

# Rebecca Peel



Interview by  
**Alex Bienstock**

Rebecca Peel (b. 1990, Colorado, US) is an artist, writer, and curator living between Portland, OR and New York, NY. She received her BFA from Pacific Northwest College of Art in 2013. Rebecca founded Amur Initiatives Media and Research Group in 2013, and has most recently exhibited her personal work in Jackson, Portland, Toronto, Columbus, San Francisco, and New York City. Recent exhibitions include a two-person show at Holiday Forever in Jackson, a solo show with Kimberly-Klark in Queens, and an upcoming group show at Midwestern Society for Arts & Crafts in Detroit. Additionally, she has self-published three books of poetry to date.



*What kind of work were you most interested in at college and what were you making while you were there?*

I guess at the time I was sort of interested in bringing aspects of modernism up to speed with where capitalism was and trying to see if I could get them to acknowledge each other in the work. So, for example, making some Haim Steinbach homage shelves and maybe a Judd-style sculpture but using them, quite literally, as display units - attempting as best as I could to point out that when you Google something like "shelf artist" neither of those two people come up but instead, very slick advertisements for similar-looking but drastically more dystopian items on Etsy or Pinterest or what have you.

In a secondary iteration of my thesis I had two rather monolithic objects in the space, one vertical and one horizontal, that I think more successfully communicated the sense of dread and feelings of disquiet that I often experience passing through areas of urbania that seem to have achieved the highest expression of flawless capitalism, like the shopping malls amidst the financial districts of any given American city.



Was this kind of work coming from a more objective interest or would you say it was an emotional critique?

Objectively, I was interested in what early modernism couldn't have possibly anticipated for itself, which was that eventually the formal aspects that made it emotionally effective to begin with would be opportunistically utilized by institutions selling all arrays of common goods, from bath towels to Prada bags to Christmas ornaments. So I suppose it's both - there was some very dark irony embedded in there that I wanted to encourage to the surface, to hold a mirror to maybe, because it seems like the driest, most procedural form of emotional manipulation, which we all somewhat seamlessly engage with and indulge in.

After thinking about this and after school, did you have a complicated relationship with wanting a conventional

artistic career? Would you say you developed a strategy of sorts?

Certainly I've had a complicated relationship with wanting a conventional artistic career. Maybe it has to do with having a complicated relationship to convention in general. I think I'm too involuntarily critical of the mechanisms of the for-profit art world to do what's required to have a lucrative selling career. Whenever I'm making any kind of work, there's always an impish inquiry, "What do people want? What are they expecting?" And then, almost reflexively, I look for a way to jar those expectations. I hate to say that I'm stubborn but I think, more than anything, I would feel dissatisfied if people weren't a little confused and maybe off-put by a lack of total clarity or ease of purchase in the objects. If you seek to understand the decisions I make, and to look at the origins of the materials, then I feel that I can trust you, and that's ultimately why I do anything. Not for money, but maybe towards what I see as necessary voices of institutional antagonism.



With this in mind you've still, at a relatively young age, been quite visible in certain parts of the art scene and some people with space and facilities trust you. How has it been, as a female identifying artist navigating these cultural networks?

You know, it wasn't until fairly recently that I was able to swallow the fact that gender might have anything to do with my trajectory as an artist. I suppose I've had some low-key visibility, but always and only with smaller project spaces and artist-run exhibitions, which has caused me to contemplate convention, again - perhaps because I'm not, like, fully and explicitly female-identifying, and don't make work that's particularly related to the feminine experience, that my perspective isn't easily employable by some larger institutions. This is a very vague conjecture, and without getting into murky territory, I will say that the most success and positive response to my work has been when there's been something "pretty" about it. I guess a lot of people like art for its beauty, and beauty is still very traditionally associated with the feminine. People see me as female-identifying for all the reasons they should - long hair, breasts, a cis-sexual navigation of the world, etc. - but seem to be surprised that I and the work I make seem to be somewhat less gendered. On any given day I typically feel very androgynous and that in itself is something that seems important to take heed of. Gender, I think, in addition to being a gradient, can also fluctuate day-to-day and hour-to-hour. Women it seems, whether cis or trans or non-binary, are wont to be pigeonholed as such and it'd be nice if that pressure could ease up some.



It's true that from what I've known about your work, it isn't explicitly dealing with gender but there are some undeniable signs that may point a certain way, until maybe very recently. You have done all sorts of work, but you are no stranger to objects and sometimes a minimal presentation or neglecting "craft". Do you find that sometimes this kind of work takes a certain amount of gumption that can be more difficult for the assumed female-identifying artist?

The neglect of craft, whether intentional or incidental, is something that for better or worse I'm pretty committed to. I've noticed, or maybe perceived, that people are generally willing to extend more leniency and charity to that kind of disregard for conventions if the artist is a man. It seems exceedingly typical to scrutinize a woman's capabilities and question whether what's presented was the result of bold decision making or actual ineptitude, but I think the more accurate reality is that everyone, man or woman, often happens upon things by accident and moves with it towards results that satisfy them. The work I've made that appears maybe more feminine was probably being made during a time when I was embracing femininity more fully, hopefully because it felt good for me to but likely also because I was younger and felt more pressure to do so. Now potentially a little more mature and confident, I really don't give much of a shit which way it's read, because I live in the middle of nowhere and see hardly anybody and have maybe, on some level, finally managed to circumnavigate those pressures. Also, I made a shift recently in my commitment to writing maybe taking a little more priority over visual art making, which has introduced a real refreshing balance to my practice, overall.

