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Anthony Lepore Finally Joined his Father's Bikini Factory — To Inspire his Art

By Catherine Wagley
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Anthony Lepore's photograph hangs in his father's bikini factory.

Artist Anthony Lepore's new photographs have funny titles: Boobie Loop for an image of a pink bikini strap popping out of a taught expanse of white and pink; Cover Up for an image of striped, see-through swimsuit lining draped over the board where legal notices regarding wages and workers rights are posted. This board hangs in the Lincoln Heights bikini factory that Lepore's grandfather built in 1971.

Lepore's father, Joseph Lepore, who runs the factory now, had at one point hoped his own son would work there someday. And over the past two years, this wish has come true — though not in the way dad expected. Anthony's been making sometimes abstract, sensual photographs using only material found in the factory as his subject.

Some of these images are hanging in François Ghebaly Gallery, in a show called "Bikini Factory." Others hang in the factory itself — a photo of flesh-colored lining piled on a bikini-clad mannequin is mounted to a shelf full of cardboard boxes — as part of "Splash, Glow, Fullflex," curated by Lauren Mackler of alt-art space Public Fiction.

The "Bikini Factory" project began almost by accident. It was late 2012 and Lepore and his partner, artist Michael Henry Hayden, were looking for studio space. They'd been working out of their apartment, then crammed with equipment and material. Lepore asked a friend, photographer Catherine Opie, for advice. "Doesn't your dad have a factory?" Opie said. "Why don't you ask him?"

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Lepore and Hayden deliberated. Would they want to work in close quarters with family and with women Lepore had known since his rambunctious childhood, when he would run through the factory, grabbing at colorful thread?

They decided to ask. At first, Lepore's father hesitated. While he liked the idea of his son in the factory, he said, there wasn't much space. Then, for Christmas, Lepore received a card with a note in it: "Merry Christmas, you can have rows 13-15." Those were three rows still occupied by sewing machines right in the factory's center.

It wasn't so strange for Lepore's father to divide the factory into parcels, as he had been lending rows to former managers so that they could start their own businesses after the once-thriving SoCal swimwear industry began slowing in the 1990s. Raquel, a veteran seamstress, now runs an active business of her own. Recently, a man and his son leased a few rows where they make gay fetish jock straps.

Lepore and Hayden had only weeks to remove the sewing machines from their rows, stack them against a shelving unit and raise walls before factory work resumed in January.

"We'd taken away everyone's horizon line," Lepore says of the square room they'd constructed in the middle of the main workspace. He and Hayden consulted with their new co-workers, then decided to paint the walls two tones of sky blue, providing a different kind of horizon line.

When he first moved into the factory, Lepore was finishing another series, *Nocturnes* — staged domestic scenes that had the crispness of production stills and always incorporated plants, often against pitch-black backdrops. The "Bikini Factory" project had not been his plan. It's just that, once he'd finished *Nocturnes*, his surroundings started to intrigue him.

As an art student, he had done a series of serious-looking, black-and-white photographs of his father, stepmother and brothers with factory workers and their children. Prints of these still hang around the factory, in his father's office, an overtly masculine space that feels as if it's been perfectly preserved since the 1970s, or high on the wall near the ladies' room.

Seeing these earlier photos reminded Lepore of how different an artist he had become. What grabbed him now were not the dramatic scenes of workers posed with machines but the small things — ripples in rolls of fabric — and the contrasts of patterns and stretchy, colorful materials against the pragmatic, dated machines.

"I started manipulating the scene around me," Lepore says. He used leftover fabric — only the same single square foot of material used to create a bikini — when making one group of photographs.

At a certain point, women he'd known since childhood, a few of whom have daughters that now work with them, started to participate. He would come in to work and find they had tossed scrap material over the wall of his studio for him to use.

One late night he decided to try on a bikini himself, because he had no idea how this fabric he'd been working with would feel against skin. It didn't fit. It clung strangely.

Most of the women working in the factory did not have bikini bodies, either. "It's a fantasy and a mundane labor that clashes in this place," he says. "That's what I was trying to figure out: How do I convey my relationship to this space in a photograph?"

So he invited four women to be in a photograph with him. They would stretch out a long sheet of golden nylon that glistened when bent. The women would stand behind, cut out holes for their arms and then stick their arms through, grabbing at bikini straps that Lepore and Hayden would hold. Then they would all be bulging, stretching, pulling and shimmering together.

This photograph went to the Ghebaly show, as did one image of Lepore's father sticking his head through a hole cut into black fabric covered with airy white clouds.

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But it's the open-by-appointment installation at the factory that best gets at the strange intersection of personal history, factory labor and concerns of Lepore as conceptual photographer. A photo of a mannequin, bent over, her rear facing the viewer and covered in the gold eyelets of a wrap-around beach skirt, hangs against the office window. Sometimes, when Lepore's dad is in there, and the vertical blinds are opened, the light coming through the slats echoes the shadows and glints in the photograph. Another minimalist photograph of striped nylon with a pucker near bottom right hangs in the lunch area, amidst oil landscape paintings by Lepore's grandmother and a colorful Virgin Mary icon.

"We wanted photographs that were more abstract," says Mackler, who with Lepore chose the images for the factory show. "They contrast the more literal, functional aesthetic of the factory, making all these kind of poetic inferences of skin, body parts."

She has found fascinating the way the workers and images cohabit. "It's seamless — the photos are just part of the landscape," Mackler says. "I don't know if it would be the same if [factory regulars] didn't know Anthony."

"I think that someone could make work similar to this without a relationship to this space," Lepore says. "But for me it has roots here." Without the story, the work would still convey certain ideas of texture, labor and tenderness. But it exists because of the story.

Often, during weekdays, Lepore's father will come in and sit on the leather couch against the eastern wall of the studio. He understands the hyper-real sculpture work Hayden does, making three-dimensional paintings of doors or windows, better than his son's imagery. Still, he tries to relate. "Love that fabric, son," he'll say.

ANTHONY LEPORE: BIKINI FACTORY | 2245 E. Washington Blvd., downtown | Through June 6 | ghebaly.com

ANTHONY LEPORE: SPLASH, GLOW, FULLFLEX | At the bikini factory, by appointment | Through June 6 | publicfiction.org