed media, 2016.....</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>Figure 3. Keturie Hehn, <i>Smart Girls Know Better: Head 23, Head 19, Head 3, Green Body, Blue Body</i>, Mixed media, 2016.....</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>Figure 4. Keturie Hehn, <i>Smart Girls Know Better: Lock 18</i>, Mixed media, 2016</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>Figure 5. Keturie Hehn, <i>Smart Girls Know Better: Head 25</i>, Mixed media, 2016</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>Figure 6. John R. Neill, <i>Mermaids</i>,.....</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>Figure 7. Alphonse Mucha, <i>The Arts: Dance</i>. Color lithograph, 1898.....</u>	<u>9</u>
<u>Figure 8. <i>Simplicity Pattern 1044 Size 18</i>, 1956.....</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>Figure 9. <i>McCall's Sewing Pattern</i>, tracing paper.....</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>Figure 10. Elise Wehle, <i>Cloudy Mountainscape</i>, Paper cut collage, 2013.....</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>Figure 11. Keturie Hehn. <i>Smart Girls Know Better: Green Body</i> detail, Mixed media, 2016.....</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>Figure 12. Lisa Yuskavage. <i>Afternoon Feeding</i>, Oil on canvas, 2011</u>	<u>12</u>
<u>Figure 13. Keturie Hehn. <i>Smart Girls Know Better: Head 25</i> process, Mixed media, 2016</u>	<u>14</u>
<u>Figure 14. Keturie Hehn, <i>Smart Girls Know Better: Lock 18</i> detail, Mixed media, 2016</u>	<u>15</u>

Introduction

*“If you could get plastic surgery, what would you get?”*¹

The work for *Smart Girls Know Better* began with a conversation held among a group of friends. One woman in the group asked, “If you could get plastic surgery, what would you get?”¹ Every single woman in the group, without hesitation, not only knew exactly what she would get, but had a prioritized list of multiple wrongs she would right. None of the men in the group could think of a single issue with their physical body. It had never even occurred to them. I was flabbergasted because I would catch myself dwelling on my own imperfections several times a day. The realization from this one quick interaction was that there was such a vast trench separating half the group; an entire portion of my own existence was completely absent in my male counterparts.

After this conversation, I found myself attempting to sort out how I felt about self-adornment. I found that there was an innate disgust towards all things “pretty,” and yet I enjoyed looking pretty. When I boiled it down, in my mind, pretty and girly things were the opposite of intelligent and serious things. While this relationship was completely fabricated, I discussed it with other female friends and found that they agreed with my assessment. A lawyer told me she didn’t wear pink or skirts because she wanted to be taken seriously in court. A physician told me that she didn’t wear girly patterns because she didn’t want patients to think that she was flippant about their care.

¹ Even the phrasing of this question, the use of “if you *could*...” as though some dream had come true, shows the desirability of literally cutting off undesirable yet healthy portions of the body.

Intellectually, I could objectively remove my emotions and desires from these two thoughts and understand that these things were not necessarily at odds with each other, yet my first reactions to the thoughts were naturally that they were combative ideas. Why did I feel the need to defend my choices of personal adornment? Why did I feel that the things I enjoyed were frivolous, a waste of time, and somehow made me less intelligent? This inner conflict and its connection to perceived intelligence became the concept behind the artwork for *Smart Girls Know Better*.

Chapter 1: Collection of Heads

The *Wizard of Oz* is the first and most popular book in the series of Oz books by L. Frank Baum. The third book of the series is called *Ozma of Oz*. In this book, the well-known character Dorothy Gale finds herself in the Land of Ev, a neighboring land to Oz, but things are not how she had previously left them. Villains have overtaken the land, and Dorothy must help free her friends.

Princess Langwidere is a self-obsessed character who has an interesting ability: she can physically remove her head from her body, and then locate and attach a different head from a variety of 30 different choices (Figure 1). Each head has its own temperament, and is simply known by its respective cabinet number. Some heads are saccharine while others are terrible, but all are beautiful.²

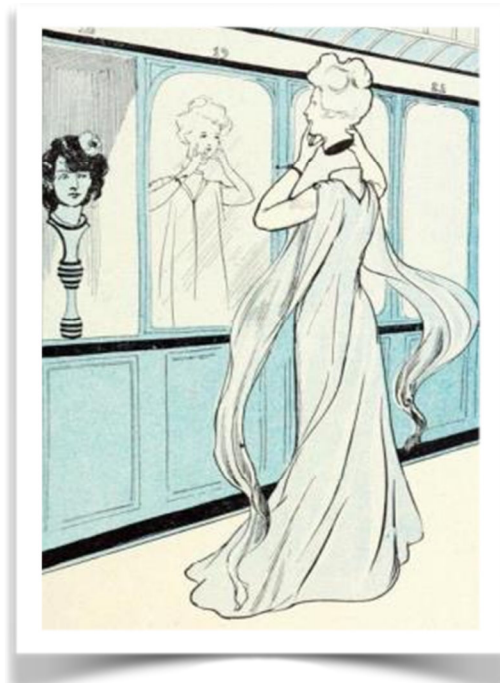


Figure 1. John R. Neill, *Princess Langwidere Removing Head*, *Ozma of Oz*. 1907

² L. Frank Baum, *Ozma of Oz*, Mactawa, 1907, 77.

The Princess inherited her role as ruler but does not care for it because she must devote 10 minutes to the responsibilities of ruling on a daily basis. While the remaining 23 hours and 50 minutes of her days are spent admiring her heads, she would rather not waste the 10 minutes ruling. When Dorothy goes to the Princess to ask for help rescuing her friends, the Princess ignores her request and bluntly states the following:

I need your head for my collection, and in the Land of Ev my will is law. I never have cared much for No. 26, and you will find that it is very little worn. Besides, it will do you just as well as the one you're wearing, for all practical purposes.³

Dorothy refuses and is locked in a tower until she agrees to comply.

The Artwork

The Princess's vivid imagery, as well as her portrayal of the relationship between enjoying prettiness and lacking seriousness are the basis for the subject matter of my current artwork. While there are many pieces to the group, none can be understood in isolation. Three 8 ft. x 4 ft. watercolors unroll like scrolls to reveal a stylized ideal body shape without a head. The unframed open display helps maintain a relaxed relationship between the viewer and the artwork. The scale of the watercolors transitions the dismissive kitschy elements to an unavoidable size. The bodies are reminiscent of 1950's advertisements, maintaining a two-dimensional form with cinched waists, unbelievably long legs, and billowing skirts. Sweeping line work displays the elegance of the bodies' immaculate and impossible forms. The geometry of enlarged sewing patterns weaves around the bodies, sizing up the unrealistic perfection the bodies represent (Figure 2).

³ Baum, *Ozma of Oz*, 80.



Figure 2. Keturie Hehn, *Smart Girls Know Better: Red Body*, Mixed media, 2016

Sickeningly sweet lace cut-outs spread like a virus around the edges of the paper. The infection advances beyond the bodies to the adjacent collection of heads on display. Unsatisfied with their territory, the cutouts cast reaching shadows onto the walls. While the lacy pathogen moves beyond the borders of the figural bodies, the figurative heads do not transform even though they have adopted the stunning parasite. More heads exist than the bodies can wear at any

one time, so they wait — untouched — as if they were books on the shelf anticipating their day in the sun (Figure 3). The pastel heads are entombed in intricate lace doilies, set on top of displays, with hardware embedded in their necks, padlocked into place. No names identify them, only the decorative number on their lock. Not all of the heads appear to be in attendance as one display remains empty. The viewer may decide whether the open lock is an invitation to join the captured or previously belonged to an escapee (Figure 4). The lovely heads are realistically rendered but do not possess the ideal standard put forth by the bodies. Though none revolt violently, a spirit of discontent is cast over all the faces (Figure 5). The mysterious heads juxtaposed with syrupy sweetness show the dissonance of seriousness and prettiness.



Figure 3. Keturie Hehn, *Smart Girls Know Better: Head 23, Head 19, Head 3, Green Body, Blue Body*, Mixed media, 2016



Figure 4. Keturie Hehn, *Smart Girls Know Better: Lock 18*, Mixed media, 2016

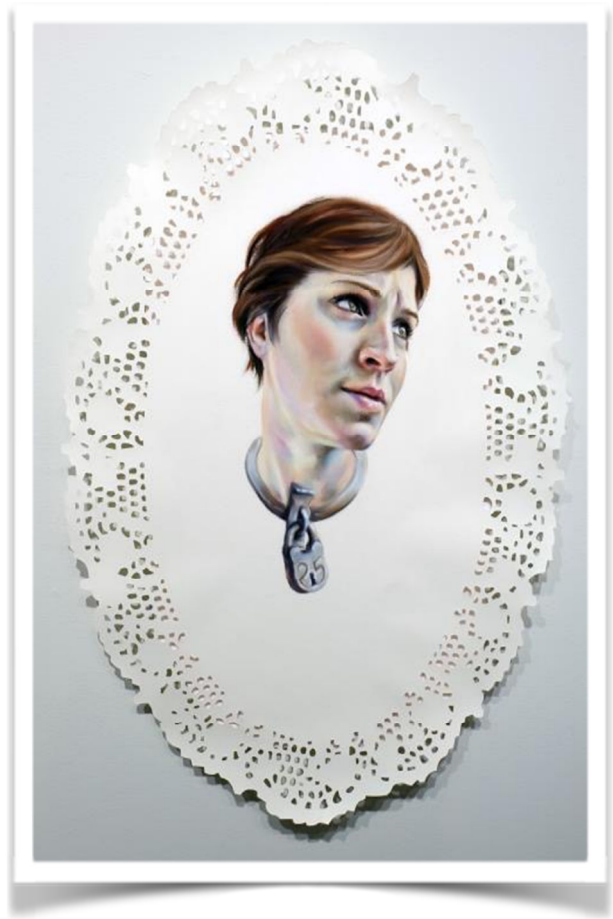


Figure 5. Keturie Hehn, *Smart Girls Know Better: Head 25*, Mixed media, 2016

Chapter 2: Kitsch Inspiration

Smart Girls Know Better was inspired by kitsch artists or artwork. Kitsch is stereotypically seen in the arts as a lowbrow or tacky style of mass produced or popular art for the un- or ill-educated about art.⁴ Art Nouveau, vintage advertisements, lace, sewing patterns, and children's book illustrations are the types of kitsch art forms I have chosen to embrace for this work because they are viewed as prettiness for low culture and therefore unserious art forms, which mimics the concept of the artwork.

John R. Neill was a children's book illustrator, and is most renowned for his work on the Oz books from 1904 - 1920. His pen and ink illustrations, such as *Mermaids* (Figure 6), portray fantasy characters with expressive line work. These illustrations influenced the fantastical subject matter as well as the flowing line quality in my current work.



Figure 6. John R. Neill, Mermaids

⁴ Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness*, trans. Alastair McEwen. (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2007), 19.

Alphonse Mucha was a Czech Art Nouveau painter who is best known for his advertisements and illustrations that feature women wearing yards of flowing fabric with floral borders that weave back and forth around the subject creating interesting negative spaces. Though his work is very detailed, it is not highly rendered and remains somewhat flat, as seen in the work, *Dance* (Figure 7). Throughout my work I have appropriated Mucha's braiding of foreground and background elements by entangling the headless bodies with sewing patterns and lace into one inseparable knot.



Figure 7. Alphonse Mucha, *The Arts: Dance*. Color lithograph, 1898

Vintage sewing patterns heavily influenced the poses and shapes of the bodies in this series. The carefree images of women living easy lives in lovely dresses and the distorted ideal of the proportions of the body were taken directly from 1950's Vogue, McCall's, and Butterick sewing patterns (Figure 8). The envelopes these ads were printed on contained patterns on tracing paper with varying sizes that were instructions as well: one simply had to follow the designated solid or dotted line corresponding to the desired size. The blue geometric line work for this series is taken directly from such patterns (Figure 9). Paper doilies inspired the cut-outs for the foundation for the heads. Paper doilies are the cheap and disposable 1950's alternative to linen doilies. All of these sources are traditionally feminine objects that would not be considered high art.



Figure 8. *Simplicity Pattern 1044 Size 18, 1956*

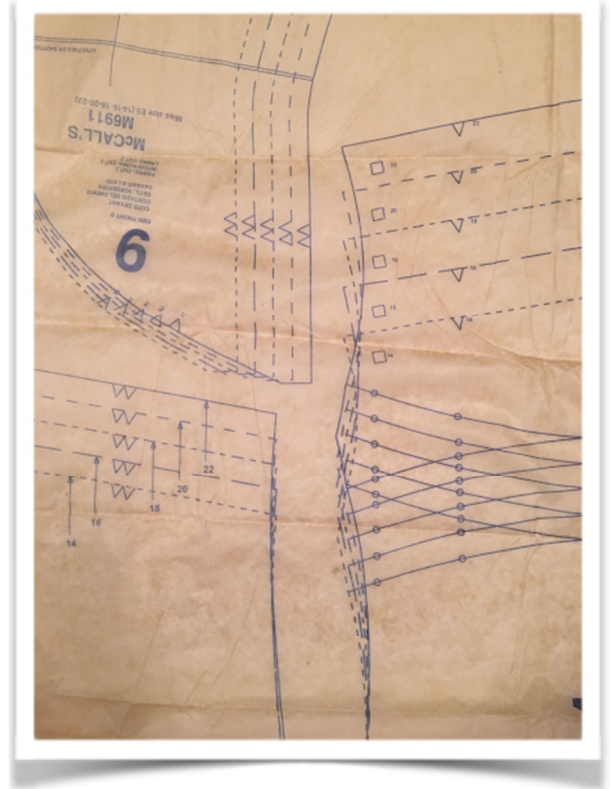


Figure 9. *McCall's Sewing Pattern, tracing paper*

Contemporary artists have influenced this artwork as well. Elise Wehle is an American collage artist who tears, folds, and cuts paper into beautiful images (Figure 10). These subtractions, reminiscent of lace or wallpaper, add a feminine quality to her work. Wehle's willingness to cut holes in her work inspired the eyelets in my work (Figure 11).

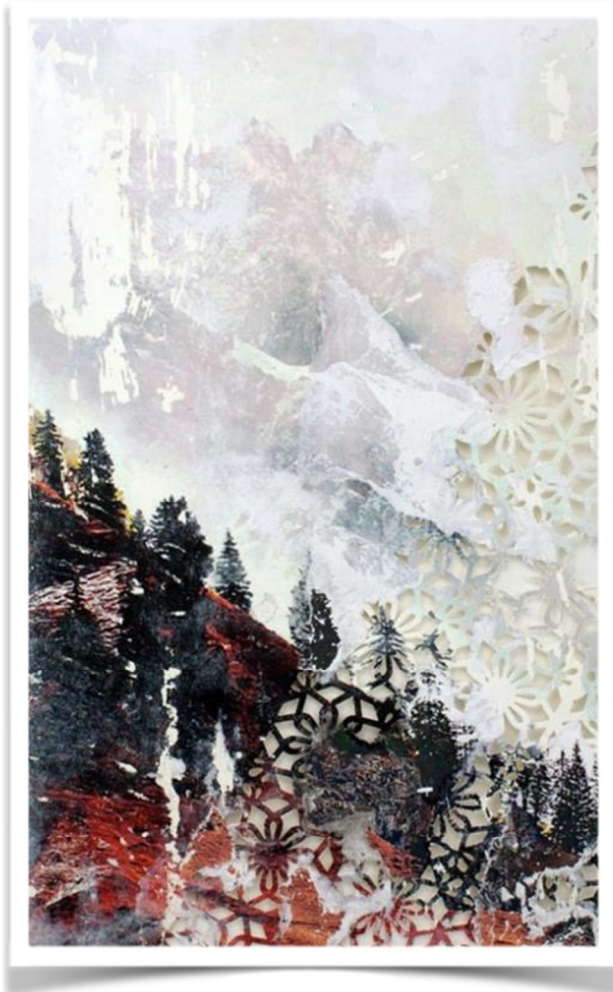


Figure 10. Elise Wehle, *Cloudy Mountainscape*, Paper cut collage, 2013



Figure 11. Keturie Hehn. *Smart Girls Know Better: Green Body* detail, Mixed media, 2016

Lisa Yuskavage is a contemporary artist who uses kitsch sources to inspire her artwork. She paints overtly sexual cartoonish female nudes that confront the voyeurism of the male gaze (Figure 12). Yuskavage states that her earliest influences were both Catholic holy cards and

copies of *Penthouse*.⁵ Through adopting kitsch, the obscene, and extreme viewer discomfort, Yuskavage embraces the uncomfortable side of art. While there is not much visual similarity between my work and Yuskavage's, reading about her journey from people-pleasing graduate student to sexy kitsch artist was very inspiring to the mental work of this series. Her bravery gave me the courage to embrace the lowbrow art forms I desired to use in my work.

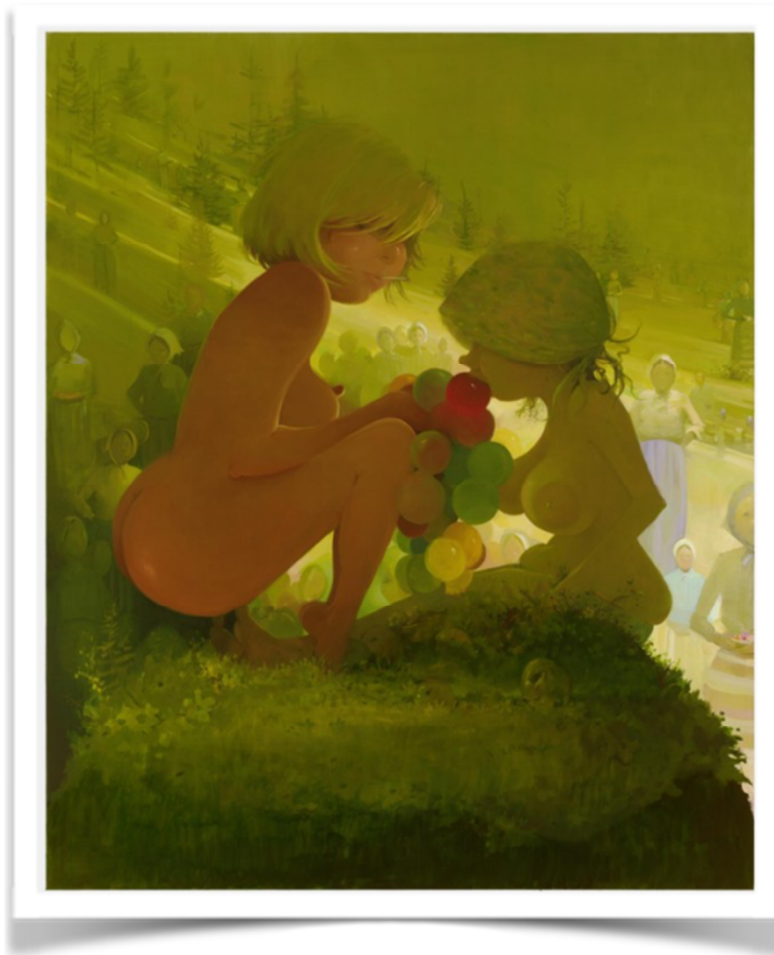


Figure 12. Lisa Yuskavage. *Afternoon Feeding*, Oil on canvas, 2011

⁵ Eleanor Heartney et al., *The Reckoning: Women Artists of the New Millennium* (New York: Prestel, 2013), 111.

Chapter 3: Technique and Process

My process began with the concept and the plan for the layout of the installation. For this series I began with the end in mind. I planned out the dimensions of each piece and researched the specific imagery I needed to execute it.

The bodies began with large rolls of cold-pressed watercolor paper submerged in a bathtub then laid out on particle board and stapled down to stretch. The warped paper flattens as it dries. Between each layer of paint on the bodies, the paper must dry completely or risk paint bleeding onto other planes. First, a wet-on-wet, smooth, and even gradient wash of watercolor is painted across the entire paper. This was accomplished by taping many brushes together on a yard stick to make one massive paintbrush. After this dried, the colorful brush strokes were added. Using a similar large brush, water was first applied to the paper in the desired stroke shape. Then, a mix of watercolor paints that naturally separate due to varying weights of pigment are added to the already wetted paper. The separations are a result of the varying weights of the pigments settling in the pool of water on the paper, creating the intentional bleeding effect.

Next, the body was drawn and the dress was painted. Unlike the smooth gradient approach, the clothing was highly saturated with a varied contrast due to a desire to help create an implied movement in the layers of fabric. After the dress was complete, the skin was painted onto the page using local colors to keep the figures looking flat and unrealistic. Once the skin tones dried, the line work was added with fast, sweeping, generalized strokes. The final step of paint application was for the sewing patterns, which were painted with gouache (due to its opacity), overlapping and underlapping between the colored sweeps of paint and the body.

Finally, the lace patterns were drawn and then cut with an Xacto knife. The holes intentionally appear to overlap and underlap the subject and pattern, just as the other elements of

the painting do. The edges were cut last and improvised to create the rounded and uneven boundaries of the paper. The remaining paper at the top and bottom were steamed with an iron and wrapped around a wooden dowel rod until cooled, then the ends were sewn in a loop with a sewing machine to hold the rods which hang from hooks for final display.

The paper doilies for the heads were programmed into and cut with a vinyl cutter. After cutting, a light pencil drawing of the facial contours were added to the paper as a guide and finally pastel was added in layers to complete the drawing (Figure 13). The large doilies were then mounted to layers of foam board and horizontal paper supports were added to the edges to maintain sturdiness for final display (Figure 14).

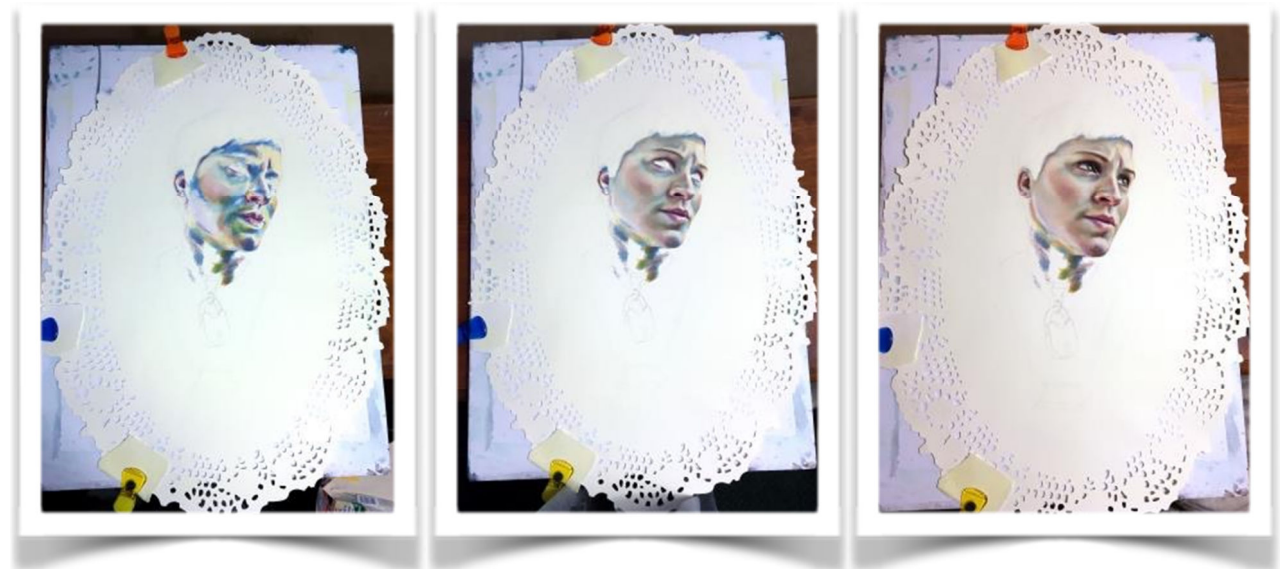


Figure 13. Keturie Hehn. *Smart Girls Know Better: Head 25* process, Mixed media, 2016



Figure 14. Keturie Hehn, *Smart Girls Know Better: Lock 18* detail, Mixed media, 2016

Conclusion

Smart Girls Know Better is a mixed media artwork that illustrates the story of Princess Langwidere from the Oz book series. Her character embodies the concept that prettiness is the opposite of seriousness and intelligence. These seemingly opposing values are found in the subject matter as well as in the choice of influences. Kitsch art forms such as doilies, sewing patterns, children's illustrations, and advertisements are all utilized in this mixed media work.

The reception of this work has been mixed. There were two distinct categories. Those who already enjoy kitsch and pretty things, and academics. The former really enjoyed it, while the latter seemed to be annoyed by it or worse. While this may indicate that I could have executed the work differently, I believe it illustrates the very point that I am trying to make with this work. Prettiness is seen as an insult to intelligence, in art and in life.

In the future, I plan to continue using pretty and kitschy as sources of inspiration. However, I don't necessarily plan to show all of my works as an interconnected narrative as this one has been. I will continue to work in mixed media, cutting, and allowing the light to create interesting shadows within my work. I also intend to continue displaying my work in a method that is untraditional to watercolor.

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