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Cuteness: Power Dynamics of an Aesthetic in Relation to Atopic Dermatitis

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Abstract

Though commonly equated with appeal, cuteness carries a connotation of belittlement or objectification due to the innate implication that an outside force can manipulate a cute subject. A response of pity and/ or nurturing is thereby evoked in the viewer. Through study of current inquiry by social theorists and anthropologists, as well as visual analysis of historic and contemporary artworks, the artist establishes factors that amplify the perception of a subject as cute. Such aspects include size, deformity – which may be the exaggeration of certain body parts such as eyes, or the presence of a physical ailment – vulnerability, fragileness, passivity, and more. These attributes impact both function within the world and the response of the world in turn. The dynamics are then translated into humorous visual metaphors, for instance the scaly texture of eczema being represented as the scales of a dinosaur, to counteract this condescending human tendency. This body of work, titled *Skin-Deep, Baby Doll,* communicates an overall message of the strength and resilience of cute subjects, in contrast to the reactions their condition elicits. Here, cute becomes fierce and bold, while eczema becomes endearing.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, "cute" is a term that others use as a descriptor, not one many would choose to describe themselves as, though this is beginning to change. Through looking at contemporary artistic influences and scholarship about societal implications of cuteness, I was able to inform and expand my identity and views on the subject. My art is a way to retake the term by choosing to identify as it, though in a less traditional setting than usual. I strive to portray cute subjects as strong and resilient in a way that contradicts the weak image society projects upon those it deems cute. This is not eliminating the aspects that make the subjects cute, but introducing more elements, such as eczema and ferocity, that add complexity to their character. The exhibition this work culminates in, "Skin-Deep, Baby Doll," is a series of self-portrait lithograph and silkscreen prints that analyze my relationship with cuteness as it has affected me as I have gotten older, with regard to being objectified. My relationship with imperfection through eczema, and the shared infantilization of each of these conditions, is explained. By using my own image, I keep the discourse relevant to my experience and am able to facilitate personal growth from an intimate and unreserved place.

2. Cuteness and Culture

Cuteness is pervasive throughout our culture here in the United States and particularly in Asia. As cuteness is a purely subjective, amorphous concept, it is impossible to define objectively. Opinions of what qualifies as cute vary drastically between people. Though not universal, there are a few characteristics that are generally consistently regarded as cute or adorable, including: youh, femininity, simplicity, malleability, and either the absurdly small or outrageously large. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word cute has been used since 1731, originally serving as an abbreviation for acute, or as a synonym for sharp or quick witted.[1] In *Cuteness Engineering: Designing*

Adorable Products and Services, the authors combine definitions from *The Nichols American Heritage Dictionary of the English Dictionary* and Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* to conclude that "the English word 'cute' means something that draws people's attention sharply in an attractive and emotional way."[2] In *The Cuteness of the Avante Garde,* social theorist Sianne Ngai argues that usage and application of the word cute shifted during the early to mid 20th century "from things to persons, and socially diminutive persons in particular."[3] She notes that the social value of cuteness expanded in tandem, ranging from positive to ambiguous and even potentially negative connotations.

Though we typically associate the word "cute" with positive attributes, such as prettiness or attractiveness, that is not always the case. Daniel Harris, author of *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism,* says cuteness "must by no means be mistaken for the physically appealing, the attractive…," instead he argues that cuteness holds a closer relationship with grotesqueness and emphasizes the pitiable and deformed aspects that make observers care about the cute subjects.[4] This is most commonly achieved through fetishizing weakness, helplessness, vulnerability, ignorance, passivity, and deformities such as large eyes, heads, or exaggerated proportions. Cuteness, then, is often gendered female because of cultural connections of women as both caring and cared for. The aesthetic is marketed toward women for this reason.

While it is necessary to point out these negative societal implications, cuteness also serves some important societal functions, which should not be ignored. It provides a social comfort, and inspires compassion, even when those are done for the wrong reasons or overstep boundaries. Perceiving something as cute elicits an emotional response, even when the reactor is the one projecting the conditions onto the subject.

The relationship between cute as a projection and perception correlate to the English concept of Psycho-physics, the relationship between the physical characteristics of a stimulus and the psychological impressions, sensations or perceptions they elicit. Anything can be made or perceived as cute by juxtaposing it among other stimuli that weaken or exaggerate it. The feelings happening within the observer and their associations with cute and are not necessarily produced from the subject being viewed. Therefore, cuteness is something conceptualized separately from and frequently without the explicit consent of the cute subject. Artists, creators, and marketers can utilize this concept to control how their creations are viewed in the public eye. When the subject has a will – when it is a person or a rendering of a real human being – this process can lead to conflict when a subject is unwillingly fetishized.

One of the more potent and widespread examples of how cuteness can be used to shift the public's view of a subject lies in the history of the teddy bear. Here, cuteness is used to weaken and pacify even a traditionally threatening image. Now a universal symbol of cuteness, teddy bears originated as small, plush, but realistic versions of bears and over time were molded into more simple, rounded shapes. The toys lost their claws and gained a bulbous head with a minimized snout. Now they are caricatures of the thing they were molded after. They were changed from fierce creatures into malleable and soft things with intentions completely opposite from their inspiration. Ngai argues that simplification is an important aspect in creating cuteness and says the aesthetic carries "the look of an object not only formed but all too easily deformed under the pressure of the [observer's] feeling or attitude towards it."[5] She continues that in order for something to be cute, it must lose its complexity and realistic details in favor of simple contours. More specifically, "The more bloblike it is, the cuter it becomes."[6] Christine Yano argues the counterpoint: that anything can be made cute through presentation.[7] In *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek Across the Pacific,* she argues that one chief way to do this is through contrast of cuteness. This is achieved by pairing something that traditionally seems cute with something that is unexpected given the context. I emulate this through my artwork by combining weak or cute girls with dinosaurs in a way that flips their roles.

Taking into account how aesthetics can be used by marketers to garner specific responses to products, authors of "Cute Little Things: The Objectification of Prepubescent Girls," Dr. Elise Holland and Professor Nick Haslam, argue that marketing toward children has become increasingly sexualized as of late. Their article explains that "An analysis of 15 popular U.S. clothing stores found that almost 30% of items targeting preteens contained sexualizing characteristics such as low-cut tops, leopard print miniskirts, and lace dresses."[8] They continue to mention "A content analysis by Boyd and Murnen (2011) [that] found that dolls, popular with 8- to 11-year-olds, displayed more and more sexualized characteristics over time."[9] The attributes referenced include larger lips, eyes, hips and breasts, particularly on fashion dolls. It should be noted that the clothes sold with these dolls feature the same suggestively sexualized designs that were previously mentioned. The inclusion of such elements on items intended for young girls implies cultural expectations for how they should present themselves. This corresponds to Harris's description of how adults reward cute behaviors in children by praising role-playing behaviors like caring for dolls.[10] In conjunction with the above findings, it can be deduced that "in promoting and legitimizing the sexualization of young girls, the media and marketers reinforce the message that a girl's value rests in how she appears to others."[11]

Some of the problems arising from cute objectification include the sexualization of passivity, which can have damaging implications for the self perceptions of young girls who traditionally occupy a role of demureness in society.

Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic says "If cuteness is the aesthetic of deformity and dejection, it is also the aesthetic of sleep. Although adorable things can be bright eyed and bushy tailed, the pose we find cutest of all is not that of a rambunctious infant screaming at the top of his lungs but that of the docile sleepyhead… [the] defenseless immobility."[12] This dehumanizes the cute subjects by putting them in a state of passive non-resistance, a condition craved and prefered by the observers. It panders not only to the observer's desire for comfort, but a desire for control which Ngai would regard as sadistic.[13] "In light of the intense physicality of our response to their helpless turpor, our compulsive groupings even constitute somehing one might call cute sex, or given that one of the partners lies there groggy and catatonic…" the attention becomes smothering when forced upon "...a serenely motionless object incapable of reciprocating."[14] This lack of agency proves concerning not only for those perceived as having a diminutive demeanor, but also for those legally below the age of consent, who are not developed enough to regard their agency in this complexity. Through Holland and Haslam's "Cute Little Things," study a correlation was found that "objectifying perceptions are associated with less sympathetic responses to girls in a bullying scenario. Participants showed less care that sexually objectified girls had been harmed, less favorable attitudes towards helping them, and a greater belief that the girls were responsible for being victimized. Taken together, these findings suggest that the potentially damaging manifestations and consequences of objectification are manifest before girls reach womanhood."[15] While there needs to be more research in this field to draw concrete conclusions, the study strongly suggests a direct relationship to existing research on the negative impacts of objectification in life and the workplace with adult women.

While cuteness can be used as a way to weaken the subject, it can also have positive impacts both on the subjects and on the observers. Doctor of Human Sciences Hiroshi Nittono and his coauthors analyze the positive impacts of cuteness in their study "The Power of Kawaii: Viewing Cute Images Promotes a Careful Behavior and Narrows Attentional Focus." They found a correlation between viewing cute subjects and performing better on tasks measuring motor functions and focus, which indicates that cuteness triggers a positive emotional response as well as an increase in sympathetic actions. Cute subjects can take advantage of the strong feelings fostered by their cuteness as a way to purposefully influence observers. The objects in question are not the only ones who benefit from this information; creators and marketers regularly use cuteness in the marketplace as a means to sell their products. "Advertisers have learned that consumers will "adopt" products that create, frequently through their packaging, an aura of motherlessness, ostracism, and melancholy."[16] Marketers and designers keep this in mind when deciding how to best promote their products or design interfaces. Wentao Wang, Senior User-Experience Designer at Baidu, Beijing, China, said in an interview that even Baidu's slogan - "Connect users and services" - "implies that all products and services are not too cool or too hard-to-get, but are kind and sweet."[17] The point is to generate a sense of familiarity or comfort with their product for user interaction in a way that promotes connection and increased use.

Sometimes, this concept can be used to build an industrial powerhouse and even establish pervasive and significant cultural norms, occasionally out of necessity. Following their involvement with the Axis powers in World War II, Japan was demilitarized, launching the nation into a period of instability and weakening their ability to interact with or influence world affairs. This period is often called the "emasculation" of Japan.[18] Following this fallout, Japan had to try to find ways to rebuild its culture, economy, and status on the world floor. According to American political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want. One can affect others' behavior in three main ways: threats of coercion ("sticks"), inducements and payments ("carrots"), and attraction that makes others want what you want."[19] He coins this third option of luring others to your side as "soft power." Anthropologist Christine Reiko Yano explains that soft power differs from the other types because it is used to "indirectly influence behavior or interests through cultural or ideological means rather than through overt military or economic domination."[20] Along these lines, if a state can make itself seem more acceptable or legitimate to others, it will encounter less resistance and even receive potential support. As a way to attract other nations and generate its own soft power, Japan began making its culture more enticing and less threatening, and therefore more "cute," or, "*kawaii*." The Japanese word *Kawaii* comes from *kawa* (face) - *hayu-shi* (flushing) meaning roughly, "ashamed [of], can't bear to see, feel[ing] pity [for]."[21] This was later modified to a meaning more similar to our contemporary understanding of cute as appealing i.e. "can't leave someone alone, [to] care for."[22] Despite their similarities, *Kawaii* in some ways carries different culturally implicit nuances from the overwhelming use of cuteness in English vocabulary. As expressed by the authors of *Cuteness Engineering*:

> "Kawaii is expressed as a property of an object and can be found in the expression "That baby animal is cute" or "This girl is pretty." On the other hand, emotion is what occurs inside the human being. Thus, such an expression as "I feel happy to see that baby animal" or "I love this girl" is possible, but one doesn't say "I feel kawaii to see that baby animal" or "I feel kawaii towards this girl." Kawaii is an impression "projected" onto the object based on the feeling of a person as if it is a property of the object itself."[23]

Once the aesthetic of kawaii gained international attention, it began proliferating. Japanese cultural leaders intentionally created cultural pastimes that appealed to the masses in order to further this end. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan invented such initiatives as the International Manga Award, 2007, The Anime Ambassador Project, 2008, and the Trend Communicators of Japanese Pop Culture, 2009, – unofficially nicknamed the "*Kawaii* Ambassadors" – a group of three young fashion models: Misako Aoki, Yuu Kimura, and Shizuka Fujioka who were nominated to carry out publicity activities.[24] Japan wanted to generate new fads and obsessions that would keep them relevant and thereby powerful. *Kyarakuta* (character), refers to characters that extend beyond their concrete definitions as cartoon designs and inanimate products, to take on personas that reflect the trends and interests of their social climate and time. This typically applies to icons like Hello Kitty, often seen as the Japanese equivalent of the American Mickey Mouse or Pooh Bear. Yano states that, "Sanrio, the maker of Hello Kitty, always intended this plush toy to be a global figure. Only two years after her "birth" in 1974, she was marketed in the US in 1976, followed by Europe in 1978 and Asia in 1990. This pathway represents the general direction and status hierarchy of global flows and terms of prestige and marketing."[25] Hello Kitty became iconic through her cute appearance: the round orb of her head, her lack of a mouth, and her blank expression. She became a signature of globalism itself, as well as the childrens' consumer culture, and "a broader band of girl culture that more recently includes adult women."[26] The character becomes much like a child's security blanket, accompanying women into the real world.[27] Marketers have inserted Hello Kitty into the loop of consumption, by having older generations pass her on to their children or grandchildren due to their nostalgia and connection to the character. As a result, companies are able to produce the same products across multiple age brackets with success, such as bags or notebooks, and even cater some objects to older audiences, like vacuums and other household products that "create nostalgized play in the real world."[28] Professional women have begun using Hello Kitty as an act of rebellion, by taking notebooks bearing her likeness into board meetings and refusing to cater to traditionally masculine environments. For younger women, they tend to adopt the aesthetic of the characters they are fond of, and then become as cute and adorable as the characters themselves, changing how they are treated. Though Hello Kitty is almost entirely marketed toward women, her iconography targets more than one age group, and many of the women who embrace her do so in a way that makes the character more fierce or powerful.

3. Cuteness in my Life and Development

As most children are, I was generally regarded as "a really cute kid." This was only exaggerated by smaller than average stature and my naturally curly hair. I recall one particular instance when I was at the supermarket with my mother. An elderly woman came up to me and said, "Let me feel your hair," while petting my head. My mom seemed far less concerned by this mild molestation than I thought she should be. Most anywhere we went, people always asked about my "Shirley Temple" curls and wanted to know whether they were real. They fawned over me and called me a miniature of my mother. Being a shy child, I began to reject my curls as an extension of the unwanted attention they garnered me. At the same time, notions of how to carry and present myself were cemented into my character, creating an expectation for myself that I should garner cute attention. Being cute was my specialty.

Figure 1. *Tia*, Tom Ketron

As I was growing up, my family frequented a Chinese restaurant. While there, we would often run into an artist named Tom Ketron who was working on his drawings. Like others, Tom would always comment on my natural curls, saying that my picture belonged in a museum. He called me "beauty queen" and warned about the dangers of the public gaze, saying to my dad, "you better keep the shotgun loaded." I always dreaded seeing him when I was younger. I loved what he could do, but I didn't like the attention he gave me. I thought he was a creepy old man. Later, I would learn that there are creeps in the world, but Tom wasn't one of them. These interactions promoted positive growth in the handling of unfamiliar situations. In 2008, with my parents' permission, Tom drew me, and gifted the portrait (Figure 1) to my family. This instance is significant for two reasons: it is an early occurrence of my physical appearance inviting unwanted (but perhaps not unpositive) attention, and, though I didn't realize at the time, Tom would become one of my greatest artistic influences.

As a Vietnam war veteran, Tom used art to create a divergent world in contrast to the harsh realities of the one in which he lived. Here enters his preference to draw figures, often either self portraits or persons with asian features, in imagined or realistically inspired but abstracted spaces. His use of line to accent the edges of forms is a practice often considered illustrative or cartoon-like by American fine art standards, but stems from a long tradition in eastern cultures, like the National University of Chinese Culture in Taiwan, where Tom studied as one of if not the first American graduate students.[29] His marks uniquely indicate areas of light and shadow through variation of their thicknesses. I emulate this technique in my own work. His works can encompass melancholia and the realistic poses of his subjects suggest that they were likely photographed before being drawn. Most of these captured moments are not entirely contrived; the subject's awareness of their observation does not contradict their performance of typical roles. Tom uses a variety of media to achieve his works, ranging from ballpoint pen drawings to ink wash paintings, sometimes blending different media together in one piece to achieve the desired end effect. This is similar to my process with lithography; I will often render my figures using a hard lithographic crayon, as it allows for more intricate detail and smooth buildup of values than its softer counterparts, in order to achieve extreme control in specific areas like subjects that are more man made. In areas where I depict more natural material I use liquid mediums, either gum arabic applied as a resist to my drawing material, blocking out shapes of lighter value before drawing, or through liquid grease drawing medium called tusche, which is essentially the lithography equivalent of watercolor. This allows me to create a more fluid, moody atmosphere.

Following my early interactions with Tom, my life became more oriented toward artmaking. My works in highschool centered around dramatic fashion. Growing up in a time when Japanese, and later Korean, pop culture was flooding into the American media, it began to affect me. Particularly due to anime, I fell in love with small feminine heroines wearing stylish garments, who looked like dolls, but could shock everyone with their power or dramatic personalities that contrasted their appearance. Otherwise beautiful and adorable characters were frequently vulgar, intimidating, angry, or even super strong. I began using clothing in much the same way I saw these characters using it, mixing sparkly, chic Kpop inspired garments with soft, frilly *Lolita* fashion or a particular mode of regarding dress that "is

not limited to the costume, makeup, nail art, and hair style; it is [instead] the entire mental orientation aiming at self-satisfaction."[30] I carried various accessories featuring cute animal characters and darling adornments: a phone case that looked like a plush teddy bear, lunchboxes with cute characters on them, headbands with oversized bows, all to surround myself in the aesthetic I had grown to love and resonate with. It was empowering.

This became difficult when a challenge to my cute identity presented itself: eczema. At any time, nearly half my body would be covered in raw, pink patches of itchy, flaky skin, meeting the clinical definitions for moderate to severe cases. People tend to infantilize eczema, since it is most often associated with or active during youth. When an adult has eczema flares, one may assume that the adult is not taking proper care of themselves and that this irresponsibility accounts for their unusual visage. People often mistake it for sunburn, especially when it afflicts the face across the nose and cheeks, under the eyes, or at the corners of the mouth. According to the Scottish charity Eczema Outreach Support, "the reality for families living with the moderate to severe form of this chronic skin condition (about 20% of sufferers) is shaped by painful flares and constant itch, infections, time consuming treatments, sleepless nights, days off school and work for parents, low confidence and breakdowns. It can also lead to social isolation."[31] People suffering from eczema are ostricized by society despite the fact that it is caused by a genetic predisposition that can fluctuate between periods of particular sensitivity and relative calm. Flare ups are likely in response to different periods of stress and calm in someone's life, or changes in environment through either location, weather conditions, across seasons, changes in diet, lifestyle, and more.

Friends, teachers, and even my general doctors would look at me with veiled disgust and great pity. I tried to cover my skin, in order to maintain the aesthetic value I felt societal pressure to possess. This only made the condition of my skin worse due to reactions to the synthetic clothes I had previously found so enticing for their design. Studies show that "a fifth of children with eczema are bullied at school and 1 in 2 has low self-esteem; there is a sense of desperation and frustration in families with skin disease; 1 in 5 mothers feel like a failure due to eczema; sleep deprivation is linked to anxiety and increased risks of depression."[32] Due to the condition's relationship to diminishment, the deformity it creates and pity it breeds, eczema is "cute," though significantly more empathy goes affected children than adults.

My style has changed significantly out of necessity. Being unable to wear clothes I had grown attached to led to periods of a dislocated sense of self. I wore different silhouettes because of difference in synthetic and natural materials. As I've gotten older, I've adapted my aesthetic to balance cute elements with professionalism and sophistication. In particular, I often flat iron my hair to appear more chic. This strategy diffuses some of the patronizing remarks that I receive as I work toward my educational and professional goals. In American society, it is almost required to separate cuteness from adulthood in order to be taken seriously and avoid stereotyping. My style has mellowed, and I no longer don eccentric daily costume to garner attention. Regardless, the attention still finds me.

4. Other Influential Artists

Kazuhiro Hori is a Japanese artist who analyzes the way women interact with the cute objects and characters they are trained to love. He frequently makes surrealistic paintings of Japanese school girls who are trapped and tortured by stuffed animals. Playthings that are supposed to be cute and cuddly become aggressive, and the objects the girls are supposed to love end up smothering them instead. It turns into a war of cute versus cute, the cute girls versus the "cute" toys. In his artwork, the girls bare melancholic faces as a sign that they have accepted their situation while still revealing traces of emotion through the flushing around their eyes, whether blushing or teary. The girls are bowing to what their identity demands, but feel unsatisfied through its superciciality. In suffering, the female figures are often rendered as helpless and cute, yet grotesque in a way that seeks balance.

Figure 2. *Sanctuary*, Kazuhiro Hori. From Beautiful Bizarre Magazine.
https://beautifulbizarre.net/2019/03/21/kazuhiro-hori-something-is-troubling-in-the-state-of-dessert/

In his piece *Sanctuary*, Hori turns several societal expectations on their heads. The pliable toys become fierce, dominating, harsh, unapproachable, and menacing. The adolescent girl becomes the toy at the whim of the soldiers and the soldiers are the actors manipulating her. The toy soldiers, normally army green, are bubblegum pink. The icing peaks either act as protective turrets, or a prison for the girl to reside in. Being seated is commonly shown as a sign of power or authority, but here it is a sign of weakness as the girl's legs are splayed awkwardly to either side, smearing and shuffling back into the confectionary construction. The oversized teddy bear behind her seems to indicate the corner she is backed into. Amongst the same pile are other, more recognizable plush figures, to the left of the girl a yellow bear, likely Disney's Winnie the Pooh, and to the right an overturned blue and white plush suspected to be Fujiko Fujio's manga/ aime character, Doraemon. In contrast to the previously mentioned point from *Pink Globalization* about characters/*kyarakuta* serving as items of comfort in daily life, they seem here to be in full separation from their imagined persona, simply the vacant and immobile shell, offering no assistance, or any regard at all for that matter. Though the toy soldiers surround the schoolgirl, some appear to have fallen down into the creamy white frosting. It is also possible that these figures are conducting a combat crawl, which is within the parameters of their traditional manufacturing. In this case, all figures aside from the girl can be deemed inanimate by nature. If the student is the only emotionally capable agent in the piece, then perhaps the situation is one of her own construct, where her own fears are reflected through the toys.

Artistically, as well as thematically, Hori serves as an inspiration and role model. This piece, along with some of his others, offers a striking balance of positive and negative space that creates an active composition. He also frames the scene with elements that run off the page and suggest that there is more to the story than what we see, hinting to further complexity. I decided to rework some of these elements in my own work to help communicate my message. In my piece *Scale* (Figure 3), I show myself alongside a Tyrannosaurus Rex, who bleeds off of the page with his immense size. However, unlike Hori, I do not make myself subservient to the figures that I am drawn with, but I become the aggressor, stepping on the dinosaur's tail. A traditionally threatening figure becomes weak and passive, while a traditionally subservient figure becomes dominant. Rather than portraying women as soft, I portray them as fierce. The conceptual relationship to eczema introduced by the title is twofold here, with scale referring both to texture and the metaphorical magnitude of the problem.

Figure 3. *Scale* Tia N. Kuhns

Figure 4. *You know it's not like candy, sweetie*, Ellen Sheidlin. From Beautiful Bizarre Magazine. https://beautifulbizarre.net/2017/08/01/the-cute-and-weird-universe-of-ellen-sheidlin/

Instagram icon Ellen Sheidlin's youthful, doll-like appearance garners her much attention online, mainly because her digitally altered photographs juxtapose her self portrait with strange and often grotesque imagery, including additional limbs, geometric or abrasive textures, animal appendages, and more. Since she lives in conservative Russia, her eccentricity stands out. Her images frequently show her figure in opposition to some other presence. In the work *You know it's not like candy, sweetie* (Figure 4), Sheidlin shows herself, dressed in all pink, trapped within a prize grabber/ claw machine that is also pink. She is crouched, surrounded by shiny wrapped candy, her size in comparison to the space looking uncomfortable. Her hands are pressed against the glass, as her eyes, wide and emphasized, gaze up and out. She wears what look like soft pajamas, and mismatched socks. Her hair is tied in pigtail buns, all marks of childish/juvenileness. Her (impractical) platform shoes are wedged around her. It is uncertain whether the pink is meant to conjure innocence and sweetness or provoke a blushing and enticing notion. Since she is surrounded by candy, her image becomes startlingly consumable, evoking a sense of taste, i.e. sweetness. Though she is confined,

one feels compelled to hug her. The pity, or awkwardness of her situation is endearing. The title suggests an opposition to the idea that she is consumable, or perhaps entices the viewer to think about her that way.

Like Sheidlin, I primarily work through self-portraits in which I manipulate both myself and my surroundings to convey deeper meanings. We share an affinity for fashion within our artwork. An entire element of my exhibit revolves around my image being translated as life-sized paper dolls with clothing specifically designed to represent items which could trigger skin irritation, but are designed to enhance traits that the world imbues upon me. The audience is able to move those clothes and dress me however they please. In this way, both Sheidlin and I represent ourselves as dolls or passive figures for the world to interact with. We emphasize our points through our femininity, visuals and the juxtaposition of our figures with other odd stimuli, such as a giant hand that manipulates me against my will. She is the most significant inspiration for choosing to use my own image to communicate my messages rather than trying to do so through others.

"Artists Trevor Gordon and Josie Vallely endeavour to address the personal impact of eczema, from building safe and dream filled spaces, to expressing imaginative representations that play with the tactile and textural manifestations of the condition."[33] 'Atopic Art: Expressions of Eczema' is a partnership project between ASCUS Art & Science, dermatologist Dr Sara Brown and charity Eczema Outreach Scotland, which culminated in an exhibition called *Beyond Skin*. The artists, having personal experience with eczema, worked with child sufferers with a goal of decreasing stigma. This mission, in conjunction with the participatory and tactile elements of the artworks, inspired the basis of my desire to make pieces that could relate the experience of eczema through more than illustration.

5. Cuteness and Eczema in *Skin-Deep, Baby Doll*

Figure 5. *Skin-Deep, Baby Doll*, Tia N. Kuhns

Through printmaking, multiple reproductions of an image or symbol can be made and integrated into new compositions, making a more cohesive body of work that evolves to form new meanings as the portfolio develops. Frequently, when creating works, I will cut out and rearrange existing elements from past prints to create a better arrangement or to clarify the message of a piece after finding some new insight in my research. In *Skin-Deep, Baby Doll* (Figure 5), the use of an everyday scene is employed; the girl looks into a mirror, but the same symbolic patterning that is found on her skin overwhelms her reflection, or perception of herself, and her figure becomes that of a scaly velociraptor. The image is composed of five separate lithographic prints collaged together. The overwhelming presence of eczema is lightly disguised through the more commonly notable elements, i.e. the figure's delicate posture, elegant clothing and decorative furnishings. This meaning is revealed upon closer inspection of the reflection and consideration of the girl's interaction with her own skin, as well as the similarity between the skin patterning and the background. Though the clothing is fashionable, and may seem sleek, an observer with eczema might note the material to be synthetic, and therefore likely to cause uncomfortable reactions likened to prickly heat rash. While the figure would traditionally be considered cute, she does not see herself as such due to her skin condition, instead seeing herself as another creature. At the same time the rest of the piece embodies cute ornamentation, including the mirror and the bow on the head of the dinosaur. The piece transforms a normally menacing creature into a benign and adorable one,

not by removing any of its menacing characteristics, but by adding new, softer ones like a bow and a smile. Similarly the cuteness of the girl is muted through the introduction of the skin disorder. Being the title piece of the show, this artwork sets up the general problem of integrating eczema with my cute identity.

Sianne Ngai suggests that, "a relationship to a socially disempowered other that actively transforms the speech of the subject [observer] who imposed the aesthetic quality onto that other abett[s] a fantasy of the cute objects retaliation."[34] In this light, if, as previously discussed, cuteness is something that is done to another, the possibility exists for a response from the subject deemed cute. Through my research, the aspect of malleability was clearly asserted as paramount to communicating the nuanced, and messy side of cuteness. In order to convey this, I first created pieces that show a direct physical manipulation with exaggerated, almost caricature like faces responding. This six piece series called *I Bite* (Figures 6 and 7) is conceptualized much like a comic strip, and is intended to humorously assert the necessity for an observer to consider the feelings and will of animate cuties, or face the consequences.

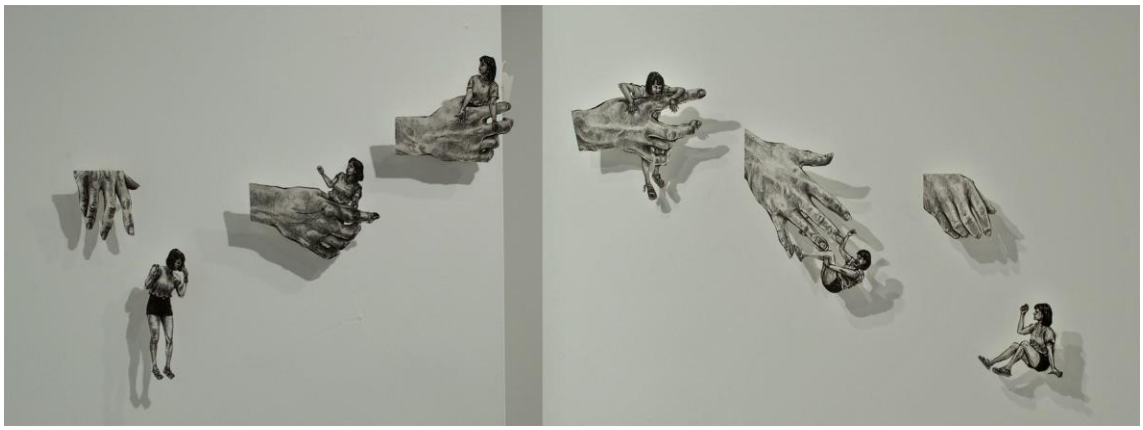

Figure 6. *I Bite* (Series), Tia N. Kuhns

Figure 7. *I Bite* (Detail), Tia N. Kuhns

Although the depiction of a clear physical manipulation was a milestone, the impact still was not satisfying enough. To fully connect with the idea, the participant would need to engage with the elements directly. What could better communicate the connections of both cuteness and eczema to childhood than play? Through the creation of life-size paper dolls (Figure 8) , I draw my audience's direct attention to the nature of their participation with cute subjects. I consciously decided to illustrate the dolls as simpler and more cartoon-like line quality as opposed to realistic rendering to make them more inviting for the audience to interact with. This was inspired by Ngai's points about how objects are simplified to be cute. Dressing a lifelike interpretation of a person covered in red patches is much more intimidating than playing with a cartoon-like representation. The fact that the dolls are life-sized points out the significance of my small stature. Even when hung on the wall, a few inches higher than if I were standing there, many

of the guests were taller than the dolls. Figure 8 demonstrates an emphasis on the difference between me, my work, and others, shown through a taller participant's interaction with the piece.

Deciding how to present the dolls proved a bit more complicated. Many people advised me to leave them as paper, but I wanted a sturdier presentation. Mounting the dolls to wood and sealing them with acrylic resin would give the work presence and make it a more stable performance piece that would show less wear and tear. Participants would be less concerned about breaking or injuring them. The resilience of the dolls reflects the resilience of cute figures; no matter what the world does to us, we are still standing. The dolls themselves are originally clad only in underwear, adding more complexity to the act of clothing them. Is the participant caring for them by clothing them, or is placing a cactus blouse, which represents the effects of polyester on eczema, on a girl with delicate skin worse than leaving her uncovered? The titles of the individual pieces of clothing give insight to the physicality of eczema and its stimuli. The style in the images is a reclamation of garments I cannot wear, but can draw, or draw myself wearing. My own *kyarakuta* appear on the underwear/ pajama shorts. Who does not love dress up?

Figure 8. *Malleable Beings*, Tia N. Kuhns

6. Conclusion

In contemporary culture, visual appearance and social expectations play a major role in everyone's lives. This body of work afforded me the ability to address difficult feelings regarding my self-concept and interactions with others as abstract visual metaphors. My research gave me the ability to effectively understand, support with evidence, and communicate more clearly the relationships and power dynamics that I demonstrated in my artwork. Over the past year, I have been able to apply my research to my creative process, formulating a more solid foundation for further discourse on the perception and intentional usage of aesthetic categories. I am cute, and I feel no need to fight against the descriptors the world has placed upon me. I embrace them, but do so on my own terms and in my own way. Cute should not be limited to being attractive, weak, manipulated, pitiable, or even grotesque, but it can be all that and much more. It can be complex, vicious, striking, and even biting.

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