

Elaine Speirs

Elaine Speirs is an artist of the beautiful, the ethereal, the feminine and the elegant - yet her works have a vibrancy and energetic strength that underlies that which may be otherwise seen as passive, creating an air of resilience, agency and intent. Her female figures are the embodiment of grace, but they are not simply objects of aesthetic pleasure - beyond the mask there is a fierce sense of self and purpose in these women, a testament to all of the positive feminine influences in the artist's own life.

Speirs' upcoming work centres on Victorian corsetry and the politics of dress through history - circling around the idea of the corset as a metaphorical cage, imposed upon women by society to dilute their power, influence and independence. The corset historically served to primarily appeal to the male gaze, its purpose to 'furnish woman with a method of heightening at once her two chief secondary sexual characteristics, the bosom above and the hips and buttocks below,'¹ essentially using pain and contortion for the benefit of aesthetic pleasure to active observers. However, the corset also had a more emotional function, with many in the Victorian era believing that the wearing of a restrictive corset served as 'evidence of a well disciplined mind and well regulated feelings,' essentially a way to 'arrest the potentially unruly and recalcitrant female mind.'² This speaks to a repression not only of the naturally occurring contours of the female body, but also to the repression of the woman in both self, mind and societal input.

The rigidity of the whalebone corsets served as a mirror, reflecting back the immovable place within society, the constricted role played by the Victorian woman. Speirs notes, 'I want to highlight the disquiet that was woven through women's garments by the postures, structures of the dresses and the materials used. They look beautiful but the corset holds up and supports the wearer, while also restricting and constricting. It highlights the female form, but uncomfortably, which is something women continue to grapple with today.' Speirs seeks to show the juxtaposition between pain and beauty endured by women. The corset serves to highlight form, curves and femininity, but at what cost?

¹ H.H. Ellis, *Studies in The Psychology of Sex: Sexual Selection in Man*, F.A. Davis and Co., Philadelphia, 1918, p. 172.

² Leigh Summers, *Bound To Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*, Berg Publishing, Oxford/New York, 2001, p. 5.

This idea that there is something lurking beneath the surface, straining for release from tight bonds is one that is perpetuated through the artworks in this collection. Speirs' compositions centre around female figures as their focal point, shown demurely and peacefully, in a sense completely unaware that they are being viewed by us, the voyeuristic viewing audience. While these women may seem tranquil, calm and measured in their serene faces and graceful posing, the world around them bursts into a symphony of movement and colour, allowing their true form to emerge in bold and vibrant strokes. Speirs seeks to show how outstanding, stoic and tenacious women are, how much they bear, whilst having to rise to expectations pressed upon them by societal demands.

In works such as *Eulogy*, the women carry flowers, historically symbols of delicateness and soft beauty, their clothes are bedecked with frills and lace. Their faces are in sharp focus, drawing the viewer in, affirming their own identity. While they are intended to be kept rigid and contained by society's metaphorical corset (and indeed their physical bodices), they cannot simply be reduced to this - the colours and bold brushstrokes that spill from their bodies are triumphant and exuberant. Similarly in works such as *The Vow* and *The Audience*, the spirit within the figures seems to bleed out from their place on the canvas, all-consuming, all-encompassing, flooding the tranquil scene around them with vibrancy and life.

Elaine Speirs' works are a testament to this: while the body can be contained, while the physical can be repressed and tightly bound in rope, or ribbon, or bone, or cord - the life, the essence of being, the fiery spirit within these women can no longer be contained. They wear their strength and vivacity proudly, they exude the very vigour and resolve which was so desperately sought to hide. They have unbound the bodice, and circumvented the conventional corset.