

Damn Control: Colleen Wolstenholme's Sculpture of Resistance

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Colleen Wolstenholme, *Prozac* (bracelet),
2002. 14K white gold. Courtesy of the
artist and Galerie Art Mür.



Throughout her career, sculptor Colleen Wolstenholme has made her subject the systems that exert control over individuals. More specifically, the Nova Scotia-based sculptor is interested in the instruments through which that control is manifested, and the effects of such control on individuals. As a feminist who came of age in the 1990s, the system most often under her scrutiny has been the patriarchy and its efforts to control women, and how women have responded, whether with resistance or acquiescence. How women are represented, and in turn, how they represent themselves, has led her to look at pornography and at fashion – whether couture or religious ‘uniforms.’ How the pharmaceutical industry targets women, for instance, was an early and persistent interest. Not content to just examine the spheres of pharmaceuticals and medicine, religion and fashion, she has applied her critical approach to the efforts of control and manipulation the art world exerts. Acutely sensitive to attempts to influence, she has resisted going under for three decades.

Back in the 1980s, media critic Neil Postman theorized that our culture was “amusing itself to death.” We were all, he argued, under the influence of a medium—television—that provided content, which was often irrelevant and benign. He wrote in his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, that, “the best things on television are its junk, and no one and nothing is seriously threatened by it.” For Postman the problem was that it was delivered in a manner that was an existential threat to our existence as a society. The problem, he argued, was the medium, not the message. Like religion, which Karl Marx famously described as the “opium of the people,” television transforms us through how it makes us perceive, rather than through what we perceive by it. Both systems affect the “doors of perception,” and it is a matter of perspective, I suppose, whether those doors are opened or closed by them.

And then there's today, where the “opium of the people” is, well, opium, or opiates, produced by multi-national corporations, delivered by a massive civil infrastructure, and disseminated by prescription, and it is this system that has attracted Colleen Wolstenholme's attention. The opiate epidemic is unique, in a way, because it is fuelled by legal drugs, albeit often distributed illegally. But most of the pills and powders out there began as legally prescribed remedies. The system of controls has slipped, or, as some would argue, has been loosed.

The ubiquity of legal drug use among young women, specifically drugs aimed at their brains, first became apparent to Colleen Wolstenholme in the mid-1990s, when, as she has described, she realized that most of the women she knew, herself included, were

medicated. Her response was to start making silver and gold casts of these pills, ‘charms’ to be worn publicly, bringing into the open what had been hidden.

Wolstenholme, who studied fine art at NSCAD and then did an MFA in jewellery at the State University of New York in New Paltz, has always used jewellery in conjunction with sculpture, and approaches it critically. In 1998 she travelled with the music festival Lilith Fair, the brainchild of her childhood friend, singer Sara McLachlan. Wolstenholme's pill jewellery became a kind of membership badge for the artists and support staff who made this iconic, women performers only, concert series an icon of 90s pop culture. Cast from pharmaceuticals such as Valium, Xanax, Prozac, Buspar and Dexedrine, Wolstenholme's jewellery was featured on the cover of *Psychology Today* and in the pages of *The Guardian* and the *LA Times*, as well as in more traditional venues for artwork such as *C Magazine* and *Border Crossings*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, her line of work led to efforts to curtail it with cease and desist letters and other legal manoeuvrings. Threats of lawsuits from large multi-nationals lent her work certain outlaw credibility, and eventually the letters stopped coming. They never had the desired effect of regulating her behaviour—Wolstenholme has been making, and selling, silver and gold pill jewellery for the past twenty years.

In the late 1990s she began her now iconic series of large-scale pill sculptures, first carved out of plaster, such as *Valium* and *Xanax 2mg*, and then cast in bronze. Her pills, pristine, clean and beautiful, were also carefully calculated affronts to certain ideas about sculpture—to the minimalist-conceptual school of NSCAD sculpture, from which she had emerged. However, pills, as subjects, were never the sole aim of these works. Like General Idea's pill works from the early 90s (such as *Placebo* and *Pharmacopeia*), or Damian Hirst's *Pharmacy* from the mid-90s and his later works using pills as imagery, Wolstenholme's use of pills was politically motivated. These charged objects were chosen for representation because of their power to provoke. Each specific provocation was different for all of these artists, but familiar forms of medication served them all.

The object of Wolstenholme's critically engaged probing was, and remains, the oppression of women (both by exterior systems and inner habituations, by their own acceptance of the systems that oppress them). Drugs, in Wolstenholme's oeuvre, are as much a symptom as a cure. Despite what may appear to be a wide-ranging sphere of interest and media (jewellery, sculpture, painting, collage, fabric, electronics), her focus is always intensely narrowed down.



Colleen Wolstenholme, *Charmed* (bracelet),
1997. Sterling silver, diameter of 18 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Art Mür.



Colleen Wolstenholme, *Spill*, 2003. Plaster, 48 x 30 x 23 cm (23 elements)/23 x 41 x 41 cm (3 elements). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Art Mür.

Wolstenholme is not a post-feminist, she does not believe that the necessary work of liberation has been completed. On the contrary, she contends, with good reason, that women remain under the influence of the patriarchy. As a result, her subjects are the systems and habits that keep that control in place. Women are prescribed mood-altering drugs – anti-depressants in particular – at a far greater rate than men. Women around the world are subject to rules and conventions that govern their behaviour, from religious laws to ideas about decorum. Pornography continues to twist human sexuality, imposing unrealistic expectations of looks, behaviour and acquiescence on women. All of this needs to be acknowledged in order to be countered.

Her series of camouflage paintings and shrouded figures of the 2000s directly examined the coercion of women through prescribed methods of dress: the habits of nuns and the burkas of certain Muslim communities. In her figurative sculptures, for instance, the women are depicted at two-thirds life size, two thirds being the equivalent value of women to men under certain forms of sharia law. The ambiguities here, that many of the women so attired are doing so willingly, were not missed by Wolstenholme. Culture itself is a system that exerts influence upon us, through our languages, our habits, our beliefs.

We are all under the influence, under many influences, and a thread that runs through them all is control, whether that control is called manners, culture or coercion.

In her newest work Wolstenholme is looking at the brain, specifically at an artistic mapping of the synapses and the impact of controls on the functions of the mind; and simultaneously at the environment, at the very large systems such as weather fronts and the earth's electromagnetic field that environmentalist and philosopher Timothy Morton terms hyperobjects. What influences them, and how that influence filters down to individuals is at the heart of her new research. Her drawings of weather systems and her large electronic sculptures of the structure of the brain and its neural activity both strive to make sense of how the individual is buffeted by forces that they cannot control, and how one remains autonomous in the face of such pressures.

As the artist says, "I am using form to try to elucidate objects and systems that are invisible to the naked eye but are nonetheless there and have huge influences on our lives." Her work over the past three decades represents a remarkable effort at exposing the influences that exert so much control over society, particularly over women's lives.



Colleen Wolstenholme, *Xanax 2MG and Dilaudid*, 2011. Bronze. Courtesy of the artist.

Damn control, Wolstenholme's work contends—resists even that which seems beneficial. Flirting with anarchy, perhaps, but then one can resist, and still comply, one can concede, while still disagreeing. Nietzsche contended that the aesthetic was a “species of intoxication,” a release of control. In *damning control*, Wolstenholme is attempting to cut through the fog to articulate a new vision for individual autonomy, within that species of intoxication called aesthetic activity.

Power, particularly that species of power called the patriarchy, is akin to the notion of the hyperobject—a thing so vast that we cannot see it in its entirety, cannot perceive it, only its effects, and in fact can barely conceive of it as a thing at all. Like a drug, the effects of power alter our consciousness and may impair our reason. But the effect does not wear off, and there is no ‘coming down.’ Instead, as Wolstenholme's work eloquently insists, there is resistance, however futile it may seem.

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