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***Preexisting Conditionings:
Painting, Gaming and Narrative Play***

A thesis / dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University,
2024

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Kansas City Art Institute, 2013

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Abstract

My work incorporates play, fantasy, and self-actualization through painting, sculpture, and video. In this essay, I will explore the ways in which my studio practice intersects with topics across fields of visual arts and in conjunction their theoretical frameworks. I will discuss the culminating body of work, tentatively titled *Preexisting Conditionings*, that my academic experience at VCU has fostered and trace its development across specific precursive works, as well as the cultural and intellectual touchstones influencing its creative impetus. In *Preexisting Conditionings*, I work primarily use oil painting, creating mostly representational figurative tableaux that correspond to narratives and characters I'm developing within the simulated world of *The Sims 4* gaming platform. Here, I will present a selection of these characters, discuss the roles they play in my narrative experiments and delineate their significance across painted and video content.

Vita

Pia Bakala (b.1991) is a Richmond, VA based visual artist who was born in Aurora, Illinois. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting and a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from the Kansas City Art Institute in 2013. She is currently a 2024 MFA Candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University's Department of Painting and Printmaking. Influenced by her personal experiences as a transgender woman, Bakala creates painterly expressions of everyday internal conflicts. In doing so, she examines various cultural preconceptions of trans-femininity, expressions of sexuality, and binaries of nature and artifice.

Introduction

In *Preexisting Conditionings*, I explore a dual notion of embodiment and disembodiment in relation to experiences ranging from fear, isolation and shame to pleasure and playfulness. This exploration is evident in my interactions with *The Sims 4*, a gaming platform through which I experiment with “world-building,” a concept I will discuss in relation to Legacy Russel’s “Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto.” With *The Sims 4*, I create custom avatars through which I play and experience a simulation of contemporary human life. It is a tool with which I create ever evolving narratives as fantastical reimaginings of lived realities. In service of this, I developed a population of characters predominantly composed of transfeminine matriarchal family units and two fictional organizations that function as settings for my characters’ development . The game’s user interface facilitates an abolition of present-day biological procreative constraints. I take full advantage of this fully customizable gender / sexuality / reproductive freedom, allowing my transgender characters to propagate amongst themselves, eschewing the binary barriers to parenthood in place in lived reality. The result is an experience of life heretofore inaccessible for me - bypassing the scientific and cultural impediments to motherhood as a transgender woman.

From a very young age my femininity was a point of contention both at home and at school. Gendered play was a bright and joyous light of opportunity for me, despite the abuse it consequently elicited. Once I was old enough to understand what shame was, parents and authority figures used it against me incessantly. Defying normative gender roles came with a double dose of it, because my actions now exposed their shame at my apparent perversion, and that not only was I endangering my own eternal soul, but also that I was endangering theirs by proxy. All the tenets of a devout catholic: the understanding of good and evil, the very real existence of god and the devil, heaven and hell, the concept of eternity - were all deeply ingrained upon the way I see the world and myself. When I eventually moved on and grew out of those limiting beliefs, something akin to a capacity for belief remained. Today that remaining

capacity informs my strategies behind art making and play. It is also likely responsible for my affinity for playing god in *The Sims 4*.

This capacity for belief animates much of the artwork I'm producing in tandem with this writing. It stimulates me, making me feel the need to augment the gaming experience I engage with in a way that pulls these fictional characters into a tangible reality that is both playful and generative. This body of my work is a culmination of many disparate experiences, desires, interests and fears. Retreating into an internal world worked as a coping strategy to escape violence early in my life, but now it is clear to me that the worlds I'm inspired to build must be enabled to exist outside of myself. Others must be able to understand that they too may one day be able to seize the tools to craft an imagining of the world they want to live in.

Painting and Play

In the case of these works, painting serves as a process of visionary realization. While the game itself is responsible for enabling me to conceptualize and narrativize the cast of characters, the abject realities implied by the bodily augmentations I'm envisioning are wholly absent from the game's simulation of life. Painting allows a holistic reimagining of a body that incorporates all of the grotesqueries of lived reality - including blood and feces.

While the practice of painting is a sensual investigation into modes of pictorial storytelling - both as a means of communicating with history but also as a platform upon which play can occur. It is a process of fine tuning my bodily processes of seeing and feeling. It responds directly to perceptual conditions and as such forms a pathway for synthesizing information between one's hand and one's eye. Rendered images are passed through the filter of the artist, leaving the image as a residual composite of the artist's intentions and actions.. Additionally, Art history is a sort of cultural receptacle for ideas, stories, images and practices. It is a limitless database with which one must contend as a contemporary artist. Recent art history also favors painting as a particularly commodifiable avenue within which to work. To make paintings as a

contemporary artist is to operate within a framework that tightly conforms to capitalism and responds quickly to the trends apparently favored by the market.

My painting practice produces images that are amalgamations of several components. First, these images are largely composed by directly referencing screenshots pulled from scenes of live gameplay. Additionally, my background in art history provides me an opportunity to view the world from a perspective that lateralizes existing hierarchies of images and media into an equal pool from which I can collect useful visual information. In this way, my paintings come into being like Frankenstein's monster - a creature whose body is composed of appropriated body parts. Painting also has the capacity to materialize immaterial or imaginary spaces. This ability becomes a governing logic by which I construct representations of fictional situations both inspired by and pulled from gameplay.

In order to define play as an activity that pertains to art in this context, I introduce Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, as a theoretical support apparatus for this body of my work. My interest in their writing specifically stems from Russell's articulation of the notion of "world-building." In their own words,

"Glitch feminism demands an occupation of the digital as a means of world-building. It allows us to seize the opportunity to generate new ideas and resources for the ongoing (r)evolution of bodies that can inevitably move and shift faster than AFK¹ modes or the societies that produce them under which we are forced to operate offline."²

In other words, the world-building of *Glitch Feminism* embraces expansive means of embodiment regarding gender and queerness, among others, within digital realms and thus relates to my own interest, experience, and goals as an artist.

¹ Russel uses the acronym AFK as shorthand for "away from keyboard"

² Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism*

3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/27/arts/transgender-nonbinary-gamers.html>

Butt Babies



To begin the process of introducing the body of work comprising *Preexisting Conditionings*, I present the two paintings above; *Georgie Gorge's Anal Birth* and *Georgie Gorge's Anal Birth 2*. In both of these paintings, one of my aforementioned matriarchs, Georgie Gorge, is giving birth anally. In the painting on the right, Georgie's birthing suite is a chaotic sight. Accompanying her is her (then) partner, Sapphire, to her right. The two of them hold hands tightly. The Squash Doctors attend dutifully, having successfully delivered one of the twins already. Paparazzi have been allowed into the delivery room to bear witness to the scene. Sapphire doesn't pass up a potential publicity stunt. In fact, she may have called them there herself. The other fetus is crowning when Sapphire starts to notice that the babies seem to resemble the Squash Squad more than they do herself or Georgie... wait a minute are these Squash babies?! Sapphire is apparently not the paternal mother of these kiddos 🤔



I conceived of the fictional organization, the SSiMMP (Sassy Squash Institute for Miscellaneous Medical Philosophies) to facilitate these kinds of fantastical reimaginings of the body, with the Sassy Squash squad as the practitioners responsible for facilitating various procedures. At once they are fertility specialists, doulas, surgeons, venture capitalists, alchemists, medical witches, etc. The SSiMMP facilitates parenthood for folks of all genders and walks of life. I used the term “paternal mother” here because in order to produce a viable sim embryo, DNA from both sim-parents are converted into a sim-sperm and a sim-egg. Sapphire in this instance is the paternal mother because her DNA was converted into sim-sperm. The fertilized sim-zygote was implanted into Georgie Gorge’s excretory pseudo-uterus.

Gaming

Russell’s conceptualization of world-building works as a foundational impetus from which new worlds - new ways of life, new ways of inhabiting our bodies, etc. spring forth. World building is a means by which we can radically re-imagine and thus impact the ways we engage with and ultimately dismantle status-quo normality. Together, technology and the internet facilitate these re-imaginings in ever expansive ways.

One of these expansive qualities is observable across genres of gaming in popular culture. When it comes to open world gaming platforms, many are largely about connecting with others - especially those that are multiplayer and facilitate that via the internet. While it is largely used to connect with others, it could also be argued that games like *The Sims* and other life-simulator and role-playing games provide an opportunity for players to connect with themselves. From an article in the *The New York Times*;

“Character creation tools in role-playing games like *Starfield* and *Baldur’s Gate 3* are making fewer gendered assumptions than in the past, giving players more freedom to select pronouns, shape their bodies and select a vocal range. Those new options are leading some players to spend hours creating their virtual avatars.”³

The Sims 4 is a game that has also embraced this freedom to customize the body, pronouns, vocal range, etc. This makes the -

Much of my play with the *Sims 4* is analogous to the ways I sought to play with dolls as a child. When I did finally get my hands on dolls, during play either alone or with others, I recreated dynamics and scenarios pulled from the media my family preferred to consume - that is - action movies (with the boys) and daytime soap operas (with my mom), among others. These programs conditioned within me at least several things which inform my personality to this day - firstly - a desire to grow up to look exactly like actress Famke Janssen à la her portrayal of Xenia Zaragevna Onatopp (pictured below/above) absolutely dragging Pierce Brosnan’s James Bond). Also present is an unquenchable thirst for drama (thanks soap operas) and an

embarrassing, deeply seated desire to get pregnant.



The first video game console my family owned was a Nintendo 64. The only game that interested me among the assortment accompanying it was *GoldenEye 007* (1997), the video game adaptation of the 1995 Bond flick of the same name. This game is most widely known by people of my generation for its multiplayer function which allowed up to 4 players to compete in a “shoot-em-up” style battle to the death. Players get to choose from an assortment of various characters from the movie in addition to a handful of other notable characters from previous films. Among them were 3 playable female characters, one of which was the aforementioned Miss Onatopp. I lived for the time I got to embody her through the screen. Sometimes I would even set up 3 other controllers for nobody else so that I could animate my chosen character and

bask in this vague and fleeting feeling of - what I know now to be - gender euphoria.



As I got older, I moved onto other games. As a pre-teen I found *The Sims* (2000) and *The Sims 2* (2004). Whereas previously with *GoldenEye 007* and playing with physical dolls left me open to ridicule and abuse from siblings, parents, etc, *The Sims* games allowed me to experiment with identity and embodiment in a way that was only for me. I was able to create my own private world, where I could learn about sexuality (although it portrays a highly sanitized version of sexuality it is not overtly prohibitive of homosexuality or gender variance) and play with what I enjoyed about embodying femininity, this was essentially playing dolls in the most highly elevated capacity.

Embodying Fear and Eros

In the body of work preceding *Preexisting Conditionings*, which culminated with a Candidacy Exhibition in 2023, I was very much interested in a painting's capability to perform. For these paintings, specifically the works, *Gooning 1*, and *Gooning 2* (see below), I reimagined the fetishizing gaze of men I encounter out and about in the world on a daily basis. To accomplish this, I experimented with the conceptual and perceptual capabilities of painting as a

space that necessitates viewership. I often utilized the trope wherein a painting functions as a window – a literal and parallel viewing apparatus that orients the viewer outside the illusory space contained within the picture plane. Here, this surface became a space of opportunity, a means by which my imaginary figurations could interact with physical reality.

The window as a viewing apparatus is also a means by which objects and entities are distorted beyond reality, according to perception – both literally and figuratively – resulting in subjects being designated as safe / dangerous (in addition to being evaluated according to other dichotomous criteria: interior / exterior, native / alien, self / other, etc)



Additionally during this time I was keenly interested in exploring my work's relationship to the viewer and the presuppositions they may bring to their viewing experience. In doing so, I'm examining cultural preconceptions of trans-femininity, expressions of sexuality, and binaries of nature and artifice. These topics are unified across works by an overarching emphasis on experiences of looking, seeing, and witnessing – figures break the fourth wall by making physical contact with the surface of a painting, others make an overt gesture of showing the viewer something, while others deploy cinematic compositional strategies. In many ways, the

viewer “activates” the pictorial scene. These paintings locate viewers themselves as objects of desire, fear or revulsion.

These paintings presented me with an opportunity to witness my generalized fear surrounding certain people and situations outside of myself. This was a fairly straightforward reversal of some of the first paintings I first produced upon arriving at VCU, (below). Upon joining the program, I attempted to resume my practice where I left off. In doing so, I created paintings continuing my then-current exploration of a desire surrounding mythologizing and creating transgender mythological creatures. With these works, I grappled with the generalized transphobia I experienced from others, imagining myself as a monstrous cave-dwelling cannibalistic figure whose sexual appetite was only outmatched by her hunger for human flesh. These paintings were a means for me to explore transfeminine desire and sexuality. They also



explored ideas concerning narrative formats and history - incorporating information and images from film, literature, and mythology.

In *Preexisting Conditionings*, I sought to embody sexuality and eroticism in a much different way. Having spent a lot of my career thus far making artworks that unpack and cope with trauma, it felt right to move on to other parts of myself to explore. In doing so, I discovered

an affinity for storytelling. With what began as a process of killing time through gaming, something much larger began to emerge. I discovered that I could build a whole world of my own from the comfort of my own laptop.

In my research to prepare for this writing, I came across this excellent quote by Legacy Russell which succinctly describes some of the feelings I had necessitating a pivot regarding the direction of my work. In an interview with Fatos Üstek for *Extra Extra Magazine*, when asked about what play means to them, they had this to say:... “I am keen on the idea of play these days because it is a radical act to engage with levity, even in moments where things feel pointless and completely devastating. “The joy of the erotic can make you laugh and helps to keep on producing, to think actively, collaborate, research and theorise. Through this period of time, all of those things are really bound up with each other and deeply co-dependent as a kind of survival mechanism.”

This quote informs much of my current drive surrounding art production. Issues in the world grow increasingly dire. A genocide is being waged against a defenseless people on the other side of the world⁴. We are all watching helplessly from these devices which at first were lauded for their ability to enable connectivity, democratize and disseminate information and galvanize political movements . The reality may in fact be that these devices are ultimately responsible for the erosion of the perceived democracy of this country⁵. Joy is indeed a radical act in the face of these realities.

4

<https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/attach/2016/10/Background%20on%20the%20term%20genocide%20in%20Israel%20Palestine%20Context.pdf>

5

<https://politicsinsider.medium.com/the-impact-of-iphones-on-politics-shaping-public-opinion-citizen-journalism-and-the-future-of-6b4503589d52>

Film as a Space for Imagining Alternate Realities

Film has played a fundamental role in my practice for many years now . Films are temporal, moving images, and I connect image creation in painting to film. David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2021) is conceptually important to this body of work.



Crimes of the Future is a 2022 science fiction, body horror, and drama film written and directed by David Cronenberg. The film stars Viggo Mortensen, Léa Seydoux and Kristen Stewart.⁶ It follows a performance artist duo (Mortensen and Seydoux) who perform surgery for audiences in a future where human evolution has accelerated for much of the population. In this ambiguous future time, significant strides in biotechnology have ushered in a new era where machines and computers seamlessly integrate with and regulate bodily functions, becoming commonplace. Concurrently, humanity itself undergoes unexplained biological transformations. Notably, a vast majority no longer experience physical pain or succumb to infectious diseases, enabling surgeries on conscious individuals in everyday settings. However, some undergo more

⁶ *Crimes of the Future*

profound physiological changes. Among them, an eight-year-old boy named Brecken, displays the innate ability to consume and digest plastics as food. Convinced that he is inhuman, Brecken's mother smothers him with a pillow, leaving his corpse to be found by her ex-husband Lang.⁷

The film posits a number of valuable questions surrounding humanity's ability to evolve in real time. Foremost, it questions how far into the future we must wait before we might be able to actualize a reality where the cellular and genetic material of our bodies may be mutable. It also presents a horrific portrayal of humanity's capacity for targeting and eliminating vulnerable individuals who are perceived to be capable of upending the status quo or who may altogether simply be too different.



Playing Doctor: Augmenting the Processes of the (AMAB) Body

The ontological and sociological questions presented in *Crimes of the Future* lead me to imagining which bodily elements or functions I would alter if the opportunity for full bodily autonomy and technology enabled augmentation were possible.

In *The Sims 4*, players are allowed to customize the gender and sexuality of their characters by making selections using the drop down menu pictured above. Among the options for reproductive capabilities, players can choose from the following options - “This Sim will be able to” 1. “Become Pregnant”, 2. “Get others pregnant” or 3. “Neither”. In making artworks for *Preexisting Conditionings*, I sought to animate this selection tool in a way that corresponds more directly to how these capabilities would be enabled through surgical processes in lived reality.



In the above painting titled, *Sassy Squash and her Surgical Sorority Assist in the Augmentation of their patient's Reproductive System*, these augmentations are imagined in ways that incorporate and acknowledge some of the oversimplifications present in the game's attempt to include a semblance of gender diversity. The patient here is a transfeminine character I made named Whitney Wonky who is undergoing this procedure so that she may experience pregnancy and childbirth. The operation serves to implant lab grown biotechnological gynecological organs into her abdominal cavity. Whitney has opted to retain her penis, so the doctors route the birth canal through her anus.



Family Play: Building Chaotic Kinsfolk in *The Sims 4*

This section will briefly describe the three matriarchal families who have come into being through my engagement with the Sims 4.

The Salad Family - Sapphire Salad, the mother of the house of Salad, is an evil, mean, and self absorbed, yet incredibly fertile transgender woman and kleptomaniac who also happens to be an A-List actress. Before she got her start acting, she married and murdered two husbands, inheriting their estates before finding the one true love of her life in Georgie Gorge. Sapphire began her life as a young adult - she was never actually young because when I created her she literally began her life as a young adult. Maybe that's why she's so evil. (That and the fact that I preselected that personality trait for her). Beginning life as a young adult with two bratty teenagers to feed would probably make you evil too.

Once Sapphire amasses some power and cache behind her name, she's reached the threshold of old age, finally earning her title of "Global Superstar". In her old age, Sapphire



seeks to extend her life. In doing so, she becomes a witch, attains immortality, and restores her youth. Sapphire ends up outliving her two original children. Pink Diamond dies of old age and the Ruby Salad (the first) commits suicide by repeatedly jumping into a shark infested koi pond. One day Sapphire hooks up with Georgie Gorge. Together they have children - 2Ruby and Emerald.



untitled
screenshot
(Squash
Domicile)
2023

The Squash Family - The Squash are composed of multitudinous generations of bright red werewolves. The Squash are an ancient lineage of matriarchal werewolves. Their progenitor is Sassy Squash. Most of them come to work in the field of medicine for some reason. Sassy marries Pearl Salad and they birth notable characters named Egg Salad, Stassi Squash, Satchel Squash, Sissy Squash, etc. Somehow they get their hands on a massive fortune with which they found the Sassy Squash Institute for Miscellaneous Medical Philosophies.



The Gorge Family - Georgie Gorge is a trans woman who became a witch and attained immortality. She married Sapphire Salad well into her 2nd young adulthood. Before that, Georgie's first love was with a trans woman vampire celebrity stylist named Fiadh Fugg. Fiadh and her cis sister, Fionnuala, moved in with Georgie who went to great lengths to supply Fiadh and her sister with plasma fruit (the game's version of a vegetarian alternative to Sim's blood. Also blood here is called plasma) very much in line with the sanitized versions of things they do in this game) so that they would not need to feast on the "blood" of live sims. Fiadh and Georgie had several kids - almost all of whom grew up and died of old age because they were mortal. .Once Georgie discovered that Fiadh had been drinking the 'plasma' of their mortal children all along, their relationship deteriorated. Georgie hooked up with their nanny, an elderly man of little consequence and had a daughter named Genifer. Genifer now owns and operates a clothing optional boutique / restaurant / celebrity hotspot.



Here we have Miss 2Ruby 2Salad, named after the hit sequel to street-racing movie, *The Fast and the Furious*, one of her mother Sapphire's favorites. In naming her so, Sapphire had high expectations for her daughter. Unable to live up to these, 2Ruby became the frequent target of her mother's ire. One of Sapphire's favorite activities is to afflict her daughter with the dreadful Curse of Repulsiveness, instantly rendering her an ugly and abject spectacle.



*Curse Cleansing
Consultation*

Painting: Oil on
canvas
Frame: foamboard,
acrylic, glass and
crystal rhinestones

In *Curse Cleansing Consultation*, Ruby Salad appears before her mother, Sapphire, and sisters Citrine and Svedka, for a consultation regarding the removal of her current affliction - The Curse of Repulsiveness - which is the reason for her verdant and unsightly appearance. Sapphire works in the Magical Plastic Surgery division of the SSiMMP Institute and is advising her daughter on a little lunchtime outpatient procedure that could clear that right up. Little do the sims of the town know that Sapphire is single handedly responsible for the massive local demand for curse removal procedures.



In *Betty Buggs and the SSiMMP Bio-Medical Waste Dispensary*, we find Betty Buggs, (a random filler character I made) stuffed into a biomedical waste dumpster. She solicits passersby for sexual favors while she waits to be reclaimed in one of Dr. Squash's experiments or divided up into parts and donated to Sims in need. She hopes to one day get picked up by a nice monogamous long-term-relationship oriented necrophiliac.

Exploitation of Play

The big big meta picture here is that I am exploiting my own production and playful nature in service of an eventual hypothetical cashing in

The below quote by alexander galloway speaks to the capitalistic exploitation of play. This quote could be used to speak to the overly adorned nature of the frames. At first, a playful impulse exists, then is exploited in service of accumulation strategy.

“We are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system,” wrote Donna Haraway, “from all work to all play, a deadly game.”¹⁰ With the growing significance of immaterial labor, and the concomitant increase in cultivation and exploitation of play—creativity, innovation, the new, the singular, flexibility, the supplement—as a productive force, play will become more and more linked to broad social structures of control. Today we are no doubt witnessing the

end of play as politically progressive, or even politically neutral.)” Alexander R. Galloway,
Gaming: Essays On Algorithmic Culture

Presentation Modules

My practice of oil painting is a means of actualizing these simulated experiences / people / places. The surface of a painting \neq touch screen - viewing apparatus / computer screen / tv screen. The use of painting here is a lateral move - whereas in the computer game, I'm creating virtual beings and places through a selection of prefab traits / characteristics / personality traits, painting too is a process of selection and amalgamation / incorporation of prefab materials.

I refer to the framelike containers for the video and painted works as presentation modules.

They are not simply framing an art object , they package, they contain. These modules act as normal decorative frames, but are actually an antigenic reaction to the paintings and experiences themselves - they accumulate mass like a cancer. They both support and subvert the structure of a painting or video work. They are modular in the sense that they are constantly mutable, portable and accumulative. They are provisional in nature in that they are composed entirely of foamcore, foamboard, and insulation foam. These materials are soft and moldable, they bend easily and are often used in the production of preparatory materials for moquettes, architectural models, and other visionary processes.

These modules are accumulative - they gather ephemera and contextualize the content that they present. In this way, they are parenthetical. What are these ephemeral materials exactly - rhinestones / gemstones (find a sturdier throughline word) and crystal / glass beads, used intramuscular injection needles, silicone pours, acrylic gloss pours, drywall screws and fragments / detritus of the foam cutting / sizing process. Also present on these modules are a mixture of laser and hand-cut foam-core letters that are formulated to further narrate details of the pictured scene.

These materials collectively speak toward capitalism, medicine, storytelling, transition (in a very literal way to transgender experience as well as in the figuratively broad sense of

transition and time), power, taste (as in the kind associated with elevated monetary value and perceived value) opulence, and absurdity.

Violence and exploitation are happening across the surface of these modules. They are penetrated, torn, sliced, burned, melted and molded. Simultaneously, they become excessively adorned through the application of shiny textures, lacquers and sparkly objects. Together, these materials coagulate to form a bastardized permutation of existing modes of production in art history (painting), contemporary culture (twitch streaming, youtube content creators, gender play), medical interventions upon the body (medically supervised gender transition /hrt, gender affirming body modification), commodity fetishism (as represented across industries - fast fashion, accessorization, accumulation strategy, arts and crafts stores)

In the sense that all individuals under capitalism are a summation of their social positions and economic value, these paintings and objects i create are, like me, an accumulation of the detritus of my various social positionings (catholic, repressed, downwardly mobile middle class, transgender, female, clinically depressed, white, and personally selected, economically favorable (economically tried and true mass produced) commodities. Perhaps the criticality I'm wringing my hands about is present in the collapsing precarities that exist in my work - I build imaginal configurations of real and perceived concepts allowing them to play out in a life simulator game.

In my exhibition, all videos are playing on iPads, which are mounted inside of these presentation modules. This gesture speaks toward the nature of a rarefied art object in conjunction with a mass produced commodity fetish item of technology. Considering technology sociologically, it becomes a means by which we are both held closer to one another and further separated and alienated. I also incorporate influences from stan Twitter (X) culture influence - "shitposting" and humor are also present in the work. - the characters I create are influenced by usernames, pseudonyms, aliases, display names, stage names.

Body Modification

The format of the game gives me the opportunity to play with identity but it also provides an opportunity to do so through manual bodily manipulation. I get to twist, pull, stretch, “bulk up”, slim, accentuate and contort facial features and body types. Skin color, hair length, shoe size, etc. can all be completely customized. These manipulations - often taking the form of feminization processes - become hereditary within the game. One character’s pseudo-rhinoplasty, fox eye lift and breast augmentation become traits that can get passed down genetically. These body modifications become physical in the paintings and presentation modules.

The glitch - cheated traits become kaleidoscopic glitches, causing the emergence of polygonal protrusions on the faces of my characters. “Cheated traits” combining so called “occult” identities (game’s term) like werewolfism and witchcraft (the game only allows one of these identities to exist in one character, but because I use cheat codes to combine these identity features, unexpected glitches can occur. These glitches are also passed down “genetically”. The performance - my performative narrative takes place during several videos. At times I appear in the video to talk the viewer through the space.

With this experience as a basis for my narrative explorations, I’m able to experiment and play beyond my desire to deconstruct and reformulate traditional family structures. I create videos in which I share the fruits of these narrative experiments and make paintings that bridge the gap between the game’s PG-13 content restrictions and the grotesqueries of lived reality. I also build sculptural interventions that allow me to contextualize and contain these images and videos within the material world. Oftentimes these interventions manifest themselves as opulent frames containing words and language which narrate the painted and video content.

Through the *Sims 4*, I’m examining the limitations of my social position and the societal trans body is not a boundary with which one must negotiate compliance or complacency but instead is a corporeal opportunity for radical human expansion.

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