

THESIS

A DISOBEDIENT MEDIATION

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## ABSTRACT

### A DISOBEDIENT MEDIATION

Historically within the canon of art, specifically painting, the female form and ultimately female identity was understood in binary terms as being an opposite of the heroic male, conveyed as a commoditized trope of the feminine. There was a disruption to the canon of art in 1968 with the invention of the handheld Sony Portapak camcorder. Many female artists adapted video into their artmaking practice for its ability to become an effective communication medium. In its infancy, the medium of video was not yet dominated by male artists and was not taught in most art institutions. Thus, it represented a medium untainted by the baggage of art history. As a result, experimental video became a feminist medium which offered an alternative form of mediation to subvert the patriarchal artistic canon. Artists have the potential to be researchers of perception and Art can become an agent of mediation to breakdown subjective social orders that cloud our consciousness. My work aims to decode and expose the abstracted systems of femininity and the domestic by using the image processing mediums of video and paint. My paintings and videos unveil multiple emotional states from the same female-identifying psyche in order to examine intimate scenes of self-conflict which have been brought on by obsessive cultural programming. By using uncomfortable representations of the domestic and the figure I also intend to highlight the psychological trauma and disrupt the patriarchal lens that is inherent within the canon of art.

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## CHAPTER I: BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

We all have a personal history which informs our social architecture and permanent parts of our psyche. I grew up in a household with three generations of women in a working-class neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. Observing how my grandmother and mother operated in the world and the challenges my mom had to overcome by being a young single parent not only inspired me but helped me appreciate the challenging work generations of women had to accomplish so that I could have the opportunities that I do today. This upbringing has inspired my academic research, informed my voice as an educator, and clarified my path as a female artist.

As a maker, I operate in a culture that is burdened by the transgressions of the past and the nefarious cultural programming of the present. The old, patriarchal language around ideal femininity has been absorbed into a new, immediate, and inescapable algorithm describing female experience based upon false narratives fed to us through media saturation without regard for the multiple ways that woman-identified persons experience femininity. This algorithm is also deeply woven into gender bias that dictates the status women have within contemporary art discourse. The culturally accepted definition of femininity affects not only how women operate within the canon and art world, but how much value is assigned to the work they make. As a female artist, who's practice involves painting, I have grappled with this baggage while approaching my work, searching for a solution to escape the patriarchal ideology that the medium of paint is chained to.

There was a disruption to the canon of art in 1968 with the invention of the handheld Sony Portapak camcorder.<sup>1</sup> Because of Video's ability to be an effective communication medium, many female artists from different art practices gravitated towards this technology as a new form of art making. In its infancy, this medium was not yet dominated by male artists and was not taught in most art institutions. Thus, it represented a medium untainted by the baggage of art history as well as cinema. As a result, experimental video became a feminist medium which offered an alternative form of mediation to subvert the patriarchal artistic canon.

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<sup>1</sup> S, Jeanjean, Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s: *Video Production by Women's Collectives*. (Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry, 27, 2011 ) 5

## CHAPTER II: FEMINIST ORIGINS OF EXPERIMENTAL VIDEO

During the 1960s and 70s opportunities for female artists to find work in cinema and traditional art making were extremely scarce. Because of this many female makers gravitated towards experimental video as a new form of artistic practice.<sup>2</sup> Carole Roussopoulos was the first recorded female artist in France to purchase the Sony Portapak Camcorder.<sup>3</sup> She studied art history in Paris in the late 1960s and created the first women's video workshop called *Introduction to Video*, which was facilitated out of her home. During this time, she met actor Delphine Seyrig, who was fed up with the lack of innovative roles for women in film. The two of them became the founders of the women's artist collective *Les Femmes Amusement* (women are having fun) which was later changed to *Les Insoumuses* (disobedient muses). *Insoumuses* is a neologism which combines the word "*insoumise*" and "*muse*"

The word *insoumise* was used to describe a disobedient woman in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> The origin of this word has an even deeper, and nefarious, history. Between 1876-1896 major cities in France were filled with industry and factories, which had atrocious working conditions and paid unfair wages to its workers.<sup>5</sup> Prostitution increased exponentially in France during this time because of the lack of work for women; there were between 30,000-120,000 prostitutes.<sup>6</sup> The term coined for an unlicensed prostitute in France was *insoumises*.<sup>7</sup> The appeal of salacious paintings that bordered on the erotic also became very popular in France, as a way to comment on and advertise the profession of prostitution.<sup>8</sup> These paintings were displayed in taverns,

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<sup>2</sup> S, Jeanjean (2011). Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s: Video Production by Women's Collectives. (Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry, 27,) 5

<sup>3</sup> S, Jeanjean (2011). Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s: Video Production by Women's Collectives. (Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry, 27,) 5

<sup>4</sup> Jeanjean, Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s: Video Production by Women's Collectives, 6

<sup>5</sup> S, Eisenman, Nineteenth century art: A critical history. London: (Thames and Hudson, 2020), 402

<sup>6</sup> S, Eisenman, Nineteenth century art: A critical history. London: (Thames and Hudson, 2020), 402

<sup>7</sup> S, Eisenman, Nineteenth century art: A critical history. London: (Thames and Hudson, 2020), 403

<sup>8</sup> S, Eisenman, Nineteenth century art: A critical history. London: (Thames and Hudson, 2020), 403



restaurants, and other public venues. Due to the objectifying images of woman painted by artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec, many men saw working women and prostitutes as indistinguishable and treated them with disdain.<sup>9</sup> Male artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec used prostitutes not only for sex but as their models as well.

The word “*muse*” also has a misogynist connotation referring to female personifications for artistic inspiration. Men were considered the genius and women the inspiration of this artistic genius. Combining the historically tragic word of *insoumise* with the word *muse* was an intentional and strategic choice for a 1970s activist women's collective who was fighting against similar injustices to women a hundred years later.

The uprising of female video collectives also coincided with second-wave feminism. One of the key issues that second wave feminism addressed was the lack of women-led organizations. There was a significant class and gender struggle in France during the 1970s. There were poor working conditions for women, specifically in factories. Early video addressed these working conditions, and other issues such as domestic violence, rape, prostitution, abortion rights, lesbian rights, and female sexuality.<sup>10</sup>

Female, video-based artistic practices grew more popular in the mid 70's and early 80s, not only in France but in other countries like the U.K. and the United States. There was an independent video sector called *Channel Four* that was established in the early 80s in London.<sup>11</sup> This independent production company helped fund the video projects for social groups who had traditionally been underrepresented. This included women collectives, people of color, and the

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<sup>9</sup> S. Eisenman, *Nineteenth century art: A critical history*. London: (Thames and Hudson, 2020), 403

<sup>10</sup> Jeanjean, *Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s: Video Production by Women's Collectives*, 7

<sup>11</sup> Fiona Carson, *Video: Feminist Visual Culture*, (2020), 250

lesbian community. In 1980s The Bracknell's Media Centre at South Hill Park Arts Centre hosted the first *National Festival of Independent Video*.<sup>12</sup> This became an annual event for community-based video art and ran every year until 1988. In 1987 the National Women's video Festival was created in London. It demonstrated a broad scope of women's video work over the last 15 years and covered many topics such as "Sexuality, institutional structures, sport, health, women's history, violence against women".<sup>13</sup> This was funded by the Greater London Arts, The Arts Council, Channel Four and many other video related organizations. These first women's collectives, magazines, and video festivals paved the path for many well-known female video artists.

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<sup>12</sup> Carson, *Video: Feminist Visual Culture*, 250

<sup>13</sup> Carson, *Video: Feminist Visual Culture*, 250

### CHAPTER III: THE PROBLEMS WITH PAINTING

The medium of video is liberated, unburdened by the canon of art, where painting is entrenched in its patriarchy. Female-identifying painters must grapple with being in a professional field that was created and is dominated by men. The literature, academic training, and visual imagery have been taught and shown through a long, historical, and patriarchal lens. Because of these cultural patterns, approaching the medium of paint with female subjects and themes of womanhood requires a simultaneous awareness of both past and present, a stifling negotiation for a female-identifying artist.

Painter and Feminist Scholar Mira Schor smartly states that “the dominant patriarchal ideology presents artistic creativity as a fundamentally male quality, and the dominant images of femininity are male fantasies.”<sup>14</sup> The first phenomenon starts with the gendering of the artistic medium and the artist. Throughout the history of art, the role of the Artist was associated with a supreme male genius, and women (passive object) were seen as the inspiration for this genius. This association is especially true throughout the history of European painting. In the European painting tradition, the painter’s ground or *canvas* was gendered as female. The painter’s ground became a system for ordering and subduing nature or taming the chaos of nature.<sup>15</sup> This reference to nature has been gendered as a feminine trait.

The second phenomenon that Schor points to is the fetishized gender roles of the artist (male) and figure (female). Representations of female figures in painting have lacked their own autonomy and agency and were turned into idealized feminine tropes by being looked at as the

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<sup>14</sup> Mira, Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 55.

<sup>15</sup> Mira, Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 55.

object of the voyeuristic male gaze. For example, the *Rokeby Venus* painted by Diego Velazquez. (Fig 1.) The history of the male gaze comes from the approach many male artists used when working with the female form. Frequently women were reduced to voyeuristic depictions of male fantasies in figurative art practices. Women were referenced not as autonomous subjects but as central objects by being rendered only for their observed sexual beauty, innocence, and nature, and lacked any sense of authentic identity. These traditional notions of how a woman is to be looked at are clearly at odds with my ideas of femininity and womanhood. This deep understanding of the gendering of not only the materiality of paint but also the role between artist and figure is something that I carefully consider while approaching my practice.

The patriarchal ideologies surrounding femininity are a form of cultural abstractization. In Gayatri Spivak's *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* she discusses how abstractization is necessary to the premise of Capitalism. For goods and services to be exchangeable, objects need to be quantifiable under the same abstract form of measurement. This abstractization into what Spivak calls "value-form"<sup>16</sup> is an accepted form of fiction. This system exists because we accept it as absolute truth, not because it is an absolute truth. Although Spivak clearly links abstractization to Capitalism, this abstraction happens in many social systems including within the canon of art.

Spivak states "Now I begin to think also of reproductive heteronormativity, with gender as the first instrument of abstraction, conjuring with sexual difference as its ordinary differential."<sup>17</sup> Spivak points to gender and womanhood as the first tool for the mode of abstraction. If we are informed who we are as women at birth, we will accept these constructs as absolute truths

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<sup>16</sup> Gayatri, Spivak, (2013). *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Gayatri, Spivak, (2013). *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

instead of forming and informing ourselves. This is a conundrum that female-identifying painters often face when exploring themes of femininity within their work. Despite best efforts, they are often doing so from a patriarchal lens because of their cultural programming as women.

Transversely if they deny it all together, they are not allowed agency to express their personal views, and the patriarchal system will continue and be further abstracted. In Laura Mulvey's

*Visual and other Pleasures* she states the following about women in the arts:

One might reach the conclusion that women have escaped the sphere of production only to be absorbed the more entirely by the sphere of consumption, to be captivated by the immediacy of the commodity world no less than men are transfixed by the immediacy of profit... Women mirror the injustice masculine society has inflicted on them-they become increasingly like commodities.<sup>18</sup>

There is certainly a level of truth to this statement within the canon of painting and other historical artistic genres. Mulvey's statement also presents a larger problem for female identifying artists who wish to escape these patriarchal views and pursue their own investigations of contemporary womanhood.

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<sup>18</sup> Laura, Mulvey. (2009). *Visual and other pleasures*. Basingstoke: (Palgrave Macmillan),84

## CHAPTER IV: PAINTING AND VIDEO: A DISOBEDIENT MEDIATION

I have wrestled with not only abstracted ideals of femininity but also the baggage of painting while approaching my practice, searching for a solution to evade the straitjacket of patriarchal ideologies. Despite these ideologies, my love of painting begins at a very primal level. The intuition, time and labor while working with this tactile, luscious medium lends itself well to show my hand as a maker. This labor of using my hands to create visible marks while creating a sense of illusion is especially important to me. Transversely, creating video allows me the freedom to explore multiple, undiscovered translations of my narrative by offering a new digital perception in a time-based medium that is not a part of a patriarchal canon. Although my practice has branched into video, I have not abandoned painting and drawing as a practice, despite their flawed history. In fact, the origins and history of video can provide a disobedient mediation to disrupt the traditional canon of painting.

My paintings are the result of harvesting image stills from manipulated experimental videos that I create. This hybrid form of art making allows me to enter into a new conversation with my imagery with agency so that I can negotiate with the baggage of painting instead of being controlled by it. Rather than dominating the canvas with paint, I first have a dialog with the video. The resulting paintings have an elaborate palimpsest which lends to the ability to expose multiple layers of reality. This layering gives my paintings a sense of movement and time that addresses the contemporary cultural programming of the female psyche.

My multi-disciplinary practice focuses on themes of trauma, feminine performance, identity, and contemporary domesticity. *Spector and Spectator* is the first painting that I created by working from a video still. (Fig 2.) The video compositing created visual distortions attributed

by layering multiple scenes on top of one another. I approach video making as a painter by focusing on light, composition, and color to create a moving narrative. The video editing creates unexpected color combinations and textures that are similar to painting.

Video offers conceptual solutions that painting cannot accomplish. Video creates a circuit between a dialogical program and myself, offers new formal possibilities, and shows how my narratives become more nuanced by becoming time based. After first creating the video, I harvest a still from a compelling moment in the video. The resulting painting creates the illusion of multiple moments in a single space while highlighting the digital references from the video programming. The figural elements that were rendered in the video compositing process present a visual ambiguity in the painting that disrupts the voyeuristic spectacle normally experienced in a painting of a female figure.

My work has been deeply influenced by the history of female video artists and contemporary female artists who embrace alternative mediums of art making. Argentinian-Israeli Video Artist Mika Rottenberg's work focuses on visually pleasing yet disturbing allegories of women operating in fictional capitalistic structures. Rottenberg works with female performers, who in their own world sell their bodily eccentricities online. These models are known for embracing their unconventional body types and commodifying them under their own terms. Rottenberg states that her performers are the "Bearers of production."<sup>19</sup> Her work has a strange dichotomy that ranges from visually seductive to suffocating. Rottenberg states: "There's a plurality to desire that ranges from being liberating to being oppressive. There's this duality."<sup>20</sup> Which is especially true in the 2004 Video titled *Mary's Cherries* (Fig.3).

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<sup>19</sup> Norton, Mika Rottenberg: Easypieces. New York: New Museum, 13

<sup>20</sup> Judith, Hudson (2010). Bomb, No. 113 Mika Rottenberg. Mika Rottenberg, 26

In the video *Mary's Cherries* we see several women operating in a vertical carnivalesque assembly line. The women on the top floor are pedaling bicycles that power lights that grow bright red fingernails on a woman named Mary. This group of women work to transform fingernails into maraschino cherries. Each character possesses an overt feminine aesthetic by wearing deeply saturated makeup and bright colors on their uniforms that recalls a bizarre 1960s factory setting. The eerie industrial noises which are the only sound in the video are juxtaposed against the saccharine red hue of Mary's fingernails. This video comments on the commodification and labor of women and highlights these abstracted capitalistic systems by using vibrant colors, and familiar tactile visual pleasure. In this fictional labor scenario, the women have autonomy and agency over creating this commodification of self, when usually that is not the case.

By choosing to highlight these uncomfortable, fragmented representations of the female form through the mediation of video there is a greater potential to disrupt the spectacle of the female performance. Carole Roussopolos states this about the intention of video vs. other media: "Our purpose is to show that no woman can represent all the other women within any patriarchal government. She can only incarnate the "feminine condition" that oscillates between the necessity to delight (the feminine) and the desire to access power (masculine). No images of television want or can represent us. We explain ourselves with video."<sup>21</sup> I address this sentiment by using historically and ideologically different mediums to create a circuit, and mutually inform each other in my practice.

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<sup>21</sup> Jeanjean, *Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s: Video Production by Women's Collectives*, 11



In my Video *Fracture* (Fig.4) the domestic space feels like a familiar yet disorienting bedroom which cannot be placed in an exact location or moment in time. This strangeness comes from intentional distortions of color, composition, manipulation of speed and by layering multiple moments of the same figure and space on top of each other. This layering allows me to create an emerging dialog between the multiple self-figures. This dialog allows for a new narrative to evolve from my moving imagery. In this video piece I chose two similar video clips and inverted once clip upside down, so it appears that the bed is sliding down from the ceiling, interrupting the viewers sense of balance. The figure, who was laying on the floor, appears to be falling from the ceiling when in reality, they are moving their legs upward. We see another figure attempting to do a handstand onto the wall, while a third figure tries to awkwardly create a bridge position on the bed. Throughout the video there are multiple representations of the same figure interacting with each other. It is unclear if the figures know they are having these interactions with themselves. To the viewer, these interactions could appear transgressive or even violent if it were not for the bright, unnatural colors, speed, and imbalance of the bedroom. This visual ambiguity creates a metaphor for the female psyche and shows how it anxiously operates during multiple moments.

After completing this video, I went through it frame by frame and chose two specific stills to paint from. The painting *Residue* (Fig.5) depicts three self-figures interacting with each other within the bedroom. Figure one is laying on the bed with her leg in the air as she anxiously pulls at her stocking, mimicking a stereotypical feminine performance. Figure two is rendered with a ghostly translucency and is seen aggressively moving through figure one. Figure one's gaze confronts figure two creating palpable tension, which adds to the complexity in the composition. Figure three is upside down appearing to be merging into the wall behind her and

rendered with intentional abstractions that mirror the digital realm. A dialog emerges between the artistic intuition of using the paint body and the technical automation of video that blurs the real and virtual. Like *Mary's Cherries*, I am also intending to disrupt the spectacle of a female performance by using provocative figurative imagery. I do this by using a bright, florescent palate and creating digital glitches with the paint body that mimic and point to the digital realm of video. This intentional rendering creates a visual obscurity that allows me to take control of the frame of the painting, and not give the viewer what they might expect with such symbols as a female figure, a bed, and a bedroom.

In artist Tom Sherman's essay: *Video is a Perceptual Prosthetic* he discusses how video can affect our cognitive preceptive behavior and can be used as a perceptual prosthetic. Video can process the world at electronic speed, which is faster than human perception. He states that "In an era when common-sense perception is programmed and force fed into populations by corporations and government agencies, the prothesis of video is necessary to fill the absence of the independent, individual perceptive reasoning."<sup>22</sup> Painting can also operate as an image processing medium which can offer a new perception. Image processing can occur though both mediums and allow for a fundamental questioning of an aesthetic and conceptual experience. Sherman also states that "video description offers a second, paradoxically more essential version of the world, another version where figure ground relationships are enhanced, where light is seen differently by the camcorders chips."<sup>23</sup> The manipulation of paint can also provide another version of the world. In this case it is done through the handling of the paint body. The manipulation of color and the control of light refraction by how thick or thinly the paint is

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<sup>22</sup> Tom, Sherman (2012). Video is a Perceptual Prosthetic. *Centre for Art Tapes*, 1-16. doi:978-1-927340-02-8

<sup>23</sup> Tom, Sherman (2012). Video is a Perceptual Prosthetic. *Centre for Art Tapes*, 1-16. doi:978-1-927340-02-8

applied. By conflating the inherent qualities of the two mediums in my work, I can further mediate an abstracted sense of reality by altering the viewer's aesthetic experience.

My work operates within this paradigm by using both video and painting to create a noticeable fragmentation within the symbolic ordering of femininity. Mikka Rottenberg also takes advantage of the strength that video has in its relationship with other mediums.

Rottenberg's multidisciplinary practice involves video, sculpture, and installation. Her sculptural work possesses beautifully grotesque qualities which in some instances, touches on the abject. You can see this aesthetic in the brightly colored, alienesque structures she builds for her sets and in the strange and luscious plastic commodities her performers create. Most notably, you can see this in her performers' bodies. Rottenberg's use of video destabilizes the traditional canon of sculpture by creating a new aesthetic reality through the resolution of video. Sculpture, like video, has a theatrical presence because of its grandiose narrative qualities. Rottenberg states: "I work on the videos for a year or two and they contain many, many sculptures. I think of the sculptures in a kinetic, chance-driven way, working with forces like gravity and heat. Also, they're very cinematic, and the cinematic is sculptural."<sup>24</sup> There is a poetic interaction between Rottenberg's sculptural installations and video which conveys a clear and intentional feminist message.

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<sup>24</sup> Norton, Mika Rottenberg: Easypieces. New York: New Museum, 28

## CHAPTER V: THE DOMESTIC AND FEMININITY

The realm of female domestic properness is an example of cultural abstraction. My own personal programming surrounding the domestic and its relationship to femininity started in my youth. As an only child I grew up in a Catholic household and learned quickly how fear and shame operated in the Church and, as a result, with the women in my home. I also learned how to disguise and hide that shame and fear to uncomfortably perform the roles that were expected for my family, men, and culture. The domestic space in my paintings and videos represents an archetype of a functional house with practical rooms. The type of women who commonly inhabit such spaces are behaved and are contained in these rooms.

The most intimate and personal domestic space is the bedroom. The bedroom is a breeding ground for action. It functions as a heightened, emotionally charged space within my work. It recalls notions of the vanity, the veneer of beauty, the objectification of self, the mirroring, and internalizing of feminine performance. The bedroom is where women perform these rituals within their symbolic order. For a woman, the bedroom can also be a place of power and a place of indeterminate growth and reflection. In my work, the representation of the bed is never made. It is unkempt and uncontained. The sheets and bedding are overflowing, intertwined and messy, mirroring the messiness of feminine performance. I focus on this vulnerable space in attempt to expose the abstracted system of femininity to highlight the trauma that it can produce.

Referencing a bedroom in painting and video can produce multiple coded readings, from the overt voyeuristic displays of female sexuality to invoking a nostalgia for our own comfortable personal space. In the video *Fusing* (Fig.6) I chose to focus on multiple moments in this symbolically charged domestic space to question the symbolism of femininity, so I can begin

to dismantle it. The windows, beds and paintings on the wall are overlapped and absorbed into each other. I shift the color from the organic to the synthetic by inverting it, pushing, and pulling the intensity and by lowering the opacity in some moments. The self-figures merge into the bed, walls, windows, and other paintings within the room. There are multiple scenes of conflict with oneself as they disappear into the space that confines them. These figures inhabit the bedroom in a way that conveys an unsettling disturbance of physical and psychological boundaries. This disturbance of these boundaries questions the performance of femininity.

Photographer Francesca Woodman created a similar discordant effect in many of her self-portraits. Woodman interrogates the orderings of femininity and the domestic by placing herself in dilapidated domestic spaces while merging herself into the architecture of abandoned buildings. By using a performative and ritualistic approach to photography, Woodman was able to capture the illusion of figures moving in and out of desolate domestic spaces. Feminist Scholar Jui-Ch'I Lui states that "Woodman's self-images can also be placed around the notion of spatial merging: the merger of her body with the building, the space or the nature she inhabits."<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche theorizes that aesthetics could provide a haunting index of the "precious realities of cultures and inner worlds."<sup>26</sup> By bringing these fractured moments of the domestic to the surface through photography, Woodman is not only talking about a collective truth but also an individual truth. Through Woodman's aesthetic experience we are also acknowledging that these are existential realities that we once created and that rule over us.

Like Woodman, Michael Borremans' also creates haunting images of the domestic where human beings are undistinguishable from lifeless sculptural figures positioned in spaces of silent

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<sup>25</sup> Jui-Ch'I, Lui (2004). Francesca Woodman's self-images: Transforming bodies in the space of femininity. *Woman's Art Journal*, 25

<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, F., & Nietzsche, F. (1967). *The Birth of tragedy*. New York: Vintage Books Knopf, div. of Random House.

despair and insolation. His practice fluctuates between traditional oil painting, drawing, and video.<sup>27</sup> His paintings are either monumental or miniature in scale, with each piece holding a beautiful, thrumming, yet disturbing quality. He uses a traditional, buttery oil painting technique that is reminiscent of the masters. He strategically uses a cold, muted palette that lends an element of strangeness to his work. His oeuvre consists of paintings and drawings that have a highly seductive illusionistic style, and videos that possess a surreal cinematic quality. His work is so beautifully convincing with its illusionistic qualities that you do not immediately notice the uncanny representations he is depicting.

This mode of figural depiction creates an effective vehicle to discuss the darkness of the domestic. In *The Loan* (Fig. 7) we see a woman with her back to us, opposite to a blank wall. She is wearing a black cocktail dress with high heels are noticeably three sizes too big for her. She appears to have a balloon ribbon tied around her neck. The figure is more notable for what she is lacking, a head. She would be a convincing mannequin if it wasn't for how Borremans renders her skin. The ambiguity of life versus lifelessness adds to the tension in the narrative. She is confined to a white piece of paper in the middle of a blank, spacious room, and is unable to move from this space. This special confinement of the figure appears to be to a poetic metaphor for domesticity.

Exploring the realm of provocative visual imagery within the domestic is of particular interest to me. Although I am creating through a female lens, working in the medium of paint while exploring the visual pleasure of womanhood can appear unnecessarily transgressive or perverse, and could mirror the injustices that women have experienced as objects in paintings for

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Borremans [Interview by 1232114278 915226447 D. Coogins]. (n.d.). *Art in America*.

centuries. Mira Schor states: “Women Artists have been impelled to resist visual pleasure in painting, moving from investigations of mark making and from involvement with materials toward a strictly instrumental use of imagery appropriated from other, presumably less lascivious media, or toward working in other media altogether; further, women artists are made to deny the implications of appearance of visual pleasure if and when it occurs in their work despite their best intentional focus on other aspects of work.”<sup>28</sup> One potential solution to this conundrum is to unveil these narratives of femininity and domesticity as fetishized abstractions which were created by an ideological patriarchal language. By doing so we could then recognize that these ideologies were created by us, yet now function outside of us.

In *Rituals* (Fig 8.) I attempt to expose the viewer’s relationship to femininity within a patriarchal construct. I focused on uncomfortable, fractured representations of femininity by using a transgressive female performance that has been visually doubled through the compositing of video. This feminine performance oscillates between naïve innocence and female perversion within a patriarchal construct. These self-figures are doubled and mirrored with solidarity and ephemerality which create a repetition that challenges historical images of women as muse or women as central objects. They offer an oblique glimpse into this patriarchal symbolic order of women as a solidified central object of the male gaze and deny the voyeuristic inspection by introducing visual ambiguity.

In the essay *Nationalism and Imagination* Gayatri Spivak analyzes the abstractization of social systems and offers a path forward to undo these systems. Spivak theorizes that these abstractions are transcendental and states that these ideologies must be detranscendentalized if

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<sup>28</sup> Schor, Mira. *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

we want to escape them.<sup>29</sup> The term transcendental is defined by Kant as being something outside of this world, something noumenal.<sup>30</sup> It is something that is a part of human construction, but it dictates outside of this world. Spivak states that Nationalism is a system that humans have created, and has become part of our unconscious imagination, informing who we are. It has become a fetishized construct that rules over us. Spivak gives the example of our linguistic interpretation of human rights. We need to consider that the way we intellectualize human rights is informed by language. We assume human rights must apply to everyone, when in fact it is the circumstances of our birth that dictate which rights, we will have as humans.<sup>31</sup> The language is cast as equal, but when applied in practice is false. When in practice, human rights is a concept of inequality, not equality. Because human rights do not apply to everyone equally, human rights are a form of abstractization. This is an example of a system that we accept as a collective truth but is part of our collective imagination.

Spivak also unpacks the effect nationalism has on the identity of women. She states: “and to think that the women in gendering have always shared this characteristic with what we, today, have learned to call “Diaspora,” even when it doesn’t have much of a resemblance with what happened so long ago in Alexandria. And yet, metonymized as nothing but a birth-canal, woman is the most primitive instrument of Nationalism.”<sup>32</sup> The patriarchal ideologies that women have absorbed are not an absolute truth, but a human construction that has become transcendental. I believe that one way to recognize and challenge these constructions is through art making. By

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<sup>29</sup> Gayatri, Spivak, (2013). *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>30</sup> Allison, H. E. (2015). *Kant's transcendental deduction: An analytical-historical commentary*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>31</sup> Gayatri, Spivak, (2013). *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Gayatri, Spivak, (2013). *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



recognizing these ideologies as fetishized abstractions through the use of video and paint, I can attempt to detranscendentalize and disrupt these patriarchal ideologies.

There are many examples of how female artists have done this. Video Artist Pipilloti Rist, created a two-dimensional print titled *The Help* (Fig.9). The print is a life-size cutout of the artist herself on fabric.<sup>33</sup> Everything about this print is intentional from the symbolic imagery to the material on which it is printed on that references the domestic space. There is blood dripping down one of her legs that is alluding to menstrual cycles, which seems to mirror the red knee-high sock covering the other leg. The blood running down her leg paired with her halo could also be a symbol of martyrdom.

In *The Help*, we see a familiar female trope, which at first seems to be a common and pleasing figure. Because of her feminine dress, she could be any anonymous housewife or suburban mother. After viewing her more closely, we are confronted with intimate depictions of her body hair and menstrual blood. Rist intentionally punishes the viewer for being initially pleased by showing these overt depictions of the female body. She appropriates patriarchal visual language as a narrative tool to subvert the many tropes womanhood. This piece effectively illustrates a straightforward statement about domesticity.

*The Help* illustrates the struggle of a woman who is forced to negotiate multiple domestic female roles. Rist blurs the lines between these distinct roles into one depiction letting the viewer know that this is not a typical representation of the female form. Rist is aware of how the artist's gaze could change the viewer's perception of the figure and how it affects the identity of the subject. She uses a confronting yet comforting gaze in this piece, which is neither averted nor

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<sup>33</sup> All Editions Pipillotti Rist | "The Help". (n.d.). Pipillotti Rist: "The Help", 2004: (for parkett 71). Retrieved March 05, 2021

distorted. Instead, she is subtly returning the gaze to the viewer. By doing this she is showing the figure is not the spectacle in this piece; perhaps the viewer is. As both subject and artist, she is effectively controlling the composition by both her expression and posture. This control gives the figure both agency and personal identity. Rist successfully executes a mode of figural depiction, which confers on this woman a degree of representational integrity by transgressing patriarchal norms of femininity.

Similar to Rist, I am also interested in using patriarchal ideologies as a tool to disrupt the symbolic visual language of femininity. I was particularly interested in the idea of subverting the visual motif of a flower since it comes up so often within the domestic spaces in my work. The flower is one of the most recognizable symbols of femininity from their so-called vaginal attributes to the images of male fantasies and female beauty. Feminist scholar Elizabeth Mangini states, “the critical stance for a feminist artist is gained by subverting the unitary subject system through doubling.”<sup>34</sup> Doubling is a way to blur gender binaries to subvert the spectacle, leaving the viewer to question the symbolic language they are used to seeing. In the video *Specter and Spectator* (Fig.10), I appropriated imagery of a corpse flower collapsing and dying, distorted it, and sped up the video to give the flower a more phallic appearance. I also worked with a model to take footage of a domestic scene which depicts images of multiple self-figures in a state of conflict. The video questions the visual language of a flower and gender performance by creating a composition that exhibits symbolic masculine and feminine sexual attributes, therefore blurring stereotypical gender roles.

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<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth, Mangini. "Pipilotti's Pickle: Making meaning from the feminine position." *OPAJ: a Journal of Performance and Art* 23, no. 2 (2001) 2

## CHAPTER VI: THE FIGURE AND THE ABJECT

Historically within the canon of art, the female form and ultimately female identity was understood in binary terms as being an opposite of the heroic male, conveyed as a commoditized trope of the feminine. My work references the psychoanalytic theory of the abject to address this symbolic order of femininity. Through both video and painting I attempt to contaminate and break down such abstracted, symbolic orderings of womanhood. For many years I could not identify my own voice as a woman without it being tied to someone else's notion of ideal femininity. My first understandings of female gender performance were through allegories of female innocence, purity and fragility of the Catholic Church and simultaneously through the oversexualized female imagery of MTV pop culture and other media. This conflicting education of womanhood was compounded with childhood trauma which erased any trace of the coveted innocence that was contingent to my value.

According to the psychoanalytical theorist Julia Kristeva the abject is a “psychically charged substance, often imagined, which exists somewhere between subject or person and object or thing. At once alien to us and intimate with us, it exposes the fragility of our boundaries, of the distinctions between what is inside and what is outside.”<sup>35</sup> In the 1980s and 90s there was a trend in artistic discourse with exploring the body through the abject, specifically with how it deals with trauma. Many artists were focusing their practice on figures with wounded and damaged bodies. These bodies bordered on the grotesque exposing a deep intimacy that reflected one’s own fragmented psyche. Many of these works commented on the AIDS epidemic

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<sup>35</sup> Kristeva, Julia. "Powers of horror." (1982)

during the time and were expressing melancholy and mourning of their loved ones.<sup>36</sup> Artists turned towards the abject to work through a trauma or as a way to disrupt subjective social orders.

I am drawn to the abject because it is where symbolic meaning collapses. It is a way for me to approach and disturb conventional orderings of societal constraints. “The abject is what I must get rid of to be an I at all.”<sup>37</sup> Says Kristeva. In my own practice, it is a method of purging psychic trauma through narrative means to reclaim a sense of authentic identity. In *Teetering* (Fig.11), there are multiple self-figures interacting with one another. They are functioning in different moments within the same room. They are attempting to uncomfortably balance on two beds in order to fuse themselves into this domestic space. I see this as a metaphor for the razor thin, tight rope walk of feminine performance and the female psyche. The composition is simultaneously balanced by the figural positioning and colors that create visual harmony, and imbalanced by presenting the viewer with a chaotic and uncomfortable narrative. I focus on using bright, neon colors, especially hot pinks. These thrumming colors are used strategically to reference the digital realm of video and to also point to an anxious female performance. The visual language of the color pink, especially soft pink is often associated with the feminine. I try to bring attention to this color association by intentionally using a hot, neon pink paint which feels synthetic and uneasy.

A canvas and a video can become sites where memory or fantasy can be attempted and can operate as a symbolic working through of traumatic events. In this way my work can become a location where treatment or exorcism can occur. Within the abject there is a general shift

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<sup>35</sup> Kristeva, Julia. "Powers of horror." (1982)

between the conceptions of the real. The body is the primary site of the abject as well, creating a category of a nonbeing as neither subject nor object. Most commonly these representations are of the body being turned inside out. There is a difference between the condition to be abject and the operation to abject. Hal Foster states: "the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between maternal body and paternal law."<sup>38</sup> He later states "The operation to abject is fundamental to the maintenance of subjectivity and society, while the condition to be abject is subversive of both formations."<sup>39</sup>

Pipilotti Rist's video *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (Fig.12) references the operation to abject by creating a disorienting video that has a severe psychological undercurrent about femininity. In this video performance Rist sings the line: *I'm not the girl who misses much*, a reference to the Beatles song, *Happiness is a Warm Gun*. Instead of singing the line: *she's not the girl who misses much*, she changes the "she to I." This subtle yet intentional pronoun shift shows that she is the subject of her representation, not someone else's. The speed of the sound is sped up and slowed in an eerie manor, so her voice fluctuates between cartoon-like and melancholy. In the video, Rist is dressed in a tight black dress with messy hair and makeup. Rist strangely dances with jerky body movements with her breasts intentionally pulled out of her dress. The strange body movements deliberately expose her body and subvert the symbolism of female sexuality. Rist uses deep saturated red and pink lighting with blurred, high contrasted figural imagery, which gives this piece a dark, unsettling feeling. The blurred imagery of the female form is similar to the self-portraits of Francesca Woodman.

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<sup>38</sup> Foster, Hal. "Obscene, abject, traumatic." *October* 78 (1996): 107-124.

<sup>39</sup> Foster, Hal. "Obscene, abject, traumatic." *October* 78 (1996): 107-124.

Woodman's work goes a step further to highlight the disquieting dimensions of the abject. In the photograph *House # 3* (Fig.13) we see Woodman morphing into an old wall with rotting wallpaper. This ghostly figure appears to be moving in a liminal state of existence while merging into this abandoned room. I created a similar effect in the painting *Fractures* (Fig.14) where there are three self-figures dissolving into the paintings on the walls, the bed, and into each other. The boundaries of the bedroom and the figures disappear into "the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me."<sup>40</sup> Kristeva explains that abjection is "an avowal of the death drive, a moment of undoing identity."<sup>41</sup> I address the abject for similar destructive yet creative potential in my practice. Kristeva implies that paternal law is what writes our social order and the abject puts this order in crisis.<sup>42</sup> The figures in my work descend into the abject by creating fractured domestic narratives to intentionally provoke such crisis. Foster also suggests:

There is a third option as well, and that is to reformulate this vocation, to rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde posited outside the symbolic order, but as a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde positioned ambivalently within this order. In this view the goal of the avant-garde is not to break with the symbolic order absolutely (this old dream is dispelled), but to expose it in crisis, to register its points not only of breakdown but of breakthrough, the new possibilities that such a crisis opens up.<sup>43</sup>

I find this method the most compelling for my practice and a potential solution to Spivak's thoughts on abstractization. As a female artist, I operate within this symbolic ordering of womanhood. The narratives I wish to depict must show how nuanced and tangled this symbolic order is and expose the psychological crisis it produces.

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<sup>40</sup> Kristeva, Julia. "Powers of horror." (1982).

<sup>41</sup> Kristeva, Julia. "Powers of horror." (1982).

<sup>42</sup> Kristeva, Julia. "Powers of horror." (1982).

<sup>43</sup> Foster, Hal. "Obscene, abject, traumatic." *October* 78 (1996): 107-124.

## CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

As a woman I am acutely aware of the historical hierarchies that created and now dictate the abstracted construct of femininity. Our social histories, privilege, and gender performances dictate how much agency we have within these suffocating systems. These historical and social hierarchies are now compounded with living in a technological age that produces a new crippling wave of overly saturated cultural programming that distracts us from using our own imagination and voice. These messages intend to inform us who we are supposed to be as woman identifying persons, negating how we truly experience our own femininity. My practice aims to disobey this symbolic order of femininity not only within culture but within the artistic canon.

Artists have the potential to be researchers of perception and Art can become an agent of mediation to breakdown subjective social orders that cloud our consciousness. My work decodes and exposes the abstracted systems of femininity and the domestic by using the image processing mediums of video and paint. My paintings and videos unveil multiple emotional states from the same female-identifying psyche in order to examine intimate scenes of self-conflict which have been brought on by obsessive cultural programming. By using uncomfortable representations of the domestic and the figure I also intend to highlight the psychological trauma and disrupt the patriarchal lens that is inherent within the canon of art.

Working in the mediums of paint and video have enormous potential for my practice. Video can be used not only to reinvent my paintings but can also be used independently to bypass an ideology that does not represent my values as a female artist. Art making, including painting, should constantly be interrogated to challenge the status quo. By merging a historically

patriarchal medium such as painting with experimental video, a medium that has been associated with feminism since its inception, my work aims to do exactly that.





Fig. 1, *Rokeby Venus*, 1647, Diego Velazquez, Oil on Canvas



Fig. 2, *Specter and Spectator*, 2020, Andrea Bagdon, Oil on Canvas



Fig. 3, *Mary's Cherries*, 2004, Mika Rottenberg, Video, <http://www.digiart21.org/art/marys-cherries>





Fig. 4, *Fractures*, 2020, Andrea Bagdon, Video, <https://vimeo.com/465140084>



Fig. 5, *Residue*, 2020, Andrea Bagdon, Oil on Canvas



Fig. 6, *Fusing*, 2021, Andrea Bagdon, Video



Fig. 7, *The Loan*, 2011, Michael Borremans, Oil on Canvas





Fig. 8, *Rituals*, 2020, Andrea Bagdon, Oil on Canvas





Fig. 9, *The Help*, 2004, Pipilotti Rist, Print on Fabric



Fig. 10, *Specter and Spectator*, 2019, Andrea Bagdon, Video, <https://vimeo.com/378002533>



Fig. 11, *Teetering*, 2020, Andrea Bagdon, Oil on Canvas



Fig. 12, *I'm not the Girl who Misses Much*, 1986, Pipilotti Rist, Video





Fig.13, *House #3*, 1976, Francesca Woodman, Photograph



Fig. 14, Fractures, 2021, Andrea Bagdon, Oil on Canvas

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