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PISSING IN THE PLEASURE GARDEN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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May, 2021

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my VCU PAPR committee and community: Caitlin Cherry, Hilary Wilder, Cara Benedetto, Noah Simblist, Hope Ginsburg, Evan Garza, Damien Ding, Raul Aguilar, Connor Stankard, Kelley-Ann Lindo, Hanaa Safwat, John Chae, Luis Vasquez La Roche, GM Keaton, Sydney Finch, Bryan Castro, Seren Moran, Kyrae Dawaun, Juliana Bustillo, Eleanor Thorp, Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo, and Ekaterina Muromtseva

Special thanks to my family: Katherine Hanson, Martha Hanson, Peter Hanson, Marge Roche and lastly thanks to Gideon Tarcov

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Abstract

In this paper I will discuss self-representation and how my paintings refer to self-sexualization on the internet and depictions of muses in art history, allowing me to occupy the joint role of artist and muse through the repetition of my own image. My thesis exhibition, *Pissing in the Pleasure Garden*, uses freestanding canvases to imitate the form of a Hortus Conclusus. I use the closed garden to contend with the contradictions of control, eroticism, and voyeurism. Similar to the landscape of the early internet created by blogs and camgirl sites, the closed garden is both public and private.

Keywords: painting, self-portraiture, landscape, muse, model, camgirl, hortus conclusus, renaissance gardens, body painting, foot fetish, flowstate, voyeurism, emo, failure, eroticism

Vita

Ellen Hanson was born in 1992, in Hinsdale, Illinois. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont in 2014 and her Masters of Fine Art from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia in 2021.

Coming of Age Online

My youth is bookended by the internet. I was born in 1992, seven months after the World Wide Web went live, and turned 18 six months after ChatRoulette was invented. While ChatRoulette may seem like an insignificant, dick-shaped blip on the internet, it impacted how I saw and began to represent myself online. Like most teenagers who grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, I felt like an outsider and identified with the sad-boy angst of 2nd and 3rd wave emo. I was drawn into the heartfelt melodramatic lyrics that were equal parts narcissistic, self-loathing, and misogynistic.¹ Emo music had almost entirely sprung from the garages and basements of middle class suburban homes in New Jersey, Long Island, and across the Midwest. Growing up in the early 2000's and identifying as an outsider meant finding your place online. I blogged and found my home in the feminine spaces of candy-colored Tumblrs and emotionally overwrought blogs like that of early net artist, Molly Soda.

When I was a Senior in highschool I got my first laptop and became hooked on ChatRoulette. ChatRoulette was a chaotic website launched in 2010 that randomly paired together two strangers via their computers' webcams. Andrey Ternovkiy, a 17-year-old from Moscow, built the site from his childhood bedroom, describing it as "one hundred percent my

¹ Hopper, Jessica. "Where the Girls Aren't ." *Rookie*, 14 July 2015, www.rookiemag.com/2015/07/where-the-girls-arent/2/.

2nd wave emo is also referred to as midwestern emo and includes the bands The Get Up Kids, American Football and Cap'n Jazz. 3rd wave emo includes Brand New, Taking Back Sunday, and Fall Out Boy. Pete Wentz from Fall Out Boy was my next door neighbor growing up and gifted me their early CDs. 3rd wave emo was also one of the early music subcultures to embrace the realm of the internet through the use of Myspace. "Emo has become another forum where women were locked out, observing ourselves through the eyes of others." "We're vessels redeemed in the light of boy-love. On a pedestal, on our backs. Muses at best. Cum rags or invisible at worst."

window into the world.”² After getting into bed I would open my computer and scroll past men lit only by their screens with their faces cropped out masturbating, until I found someone to talk to and get naked with.³ As I explored and exposed myself having internet sex with strangers and became embarrassingly vulnerable while spilling my teenage guts in Blogspot posts, I was unknowingly experimenting with online performance. Through these different modes of expression, I had the ability to move between being defined by my body and leaving it behind. In their 2020 cyberfeminist book *Glitch Feminism*, author and curator Legacy Russell explains the power of the glitch as a tool to modify, manipulate, or refuse the gendered body. “Through the application of the glitch, we ghost on the gendered body and accelerate toward its end. The infinite possibilities presented as a consequence of this allows for our exploration: we can dis-identify and by dis-identifying, we can make up our own rules in wrestling with the problem of the body” (Russell).⁴ Russell also compares the personal blog to *a room of one’s own*, but I see these spaces of blogs and early camming sites more like an enclosed garden or Hortus Conclusus. They are private spaces that exist in the public realm becoming both protected and exposed.

Welcome to My Room

The first era of the camgirl, which peaked in 1998 and dwindled in the early years of the millenium, was a precursor to the era of social media. In the late 1990’s, before third party camming sites offered an endless scroll, camgirls streamed from their own personal sites. The first camgirl was 20 year old Jennifer Ringly, Jennicam, who set up her webcam in her

² Pardes, Arielle. “Chatroulette Was Shorthand for Chaos Online. Then Came the 2010s.” *Wired*, Conde Nast, 2019, www.wired.com/story/chatroulette-internet-chaos-2010s/.

³ At the height of ChatRoulette’s popularity a study found one in eight screens resulted in something “R-rated”

⁴ Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism: a Manifesto*. Verso, 2020. 10.

dormroom in 1996. She streamed everything that happened in her room from doing homework and eating to showering and sex with her boyfriend. The widespread fascination with her site was that it offered something more intimate and seemingly more authentic than porn. This pseudo voyeuristic view into her everyday life garnered her 100 million viewers a week.⁵

Currently, on the websites Camsoda, MyFreeCams, and Chaturbate, cam models give live shows, usually streaming from their bedrooms, while audiences either watch for free or tip in exchange for requests. Camming is unique from other forms of porn because of the live and participatory aspect and because of the simulation of voyeurism and intimacy. The live, solo and amateur nature of camming expands the fantasy beyond sex and into the realm of relationship. However, while each viewer feels like the camgirl is looking directly at them, talking and performing for them alone, the camgirl's truest audience is herself. She stares into her digital reflection and watches her every move while faceless accounts with impersonal usernames tip and post comments.

I started webcamming on Chaturbate and Camsoda in 2016 to supplement my other job of bartending. Although I started from a practical sense of needing a quick and flexible way to make money I became enthralled by the same thrill I had found through ChatRoulette. It felt mischievous which is a hard feeling to come by once you leave your teenage years. Under a pseudonym I could create a whole different persona and at any moment I could sneak into a bathroom to sext my clients before returning to my public persona. Prior to webcamming I was growing increasingly embittered with the constant presence of my feminine body. I kept going back and forth between wanting to be feminine and wanting to reject everything feminine about me. I had just shaved my head. At the bar I was frustrated by the pervasiveness of misogyny and

⁵ Senft, Theresa M. *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks*. Lang, 2008. 15-17

sexual harassment from customers and coworkers. Webcamming, while in most senses just another shitty job, gave me a feeling of control over my body I lacked in other aspects of my life.

During this time, I was painting a lot of landscapes and interiors that blurred the distinction between the two. I was using framing devices such as Trompe L'oeil windows to position the viewer as an outsider looking in. At some point it hit me that the dynamic I was trying to create within my paintings was similar to the existing dynamic in webcamming. After this realization I started to bring figures into my work and at times directly reference webcamming. As I started painting self-portraits I began to see how painting myself, just like performing on ChatRoulette and Chaturbate, is a way of exploring and exposing my image.

The Role of the Muse

Through painting myself repeatedly I became interested in the subjectivity of the model and the dynamics between model, artist, and viewer. Figure paintings contain three viewpoints: the subject, the artist looking at and representing the subject, and the viewer looking at the painting that contains elements of both the subject and the artist. While webcamming I get to be the model, artist, and viewer: giving the viewer a peak behind the cyber curtain into the privacy of my bedroom. This voyeuristic titillation and performed but not faked authenticity reminded me of the art historical trope of the studio self-portrait with a muse. My interest in the artist/muse relationship comes from a feeling of attraction. I want to indulge in the romanticization of the artist. When looking at these paintings, I see myself in the artist and the muse. I want to become both simultaneously. I'm interested in how painting today can play with the history of representation and romanticism in art while also working with the more recent phenomena of self-representation and self-sexualization on the internet.

The trope of the studio self-portrait with a muse goes back centuries and takes on varying forms such as Pygmalion, Apelles and Campaspe, and women that became mythologized and immortalized as muses. These paintings functioned as allegories, with the nameless muse representing not just a model to be painted but the artist's personified inspiration. In these examples, the naked white woman is as empty as the blank canvas who has come to life only to provide the artist with inspiration and emotional support. The blank canvas seduces the painter with its perfectly taught, textured weave that like a peephole opens itself up to possibility.

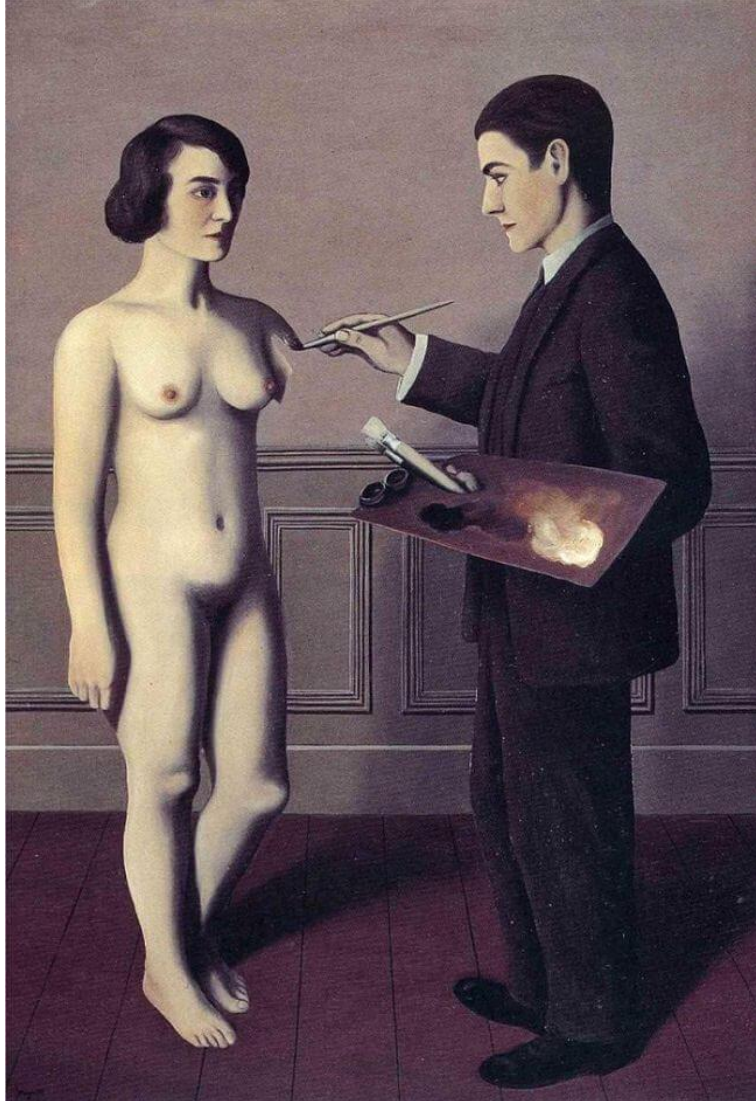
One example of this is *Apelles' Studio at Ephesus* by Giorgio Vasari painted in 1542. It's one of many Renaissance paintings that takes its subject matter from the legendary painter of antiquity immortalized in the writings of Pliny the Elder. Vasari depicts the story of Apelles painting a nude portrait of Campaspe, Alexander the Great's favorite concubine. As the story goes, Apelles fell in love with Campaspe while painting the portrait and Alexander found the painting so beautiful that he gifted Campaspe as a present to Apelle. Another telling of this story is that Alexander found the portrait so beautiful that his love for the painting replaced his love for Campaspe.⁶ Either way, real life Campaspe and her painted image become interchangeable and romantic love and the love of painting start to mirror each other. This work, painted on the walls of Casa Vasari, masterfully uses illusion to break through the wall it is painted on. Like a webcamming session of a viewer watching from their bedroom into the camgirl's bedroom, Vasari is bringing the fantasy of Apelles and Campaspe into his own home. The doubling of Campaspe and mise en scene approach to the painting heightens this illusion while reinforcing the surface and process of painting.

⁶ Cheney, Liana DeGirolami. "Vasari's Depiction of Pliny's Histories." *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1989, pp. 97–120., doi:10.1163/23526963-90000112.



Giorgio Vasari, *Apelles' Studio at Ephesus* (detail), 1542

A later example is Rene Magritte's *Attempting the Impossible*, painted in 1928. In this painting Magritte paints himself rendering an incomplete nude woman. Though not depicting the story of Apelles, Magritte paints the same desire to paint a figure to fall in love with. Like a lot of work by Magritte, this painting questions the difference between reality and representation. Can the painter paint something that can become real?



Rene Magritte Attempting the Impossible, 1928

Both Vasari and Magritte's paintings seem like versions of the myth of Pygmalion who fell in love with his ivory sculpture. Does Vasari also fall in love with the image of Campaspe because of his own remarkable skill of painting flesh? If so, is this love for one's own creation really a narcissistic love for oneself cloaked in another's body? "The artist chose his models according to a 'type' that haunted him. And yet he often seems to have been unsatisfied, ever searching for a more adequate subject, one corresponding more closely to his imagination.

Unless, like a Narcissus in disguise, he was looking for a model resembling himself.” (Borel).⁷ In this case, we can appreciate these paintings as a form of self creation and love of painting while critiquing the artist’s use of the objectified figure.

The artist flattens the living muse and transforms her into an ideal. The male artist uses the female muse for inspiration but denies her agency in becoming her own creator or even biographer. One example of such a figure is Elizabeth Siddal, the artist and famed red headed muse of the Pre-Raphaelites. Siddal was pursued by Dante Gabriel Rossetti because of her beauty and her likeness to Dante’s Beatrice. Rossetti even decided that she was the reincarnation of Beatrice which like many aspects of the Pre-Raphaelites is an overly romantic notion that ultimately ignores the individuality of Siddal. Siddal was the model for Sir John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* and posed many nights throughout the winter in a full bathtub. One night the lamps heating the tub went out and she continued to sit without complaining resulting in her coming down with pneumonia.⁸

In *Heroines*, Kate Zambreno tracks the lives of the wives and mistresses of modernist writers such as Vivienne Eliot, Jane Bowles, Jean Rhys, and Zelda Fitzgerald. She weaves through their stories to create a larger narrative about becoming a muse or a character while simultaneously being silenced. Zelda Fitzgerald words were stolen almost verbatim for the character of Daisy yet when she attempted to pursue writing herself she was institutionalized in an act that suppressed her voice and forced her to remain in the role of the muse. Zambreno writes, “I wonder, what is the effect of being made a character if one wishes to be an author? Of being re(written)?” .⁹ To be a muse is to have your story be valuable only when written or painted by someone else.

⁷ Borel, France, and Hardy Brownstein. *The Seduction of Venus: Artists and Models*. Rizolli International, 1990. 7.

⁸ Prose, Francine. *The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women and the Artists They Inspired*. Union Books, 2013. 101-107.

⁹ Zambreno, Kate. *Heroines*. Semiotext(e), 2012. 157.

Tracey Emin's performance, *Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made* and the resulting photographs taken titled, *The Life Model Goes Mad* are examples of a contemporary artist simultaneously playing the roles of the artist and the muse. Emin created a studio within Galleri Andreas Brändström in Stockholm where she painted naked for a three week period. The performance could be viewed through 16 fisheye lenses set into the wall that acted as peep-holes. For Emin, this work was about confronting the act of painting which she had abandoned in her practice while also grappling with its history. "Emin... uses an en-abyme strategy to give voice to the muted model, her sexuality appropriated, her emotiveness denigrated." (Townsend).¹⁰ The paintings she made during this performance are mostly self-portraits with blurbs of personal, diaristic text talking on subjects ranging from love to shitting. Her physical nudity was mirrored in her naked display of her thoughts on the canvas. These works are a play on the "mad" genius male artist and the objectified model while also referencing the history of false diagnosis and institutionalization being weaponized against women.¹¹ Some of the work to come out of this performance was a set of body paintings reminiscent of Yves Klein's *Anthropometry* from 1960. By recreating this action she is returning the subjectivity to the female body from tool to artist.

Though what draws me most to Emin's work is that it's precisely not a clear solution to the problem of objectification. The life model, while becoming the artist herself, is still the subject. Her nudity is still on display for viewers. The vulnerability of this piece moves far beyond Emin's nakedness and into the more complicated vulnerability of what one does and thinks when they are alone. Like the mundanity of JenniCam (which went live the same year

¹⁰ Merck, Mandy, and Chris Townsend. *The Art of Tracey Emin: with 54 Illustrations*. Thames & Hudson, 2002. 15.

¹¹ Vasari wrote in 1550 that the artists he knew all shared an 'element of savagery and madness'

Emin did this performance), what is ultimately most interesting about this piece isn't the shock of Emin's nudity but the voyeuristic view of watching her every move.



Tracey Emin, "Life Model Goes Mad", 1996

My artistic practice, while not directly depicting girlhood, contains a sensibility of feminine adolescence: the excitement of discovering the manipulation of one's body online. How far back do I want to pull back the curtain? Which forms of exposure do I want to allow or account for? I see a similar sensibility in the paintings of Emma Stern. Her smoothly painted figures are modeled after contemporary 3D renderings but look back to the emblems of 2000's

era girlhood like Second Life characters and Dollz Icons (with all of the attitude and none of pixelization). Like Lisa Yuskavage, she is concerned with the subjectivity and sexualization of young girls without taking an overtly critical stance. Both artists make work inline with what Lauren Berlant calls the *Juxtapolitical*, explaining that people’s interests are, “less in changing the world than in not being defeated by it, and meanwhile finding satisfaction in minor pleasures and major fantasies” (Berlant).¹² These figures aren’t concerned with something you could call empowerment but instead with making their own worlds and fantasies out of and within an unavoidable male gaze.



Emma Stern, *Dallas, Bri, and Rose (Sleepover)*, 2020

¹² Berlant, Lauren Gail. *The Female Complaint: the Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Duke University Press, 2008. 27.

The Muse's Reflection

In 2019, my paintings, *Untitled (Apron)* and *Untitled (Coveralls)*, centered around treating my studio practice as a webcamming session. I sewed lingerie versions of a painting apron, a 19th century smock and coveralls out of satin and sheer silks. I took videos of myself gesso-ing my own canvases while wearing these outfits and clear acrylic *Pleaser* heels.¹³ I gesso-ed with my hands, wiping the excess gesso on the coveralls as if it were baby oil on my body. From these videos, I took screenshots to use as source images for paintings. As I continued working, I introduced the sheer fabric from the lingerie as a material in the paintings.

In these paintings I was interested in the conflation of the artist and the muse in the context of art history and in the context of self-representation and self-sexualization on the internet. Like the camgirl staring into her reflection, I double my own image in the process of painting. While the doubling is literal with more than one representation of myself within the same composition, some have theorized that simply being a woman is an inherent dual existence. John Berger writes, “a woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.”¹⁴ Similarly, in the polemic, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, Tiqqun write, “The Young-Girl always-already lives as a couple, that is, she lives with her image.”¹⁵ While Berger is observing a more abstract, pre-internet form of doubling his idea has become more literal through the self-sexualization and the commodification of one’s image online. Like Vasari and Magritte, I am playing with the facade and realness of painting by moving between gestural marks that heighten the process of

¹³ *Pleaser* is a shoe brand founded in 1993 and their iconic sky high platform heels are frequently worn by sex workers. The Met Museum has a pair in its collection that was gifted by Harold Koda who coincidentally was the editor of a book titled, *The Model as Muse: Embodying Fashion*. Metmuseum.org, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/83059.

¹⁴ Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. BBC and Penguin, 1972. 46

¹⁵ Tiqqun. *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Semiotext(e), 2012. 59

painting and illusionistic marks that give the viewer a window into another scene. The transparency of the fabric reveals the substrate of the painting as something that can be sexualized. This act of formally revealing the substrate while depicting my exposed body is a negotiation of the sexuality in painting versus the sexuality of the body. My painted figure is in control of both.

My painting practice performs intimacy. The studio becomes a showroom. Like a visit to the peephole of the cam girl's bedroom office, my studio visits are simultaneously a charade and a peek behind the curtain.



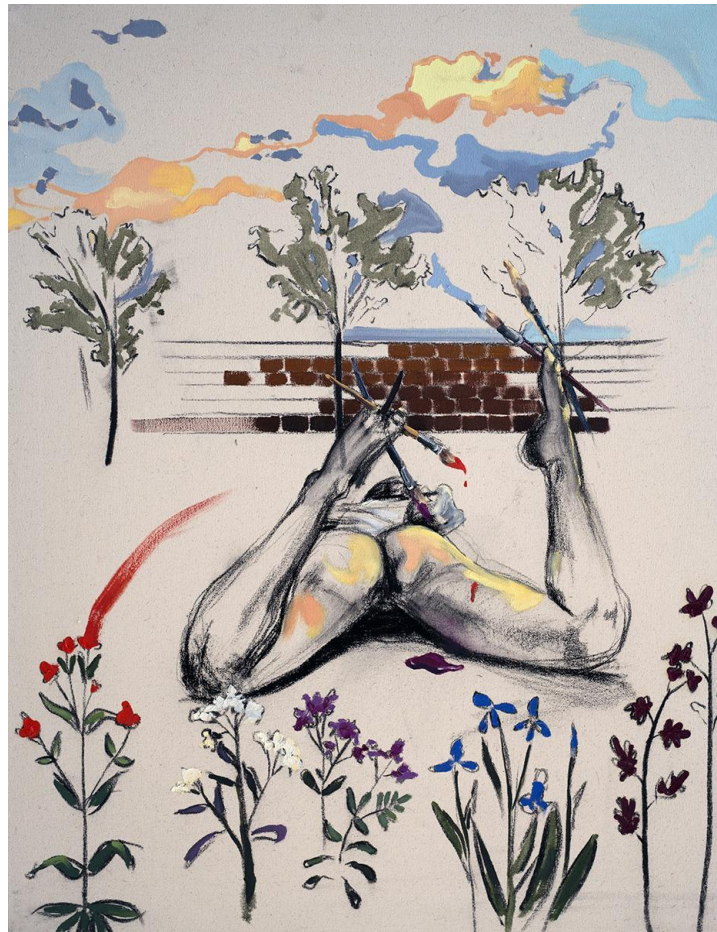
Untitled (Apron), fabric, gesso, oil and pastels, 65" x 56", 2019



Untitled (Coveralls), fabric, gesso, oil and pastels, 58” x 48”, 2019

As my painting continued into the spring of 2020, the figure’s relationship to their self-image and self-sexualization became more ambiguous. I continued to represent myself in the paintings but these were absurd figures falling over themselves. They appeared to have lost control and confidence in their agency as images or maybe they never had as much as they thought. In *Insert* and *Paintbrush Butt* I depicted the figure with a paintbrush held between their buttocks or in their vagina, straddling usefulness and pleasure, sexualization and humor. In both *The Martyrdom of an Untimely Sensuality* and *Hortus Conclusus* I positioned the figure half naked on the ground painting themselves into the landscape using their feet instead of their hands. These characters could fit into Sianne Ngai’s aesthetic category of the zany: “For all their

playfulness and commitment to fun, the zany's characters give the impression of needing to labor excessively hard to produce our laughter, straining themselves to the point of endangering not just themselves but also those around them.” (Ngai).¹⁶ It is uncertain whether these figures flail on the ground for the viewers amusement, for play, or for pain. The paint drips are violent and erotic like the broken and falling pearls in Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia*.



Hortus Conclusus, charcoal and oil on canvas, 36 x 28”, 2020

¹⁶ Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard University Press, 2015. 10



The Martyrdom of an Untimely Sensuality, oil on fabric, 2020



Tintoretto, *Tarquin and Lucretia*, 1578/80

Falling and Falling Into a Flowstate

As I painted my figures flailing, I began to perform the actions I depicted, holding the paint brushes between my toes while trying to paint. Four canvases, stretched with sheer fabric and painted on by foot, stand in a circle at the center of my thesis exhibition. The canvases, each 30 inches high and installed in a circle with a diameter of 6 feet, directly relate to my body. The height reflects how high I can paint with my foot while sitting on the ground and the diameter gives me just enough space to lay down. The circle acts to frame my body, especially in its absence. In this way the work centers its own creation. Painting with my feet is a sensual act of giving my whole body to the painting. It is also about athleticism and giving up control. In this piece, my body is both subject and tool. Through foot painting I am guided by failure and eroticism while working in a lineage of performance painting such as Shigeo Kubota and feminist body painting such as Cheryl Donegan and Carolee Schneemann.



Pissing in the Pleasure Garden, Installation at The Anderson Gallery, 2021

Painting is about movement. The gesture of each mark records the action of the artist. There are the short strokes of hesitation, the smooth surface of patience and the sweeping gestures of confidence. Every brushstroke contains the energy that made it. I think of each painting as public evidence of a private performance. Isabelle Graw writes about the liveliness of a painting, “painting can be regarded as a trace of an activity, that it evokes subjectivity- the subjectivity of painting- and suggests agency” she continues, “while paintings seem to somewhat contain the artist, they can’t be reduced to this person. What prevents the reduction of this painterly product to its maker is its specific materiality” (Graw).¹⁷ I can control the flow of the paint by mixing oil paint with the medium Neo Megilp to create the right fluidity to last the length of the mark or keep the paint in stiff peaks to dry brush at the end. Drips remind me that even illusion is bound by gravity.

While painting with my feet I was aware of the clumsiness of my own body. Far from aspiring to gain dexterity in my toes, this act is directly opposed to mastery. I wanted to embrace a struggle that has no interest in success and continues to flail. In *Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam addresses the fertility of failure, “Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative effects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative effects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life.”¹⁸ Through repositioning my body’s relationship to the canvas and way of mark making I engaged with failure in a way that allowed me to recenter play and even mischievousness in my work.

¹⁷ Lajer-Burcharth, Ewa, and Isabelle Graw. *Painting beyond Itself: the Medium in Post-Medium Condition*. Sternberg Press, 2016.

¹⁸ Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011. 3.

Halberstam also describes a “shadow feminism” that is rooted in refusal, absence, and self-destruction. Freud may have defined femininity as a failed masculinity but “shadow feminism” finds freedom in the failure of unbecoming.

When I record my body’s movement through the brushwork in a painting I am also recording my mental space. Through painting I am trying to achieve a “flowstate” where there’s no separation between me and the painting and every movement of the brush is made through feeling and not thought. I represent those moments that are both out of body and completely of the body. The positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi first proposed the concept of a “flowstate,” writing, “I developed a theory of optimal experience based on the concept of *flow*--the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi).¹⁹ This state, whether under this name, a different one, or no name at all, is familiar yet elusive to all artists and athletes. It is the high we are always chasing. It is the feeling of being so effortlessly in tune with one’s medium that one loses all sense of self and all sense of time. “The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow” (Csikszentmihalyi). The motivation for the state comes from performing activities solely for an intrinsic reason. The “flowstate” is a paradox of control. Getting into a “flowstate” requires control over consciousness but once you are in it you are able to relinquish control.

Achieving a “flowstate” involves tapping into the power of the erotic. In her essay *Uses of the Erotic*, Audre Lorde speaks of the erotic as “Our most profoundly creative source” and continues, “I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colours my life with a kind of energy that heightens and

¹⁹ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper and Row, 2009. 4.

sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.” (Lorde)²⁰ The act of painting, both bodily and sensual, flows out of me through the power of the erotic.

This state that I reach while painting is similar to what my sister experiences through running. My sister is an ultra-runner who once ran 103 miles straight over the course of 32 hours on the Upper Superior Trail in Minnesota. She, like many athletes, is trying to escape herself while becoming closer to herself. She is running to reach a point where her thoughts are no longer sentences repeating in her head but shapeless forms that rush through her body. She described at mile 34 reaching a “flow state” of harmony with the trail and at mile 50 her mind unraveling and her sense of time warping. At mile 70 her emotions began to betray her with doubts, dark thoughts and uncontrollable sobbing.

Most of the landscapes I paint come from photos she sends me. I think through painting them I am able to come closer to her experience than if I visited those locations myself. Being deeply involved in a painting brings me into the same “flow state” and like my sister, this state is interrupted by dark thoughts that I am too lost in myself to get out of. When I start painting my movements are awkward and hesitant. Each mark feels jarring and out of place. I spend too much time trying to figure out what goes next. As I continue working I move beyond this self-consciousness. I no longer pause in between marks. When I reach a “flowstate” I do not think about what the painting needs, my body becomes in touch with some deeper intuition. I am in constant motion moving between my palette and my painting, and leaping back to take in the full view. It becomes a dance. Painting in a “flowstate” reminds me of Clarice Lispector talking about using both painting and writing to capture the present moment. In *Agua Viva* she writes, “I also use my whole body when I paint and set the bodiless upon the canvas, my whole body

²⁰ “Uses of the Erotic.” *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, by Audre Lorde, Penguin Books, 2018. 12.

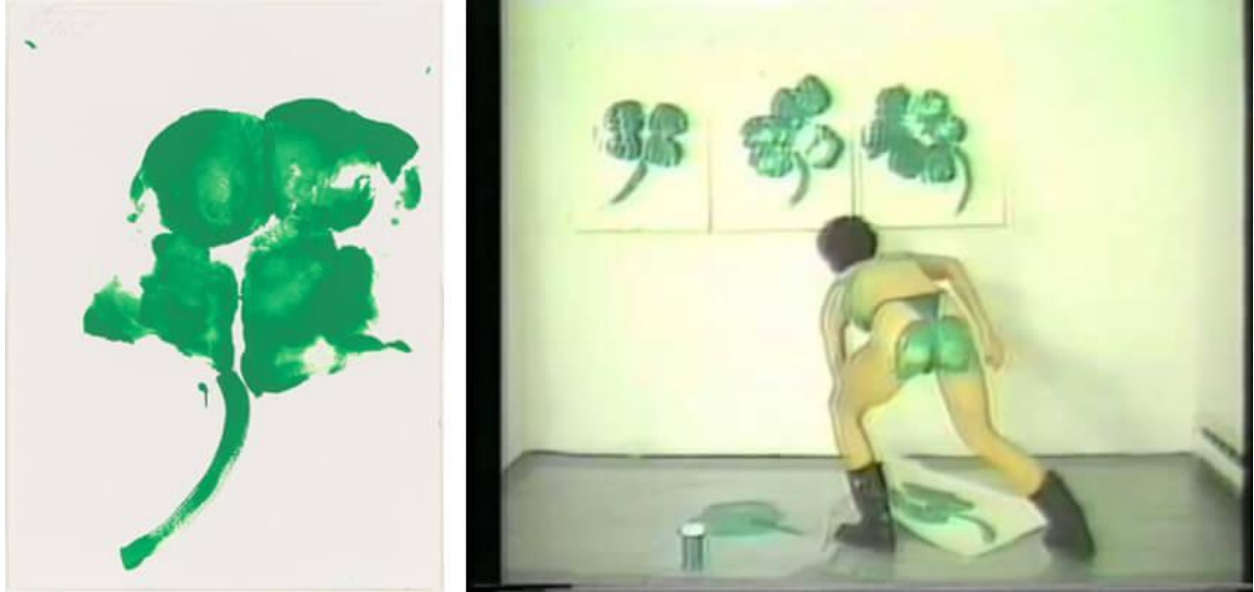
wrestling with myself’ (Lispector)²¹. To wrestle with oneself while painting is to acknowledge that the embodied movement of a flowstate is not necessarily one of pleasure.²² Painting with my feet contains a similar awkwardness that, like my early self-representation online, both rejects and embraces the body.



Shigeko Kubota, *Vagina Painting*, 1965

²¹ Lispector, Clarice, et al. *Água Viva*. New Directions, 2012. 4.

²² Csikentmihalyi distinguishes flow from pleasure in part because of its relationship to challenges and even pain.



Cheryl Donegan, Kiss My Royal Irish Ass, 1993

Landscape

I weave landscapes into my work in the form of isolated lakes, nighttime forests and structured renaissance gardens. It is a projection of the subject's interiority and used to heighten the sense of voyeurism.

Growing up in the suburbs of Chicago and travelling to my grandparent's houses in Michigan and Wisconsin for the summer I spent a lot of time in freshwater lakes. Michigan has 11,000 lakes and Wisconsin has 15,074. My favorite memories are of running into the solid black moonlit water butt-naked with my cousins. For me, skinny dipping is another moment of being both within and beyond one's body. While swimming we could see through the windows of lit houses but know that the veil of darkness was enough to cover our nudity. However as soon as my head went below the inky water I lost all sense of place. I depict small freshwater lakes throughout my paintings. These pools are where the studio and the figure's interiority meet. They are lakes that fit into the landscape but they are also pooled paint, spilled Gamsol, possibly even

blood and tears. They are life-giving wells that energize the figure. From another point of view they are a well to fall into, a trap and a toxic spill.

The forest landscapes that appear in *Hot Blue Moonlight* and *Torn Coolness* are a continuation of this interiority. They reference photos from my sister's runs and hikes, tying back into the ideas around "flowstates". I want these landscapes to play a similar role to the landscapes in *The Glass Essay* by Anne Carson where the visual description of the moor both sets the scene and becomes a metaphor. "My lonely life around me like a moor, my ungainly body stumping over the mud flats with a look of transformation"(Carson).²³ In this essay Carson uses the landscape to connect her to Emily Brontë and speak about loneliness, mourning, and masochism. The moor, although sprawling and expansive, becomes a cruel and confining space that closes in around her. In *Hot Blue Moonlight* the gestural mass of trees painted in the warm night tones of phthalo blue and quinacridone magenta are illuminated by glowing blue figures erected out of a steely pool of frozen water. The figures and the landscape are one. This landscape connects me to my sister and creates a scene that fluctuates between the glassy calm of the ice and the volatile chaos of the figures.

²³ Carson, Anne. *Glass, Irony, and God*. New Directions Books, 2005. 2.



Hot Blue Moonlight, oil on fabric, 84 x 72", 2021

Hortus Conclusus

In my thesis exhibition *Pissing in the Pleasure Garden*, the installation of paintings is based on the closed garden or Hortus Conclusus, specifically its appearance in Renaissance paintings and prints. In this exhibition the paintings function as both typical illusionistic surfaces as well as architectural landscape structures such as fountains, hedges, and walls. By dividing the

gallery space, these works create layers of privacy that the viewer can weave in and out of, moving from voyeur to participant and back. I'm interested in how this space is both public and private creating a viewing experience that is both voyeuristic and intimate.

The Renaissance garden is a place of contradictions and moral ambiguity. It is both natural and cultivated, both inside and outside. It represents both growth and decay, virginity and erotic sin (including, of course, erotic pleasure). This contained eroticism lays the groundwork for my paintings that deal with privacy, pleasure, vulnerability, and voyeurism. The historian Luke Morgan describes the distinctly sixteenth-century idea of “the garden as a work of art, that is, a landscape of pleasure rather than use and composed according to aesthetic rather than utilitarian principles.”²⁴

In literature and visual art, the Hortus Conclusus is frequently a metaphor for the virgin Mary. In a popular text of the Middle Ages, *Song of Songs*, the Hortus Conclusus is referenced to “My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up”.²⁵ Here the walled garden represents patriarchal order and chastity. Similarly, the closed garden is frequently depicted in annunciation paintings to represent Mary's virginity. The closed garden is also depicted in paintings and prints as a place where societal rules don't apply and experience is based on pleasure. “Italian artists combined the theme of nudity with the garden, thus emphasizing its significance as a secret place, a place of sensual pleasure, hortus conclusus and a garden of love”(Hyde).²⁶ The closed garden can be seen in paintings of the Golden Age where nude figures exist in harmony with the landscape and swim in the water of life. Functionally, the

²⁴ Hyde, Elizabeth, and Luke Morgan. *A Cultural History of Gardens in the Renaissance*. Bloomsbury Academic an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017. 22

²⁵ Yoshikawa, Naoe Kukita "The Virgin in the Hortus conclusus: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul." *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 50, No. 1 (2015) : 11-32.

²⁶ Hyde, Elizabeth. *A Cultural History of Gardens in the Renaissance*. Bloomsbury Academic an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017.

Hortus Conclusus was also a site of spirituality and healing, present in monasteries and hospitals.²⁷

In *Pissing in the Pleasure Garden* the Hortus Conclusus creates a framework for my paintings that deal with contradictions and ambiguities around sexualization, femininity and control. Like the cultivated garden that wants to at once be organic and structured, mutable and permanent, my work struggles with its relationship with control. Do I want to have control or have it taken from me?



Unknown, *Emilia in the Rosegarden*, 1460

²⁷ Yoshikawa, Naoe Kukita "The Virgin in the Hortus conclusus: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul." *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 50, No. 1 (2015) : 11-32.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Golden Age*, 1530



Pissing in the Pleasure Garden, Installation at The Anderson Gallery, 2021

Form and Material: The Painting as Body

The explorations into self-representation and voyeurism are embodied in the form and materials that make up *Pissing in the Pleasure Garden*. Each of the eight canvases can be viewed in the round and work simultaneously as surfaces for the painting and architectural elements in the gallery. The wood support beams, treated with fake rock texture to mimic a garden wall, divide the gallery into interior and exterior spaces. By creating these divisions I control how the viewer navigates the space and what they can and can't see from different angles. The fabric stretching over the wood occasionally becomes transparent, creating a window or screen within the space. A painting almost always acts like a window framing a view into another scene. In the case of the paintings in this exhibition, this window-like nature is two-fold giving the spectator a view into the painted scene and a view through the surface.

The canvas is another figure within my work. When I stretch various fabrics over the substrate I am using it like lingerie to both dress the canvas and heighten the eroticism through glimpses of the nude substrate. The undressing of the canvas becomes a parallel to the depicted nude figure. Max Loreau writes, "Thus the canvas is secretly for the painter the double of his own body. When he manipulates it, experimenting with the play of its surfaces, it is he whom he brings into being through it, whom he discovers without seeing it, witnessing the formation of his physique, of his appearance, as if he were modeling his own flesh and giving a figure to his own being... the body is like a canvas, the canvas is like a body."²⁸ Through manipulating the canvas I manipulate my body.

²⁸ Loreau, Max. *La Peinture a L'oeuvre Et L'enigme Du Corps*. Gallimard, 1980.



Pissing in the Pleasure Garden, Installation at The Anderson Gallery, 2021

Conclusion

Pissing in the Pleasure Garden is a place of becoming and unravelling; a place of growth and decay; a place of “flowstates” and failure; a place of romanticism and rejection. *Pissing in the Pleasure Garden* invites the viewer into my Hortus Conclusus which, like my teenage bedroom or artist’s studio, offers the viewer a glimpse of not just my naked body but my exposed emotions. Instead of being my window into the world, I allow the world a window into me. Within this space I negotiate having and giving up control through rendering my own body and painting with my feet. Even as I moved beyond self-portraits that directly reference the digitized self the words of Legacy Russell continue to resonate, “Through the digital, we make new worlds and dare to modify our own. Through the digital, the body ‘in glitch’ finds its genesis.

Embracing the glitch is therefore a participatory action that challenges the status quo.”²⁹ I am aiming to find this glitch within painting.

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