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Double Jointed:

Gendered Flexibility and the Overextended Self

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

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### **For my mom, my grandma, and my sister**

Thank you for teaching me how to bend with the wind

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Madeleine, Paz, Riley, Bridget, Holly F., Jake, Chelsea, Sweet Pea, Nate's Bagels,

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores compulsory domesticity and the impulse to overextend oneself – both pressures often associated with the construct of femininity. Through diving into my personal history, which includes growing up in a three-generational home of women, I explore mimesis as it functions in both the replication of identity and in terms of pictorial representation; specifically I address its relationship to gender, manifestation within the body, and the search for subjectivity through the process of making and thinking. In various forms of material explorations, I play with ideas of malleability, mimicry and “embedded” behaviors that are passed down and embodied in those socialized as women in a heteronormative structure. I translate this act of overextension as a play on words as well as through form, creating connections by hinging, stretching, folding and linking, to address the psychological as well as physical. I chose the title *Double Jointed*, meaning one's joints can move past the normal range of motion, as it implies that you have two joints where you should have one. With this notion, I address the embodiment of these cultural patterns as physical, and aim to frame these perceived weaknesses as strengths, within my practice and personhood.

## Embedded Narrative

I began my first-year artist-talk by delving into the description of the *Scythian Lamb* or *Lamb of Tartary*, a strange myth from the Middle Ages. This *creature*, often mistaken for an animal, is actually a type of fern native to southeastern Asia, characterized by stalks covered in shaggy hair and brown fibrous leaves<sup>1</sup>. Due to its furry texture, it was erroneously believed to produce vegetable wool. According to legend, it was tethered to the ground by a stalk or umbilical cord, consuming all vegetation within its reach until it either perished from starvation or was devoured by a wolf. Its bones were purportedly used in ceremonies for divination, while its wool was fashioned into hats. Its flesh is said to taste sweet, and its blood like honey<sup>2</sup>



Elizabeth Blackwell, “The Scythian Lamb” Pl. 360, From *A Curious Herbal*, London, 1737-1739.

<sup>1</sup> Carrubba, Robert W. “Engelbert Kaempfer and the Myth of the Scythian Lamb.” *The Classical World* 87, no. 1 (1993): 41–47. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4351440>.

<sup>2</sup> “Baromez.” 2024. Pdx.edu. 2024.

<https://web.pdx.edu/~tdehart/Madam%20Mythos/Countries/Eur/Profiles/Barometz/baromez.html>.



Upon examining the *Scythian Lamb* and its woolly exterior, it becomes apparent why it was misidentified as an animal. The misreading of something often leads to the creation of a subject that is constantly evolving; similar to the game of telephone, the description of the lamb likely became stretched and exaggerated with each retelling.

Myths, with their inherent abstraction of reality, have always been a central theme in my artistic practice. In my thesis exhibition, *Double Jointed*, I wanted to evoke similar undefinable yet animistic qualities. Works in the exhibition embody characteristics of architecture, animal, body, and landscape simultaneously. Their subjects are malleable, porous, and undefinable.

The predominant myths and narratives I was raised with were rigid, biblical in nature, and centered around archetypes of stark gender roles, engaging in duty, devotion, and sacrifice. As I matured, I encountered other forms of storytelling—polytheistic myths, magical realism, and science fiction—each offering perspectives that challenged the perceived binary of my upbringing. These genres embraced notions of multiplicity and boundarylessness, sparking within me a fascination with the realm of fantasy and the potential for crafting new worlds.

Archetypes, through the Jungian lens, are mirrored reflections of universal or essential qualities.<sup>3</sup> The concept is usually met with skepticism in light of feminist critique, due to their replication in cultural representations, reinforcing dominant narratives and excluding multiplicity or diverse experiences<sup>4</sup>. In my previous paintings, I was seeking to create the Anti-Archetype and the Anti-Heroine.

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<sup>3</sup> Leigh, David J. "Carl Jung's Archetypal Psychology, Literature, and Ultimate Meaning." *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 34, no. 1–2 (2011): 95–112. <https://doi.org/10.3138/uram.34.1-2.95>.

<sup>4</sup> Goldenberg, Naomi R. "A Feminist Critique of Jung." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2, no. 2 (1976): 443–49. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493369>.



Jacob Andries Bescheij, *Maria Magdalene washing the feet of Christ*, 1735

The first Anti-Heroine that captured my interest was Mary Magdalene, a complex figure in Christianity, categorized in many ways from ascetic to sex worker to hermit to bride of Christ. Much like the Scythian lamb, I feel that the story of Mary Magdalene took on a similarly shapeshifting mythology of its own, both fluid and undefinable. I was in church when I heard the priest describe the moment where she washed the feet of Jesus Christ with her hair. This brought together, for me, the realms of myth, art, and the complexities of womanhood. This act of subservience initially evoked feelings of indignation, yet I was touched by the use of hair as a material for cleansing, care, and comfort. Mary Magdalene's image has been manipulated by religious institutions into a spectrum of portrayals throughout history. She has evolved into a multifaceted representation embodying various archetypes, embodying whatever the times have needed her to be. As a child, I lacked the cognitive capacity to grapple with the discomfort of not being able to neatly categorize her.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Ann Caldwell, "The Changing Myth of Mary Magdalene," PhD diss., (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2018).

Complexities like this led me to delve deeper into the malleability of Archetype. During my first year of graduate study, I made a series of paintings inspired by the myth of the Siren. In classical Greek mythology, Sirens were depicted as seductive creatures with the power to lure sailors to their doom with their enchanting voices. The most famous depiction of Sirens comes from Homer's "Odyssey," in which Odysseus and his crew encounter them during their journey home from Troy<sup>6</sup>; despite the temptation of their song, the men are able to fill their ears with beeswax and escape the call.



William Etty, *The Sirens and Ulysses*, 14' x 9', Oil on Canvas, 1837

Sirens were often portrayed as delicate and demure one-dimensional beings in art historical representations, symbolizing the perilous nature of temptation and confined within the narrative of archetypal sexuality. They are frozen within the moment of seduction, lacking depth and complexity; even in depictions of violence, their fragility is preserved, perpetuating the notion of their accidental and insignificant kills. These portrayals stirred within me a desire to evoke sympathy for the Sirens, to explore their motives and challenge the traditional predator-prey dichotomy. In my interpretation, I sought to infuse this familiar trope with subjectivity, agency, and contradiction, primarily utilizing figuration, body language, and visual cues as vehicles of transformation.

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<sup>6</sup> Homer. *The Odyssey*. London : New York : W. Heinemann; G.P. Putnam's sons, 1919.



*Siren's Wake*, 72"x110" Oil on Canvas, 2023

In *Siren's Wake*, my intention was not to portray the typical sensual temptation associated with Sirens, but rather the calm aftermath, akin to detumescence, the come-down after a climax. The figure's body language embodies a sense of remorse or release, as they lay in a limp pile of tangled bodies. I included the sonic waves of their scream, giving the Siren a voice through visual gesture. This representation aims to shift the narrative, acknowledging the Siren as a complex subject rather than an object of desire.



*Wading*, 48"x 56" Oil on Canvas, 2023

In *Wading*, the subject undergoes a transformation from the sexualized lure, obscuring her face and body while emphasizing her balding head and stringy hair. The trope of hair loss serves as a symbol of resistance to sexual appeal, challenging conventional notions of femininity and beauty. Through these works, I sought to disrupt and reconstruct the figures, exploring themes of malleability and rediscovery through pure figuration and painting language, advocating for the complexity and agency of female characters in art.

However, the malleability I sought grew into its own life, apart from any specific historical narrative; thus, the work became deeply personal, acting as cryptic self-portraiture. Through pure figuration and painting language, I focused on the formlessness of a body, with emphasis on its permeability to light – the salient feature being the act of granting the figure permission to remain undefined through physicality

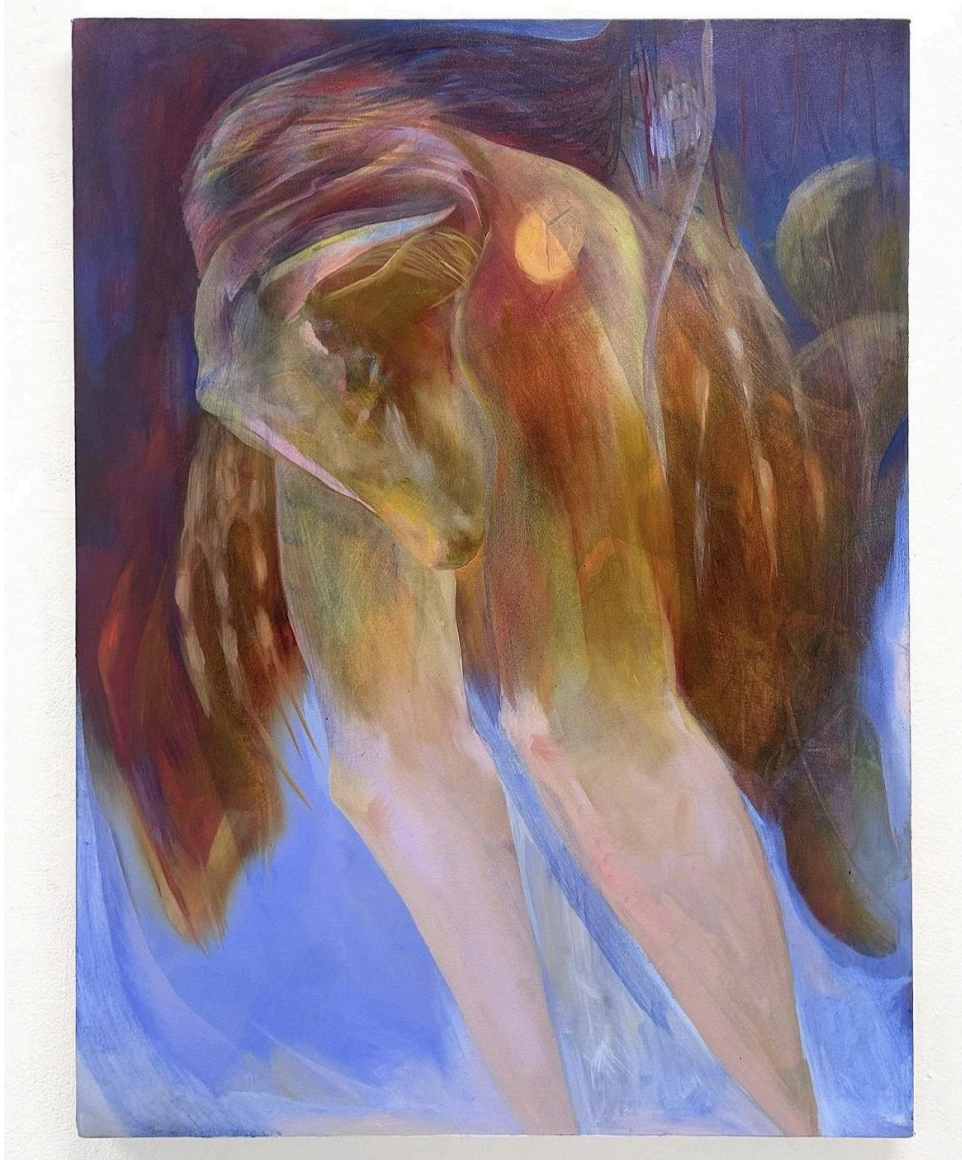
of process. In these later paintings, I embrace figuration as uncertain and messy with emphasis on a shaky hand and searching through mark making, creating indeterminate bodies that act as energy sources suspended in air.



*Vital Heat*, 30"x 40" Oil on Canvas

During the process of painting *Vital Heat*, I used a dish sponge to wipe the surface of the painting with thin layers of contrasting cool and warm colors until figures emerged. The plasticity of identity I was searching for now became a plasticity of process. The figures brought themselves to the forefront of this painting. At first, I saw a figure falling onto their back and another hovering between their legs. For the physically charged energy I sought in this work, it was important for me to show the weight and gravity of the fall and the embrace. Similar to a Rorschach inkblot test, where subjective interpretations depend on past experiences, I make marks, discern what I see, and determine if it reinforces the narrative I wish to convey. If not, the mark is negated; if it proves meaningful and recognizable, it is further detailed and

delineated. Deciding on the image in this way is a process of decision making by refusal and approval, enacting my own agency over their narrative.



*Golden Calf*, 30" x 20", Oil on Canvas, 2024

The painting *Golden Calf* blurs the delineation between human and non-human, allowing the figure to exist in a state of metamorphosis and transformation. The title refers to the concept of idolatry, or putting something or someone on a pedestal. In this case, the *false God* rests in between the legs of the

figure, referencing a past romantic relationship in which I feel I gave my individuality up too freely for the sake of love. Much of this past work relates to myself in this lens of codependency and interdependency, which becomes a central theme in *Double Jointed*.

## **Self Reflection**

For me, painting is a form of self-taught reflection. The women in my life have always put others first, even to the detriment of themselves, and the self reflection that I witnessed always involved a mirror. It wasn't until my grandma came to live with us when I was around age six that I understood where my mom and her five sisters learned their putting-on-makeup face. It's an exaggerated pursed-lips, tight-cheeks kind of stare, and the only time I witnessed my mom spend a lingering and tender moment with herself. I thought that because I noticed this unconscious imitation, I had the power to resist it. At the time, mimicry felt like a lack of agency. Mimesis, originating from ancient Greek philosophy, is a concept often used to describe the act of imitation or copying<sup>7</sup>. In the context of art, it refers to the process by which an artist produces a representation. In this body of work I take this one step further, claiming that reflection itself is both physical and psychological, something that can in turn be produced through these matriarchal lines. When I first began painting, it felt like an experiment in accessing what was only mine. Redirecting the act of self-examination from the mirror to the canvas, I seized the opportunity to thoughtfully envision my own ideal conditions. Painting provided a sanctuary for uninterrupted introspection, and was surprisingly acknowledged and respected as such by the influential women in my life. In this body of work, I wanted to take the relationship between painting and embedded reflection far beyond figuration.

Throughout history, mirrors in paintings have symbolized vanity, lust, or narcissism<sup>8</sup>. However, they also carry an important symbolism of liberation. They were wielded as tools of agency for female

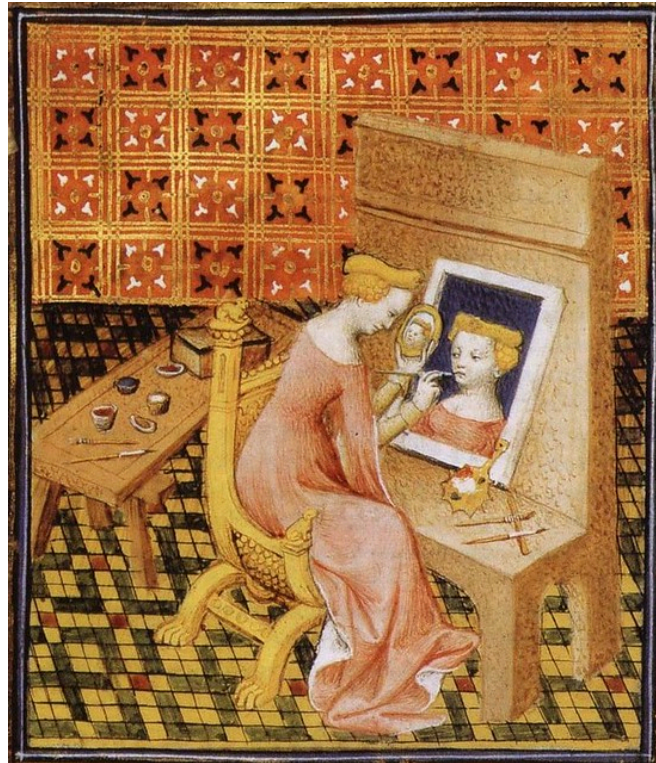
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<sup>7</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "mimesis." Encyclopedia Britannica, November 22, 2011. <https://www.britannica.com/art/mimesis>.

<sup>8</sup> "The Fitzwilliam Museum - Mirrors." n.d. The Fitzwilliam Museum. Accessed April 27, 2024. <https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/explore-our-collection/highlights/context/sign-and-symbols/mirrors>.



artists through self portraiture, in order to challenge traditional representations of themselves, and granted women, primarily in Europe, autonomous art-making when access to nude models and art academies was restricted.<sup>9</sup>



*Marcia Painting her Self-Portrait*, illustrated in Giovanni Boccaccio, *De Mulieribus Claris* (Concerning Famous Women), 1402.

In “Women Artists and the Looking Glass”, Art Critic Jennifer Higgin describes the above painting *Marcia Painting her Self-Portrait*:

Marcia is seated at a desk, a convex mirror in her left hand; her right hand holds a brush, with which she is painting the lips of her self-portrait, a small detail that shows that Marcia’s agency of description is through paint, not words. A small palette, which at first glance looks like

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<sup>9</sup> Higgin, Jennifer, and Mimi Chu. 2021. “Women Artists and the Looking Glass.” *Frieze*. <https://www.frieze.com/article/women-artists-and-looking-glass>.

another hand mirror, is placed to her right, next to two brushes. In this tiny image is a triple portrait: Marcia at the easel, represented in her self-portrait and reflected in her mirror.<sup>10</sup>

With the addition of the mirror, painting continued to transform and complicate the self-reflected female gaze. During world war II, several female surrealist painters relocated to Mexico City; Leonora Carrington, Katy Horna, and Remedios Varo exemplified a new visual representation of self reflexivity<sup>11</sup>. They abstracted their view of self as they shifted from being muses to creators, incorporating a more mythopoetic perspective through a fantasy and world-building. They depicted themselves as animals and cosmic beings with references to alchemical transformation.



Remedios Varo, “Armonía” (Harmony) (1956); collection Eduardo F. Costantini (© 2023 Remedios Varo, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Madrid)

<sup>10</sup> Higgle, Jennifer, and Mimi Chu. 2021. “Women Artists and the Looking Glass.” *Frieze*. <https://www.frieze.com/article/women-artists-and-looking-glass>.

<sup>11</sup> Carrington, Gabriel Weisz. *The invisible painting: My memoir of Leonora Carrington*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021.

In the painting *Armonía*, Varo inserts us into a world of vaporous animism, where even the walls are personified. As she sits, she engages in a three dimensional musical composition of shapes and symbols. Much like the other Magical Realists, Varo's work is rooted in introspective worlds and unconscious fantasy, embodying the unpredictable and shapeshifting internal gaze.

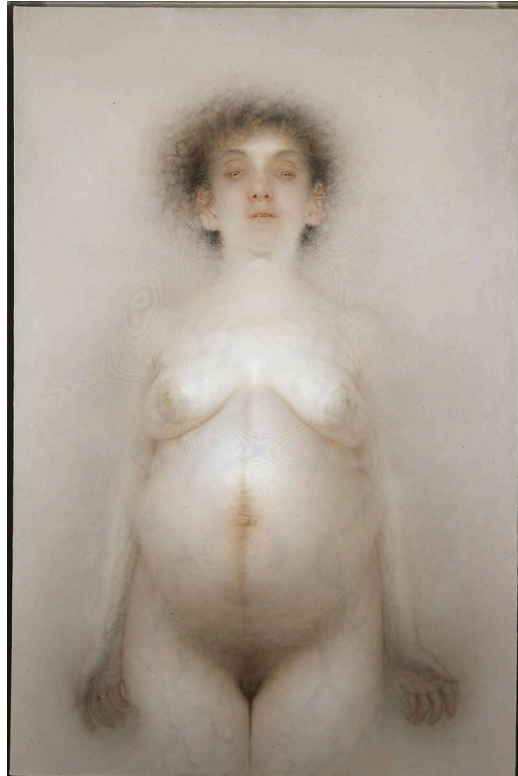


Paula Rego, *Dog Woman*, Pastel on canvas 120 x 160 cm 47 1/4 x 63 in, 1994

Another artist who uses a zoomorphic lens of self reflection is Paula Rego, a Portuguese artist known for her paintings of fairytale adaptations. In Rego's "Dog Woman" series, she challenges societal expectations of *feminine* behavior and body language, portraying women as dogs with irreverence and freedom. This painting is Rego's tribute to her model, Lila Nunes, the caretaker of her dying husband but also a stand-in for herself<sup>12</sup>. The subject acts as a space in between her and her husband, blurring the lines

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.victoria-miro.com/artworks/29910/>

between self-portrait and allegory, personifying subservience and strength. This simple adjustment from normative to animalistic body language reflects Rego's exploration of gender performance and caregiving, exploring the space between control and unraveling.



Anne Harris, *2nd Portrait with Max*, Oil on Canvas, 1997

Similarly, my former professor and contemporary artist Anne Harris grapples with identity through self-portraiture. Harris is an artist who navigates the search for self in a similarly ambiguous way. Her work is hazy and ethereal, and her figures feel unsolid, unstable, and penetrated with light. In this way, she captures their state of becoming as they slowly solidify into view. She often reflects on the femme experience through aging and societal perceptions of beauty. In one interview speaking about her solo exhibition *Phantasmatical: Self-Portraits*, at Alexandre Gallery in New York, she states that she wishes to

portray the feeling of going from an oblivious child, to a watched adult, and back to invisibility as one ages.<sup>13</sup> Harris also mentions not knowing exactly what she truly looks like, and the paintings are made so as to understand. Oftentimes, the paintings turn out to look only slightly like her, and instead seem to be an amalgamation of many women. Instead of the common point of focus being the face, these figures come into focus around the chest or belly. It seems that her paintings act as mirrors meant to be deciphered, like riddles or mazes to the truth of self. She leans into, instead of away from, the deceptive nature of looking at one's self.

The mirror phase in psychoanalysis serves as a foundation for understanding the construction of identity and the interplay between perception and representation<sup>14</sup>. While Lacan, Foucault, and Freud conceived of the mirror as a developmental stage, I propose exploring alternative modes of self-reflection. The mirror image is filtered through our inherently distorted, exaggerated opinion of ourselves, reflecting our fears and insecurities. The illusion of painting offers liberation, allowing for the manipulation and translation of the self, embracing its malleability mid-metamorphosis. This plasticity of self-transcription parallels the evolution of painting and the emergence of the female gaze.

In feminist thought, mirrors carry profound symbolic weight. Melanie Klein, a prominent psychoanalyst, emphasized the importance of early childhood relationships with caregivers and the role of the mirror in shaping self-perception<sup>15</sup>. This perspective highlights the significance of mirrors as mediators of interpersonal dynamics and power structures. By using the idea of reflection in a metaphorical way I am able to abstract the manifestation of mimesis, allowing it to be mutated, non-figurative, and materially distorted.

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<sup>13</sup>“Anne Harris, Phantasmatical: Self-Portraits.” 2013. YouTube. <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=FzCdSx85aW4>.

<sup>14</sup>Allen, Amy, and Mari Ruti. 2019. *Critical Theory Between Klein and Lacan: A Dialogue*. N.p.: Bloomsbury Academic.

<sup>15</sup> Allen, Amy, and Mari Ruti. 2019. *Critical Theory Between Klein and Lacan: A Dialogue*. N.p.: Bloomsbury Academic.

In *Double Jointed* there is a single painting that mimics the checkerboard tile of the floor. With its desaturated low contrast, it is almost a smudge of the imitated pattern that is warped and distorted.



Installation of *Wall Painting*, 72" x 110" Oil on Canvas, Joint Compound, Foam, Drywall Tape, 2024

Once approached, it becomes clear that there is no discrete edge, the painting is plastered to the wall. This picture plane acts as a mirror but also a shadow or an after-image of what is underneath the viewer's feet. It brings a subtle awareness to the mutability of the surrounding space. The floor is just a series of marks and the walls are made up of tape and mud. The use of the wall as an extension of the painting creates doubt around its solidity, exposing the malleability of the architecture we assume to be fixed.



*Detail of Wall Painting*

The painting becomes an ephemeral feature of the space, it is made only for this placement. By transforming a painting from a treasured object to a facet of architecture, this work interacts with the idea of flexible vs. fixed ideologies, both in medium as well as identity formation.



Installation of *Wall Painting*

## **Domesticity**

*Double Jointed* is rooted in my relationship to stagnancy, my contradictory desire for safety and stability yet trepidation towards becoming ensnared in a caretaking role. The recent decline of my Mom's health and shifting family and relationship dynamics brought this into the forefront of my vision during my time in graduate school.

Maggie Nelson, an acclaimed American writer known for exploration of themes including gender, sexuality, and art has been a source of recent inspiration. In her book "The Argonauts," she intertwines personal narrative with philosophical reflection, chronicling her experiences of love, gender fluidity, and



family structures. She reflects on her contentment with renting an apartment, despite the deteriorating condition of her home.<sup>16</sup> She questions the radicality of refusing conventional norms of upkeep, stating,

I was so happy renting in New York, in the way that I did, which involved never lifting a finger to better my surroundings, which allows you to let things literally fall apart around you. Then, when it gets to be too much you just move on (Nelson, 14).

Nelson's perspective acknowledges and challenges the societal pressure to maintain a pristine home. In a similar way, I have felt that my practice serves as a metaphor for creating and maintaining a space for myself in which I push against the idea of perfection; however, I also see engaging with care and beauty as an act of pleasure and an essential form of self-preservation. In this way, I do not find the act of *not caring* as liberatory. However, in my practice, it is crucial that both care and a pursuit of beauty are approached out of choice and not compulsion.

In order to mediate this cognitive dissonance, I manipulate and mutate the cycle of mimicry instead of refusing it, using it as a strength within my practice. In *Double Jointed* there are a series of home-related items, used only slightly for their intended purpose. The wool that surrounds *House* is specialty home insulation; it envelopes the outside of *House*, in a traditional way, with the only difference being that it is normally a material meant to be hidden. Here it becomes the defining feature of the work; it becomes carefully and thoughtfully sculpted, with particular attention paid towards the first side you can see upon entering the room.

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<sup>16</sup> Nelson, Maggie, 1973-. 2015. *The Argonauts*. Minneapolis, Minnesota, Graywolf Press.



*House*, 8'x10'x10', Wood Panels, Hinges, Oil Paint, Graphite, Wool, Foam, 2024



Installation of *House*

The *Keys* take on a similar role in the installation. In this work, I contemplated the notion of entry and ownership of the domestic space and how it could be reimagined. This piece transforms the symbol of keys, rendering them useless and devoid of their traditional power. Instead of acting as instruments of access, the keys take on a spinal or bodily quality, becoming fixed in the lock lodged in the wall. The entirety of the keys is resting on a similar bed of raw wool denoting its relationship to yet displacement from *House*.



Installation of *Keys*, Dimensionals Variable, Wool, Miscellaneous Keys and Keychains, Hotel Key Card, Galvanized Steel Chain, Door Lock, 2024

The abundance of keys in the sculpture serves to trivialize their power, calling into question notions of consent and permission. The more keys there are, the more impotent they become, their significance diluted by their sheer quantity. Attached to a chain, the keys highlight the malleability of their meaning through their multiplicity and hinged appearance. This approach aims to stretch a symbol to its maximum potential through repetition and accumulation. In addition, I acquired them through eBay lot bidding, garage sale hunting, and donations from friends and fellow artists. The act of giving someone your old keys is one of trust and care, and also a goodbye to a place you aren't meant to enter anymore.



Detail of Keys

By drowning the key in a sea of others, the sculpture challenges the individualist desire to possess one's own home, complicating the idea of ownership and access. The metal keys, shiny and layered, take on a soft and fabric-like quality, despite their rigid materiality. In this shape, almost 70 pounds of keys create the impression of a fringed or soft material, like a feather boa, reinforcing the concept of plasticity through physical material.

Catherine Opie, An American photographer known for her compelling portraits and documentary style photographs, is also mentioned in the aforementioned passage from Nelson. Opie's work offers a poignant exploration of identity, community, the American Landscape, the performance of domesticity and its implications.



Catherine Opie, *Cutting*, 39" × 28 3/4", Chromogenic print, 1993

In the portrait *Cutting*, the back of a figure is shown; depicted is the artist herself, and on her back are classic children's drawing motifs – gendered stick figures, a sun in the clouds, and a house. These images are actually deeply carved into her flesh, embodying the longing for conventional domestic elements within a queer relationship along with the inherent pain and personal sacrifice that accompany deviating from societal norms.

A consideration of the domestic sphere not only as a physical place, but also as an interior landscape is an essential part of *Double Jointed*. Explorations of space, memory, and the body resonate as tangible metaphors in this installation for both the conscious mind as well as unconscious, embedded narratives.



Louise Bourgeois: *Structures of Existence; The Cells*, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2016

Drawing inspiration from Louise Bourgeois, a French-American artist whose work encompasses themes of trauma, memory, and the subconscious, *Double Jointed* similarly navigates the complexities of the domestic sphere as a psychological shell. Of particular interest to me is her series "Structures of Existence: The Cells," which are multifaceted enclosures filled with objects and sculptural forms arranged to provoke emotional responses. Much like in a theatrical setting, everyday objects such as clothes and furniture serve as charged barriers between the artist's inner world and the external environment.



Louise Bourgeois: *Structures of Existence; The Cells*, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2016

## THE BODY & GETTING STUCK

For Bourgeois, bodies and architecture are intertwined themes. Another series of work, the *Femme Maison* (woman-house, but also house-wife) is comprised of drawings, paintings and sculptures depicting women with houses for bodies and houses for heads, obscuring their identity and merging them with domestic spaces<sup>17</sup>. In creating *House I* I drew upon Bourgeois's conceptual framework, particularly her use of bodily metaphors and the shape of a central “enclosure” within the space. The illusionary properties of materials in *House* mirror the fluidity of gender presentation within Bourgeois' work. Within this

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<sup>17</sup> “Louise Bourgeois. *Femme Maison*. 1946-1947.” n.d. MoMA. Accessed April 27, 2024. <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/42/665>.

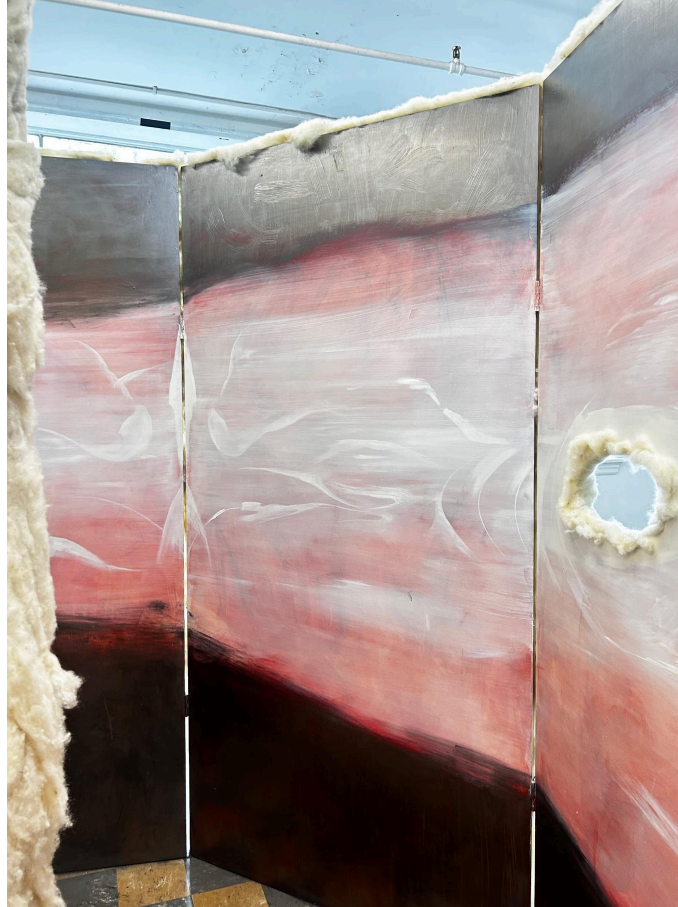
installation I chose to interplay soft/hard textures and interior/exterior spaces so as to challenge binary categorizations.

In *Double Jointed* the paintings within the spiral, in the interior space of this “house” act as the internal world of the body. The marks and experiences inscribed onto its walls are mimetic gestures that slightly mirror each other on each adjacent panel. The panels become decorated like the body accumulates memories on the inside of its walls, and much like our psyche it is permeable through the holes. The shape acts as a stimulus for movement, an extension of the body's innate impulse to explore and redefine its own limits.



Above view of *House*



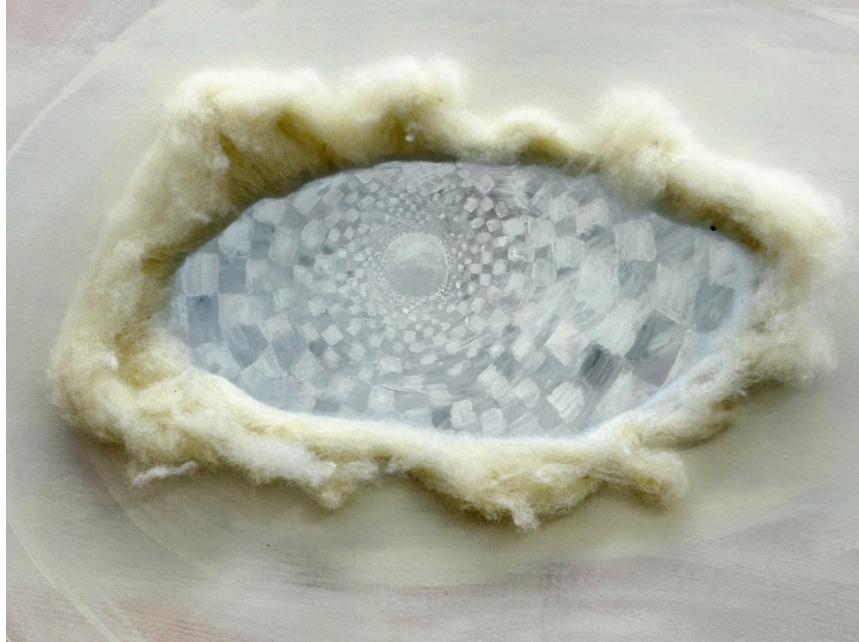


Interior view of *House*

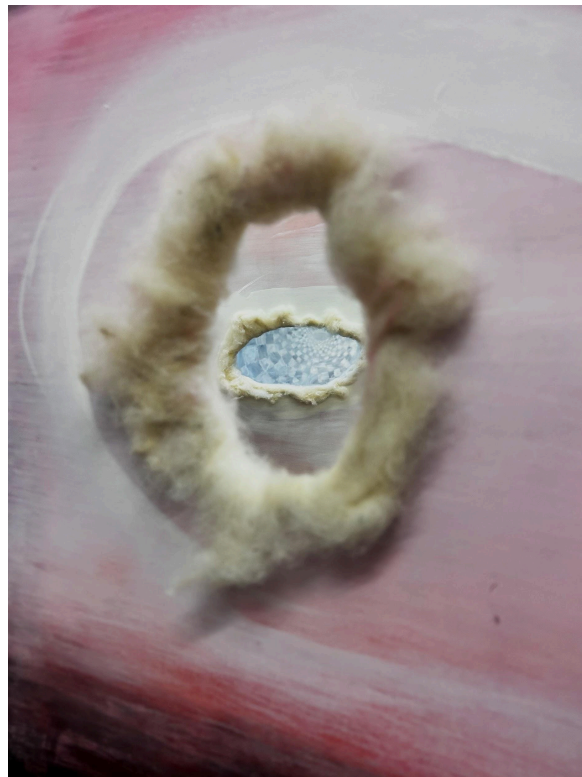
In *Body, Memory, and Architecture*, by Kent C Bloomer, an American sculptor, and Charles W. Moore, an American architect, the authors compare bodily boundaries to the boundaries of the house; domestic activities relate to internal experiences and bodily transactions, for example, pulling down the window shades and locking the front door parallel the stiffening and closing off of a bodily boundary or personal space<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Bloomer, Kent C., and Charles W. Moore. *Body, Memory, and Architecture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.



View of *Wall Painting* from within *House*



Innermost view of *Wall Painting* from within *House*

In approaching the layout for *House*, I wanted to create no closures or boundaries. You walk in and you are meant to walk out; it is a transient space. Because the space is permeable to sight, the boundarylessness acts as a way to foster connection between the looker on the outside and the person within, as one must ask permission to exit from the person entering. In this open system there is cooperation and negotiation of personal boundaries.



Entrance of *House*

There is also a slight visual and spatial pressure: the dark graphite edges narrow in on you from the top and bottom, and the walls become closer, ultimately resulting in a dead-end. This is done through the narrowing pathway, width-wise, as well as with the dark perspectival horizons coming to a point as you

travel through the spiral. There is a feeling that the shape is opening up to us as well as closing in, the climax is a porous vantage point through the center holes that are suspended inside the spiral.



Outer Surface of *House*

The surface of the house is shaped with an animistic quality. Much like in the way I discern figures during my painting process, the forms are pulled out of atmospheric ground. In this case, the wool acts as the preliminary material that becomes sculpted into bodily forms. Through the gesture of shaping, rubbing, and felting, its walls begin to move and breathe like sea foam. I pull the wool apart in certain

areas to cradle the silver stones, creating pits that resemble craters of the moon or paths that imply movement. The spirals in the image above, created by this process, resemble the spiral of an ear. The monolithic sculpture itself is as expressive as the human figure.

This entire installation seeks to embrace malleability as a liberatory strength and not as an inherent weakness. However, it is also important to highlight the moments of resistance, stagnancy or the refusal of malleability. Elements of *Double Jointed* reference experience and memory as they become calcified and *stuck* within our being. Sometimes, we do not have a choice of the things that become embedded in our nature. There are instances, such as the silver stones, that do not move through with ease; they do not permeate the flexible membrane.



*Lock embedded in the wall*

To feel stuck or frozen is something I work through in my practice and it is why my work is inherently process based and site-specific. Several of the elements within the show are embedded in

various surfaces – the painting, the lock, and the silver stones. These seemingly fossilized materials reference myths of petrification which often address ideas of gaze, power, and consequence.



*Silver Stone*, 12" x 5" x 3", Plaster, Foam, Paint, Joint Compound, 2024

In multiple tales, the transformation of individuals into stone serves as a type of a punishment or curse. For example, in Greek mythology, we encounter figures like Niobe, whose arrogance led to the death of her children and her transformation into a weeping stone figure<sup>19</sup>. Another example is Lot's wife in the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, who disobeyed the command not to look back at the destruction of the cities and was turned into a pillar of salt<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Homer. "Iliad, Book 24." *Arion (Boston)* 22, no. 3 (2015): 9–34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/arion.22.3.0009>.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis. 19:26 RSV

These myths of petrification provide rich symbolism for the consequences of human actions; however, the petrified elements in *Double Jointed* are not punishments. In contrast to the grave fate of those mythological bodies, these lightweight stones act as silver plated calluses, glimmering throughout the space. They are carefully carved, polished and adorned with delicate chains or key chains with inscribed platitudes.



*Silver Stone*, 20"x 6"x 3", Plaster, Foam, Paint, Joint Compound, Steel Hardware, Key Chain, 2024

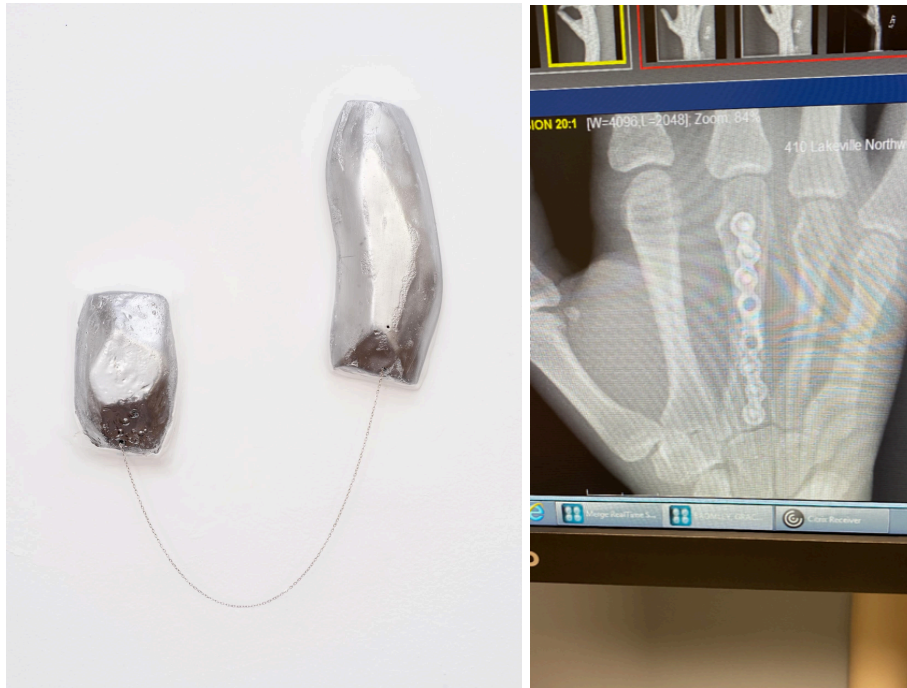


Detail of *Silver Stone* with Key Chain

The concept of the petrified body extends beyond mythological transformation to encompass the idea of the body becoming bionic through medical intervention. Through casualties of repetitive, compulsory behaviors, or overextension, the body can become altered and abstracted through foreign objects and surgical implants. On one particular occasion in 2020 I was leaving my babysitting job, a career path I had defaulted to for several years, when I had a bike accident and broke my dominant hand. Months later, the bone broke a second time when I returned to work too soon. I now have what resembles a bike chain inside of my palm, and after twenty-some years wearing heels at high altitudes my mom's spine is held



together by a similarly inhuman apparatus. In each of these instances, the medical intervention serves as a testament to the (unrequested) pursuit of spreading ourselves too thin. *Double Jointed* is a fusion of external and internal elements in a similar way, revealing evidence of habitual movements and contortions through painting and sculpting gestures.



*Silver Stone with Chain*, 18" x 15"x 3," Foam, Plaster, Paint, Silver Chain, 2024. X-Ray of my right hand

### **Conclusion - The Dialogic Self**

The structure of *Double Jointed* functions as a dialogic self, a form of subjectivity that is extended outwards. The term refers to a self that is considered as an extension of significant others and an environment; it is a dynamic multiplicity of selves between which relationships emerge and are ever changing<sup>21</sup>. This installation approach encompasses the porosity I have sought throughout my practice in

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<sup>21</sup> Fand, Roxanne J. *The Dialogic Self: Reconstructing Subjectivity in Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999.

painting; however, this multiplicity of self, which is an open network of being, could not be encapsulated by a singular discrete painting or self portrait.

In considering the installation as a whole system, together these works create a working organelle, a body that operates through unification. The elements need to be seen together to work as a whole. They are an imitation of natural systems or an abstracted body and they reinvent material properties to speak about nature vs. nurture. The stones play a crucial role, evoking imagery of herniation with their protrusion from the wall, akin to a pimple on a face or a disc sliding out of a back. They evoke movement and emergence. *House* serves as a metaphor for domesticity and the body, with its inner spiral and intestine-colored interior representing the inner workings of the body. The chain and keys hang suspended like nerves, creating a neural network of veins. The spine, symbolizing the body's foundation, lineage and replication, bears both physical and metaphorical burdens.

The spiral and labyrinthine motifs on which I based the formation of *House* evoke a sense of curling inward or retreating; viewed from within, *House* resembles the interior of a colon or womb, with an eye-shaped cutout offering a unique vantage point. Hardware and hinges reflect the tension between structure and disorder, stability and unpredictability. Together, these works form a cohesive system, abstracted into a body-like structure that challenges the distinction between nature and nurture. They invite viewers to consider the complex interplay of internal and external forces in shaping individual experiences and identities.

Highlighting the role of interconnectedness and interdependence, *Double Jointed* acts as a form of caregiving in itself. In essence, this thesis invites contemplation on the ways in which individuals navigate and negotiate societal pressures, gender constructs, and personal identities. It emphasizes the transformative potential of making as a means of self-expression, self-care, and empowerment. Through the exploration of familial embodied experiences and matriarchal lineage through mimesis, this body of work offers a nuanced pursuit on the celebration of malleability and multiplicity of being.

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