

Statement Piece:
Examining Alleles' Studios Prosthetic Covers as Aesthetic Activism

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Prosthetic¹ design- like many prized examples of innovation- blossomed in the rubble of war. The first recorded use of a prosthetic limb was by a Roman general, and a soldier in the Civil War created the first iteration of modern lower half prosthesis.² But it was not until after World War II that the Department of Defence (DoD) invested significant funding towards improving a design structure created decades earlier. The pursuit to create a completely integrated artificial limb was simply an offshoot of the fundamental goal of creating a completely re-integrated soldier.³ After the Vietnam War, the DoD increasingly involved soldiers in the design process to better achieve this objective. This new perspective leads to unheard of variety of choice in prosthetics rather than one for all occasions. Appreciation for this shift was expressed by one soldier involved in the project,, General Carberry, who “ [compared] the limb to a suit... classifying the limb, he wore changeable, variable technology, one that a man might select depending on subjective ideas of comfort, fit, and function.”⁴ However, the shackles of normality constrained even this variation. That is to say, the designers tailored the ‘suit’ to fit a specific demographic: male veterans. By this analogy, prosthetics become another component of a concerted effort to “correlate the male American worker with qualities of a certain brand of normative masculinity; independence, reliability, efficiency, resiliency.”⁵ A suitable prosthesis is thus one that keeps the amputee moving and unseen; it performs as unobtrusively and pragmatically as the person to whom it is attached.

¹ Prostheses are commonly defined as as an artificial device that replaces a missing body part.

² Ott, Katherine. “Prosthetics.” In *Keywords for Disability Studies*, edited by Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, 140-43, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 140.

³ Bess Williamson, *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 17.

⁴ Williamson, *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design*, 30.

⁵ Le Cobusier, *Le Modulor and Modulor 2*, trans. Peter De Francia and Anna Bostock (Basel: Birkhäuser Architecture, 2000) .

Under this framework, Alleles Studios' prosthetic covers design fails gleefully. The Nouveau leg cover demands your attention. The colors- the bubble gum pink background and gold embellishments- are bright, contrasting, and engaging. (Figure 1) The golden flora illustration wraps around the calf and tucks beneath the knee, creating a scenic route for your eyes to travel. Although Alleles, founded in 2015, makes the covers out of ABS plastic⁶ the Nouveau shimmers as if made from a precious material. It is ostentatious, feminine, and excessive. The Nouveau is tailor-made, but it is more comparable to a ball gown than a suit. Alleles' innovation lies within these frills, and sparkles- this hypervisibility.

Alleles Studios' leg covers carry the weight of society's stare with grace. They reclaim this gaze, drawing your eyes towards the amputee, rather than away. The leg cover is beautiful and eye-catching. In a word: desirable. This undeniable appeal is revolutionary in a culture where "the disabled body represents the undesirable...a threat to the wholeness of the self."⁷ The flamboyance of the Nouveau leg case is subversive in a world where it was once illegal in some countries for 'deformed' people to be in public.⁸ Visibility is reserved for those who the suit of normality fits like a glove; those allowed the privilege of beauty. Said 'privilege' is deemed excessive for disabled people, often on a systematic level. Anita Perr, Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the New York University Ability Project, states that products often have to "look medical or insurance won't cover them."⁹ This being the case, the Nouveau's rejection of streamlined aesthetics asserts a rejection of the bias that they reinforce. Alleles' frippery is an act of

⁶ ABS plastic is a durable, malleable and low cost thermoplastic polymer.

⁷ Solvang, Per. "The Amputee Body Desired: Beauty Destabilized? Disability Re-valued?" *Sexuality and Disability* 25 (2007): 51.

⁸ Gary L. Albrecht, *Encyclopedia of Disability* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 1575.

⁹ Anita Perr, Interviewed by the author. Digital recording. New York City, NY, July 23, 2019.

rebellion. Wanne McCauley, a Alleles Studio designer, outright states that the company does not design for insurance, prosthetists, or clinicians - they “design for amputees.”¹⁰

And yet, their prosthetic covers are not designed by amputees. Frankly, I find it disappointing that a product which seeks to empower disabled people does not have them at the helm. After all, there is a reason that one of the central principles of human-centered design is collaboration. As Per attests, “a designer still needs to be part of a team because they’re only going to know what’s in their head.”¹¹ In this case, the heads belong to able-bodied individuals who do not have the lived experiences of an amputee.

All designers need to collaborate with the population for whom they are designing. Design is a conversation and a genuinely empowering object amplifies the voices of the unheard within its every fiber. The Department of Defense recognized this philosophy in their direct work with Vietnam veterans. That is not to say, however, that Alleles should be or is seeking to boost the same voice. Far from it, as is evident in their unique aesthetic, Alleles studios seeks to bring an entirely new voice to the dialogue; the voice of someone who does not try to fit into the suit, someone who wants something unabashedly beautiful. In doing so, Alleles allows prosthetics to become objects of admiration imbued with an inherent worth- independent of an established “usefulness.”

The evolution of prosthetics into art forms of their own speaks to a societal shift; a refusal to hide something about yourself solely because it makes people uncomfortable. Beautiful and loud things, like the Nouveau, are vital in this movement. But they would mean nothing without the people wearing them, the people choosing to be seen despite all odds. This ethos is exemplified by Mari

¹⁰ Meera Jagganathan, This duo wants to do for prosthetics what fashion designers did for eyeglasses,” *MarketWatch*, July 6th, 2018.

<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/this-duo-wants-to-do-for-prosthetics-what-fashion-designers-did-for-eyeglasses-2018-07-06-12883815>

¹¹ Perr, Interview by the author, July 23, 2019.

Katayama, a disabled artist whose self portraits play with the audience's gaze on both her body and her prosthetic.¹² In many pieces, such as “ You're Mine #002” (Figure 2), She combines established emblems of beauty, like lace and lingerie, with the supposedly grotesque- her body. In doing so, she showcases how arbitrary the lines between the two are. To change what is perceived as beautiful is to change what is perceived as good. Doing so is a war in and of itself, fought in pink and gold armour.

Images



Figure 1: *The Nouveau prosthetic leg case is shown tilted to the side, surrounded by bright colors and luxurious materials.*

¹² Holly Black, “ Mari Katayama Celebrates the Body Beautiful,” *Elephant*, January 26, 2019, Accessed July 27, 2019. <https://elephant.art/mari-katayama-celebrates-the-body-beautiful/>

Source:

<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/this-duo-wants-to-do-for-prosthetics-what-fashion-designers-did-for-eyeglasses-2018-07-06-12883815>



Figure 2: In her piece, *You're Mine #002*, Katayama sits upright in an embellished bodice. Her amputations are visible and her gaze is steady.

Website: <https://elephant.art/mari-katayama-celebrates-the-body-beautiful/>

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