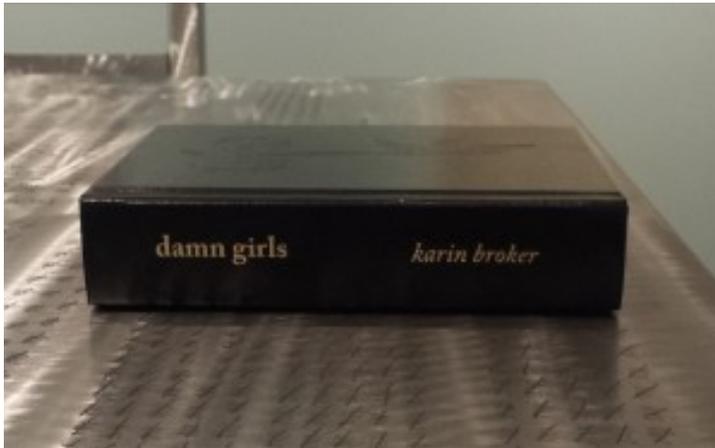


*Glasstire*

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## Karin Broker: Damn Girls at McClain Gallery

May 16th, 2014 – CASEY GREGORY



Karin Broker's drippy bouquets in black and white are right up my alley, aesthetically speaking. In the hushed chambers of McClain Gallery, her conté flowers bloom and wilt like overwrought vanitas paintings. The freshness of Broker's marks belie the painstaking rendering of each petal, not to mention the surfaces themselves, which are covered in thousands of lines of text. But, this isn't a show about

beauty's decay (in a literal sense) or even fabulously painted botanicals. Each painting references a particular theme in the history of women, thus the show's title *damn girls*.

The surface that allows Broker to splish and splash so gorgeously is Formica (the kind paneling every wanna-be June Cleaver's kitchen in the 1950s), and the text on them is her dizzyingly researched premise. In an adjoining room, Broker has included a leather bound volume corresponding to each painting, detailing her research. In the intro to the book titled *Amaryllis Goodbyes*, Broker notes her "apologies to the millions of women who also suffered and were killed because of their gender and their beliefs." Of course, this is one of art's great and historic purposes: memorialization. The women represented by these flowers, or perhaps to whom the flowers are dedicated, were each considered a "thorn" in someone's side during their lifetimes. There are trailblazers and torture victims, martyrs and unsung heroes.





The gesture of extending a bouquet to women lost and forgotten is a lovely one, but Broker's iconography becomes dated in parts of the exhibition. Part of Broker's show is an installation with an etched steel table and chairs, several collages and a foreboding steel monolith with an antique clothes iron attached to a chain. The iron, the Formica, and some of the mid-century advertising Broker uses in her collaged pieces don't speak to contemporary feminism's issues. While the chained iron may reference a specific event (she has included the names of the three Cleveland kidnapping victims freed in 2013), that isn't evident upon first viewing. Being tethered to housework seems a far less relevant problem today than the continuing objectification of the female body (and women's complicity in this via selfies, the "thigh gap" craze, etc) or persistent male/female wage discrepancies. But, just as any artist, Broker is making work from her own experience, and the very fact that I find myself in these existential woods after

viewing the pieces is a testament to their provocative nature.

So here is the conflict: the adverts featuring cutely-coiffed housewives in high heels seem laughably quaint. But there are lingering, pervasive and menacing problems facing women now. Broker's work simultaneously mourns and celebrates marginalized or persecuted figures from the past, but what solutions are offered to present-day feminists? How can we avoid having to be memorialized someday?

