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HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Inside a Bikini Factory, a Photographer Plays with Fabric

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LOS ANGELES — For the past two years, Anthony Lepore has been making photographs in his father's bikini factory. Now, some of these works are on view in the exhibition Bikini Factory at François Ghebaly Gallery. Lepore's father inherited the factory from his father, a man who always said that when it came to manufacturing garments, the bikini business had "the most profit for the least amount of fabric." Lepore began spending time there when he was a toddler. By the age of five or six he was visiting every Saturday, in his words, a curious little "maniac," torturing "the ladies" (a few of whom still work there) by playing with their elastics, stretching nylon fabrics as far as they would go, and swinging from racks designed to hold hundreds of bikinis.

The factory lies on the industrial edge of Los Angeles's oldest residential suburb, Lincoln Heights. The building's entrance leads into the community break area, where, on a studio visit, Lepore pointed out a small oil painting by his grandmother, one of many hanging throughout the factory, all signed G. Lepore.



Anthony Lepore, "Window Dressing" (2015), archival pigment print, 40 x 53 in (all images courtesy of the artist and Francois Ghebaly Gallery unless otherwise noted)

The oils show mountains by rivers, trees by rivers, a roiling ocean at sunset, a winter scene, thick with impasto-like brush strokes and saturated colors. Separating the break area from the phalanx of sewing stations is a wall of brown boxes. The words "Cotton Candy," "Snakebite," "Rockstar," "Sport," and "Circus" — the joyous hermeneutics of swimwear — are scrawled in Sharpie across their cardboard faces, indicating the various fabric patterns within.

Lepore moved his studio into the factory in 2012. In the 1990s, after his grandfather passed, the factory downsized yet stayed afloat throughout the decades. With layoffs came space, and, in time, Lepore's father gave the artist and his partner, the painter Michael Henry Hayden, 600 square feet of the factory as a Christmas gift. While the factory was closed, the two artists spent two weeks building a shared studio. It now sits in the middle of the factory, a two-tone blue square of drywall, surrounded on all sides by bolts of fabric, machines, cutting tables, spindles, and thread.

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“All the material in this building repels water except for the towels in the bathroom,” says Lepore, referring to the massive piles and stacked bolts of fabric while standing for a moment among the sewing tables, silent and still after hours. In his series of images made in the factory, the fantasy world of the bikini rushes in with fits and starts — a world of oftentimes awkward-fitting and gravity-defying fabrics. “I felt awful — like a horrible man-monster,” Lepore said about the time he tried on a bikini, alone, one night after months of working on the photographic series. The stretchy, clingy fabric made his body parts bulge and show in strange places; the experience inspired him to make a drawing of bikini fabric taut across a big body, with hands grabbing and pulling at the fabric. This drawing then inspired “The Fitting” (2014), a 16-foot long work that shows several arms poking through holes cut in a brownish gold fabric — what Lepore describes as a “mundane-looking special fabric” — stretched across three panels of a triptych. A layer of pink material peeks out from behind the edges of the brown and pushes through in areas where the pliable fabric is stressed like the blush of blood after a spank.

The metaphors for lycra/nylon qualities come through in many of these works — the tug of elastic pulling against you, while being satisfying to test its limits. In “Gold Cup” (2014), a woman’s breast encased in gold lame and chains — at first abstracted for being upside down — peeks out from under beige fabric clippings that undulate like a sandy landscape.



Anthony Lepore, "Shear" (2014, archival pigment print, 34 x 27 inches)



Anthony Lepore's studio in the bikini factory (image by the artist)

The most disorienting photograph, “Mirage” (2014), depicts what would otherwise be a humble image of a mop — a placid and thin layer of water on a concrete floor, mop halted — with a dizzying, ‘60s reflection of stripes in rainbow hues, cut through with black, white, and metallic gold stripes that are on the verge of being dashed into a watery mess. “Shear” (2014) depicts Lepore’s grandfather’s favorite fabric shears, grasped by a hand behind a layer of bikini-lining fabric that stretches to the frame of the image (a visual pun, says Lepore — “shears” on “sheer fabric”). The image is life-size, putting the viewer right there with the shears, as if you could reach out and take them from the hand. In “The Boss” (2013), the tufted head of a balding man pokes out from under a fabric patterned with planets, moons, stars, and supernovae. Also life-size, the man’s head looks eerily three-dimensional and real. The model is Lepore’s father, the boss of the factory — and might as well be the center of the universe as far as that is concerned.

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Anthony Lepore, "The Boss" (2014), archival pigment print, 34 x 27 inches

Lepore does not use Photoshop manipulation in any of the images described above, and yet many of the Bikini Factory works give a sense of unreality, especially in works such as "Mirage." These images prism out a vision at once absurd and optimistic, while also remaining grounded in good, old-fashioned industrial fortitude. As a child Lepore was entitled to play in the factory; as an adult he is moving things around and reassembling them to his liking. Yet there is a deep-seated respect that Lepore conveys in his Bikini Factory images — an awe for the space. Several images, collectively titled "Factory Chairs" (2014–15), are portraits of single chairs that the employees of the factory have personalized and decorated over the years with cushions, bikini fabric, and straps for both comfort and decoration.

Lepore shot each chair floating in neutral space, like an insect pinned to white velvet, by hanging them one by one on the outside wall of the factory, lit from the side by the setting sun.

According to Lepore, the atmosphere of the bikini factory has always been one of creative possibility, both for him as an artist and according to those who make the bikinis. His relationship with his father's workers is strong — they regularly toss new samples of fabric over the wall of his studio for his use, and they have been models in works such as "The Fitting." All of this comes together as an inspired exploration of a space. The images of Bikini Factory are fun and humorous, revealing a vivid world the viewer will want to get lost in.

Anthony Lepore: Bikini Factory continues at François Ghebaly Gallery (2245 E Washington Blvd., Los Angeles, California) through June 6.