I dreamed that I was preparing a talk. I was in a large Gothic mansion, an Institute of some kind. While I was outlining the points I wanted to make in my talk, a friend of mine, who is a curator, came up to me and handed me a book. I skimmed through the book and was reminded of a crucial point I wanted to make. On my yellow pad I wrote: "MAPPING THE TERRITORY OF THE UNKNOWN WOMAN."

At first I imagined that the dream was guiding me to investigate what it means to be a woman in this time and place. However, I concluded that that was far too big a task, one that ran the risk of breaking my heart. So, I reoriented myself and took on something more straightforward, namely, what is it like to be a woman in this time and place? That brought me straight to clothes and I just completed a series called “Female Personae” that uses clothing forms to explore that question.
Many pieces in the series are pretty objects made from sinister materials. Women love their clothes and their clothes injure them. I mean actual, not metaphorical, injury. We need not go to distant times and places and witness Isadora Duncan being killed by her trademark drapery, or a courtesan hobbed by bound feet, or a Victorian matron made faint by her strays. At this 21st century moment we can consider the underwire digging into flesh, the platforms you fall off of, the tight jeans that give you an infection.
And still, I love my clothes. The piece “Out of Season” portrays that love—the way in which a dress can capture something about feminine love, the glow of a female kind of light.
A piece like “Strap/yoke/halter/hook”, which sports a skirt decorated with the names of menacing-sounding fashions (choker, stays, stiletto, boning, merry widow, hobble skirt) or “Good Mornin’ Little school Girl”, (in slide #2) which is a sweet little sundress fabricated from escort and massage parlor ads, use rather blatant strategies to show the seductiveness of a persona that injures.
The majority of women who are more or less normally socialized give meticulous, fastidious, sometimes obsessive attention to details of their appearance. The particular details a particular woman focuses on may be influenced by her ethnicity, class, politics, region, religion, race, or they may be quite idiosyncratic. What remains consistent is the pressure to maintain a very specific kind of persona, a persona that acts as a shield against criticism from other women, a prop for self image, an obsessive defense against anxiety, and, in some ways, at some times, an expression of primal and archetypal aspects of femininity.
Female personae are pretty things made of sinister materials. They are a feminine disguise that slowly and surely confuses both the wearer and the beholder as to the nature of the person within. Yet, the seductiveness of Feminine disguise remains largely impervious to this insight. That is the conundrum that my work in the series "Female personae" explores.
Equal Opportunity

The ideal Feminine Persona exaggerates certain female characteristics, such as flawless skin, enhanced breasts, or a tiny waist, while obliterating others, like big hips and thighs or pubic hair. The ideal is, in effect, a feminine disguise and trying to maintain it causes individual women considerable suffering.
When Cotton was King, who was Queen?

However, ancient Goddess images also exaggerate various female attributes and eliminate others, (the Venus of Willendorf, and figures of Ishtar are examples) presenting a distorted but powerful form that evokes the archetypal Feminine. For me this prompts some intriguing questions. In pursuing the exaggerated ideal body type, are women unconsciously pursuing an identification with Goddess imagery?
Pinkwash

Is the power of the archetype part of why the ideal of conventional Beauty has such staying power, despite the impossibility of its demands and the damage it does? In those rare moments when a woman feels she has the perfect outfit, or the perfect hair, does her brief glow of joy spring from satisfied vanity, or is it a touch of the numinous?
The joy we occasionally feel in the Female Persona, that brief glow of appreciation, before we turn our attention to all of our physical shortcomings, is, I think, a joy that comes from making the numinous Feminine concrete and manifest, in a culture that makes little room for it. Such moments are easily destroyed because they take place within a cultural paradox. They always recur because they touch on something archetypal, that presses for expression. Of course, any individual woman who tries to embody the archetype will court inflation or disintegration. We cannot get our personae exactly right because, in the Western World, Female Personae are partly mythical.