

Don't Show Your Dirty Laundry to the Neighbors: The Theatrics of Southern Culture

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Abstract

The women portrayed in this series show the private side of the woman who was brought up to be a "Southern Belle." Based on personal observation, the artist depicts aristocratic Southern social culture as involving a great deal of manipulation in order to conceal imperfections and to display qualities which are socially acceptable. To highlight this perception, this series of drawings, "Don't Show Your Dirty Laundry," focuses on narratives about Southern women who pretend to be without moral defect and instead display qualities which are socially acceptable. This pressure to hide human emotions and characteristics is so strong that while the world is collapsing around her, the proper Southern lady still manages to put on a girdle and look as she is expected to. According to Alexis Brown this utopian woman, "embraced femininity, beauty, simplicity, and submissiveness; the highest roles to which a Southern woman could aspire were those of nurturing mother, dutiful wife, and social moral pillar."ⁱ The image of the seemingly infallible woman pictured by Western civilization is the foundation of this body of work. Through the utilization of watercolor and colored pencil, the drawing method for this series is very controlled and leaves room for few mistakes. Therefore, the very process of making this work through the restricted utilization of watercolor and colored pencil resembles the restriction encompassing Southern women. By using watercolor as a preliminary drawing, the roughness of colored pencil is softened. This surface allows for definition of specific focal points by using only watercolor in some areas as a fading background to the figure. These two mediums used together create delicate images which seem to flatter the women who are depicted while also providing a clear contrast between their perfect appearance and reality. Like the work of Suzanne Heintz, and other artists discussed in this paper, this series of drawings questions the role of women according to the standards of the American norm.

1. Visual Depictions of the "Southern Belle"

The women portrayed in this series show the private side of the woman who was brought up to be a "Southern Belle." These ladies are portrayed with vices such as smoking or drinking, which they use to cope with anything from stressors to traumas which have vexed them for years. An example of such a stressor would be the knowledge a wife has that her husband has been having affairs for years even though she is unwilling to do or say anything about it. The objects I have chosen to draw in this series are ones that a proper Southern woman may have in her own home to deflect attention away from anything unseemly. For instance, the intricate nineteenth century figurines in *Manger Scene* represent a room in the house reserved only for company and holidays. Every doily and piece of china is kept in this room in order to impress those who enter it. This room distracts the honored guest from the rest of the house, which may be less perfect.

The main inspirations for this series were my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. In my opinion, they are a clear example of how this culture of concealing is obvious in older generations, and much more subtle, but still present in modern Southern society. In letters to her sister, Eunice, my great-grandmother constantly lied about her daughter's accomplishments, either exaggerating or making them up completely so that my grandmother would

seem more accomplished than her cousin. My mother displays this type of behavior in a similar way, by setting clear standards at an early age of how I was meant to act so that I would not appear “impolite” or “tacky” in public.

The women chosen to be depicted for this series for this series are all close female friends or family across a variety of backgrounds. However they are united by the fact that they are women in my life to whom I feel I can divulge anything. According to interviews conducted by Cherry Good to support her research for her article, “The Southern Lady, or the Art of Dissembling.”ⁱⁱ Southern women only speak of things which are improper when in the company of close female friends. They would never do so in male company or in public. Only these women know the intimate details of each others’ lives and therefore it is known only among each other that each of them is participating in a grand show when in public.ⁱⁱⁱ By creating an environment of closely connected women, I have created a mock environment where women who do not show their true selves in public are at ease. This type of friend group composed of women exists in the South because these women feel that they cannot confide in their own husbands and family. They only feel comfortable revealing their true selves to women who are demographically similar to themselves and because of this, acknowledge that they are imperfect.



Figure 1: Margit Briggs, *Red Hat Lady*, 2015, Watercolor and Colored Pencil on paper, 42” x 35”

Although much of my close family is from the area known as the Deep South, I feel wholly disconnected from this steeped tradition of concealment. Even though my grandmother and mother still follow this criteria, the outing of my uncle as a homosexual several years prior to my birth and my family’s acceptance of it completely changed my family dynamic. Thanks mostly to this change, I have decided not only to do whatever it takes to make me happy, but also to be completely honest about it to my family and friends. This is a trait which vastly differs from the generations of my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. My separation from this custom and complete honesty with the women who practice it has allowed me to better observe these social customs objectively. This culture of obscuring reality is a quality which I have observed not only within my own family and community, but in interactions with strangers and media relating to the South. By creating work on this topic, I am bringing to light an aspect of human nature which I believe to be damaging to relationships. The failure or complete avoidance of communication is damaging because ignored anger or tension in a family can tear that family apart. I see this trait not tapering off, but growing stronger in newer generations of people.

The piece, *Pinch* (Fig. 10), shows a woman in between an oxygen tank and a bed. The line of the chord moves from the tank to the woman's hands and then to the bed. The woman is closing off the air supply to whoever may be in the bed adjacent to her. Her action paired with the grouping of these three things makes the line of the chord across the drawing an important feature. Not only does it lead your eye to the subject, it also is reminiscent of a pulse line, indicating that a theme in the piece is death. The woman featured in the piece has a clenched jaw and vacant expression, indicating tension and focus. Her hands clench the chord as one may hold a rosary bead, which enhances the meditative quality of the chord and her position. *Pinch* is a bit excessive when categorizing an entire demographic such as affluent Southern women, but is nonetheless a poignant example of the mistakes people make when they have been taught that major life decisions should be valued based on the influence they have on one's reputation.

Aristocratic Southern social culture involves a great deal of manipulation in order to create the appearance of a life without physical or moral defect. Among aristocratic Southern women and those who strive to be, there is a constant effort to conceal imperfections and display qualities which are socially acceptable. Since the Pre-Civil War South, Southern white women were considered sacred, a position which secured them protection and love from their fathers and husbands.^{iv} According to this tradition, to sully this reputation by being immoral or unchaste would be to rip out from under them the security which they held dear.^v Despite their reputation as an "innocent above reproach" who needs to be protected, Southern ladies are meant to be stoic and morally stronger than men. This is not to say that these women blithely uphold these grandiose standards. In her novel examining Southern sexual and social culture, Florence King relates a story to the reader detailing the nature of the private and public lives of a Southern lady:

When the passage of time brought greater sexual freedom to women, Miss Lily indeed became good in bed. Northern soldiers stationed in the many Army camps in the South licked their chops the moment they received their orders and said, "Oh, boy, Southern Girls!" ...Even when Miss Lily did not actually come across, she performed all the preliminaries with a fiery abandon that many Yankees, especially those with immigrant Catholic backgrounds, had never before encountered. Living in the myth-drenched South had made Lily a fine actress, and she had a Southern gift for playing to the galleries... There was no doubt that Lily was nice, for in her nonsexual moments she danced the measured ballet of Southern life with exquisite propriety.^{vi}

In this passage, the Southern lady also has to contend with the persona of the virgin versus the harlot which exists in many cultures. If she remains chaste and innocent, she is more desirable according to custom, but is not ultimately what her future husband wants.^{vii} The intense pressure to hide human emotions and characteristics is so strong that while her world is collapsing around her, the proper Southern lady still manages to put on a girdle and look as she is expected to. This behavior has permeated into the very family unit to the point where a crisis which is deemed unsuitable in accordance with social customs may never be discussed and dealt with.^{viii}

Masking in Southern culture is displayed even more prominently in media such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Scarlett does not take part in this culture of concealing. Because of this, she is assigned male characteristics such as interest in trade and ambition beyond the household. The women around her scorn her for appearing at a public event shortly after she has been widowed and romantically pursuing a married man: things a Southern woman would certainly do in a much more subtle fashion. It is assumed in this movie that those who do not participate in this culture have no ethical code; however, this surely cannot always be the case. Perhaps the character of Scarlett is so demonized because she makes things happen rather allowing men to do them for her, because she has absolutely no interest in domestic work, and, most importantly, because the mistakes which she has made are on public display.

As one can imagine, this behavioral norm can be detrimental to the structure of a community. Though this behavior is not isolated only to Southern culture, I do believe it is prominent among this group of people based on interactions I have had with the women who surrounded me as well as female classmates in the conservative community in which I grew up. The indecency of behaving in a manner which is outside societal standards is only one aspect of this tradition. It is equally possible for a woman to be deceitfully perfect simply by carrying on with social customs.

A good example of such a false character lies in the way people mourn. Like any other societal rite, funerals are associated with community and togetherness. However, *Mourning* deals with those who are sympathetic merely by obligation. In my piece, a group of women walk with casseroles and pies to give to a mourning family. All but one is dressed in black funeral attire. The "other" is a woman who is disheveled and vulnerable looking. To further differentiate her from the rest of the group, I depict her carrying nothing. She is the only woman among the mourners who is mourning the loss of a loved one. The remaining women are merely acting on social etiquette. Repeating these women moving in the same direction for a similar purpose--while having one different from the

rest--highlights the woman who is distinctive. This also makes her the subject of the painting because she is the most vulnerable and exposed.

The aspect of culture involving avoiding conflict to appear perfect began with the pre-Civil War era image of the Southern Belle, a woman placed on a pedestal, so virtuous and beautiful that she transcends humanity.^{ix} According to Brown this woman, "embraced femininity, beauty, simplicity, and submissiveness; the highest roles to which a Southern woman could aspire were those of nurturing mother, dutiful wife, and social moral pillar."^x Women were expected to be heavily involved in the church which was their only allowed outlet. This role of piety was contrasted greatly with the role of Southern men in the South, who were considered naturally promiscuous.^{xi} By creating an environment where men were expected to do wrong, while women were expected to allow it, the basis of an entire culture was created by stripping women of any control in their own lives. Post-Antebellum Southern women have attempted and continue to attempt to copy the image of the Southern Belle, a thoroughly impossible task.

For example, *Madame Bovary* (Fig. 3) shows a gloved hand holding a Bible with a book inside of it with the implication being that she is using the Bible to disguise what she is actually reading. Instead, she is reading the novel, *Madame Bovary*. The copy is worn and yellowed, showing clearly that this book has been read by more generations of her family than the pristine, new Bible which it covers. *Madame Bovary* was written in the nineteenth century and has the reputation of being a beacon for sexually repressed women of this time period. The combination of these two books points to the false piety which my character exhibits which may carry over into other aspects of her life. This piece as well as *Have you Prayed it Through?* (Fig. 4), are significant to my life. Although I am not particularly religious at all, each of these books is opened to my favorite hymn, "Blessed Assurance," and Bible verse, "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these." This shows that anyone can feign piety, and that although certainly women have been truly Christian for centuries, the adverse can also be said.

The discolored novel is painted with tea and watercolor and the hymn text is drawn in colored pencil. The uniformity and repetition of this piece integrate it into the other still life's in my series, some using lace and others using figures. This is the center piece of a triptych which is surrounded on either side by the laps of two seated women on a pew. This indicates that the suggested subject of the drawing (the woman holding the books) is in a public place, or church more specifically. By the edge of the Bible not being shown, the woman is secluded from the public scene around her and engrossed in what she is reading.

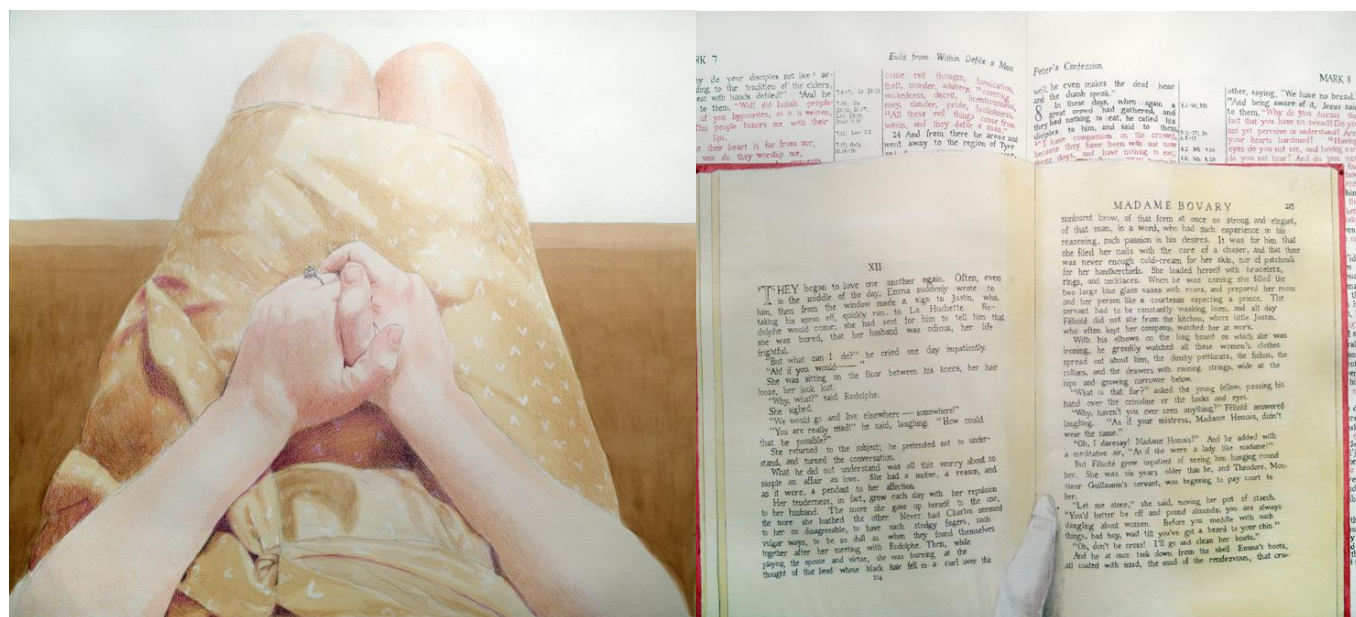


Figure 2 and 3: Margit Briggs, *Madame Bovary*, 2015, Watercolor, Tea, and Colored Pencil on Paper, 103" x 33"



Figure 4: Margit Briggs, *Have You Prayed it Through?*, 2014, Watercolor, Tea, and Colored Pencil on Paper (Detail)

In “Don’t Show Your Dirty Laundry to the Neighbors”, gloves are used as a metaphor for masking stressors and aspects of life which are less than perfect. Southern women are taught to mask their flaws and feelings because they are considered immodest or unladylike.^{xiii} In Southern culture, gloves are used not only as a symbol of that which is delicate and feminine, but also to conceal flaws caused by aging and household work.^{xiii} Southern women during the mid-twentieth century wore gloves when they went to church and often whenever they were in public. These women were expected to appear and behave a certain way when they crossed the threshold of their homes. According to Gillespie, “Southern women, with the gloves off, speak their minds.”^{xiv} This statement implies that when a woman speaks her mind, it is in opposition to her femininity and general nature. This is the very essence of the “Southern Belle,” a woman who is revered and loved by her husband and those around her, but is at the same time without a voice of her own. In most of my works, I have depicted the time period when it was most fashionable to wear gloves in public, the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. When depicted without gloves, the women in this series are either in the privacy of their homes, or they are women of an older age. The use of this time period is vital to clarify that this culture is not only deeply rooted in tradition, but also archaic.

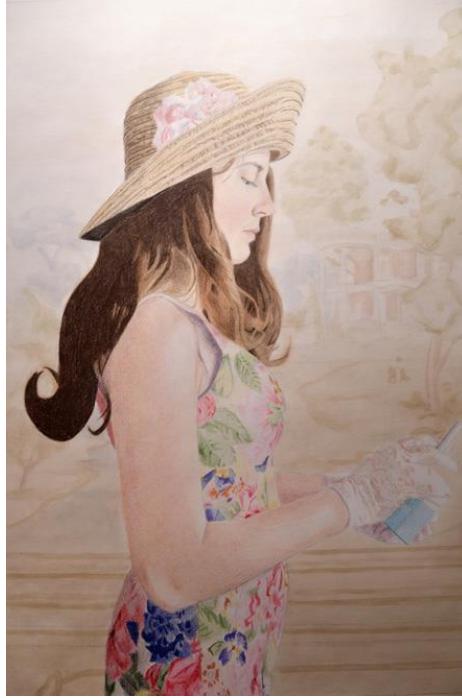


Figure 5: Margit Briggs, *Seclusion*, 2014, Watercolor and Colored Pencil on Paper, 40" x 28"

The environments which I have chosen to depict show a variance of comfort, but certainly show the homes of the middle and upper classes. By using interior design techniques which are traditionally Southern, such as decorative plates as wall decoration and scenic wallpaper, I have created a background which to the viewer registers as a historic Southern household. In many of these images, I then alter the image of the "Southern Belle" from a pedestaled goddess to a human with a soul who has deficiencies. For instance, the woman shown in the piece entitled *Seclusion* (Fig. 5) smokes as a way to cope with stressors caused by anything from her cheating husband to whether she left the stove on. The wall behind her, complete with detailed moulding and scenic wallpaper indicates a room which is not often used. In this room, she is able to be herself as well as to escape the demands of her children and husband. In each portrait, I have also changed certain physical traits which the model finds unflattering about herself, such as weight or hair color. *Potluck* (Fig. 8) is an example of such an alteration. In my drawing I not only made the model thinner than she was in the original photo, but also darkened her hair color to a richer brown.

2. Method

My drawing method is very controlled and leaves room for few mistakes. Therefore, the very process of making my work resembles the restriction encompassing Southern women. Initially, I use a series of points to create an image which relate to points within the original photo. A point may represent a corner created by the crease in someone's arm or the outermost point on the edge of an ellipse. I determine these points using proportions based on the edge of the visual plane. This process lends an accuracy to my final drawing which could not be executed by drawing without any kind of grid. Having completed the outline of the drawing in pencil, I use watercolor to define shadows and areas of color saturation of the image. Watercolor is important for establishing value and creating a richness of tone by the layering of colors. I then further sharpen the drawing by going over the watercolor wash with colored pencil. This process is extremely important, because it creates contrast in certain areas of a piece so as to highlight the subject of the drawing. Colored pencil is important for defining areas that should be more dominant within a piece. Depending on what I intend to be the message in my final series, the use of combined watercolor and colored pencil allows me to draw particular attention to what I want the viewer to notice first in a drawing. I can sharpen one area of the drawing, while letting the rest fade with less contrasting areas of watercolor. Both mediums require a

great deal of concentration and planning. Not only are both permanent to a great extent, they are also repetitive, with both requiring many layers. For watercolor this layering is important for contrast while for colored pencil it is important for smoothness. This repetition and attention to detail that the two mediums lend give these mediums a meditative quality. There is even more of a sense of obsession in this process due to the fact that I use colored pencil over cold press watercolor paper which has a textured surface. In order to draw with precision, I must work into each groove of the paper. Most of my time in the studio is spent observing my piece. By doing this, I am able to note areas that are effective and change areas which are not.



Figure 6, 7, and 8: Margit Briggs, *Potluck*, 2015, Watercolor and Colored Pencil on Paper, 42" x 32"

My first set of drawings, such as *Have You Prayed it Through?*, *Seclusion*, and *Tea Time*, were done on Strathmore cold press watercolor paper which is smooth with slight dips. On these drawings I used more colored pencil and less watercolor. This process proved very tedious and time consuming. I had to create many layers over the paper to fill the textured areas. In the next series of drawings, I used Arches cold press watercolor paper, which is rough, with less of a break between ridges. This texture makes it much more difficult to create smooth areas in my drawings, so when using this paper, I employ watercolor much more liberally and rely on colored pencil for definition. In situations where I depict pattern or fine detail, I use liquid frisket. This tool adheres to the paper so that the area touched by it will stay a certain color while the area around it is darkened or colored differently.

Watercolor is a medium which can be gestural or controlled and meticulously planned. In this series, the latter is used. However no matter how extensive the planning, watercolor still leaves many opportunities for mistakes when executing detail, especially for the impatient artist. If one wash is not allowed to dry before applying another there can be unseemly blotting, which can also appear when letting the paint dry in the middle of a wash. If this hastily applied wash is applied to an area next to the original wash in a new color, there is the risk of the colors bleeding into one another. One can test colors on a scrap piece of paper, but this color may look lighter, darker, or like a slightly different color altogether when it occupies a larger surface area. For this reason, this medium is used in sync with colored pencil. By applying colored pencil to rely on detail, none of the issues previously listed for watercolor are a problem. There is ample control of line weight, color, and contour.



Figure 9: Margit Briggs, *Mardi Gras II*, 2014, Watercolor and Colored Pencil on Paper, 30" x 22"

For example, *Mardi Gras II* (Fig. 9) shows a gradient from watercolor and colored pencil to only watercolor. It is clear from this image that this process is time consuming. In order to create depth, the wash cannot be too saturated so that shadows and highlights build over many washes. Even after several washes, a drawing can still be as light as the watercolor in this image. When considering style, the extreme control in this series reflects the nature of the confined image of the domestic Southern woman who goes above and beyond the rational norm to conceal her dirty laundry. Although this image has changed drastically over time, it is still present and has evolved into an innate lack of communication.



Figure 10: Margit Briggs, *Pinch*, 2015, Watercolor and Colored Pencil on Paper, 43" x 42"

3. Influences

Zoe Hawk creates works which use groups of school girls to portray the culture of “gendered socialization.”^{xv} She uses a repeated motif of school children throughout all of her pieces who are dressed and styled similarly to draw attention to an individual’s assimilation into a broader culture. Hawks’ use of gouache softens her subject, also relating it to an older time period.



Figure 11: Zoe Hawk, *Wake*, Gouache on paper, 2012¹⁵

Zoe Hawk uses gouache to depict a certain period of time as well as a social tradition which is also replicated in this series. She utilizes negative space to attract the viewers' eye to what is most important within her paintings, which is often the school girls, who she styles similarly so that they seem like one unit. Hawk uses only figures on a white plane in some cases, isolating them in the frame of reference. This gives the viewer only one place to look. Hawk effectively uses repetition throughout her pieces to draw attention to her subject, much like the repetition of pattern in my own work. She also successfully tackles a facet of my own concept: the social separation of men and women. Hawk also draws light to the idea of a person being a part of a larger community rather than an individual. Her light color scheme ties in with my own application of watercolor and colored pencil to depict an older time period which is out-of-date, but continuously influence modern society.

Like Zoe Hawk, Suzanne Heintz looks toward a time period which to her seems archaic. Her pieces are a response to people who ask her why she is not married. Heintz satirizes the "the idealization of family, and the glorification of the role of women as Mother and Homemaker"^{xvi} and questions why this cultural phenomenon is a societal norm. She uses mannequins to show that what some Americans may view as the ideal is unrealistic and fabricated. By saturating these images, she idealizes them in the same fashion as my work does by softening colors. Both series show something which is commonplace in society, but which to the artist seems limiting in American or Southern culture. Heintz also draws attention to the trend of women adhering to a certain facade by using bright, plastic colors and exaggerated facial expressions.

Suzanne Heintz successfully portrays ideas associated with antiquated femininity and women who occupy the domestic sphere. Unlike my own series, her approach to this concept is palpable and in your face so as to leave no question as to her meaning. She uses mannequins in her work to enhance the plastic feeling of her photographs, augmenting the idea of the perfect American family. Like my series, she uses dated scenes to imply that cultural practices which are still the norm today, such as marriage, may need to be redefined for future generations.



Figure 12: Suzanne Heintz, *Untitled*, Photograph,¹⁶



Figure 13: Suzanne Heintz, *Untitled*, Photograph, 2011.¹⁶

The content of my pieces are most inspired not only by artists, but by pop culture, including plays, movies and television series. Southern culture is not the only group of people who have women reminiscent of the famed Southern Belle. The British television series, "Keeping up Appearances" satirizes this culture of people by creating a woman who does this to the extreme. Hyacinth Bouquet often pretends she is acquainted with the local nobility and pretends that she is not at all related to her unemployed sister and brother-in-law. She also extravagantly spends money to make it seem like she is more wealthy than she actually is.

Unlike "Keeping up Appearances," the plays written by Jesse Jones, Nicholas Hope, and Jamie Wooten have given me insight into the dynamic of a group of Southern women as they experience major life events together

over an extended period of time. This is the premise of most of their productions, and is helpful when creating my own series which is based on the evolution of a group of Southern women and their friendship. In some cases, the only characters are the women involved in this relationship while husbands and children fall in and out of favor. This implies that their husbands and children are less aware of their matriarchs thoughts and feelings than the close bond experienced by this group of women.

4. Conclusion

The women who are depicted in this series are middle to upper class Southern women who are limited by tradition. Through drawing many different women in this light, it has become clear to me that this also speaks to the traditional housewife, a role which many women are still expected to fill. The need to be the perfect housewife and the perfect mother has pushed women to hide flaws, even flaws which are fundamental to their own personalities. Beverly Lowry reports, "After last year's Miss America pageant, in which eight of ten semifinalists were from the South, a northern contestant is said to have remarked, 'There ought to be a different category for Southern girls. They've been doing this since they were born.'"^{xvii} Lowry is referencing Southern culture, which is a show within itself. Since this is a fairly recent article, it shows that this phenomenon is not simply a case of the plantation owner's wife, but a cultural standard which persists to this day. This duplicitous behavior is instilled in the fiber of affluent families. With such a veil over their own flaws, including flaws which are permanent, comes internalized feelings which manifest anxiety and depression.^{xviii} By using visually pleasing images of women who appear to be well put together, at first the subtle imperfections displayed by each woman are masked, but upon further inspection, this facade crumbles.

Through the process of creating "Don't Show Your Dirty Laundry to the Neighbors" with watercolor, liquid frisket, and colored pencil, I have found that in this process the texture of the paper is most important for determining the extent of detail in a drawing. Cold press watercolor paper is ideal for watercolor, as the textured paper takes in more pigment, however this paper has made it difficult to execute the amount of detail and type of texture that I was looking for in this series. Finer detail is also heightened by using more watercolor than colored pencil so that the value and saturation is established before applying colored pencil. Colored pencil is used as a final touch for defining areas such as sharp edges which watercolor cannot create. Even with a variety of textures, the faded mid-century look which is lent by the combination of watercolor and colored pencil helps suggest to the viewer that the concealment of untoward behavior is a totemic tradition which has remained constant.

5. Endnotes

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