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Gallery Hopping: Last Chance to See Zoe Buckman's Hardhitting Feminism at Project for Empty Space

By Sarah Cascone

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*Catch Zoe Buckman at the GRAB BACK: Feminist Incubator.*

As the controversy mounts over the legitimacy of corporate-funded feminist statue *The Fearless Girl*, it's worth your time to make a trip to Newark, where British artist Zoe Buckman is showing feminist work that literally packs a punch. "Imprison Her Soft Hand," on view at Newark's Project for Empty Space (PES) is partially inspired by the artist's time in the ring—she's been boxing for years—with sculptures of elegant, lace-trimmed boxing gloves hanging from the ceiling and lining one wall in glass vitrines. It's a surprisingly effective image, an instrument of brute force decked out in the trappings of a bride—Buckman actually sources the fabric from used wedding dresses. "The work is about the ways in our society that patriarchal constructs keep us controlled," she told artnet News at the opening. Work from three other series created over the last five years and all celebrating female empowerment are included in the exhibition, the artist's first to present more than a single body of work. A haunting vintage gynecological chair is complemented by a pedestal covered with speculums, painted a flat, matte, white. Neon sculptures shapes like a chastity belt and ovaries (outfitted with more boxing gloves) cast a warm glow over the gallery, a feminist reclamation of the typical strip club sign. The exhibition title comes from the John Keats poem "Ode on Melancholy," and its lines "Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows/Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave." "When I was 17 years old I started the Romantic poets in school, I'd never been in love and Keats just stole my heart," said Buckman. "As someone gets

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melancholic and depressed, but also experiences joy, that poem particularly spoke to me—it's also very short and I liked that!" As a teenager, Buckman interpreted the "imprison" line as something beautiful and romantic, with the man holding the woman in a loving embrace. "As the years went by, I've been like 'why you gotta imprison her though?'" she admitted. The contrast of the violence of the word imprison and the word soft, as referring to the woman, was a powerful jumping off point. If one theme runs through Buckman's work, it's that a woman doesn't have to be soft to be feminine—why not then, let her rave?



*Installation view, "Zoe Buckman: Imprison Her Soft Hand." Courtesy of BFA.*

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The show is part of PES's GRAB BACK: Feminist Incubator Space, which launched in January, and refers of course, to President Donald Trump's infamous remarks about being able to touch women as he pleased. "We actually had other programming BETHANIEBRADY.COM scheduled for the beginning of this year, and after the travesty of the election we decided to switch things up a bit," explained PES founder

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and director Jasmine Wahi. The Buckman exhibition is the second of four phases for the incubator program, which will run through June. In addition to the exhibition series, which next welcomes Hiba Schahbaz, the incubator space is also home to an ongoing participatory art project, called the Pussy Polaroid Project. PES plans to send all of the photos, in which women pose for a portrait holding up the feminist message of their choosing, to Vice President Mike Pence. As for Buckman, the election has brought with it new opportunities for her work, as she has found herself in the unusual position of having institutions that have previously declined to work with her seeking her out. "I'm like, 'now you hear me,'" she laughed.