Colleen Wolstenholme, *Iconophobia*

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To be born woman is so know—
—Although they do not talk of it at school—
—That we must labour to be beautiful.
—W. B. YEATS, Adam's Curse

Repression of feelings. Suppression of emotions. These have been with us for generations. In particular, women have been subjected to societal dictates of what is "acceptable" or appropriate behaviour. As children, as girls, we have been told how "nice" girls behave. One cannot be loud, or angry or boisterous. To be any of those things is somehow to repudiate or reject femininity and thus be left open for criticism or public censure.

Colleen WOLSTENHOLME, Iconophobia

Think these are old-hat ideas, things that have already been dealt with by past generations? Think again. Ways of thinking are deeply entrenched within our society and will take more than a few years to change. In 1993 then Prime Minister Kim Campbell was asked about the development of our National Forces during the debate. Her response was "That's not about Women's Issues."

For several years now artist Colleen Wolstenholme has addressed these issues. In particular using the metaphor of antidepressants as her means. Her pharmacologically inspired work has gained attention internationally and has been widely featured in magazines and journals, including Harper's, People, and the London Sunday Times, as well as being reviewed in numerous art magazines and journals. In particular, Wolstenholme looks at how pharmaceuticals have been used to create "acceptable" behaviours and demeanours in women.

Wolstenholme's latest body of work, Iconophobia, continues with her pharmaceutical metaphors but also extends itself to include a greater and more pervasive social critique—something that curator Ivan Jurakic described as a "metaphorical resistance against authoritative power structures..." and as a "...critique of ideological coercion...".

It is no accident either that Wolstenholme incorporates identifiable logos and trademark names in her work. By doing so she investigates the dynamics and relationship of media and self-worth, especially of women. As Naomi Wolfe brought forth in her seminal work The Beauty Myth, women are socialized to want to attain a certain "look" which necessitates spending inordinate amounts of money on things such as make-up, hairstylists, etc. Wolfe and others have pointed that this is done strategically and, as women have become "emancipated" and more powerful and independent within society, that corporations have created a means to keep women poor through consumerism.

This idea has been extended into the realm of SSRIs anti-depressant sales. In a recent report commissioned by the working group, Women and Health Protection, researcher Janet Currie documents the vast increase in the use of SSRIs antidepressants among Canadians. The number of SSRI prescriptions dispensed in Canada went from just under 9 million in 1999 to over 15.5 million by 2003. In her report, entitled The Marketization of Depression: Prescribing SSRI Antidepressants to Women, Currie questions the science behind the drugs and their real-world effectiveness. She draws attention to the serious harms that these drugs can and do cause, as well as to their addictive properties.

Currie also points out that two-thirds of SSRI users are women. "The clinical trial results for SSRIs raise many questions about their effectiveness, and yet hundreds of thousands of Canadian women are being exposed to these potent brain chemicals, sometimes for many, many years despite their many risks and side effects," says Currie. Wolstenholme reminds us of how pervasive the prescribing of medications like this is within our current society.

Wolstenholme posits that this (over)medication is a means of keeping those who do not conform in society and those who are most economically vulnerable (children, women, seniors) in a "managed" and manageable state. Triad reinforces that concept. Rather than using pharmaceuticals in this instance Wolstenholme created three burqa-clad women who are slightly smaller than life-size. The figures are placed in a circular arrangement but are facing away from one another. There is a disconnect between them and their reluctance to look toward each other for support, creating a strong atmosphere of isolation. We cannot help but wonder at the source of isolation. Is it shame? Is it reluctance to admit the need for another's help? Is it fear of breaking out of imposed boundaries and expectations? The figures in Triad are vulnerable and helpless, imprisoned within the plaster folds of their burqas, unable to progress or move. They are incapacitated.

Wolstenholme's work is strong. It is strong in technique and in intention. She takes the "power" of brand names and cultural icons and subverts them, taking from them the meaning that the corporations would like us to associate with them and giving us instead the opportunity to decide for ourselves. —

Colleen WOLSTENHOLME, Iconophobia
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Virginia EICHHORN is the Curator of the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery. She is a board member for both Visual Arts Ontario and the Association for Native Development in Performance and Visual Arts. She has contributed numerous articles to many prestigious Canadian magazines and lives in Kitchener with her husband and three sons.