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Reflections on Sexuality, Sensuality, and Painting

Loie Hollowell

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Reflections on Sexuality, Sensuality, and Painting

A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the Department of Painting and Printmaking at the
School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Loie Hollowell

Christine Gray, Committee Chair
Javier Tapia, Thesis Advisor, Committee Member
Holly Morrison, Committee Member

Virginia Commonwealth University
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Thesis Abstract

The written component of my thesis will take the form of an extended artist statement in which I discuss all six paintings included in my thesis exhibition. A major theme of my work is sexuality, specifically female sexuality. This thesis will begin by looking at the three miniature paintings that spearheaded the investigation of this theme. I will examine the generalized and personal feminist symbolism that these paintings contain. The two works that followed the miniatures are depictions of sexual interactions between my husband and myself. I will explain the significance of my depictions and relate them to the work of contemporary painters who deal with the same subject matter. The last painting in this series is a seven by eight foot landscape. I will explain how it relates to my figurative work and why nature has a constant presence in all of my paintings. Lastly, I will clarify why the lighting and composition of my paintings takes the form of traditional stage sets.
Historically, my art practice has been located in autobiography. Within the past few years, the progression of the work has had particular emphasis on the female form, namely myself, as well as candid references to my sexuality.

Earlier in my graduate career my work’s connection to sexuality was far from straightforward. During the first year of school, I created quasi-therapeutic and soporific images in order to explore my struggle with insomnia. These paintings embodied the sensual, soft, and empty feeling I would experience while drifting off to sleep. I made these paintings through a process of staining. At first the stains resulted in abstract gradients that illustrated an ephemeral dream space. Over time they developed into draped and crumpled fabric that mimicked my bedroom curtains and sheets. The evolution of the fabric work took on a pointed feminist content, in which the stained fabric became a direct metaphor for menstrual blood and sexual byproducts found on a used bed sheet. My current paintings bring into question the post-feminist idea that sexism has been ameliorated if not almost eradicated. Just as I believe we can never live in a truly post-racial society, there will never be a time when genders share equal power.
Three miniature paintings; *Eyeing the Everglades, Mirror Stage, and Glass, Peacock*; mark the first stage of this exploration. These paintings focus on a single woman surrounded by nature while she explores her body. The figure addresses the viewer either directly or through a mirror. She expresses opposing desires, at once wanting to be looked at while simultaneously wanting to be free of the viewer’s gaze. Of all my recent work, these miniatures contain the most symbolism and are the least autobiographical. In each painting the female figure fills up the majority of the canvas so that her gestures and exposed body parts become the central content. Their assertive actions speak of a second wave feminist mentality that is uncensored and not interested in being polite. These extreme actions are in direct conflict with the paintings’ intimate scale, smooth surfaces, detailed and tender paint handling, and conventionally beautiful and natural pallets. I paint under conventions of beauty in order to seduce my viewers into engaging with potent and sometimes off putting content.

Rather than sitting passively like a classical odalisque, my figures position themselves in the seat of power. In *Eyeing the Everglades* I direct the figure’s gaze at the viewer. In a studio visit the artist Trenton Doyle Hancock described this painting best, when he noted that it reminded him of “…getting pulled over by the cops at night.” He likened the vagina, which is the brightest part of the painting, to a “flashlight being shone into ones eyes by a cop. All you can see is the bright light, while hidden behind it the cop is watching your every move.” Viewers who venture to take a closer look at *Eyeing the Everglades* find that the woman’s face is peering at you from between her parted legs. I chose the Florida everglades as the setting for this painting as it can be claustrophobically humid and dense with overgrowth, letting scant amounts of light through. I wanted to
bring the viewer into this humid and dimly lit space so that they would feel a sensation of being confronted with the woman’s glowing vagina. *Eyeing the Everglades* is the most assertive of the three miniatures. Rather than laying passively on the ground with legs spread in offering, she stands, bends over, putting her genitals closer to eye level so that viewers are forced to look. In this bent position with her face in shadow, her vagina becomes a mandorla radiating from the center of the composition.

The figures in *Glass, Peacock* and *Mirror Stage* look at the viewer through the mediated source of a mirror. In Jacques Lacan’s 1953 essay, *Some Reflections on the Ego*, he writes, “The mirror stage is a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body image.” *Glass, Peacock* and *Mirror Stage* are in direct response to this two-layered definition.

In *Mirror Stage* a woman lays on the ground while looking at her face in a handheld mirror. She is in motion, as a transparent head and arm come out of her body and
focus on the same mirror, this time directed at her genitals. The woman’s dual movements symbolize Lacan’s two-layered definition. Her transparent self is symbolic of Lacan’s first definition regarding the mental development of children. Boys see their penises every day, but a mirror is necessary for a woman to look at her vagina. Puberty sparks new interest in this hidden, but essential anatomy. When I finally got the courage to peek at my sex, I felt as if I were experiencing the sensation a baby has when recognizing itself in the mirror for the first time. The transparent body is a portrait of that experience.

Lacan closely relates the second part of his mirror stage definition to narcissism and Narcissus, the man who falls in love with his own reflection. In my painting the reclining woman stares at her self with piercing eyes and slight smile, facial expressions indicative the sexual desire she feels for herself.

The composition and concepts of Mirror Stage are a reaction to Henri Rousseau’s 1908 painting, Beauty and the Beast. I see his painting as a rape fantasy, in which the beast represents Rousseau and Beauty represents the object of his desire. In Rosseau's painting the woman coquettishly mirrors her beauty, which is juxtiposed with the
straightforward and aggressive penetration of the beast. In Rousseau’s fantasy the woman does not fight back, she submits herself to the beast. Rousseau paints a depiction of conquest. In Mirror Stage I replace the beast with the woman’s vagina. Her vagina is its own little beast, pink and pulsating. Her sexual power is the painting’s focus—containing the potential to create life.

In Glass, Peacock a large glass mirror rests against a tree. A woman sits in front of the mirror with her back to the viewer, while her face, torso, and faintly depicted vagina—enveloping one of her hands—are reflected in the mirror. A second pair of transparent legs and genitals emerges from the base of her torso. As with Mirror Stage, the multiple limbs suggest her movement of facing and turning away from the viewer. The second pair of legs and genitalia could also be representative of a more confident alter ego. As with Mirror Stage, this painting illustrates the link between Lacan’s mirror stage and narcissism. It shows a woman who takes obvious pleasure in looking at her self and being looked at by others. While she looks at the viewer she exposes and touches herself, suggesting that she is an exhibitionist. I am also a bit of an exhibitionist, not
because it gives me sexual pleasure, but because I revel in making the prudish feel uncomfortable. This was the only painting in which I worked from a photograph to capture facial similitude. The headless peacock in the background of the painting is a symbolic element that deepens the complexity of the central figure. Classically, peacocks are symbols of immortality thus when its head is cut off it becomes a symbol of mortality. This representation imbues the painting with a dark and restless feeling.

Following the three miniatures, I made two paintings—*Jon, Loie, and Legs; Jon and Loie nipple kiss*—that depicted interactions between my husband and myself. While the figures in the previous paintings were symbols for post-feminist concerns, the depicted interactions between my husband and myself are specific to our relationship. In American culture, relationships between Caucasian women and African-American men have been superficially relegated to simplistic overtones of the dalliance of a hypersexual male with the supplicant female. I have been encouraged to dispel this cultural stereotype by painters like Marlene Dumas and Mickalene Thomas, both of whom create work about
female sexuality and the complexity of interracial romance based on lived experience. Mickalene Thomas’ painting, *Sleep: Deux Femmes Noires* puts a new spin on Gustave Courbet’s *Le Sommeil*, which shows two entwined nude women asleep on a bed. In Thomas’ painting the women are two different colors. One figure is black and appears to be a self-portrait. The second figure is yellow with facial features that are difficult to attribute racially. This contemporary take on a classic painting illuminates compassion and awareness for the beauty of interracial compassion, and the normality of lesbian love. Where Thomas’ work shows uplifted and empowered women, Dumas, a South African, sheds light on the vulnerable: children, women, and blacks. Her work carries empathy and gravitas. *Couples* is a five panel series of paintings where each panel depicts a light skinned woman and dark skinned man in various positions of embrace. The figures’ repeated actions are anticlimactic and speak of longing for the unattainable. I strive to make work that uplifts like Thomas’, as well as embodies the potent and deeply psychological work of Dumas.
In recent years interracial marriage has been on a steady rise, while marriage as an institution has steadily declined for the past several decades.\(^1\) As a point of interest surrounding the larger narrative of my life, it is important to add that only forty-five years have gone by since the 1967 Supreme Court case ‘Loving vs. Virginia’ deemed interracial marriage legal in all states. I believe that the increase of interracial marriages, as well as an increase of inter-religious marriage, is the result of a globalizing world in which overcoming differences and joining forces is necessary for the survival of the human species.

The first painting that depicts intimacy in my marriage is titled *Jon, Loie, and Legs*, and shows my husband and I lying in a wooded landscape. Jon is husky and muscular with features that diametrically oppose my own. The spatial dynamic of our biomorphic forms visually and conceptually activates the narrative accessibility of the work. Our legs are intertwined and are unified in color and shape, becoming one rhythmic unit, creating difficulty in discerning whose legs belong to whom. Nevertheless, the torsos clearly belong to distinctly different people. The homogeneous leg region is

symbolic of the undifferentiated awareness that comes with love. The torsos come to represent the ability to maintain individual personhood in relation to one another.

The second painting titled, *Jon and Loie nipple kiss* depicts a primal fantasy that counters the intellectual beings that Jon and I are in the real world. In this painting I pin him to the ground in a beast like position. I am on all fours with a biting mouth and glowing eyes like that of a fantastical werewolf. A small, dimly lit, and almost invisible penis hints to the fact that the figures are sexually engaged. While his face looks content, his legs flail into the surrounding cactus garden. I chose to paint cacti because they are so easily anthropomorphized. The saguaro cacti, which line the horizon in the painting, are naturally figure like in structure. I chose to paint the prickly pear cactus in the foreground because of its beautifully patterned thorns and flat, fleshy, round pads. Cacti’s inherent contradictory nature; being both beautiful and well protected; is what make them an appealing subject matter. *Jon and Loie nipple kiss* is a painting that illuminates my fantasy of sometimes longing to be physically stronger than

*Jon and Loie nipple kiss*
36"x48", oil on canvas, 2012
Jon. The tender moment shared between our nipples points to that fact that within my aggressive fantasy there is mutual pleasure.

The landscape elements in all the paintings are as significant as the figures in creating narrative. I replaced the human figures with anthropomorphized cacti in *Prickly Pear and Barrel Cacti*. Despite the lack of overt sex, as depicted in the figurative work, the cacti scenarios imbue the painting with feelings of longing, desire, and loss. The saguaro cacti in the middle of the composition are human scaled and are the most animated of all the plants in the painting. The saguaro with castrated limbs falls into the other cactus’s five healthy branches, while behind them a vast desert landscape is spotted with lone saguaros, symbols of perseverance. The middle cacti embrace with such uncertainty that it is hard to tell whether it is passion of pity that motives them. These saguaros symbolize the complex nature of species interdependence. The ‘big prick’ of a barrel cactus grows directly in front of the saguaros, interrupting their emotional moment with its large phallic shape. Prickly pears adorn the forefront of the composition. Their usual flowering red orbs are replaced with countless thorny red mandorlas.
In *Prickly Pear and Barrel Cacti*, as well as in most of the other work, it is the dark pallet that provides the greatest feeling of longing and desire. Amidst the darkness the characters are lit with dramatic, artificially colored light, bonded together within a vast and impenetrable ultramarine and prussian blue sky. In *Prickly Pear and Barrel Cacti* the faint yellow light coming from the horizon and the deep blue atmospheric light are barely sufficient to penetrate the looming ivory black clouds. The cacti long to be bathed with the same intensity of yellow and blue given to the figures in *Jon, Loie, and Legs*. In dusky twilight, the saguaros’ awkward embrace is made more dramatic and desperate as they reach for the last visible rays of light. Liminal times of day are imbues with a sense of the romantic and climactic. At twilight an intimate couple has the whole night ahead of them, and at dawn the escapades of the night before are fully realized—either bring the couple closer together or splitting them apart. My paintings, like traditional theatre and film, see the action crescendo at the center or top center of the frame. Symmetry draws the viewer’s eyes towards the center, proffering direct and engaging experience with the subject.

From miniature to massive landscape, it is easy to find the influences of Henri Rousseau in this body of work. Despite constant rejection, angry disapproval, and teasing, he continued to paint, always striving for his work to be taken seriously. Rich with invented people, plants, and animals, Rousseau’s vision of a chaotic utopia appears the opposite of his real life, as *Le Douanier*, the customs officer.

When viewed through a postmodern lens, Rousseau’s use of tropical imagery that he found in books of botanical illustrations and expedition guides, were treated as novelty views of the ‘other’. While my work utilizes many of Rousseau’s formal structures, it is a
product of the postmodern experience, in which global travel and direct experience, sexual liberation, and the blending of races is possible. Like Rousseau, I believe in the power of painting. Rosseau’s palette of earthly ochre, sienna and umber, mixed with emerald and vermilion green, and naples yellow created a world of shadow and light. Taking cues from Rousseau I mixed prussian blue, van dyke brown, and ivory black, to form soft shadowy worlds illuminated by touches of warm cadmium and cool cobalt hues. Like Rousseau, the smooth, sensual surface of the oil paint imparts a medium based sensuality. The tactic of communicating to the kinesthetic sense of the viewer via painterly touch lures the audience closer, taking them into fantastical worlds—blending reality and fiction.