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Virtual Bodies: Probing Fake Flesh

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Virtual Bodies: Probing Fake Flesh

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Abstract

This thesis explores the fluid and often elusive concept of the body as mediated through technology and art, questioning the boundaries between the physical and virtual. By investigating the interactions of cultural ideals, technological mediation, and material experimentation, the research delves into how contemporary art practices can challenge and expand our understanding of embodiment.

Central to this exploration is the use of varied mediums such as sculpture, digital imagery, and installation art to create what I term "virtual bodies"—conceptual entities that exist at the intersection of imagination and material reality. These creations often reflect and critique societal norms regarding beauty, health, and identity, particularly through the lens of the female experience, employing disruptive erotics to challenge the medical and male gaze and their objectifying tendencies.

The work presented aims to provoke thought about the mutable nature of identity in the digital age and to foster a deeper understanding of how art interacts with and reshapes our perceptions of the physical self in increasingly virtual environments.

Key Words: Surrogate, AI, Empathy, Medical Gaze, Male Gaze, Beauty, Health, Sculpture, Digital Art, Erotics

Is My Body Imagined?

virtuality /vɜː.tʃuˈæl.ə.t̬i/ *noun*: the fact of existing, but not in a way that is physically real, or a thing that is imagined or considered rather than being real.

-Cambridge Dictionary, "Virtuality" [1]

My artwork is predicated on the notion that all bodies are in constant flux. One's perception of their figure is simulated, informed by cultural ideals like *health* and *beauty*. Through my art, I speculate on possible virtual bodies. I re-imagine my own figure through sculpture, digital images, installations, and videos. I revert the virtual experiences of my body back into experiential space using various technologies, ranging from sculpted surrogates to digital avatars. In this sense, all my work is self-portraiture which, just like my body, is mediated and permeated by material and technology.

Figure 1: Emily Elhoffer, *Derealized,* part of the *Seated Nude* series, 2019, Digital photograph.

Works such as *Derealized* (fig. 1) explore self-portraiture and material. *Derealized* is an example from my "Seated Nude" series where I document my body on a sculpted chair; I disintegrate my figure into form, into object. This photograph features a centralized mass of lumpy, bulgy pink volumes. My body becomes lost in puffy folds, fleshy puckers, and fatty plush. A face, obscured beneath veiled fringe dangling from plush undulating forms, becomes the first identifiable feature to signify the presence of identity—but the viewer must look for it, often searching within the image until they see 'me'. A hidden, obscured 'me'; camouflaged by fat, cradled in a womb-chair. Upon discovery of the figure, a sense of haptic softness is doubled—art theorist Laura Marks explains that these kinds of "haptic images [don't] invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image….Haptic images pull the viewer close, too close to see properly, and this itself is erotic."[2] I combine sensuality and empathy to subjectify the bodies in my work.

The erotic—separate from the sexual—speaks to a kind of proprioceptive arousal rather than an image-based depiction of "sexuality". As a person born femme, I am sick (physically, emotionally, and mentally) from seeing bodies like mine objectified in images and video within a prescriptive male gaze.[3] The male gaze is a concept developed from film theory, but it reaches into many disciplines that prioritize a centralized point of view: a camera, a screen, a monitor, a VR headset. Art historian Amelia Jones states, "We don't know how to exist any more without imagining ourselves as a picture."[4] I exploit this conundrum in my self-portraiture. I argue that an ever-present male gaze is now internalized, drastically impacting femme subjectivity. Because of this, our contemporary femme bodies exist in an increasingly fraught relationship with technology and self-imaging.

Figure 2: Lisa Yuskavage, *Small Flesh Studio,* 2022. Oil on Linen. 45.4x50.2cm.

Eroticized, sultry, and campy painter Lisa Yuskavage (fig. 2) inspires me to delve into the discomfort of arousing art. Her figures, overtly sexualized and covertly childish, conflate various forms of what is deemed inappropriate imagery—they seem to be sourced equally from 80s porn mags, over-filtered Instagram selfies from the aughts, and well-made fanart from Rule 34.[5] She vibrates her viewers between slippery discomfort and building desire. I believe she exploits her femme subjects and exaggerates their features to fulfill a monstrous gaze. I align with this subversive strategy in my work.

Through a health-obsessed culture, we are constantly re-interpreting what a 'body' is and placing value judgements upon it. Disruptive erotics, like those Yuskavage uses, interrupt socialized internalized gazes; as normalizing agents, socialized gazes are internalized as supposedly 'natural' and often supplemented by masculine rationality with no consideration for independent subjectivity. One of these agents, the medical gaze, operates for medical professionals to turn humans into objects.[6] Doctors, nurses, and surgeons adapt the medical gaze to see their patient *as the material of their body*, instead of as a whole identity. This gaze is steeped in indoctrinated biases: racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism. It also is not limited to hospitals; we see it in everyday culture, specifically in social discourse around health. Consider anatomical illustrations within high school textbooks, articles on health in magazines, and

trending social media health fads.

Figure 3: Emily Elhoffer, *In the Flesh,* 2019-present. Aging latex cast upon 200+ removed syringes. 48 x 48 x 3".

An early example of my research into medicine's impact on health and beauty is *In the Flesh* (fig. 3). It is a wall relief made from a single latex 'flesh' cast upon over 200 hypodermic syringes. This work was made while I meditated on beauty augmentations, like Botox, and the paralyzing realization that my aging femme body is becoming invisible. Its syringes were arranged in a grid, and delicately misted with liquid latex (fig. 4). Each syringe was then degloved, and their empty latex casings dangle as a singular skin. Over the years, every flaccid latex syringe will shrivel up and harden, eventually needing to be replaced with new, fresh casts.

In the Flesh is a living work; I wrestle with the limits of latex and transform it into a metaphorical skin.

Figure 4*: Emily Elhoffer, Process image of In the Flesh,* wet with its first layer of latex.

Metaphorical skins and allegorical bodies integrate with technology to ask: *what is a body?* I struggle to centralize my identity within any singular, centralized fleshy locale; philosopher and artist Legacy Russel shares, "To seize "multiple selves" is…an inherently feminist act: multiplicity is a liberty."[7] My art entangles bodies, using disruptive erotics to subvert hegemonic cultural value systems. I believe that bodies are permeated and mediated through technology. I therefore employ it, stretching its limits like spandex as I virtualize the self. I birth speculative bodies who ask viewers, sometimes humorously, or sensually, or coquettishly, *is your body imagined?*

What is a Body?

…phantom limb' and hysteria can be understood only if we take into account the fact that all healthy people are, or have, in addition to the material body, a body-phantom or an imaginary body. The physical image of the body is necessary in order for us to have motility in the world, without which we could not be intentional subjects. The imaginary body is developed, learnt, connected to the body image of others, and is not static.

-Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality* [8]

My artwork has been described as 'lumpy'. For nearly a decade, I created art — mostly sculpture made from stuffed spandex — which features fleshy forms that muffin top, pudge, and swell. These sculptures reflect concepts I hold around the taboo form of 'fat'. Theoretically and materially, I engage with fat as it relates to my femme body. Fat as subject, and my body as object (and vice versa), coalesce in my practice to create new kinds of virtual bodies. Erotic, funny, uncanny, and sympathetic, the work charges viewers with a melting pot of sensuous, sometimes uncomfortable feelings, further escalated by my current use of technology.

Figure 5: Emily Elhoffer, *I Like How It Feels, I Want It Gone,* 2022, from the *Bound* series, Stuffed pleather and painted wood, 44 x 29 x 6.5".

My lumpy style is manifested within the *Bound* (fig. 5) series. I created twelve monochromatic wall works in 2022 which are relief sculptures made from stuffed pleather and painted wood. Each work from *Bound* is titled from a poll where I asked, "How do you feel about your body fat?" Works titled *It's Just Flesh* and *Ugh* sag outwards from their walls.[9] Overstuffed and spilling out, their forms mimic fatty tummies, cellulose-riddled thighs, and interior landscapes of intestinal delight. Satin-gloss surfaces shine like supple skin. Their impression oscillates between fetishistic and uncanny, depending on the viewer's affectual gauge.[10] The relationship between these polarized feelings is described by Laura Marks in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*: "Uncanniness…. Is what fetishism seeks to keep at bay."[11] In my practice, I toe the line between these two diametric affective poles. I strategically enmesh fetishistic with uncanny; when feeling these sensations together, a novel kind of body-state brings viewers somewhere *else*. They are sensually within and abjectly outside their body. They are erotically within and repulsively outside my surrogates.

As an artist, I consider taboo body forms and I challenge the silent power of their implications. Viewers are invited to visually acclimate to the punchy, flabby volumes harshly constricted, or carefully hugged, within their geometrically irregular frames. Through them, a nontraditional beauty of the human form manifests. Its presence saturates the visual environment with lesser-seen parts of bodies which may be celebrated, shamed, appreciated, or disregarded. Responses to this work reflect a viewer's predispositions towards taboo bodies; some are comforted, others are aroused, and a few are disturbed.

Banished by the powerful gazes of "beauty" and "health", terms conflated by male and medical gazes, taboo bodies lurk in plain sight. Fat is an important subject within my practice. It functions on many symbolic levels. It is invisible: fat people are invisible to society, in the

media, and are pressured to 'hide' their fat beneath restricting spandex or baggy clothing. It is hyper visible: the subjectivity of people who carry any amount of undesirable body fat is a psychological nightmare-circus filled with shame, hate, and dysmorphic bodily dissociation. Fat is absurdly feminine—biologically partial to female bodies— yet eschewed by hegemonic female beauty standards. It envelops a body in safety. It encases a person in fear. These paradoxical realities of fat, squished between often opposing ontologies, slips "fat" into a symbol.

Despite recent movements toward body positivity in mass media, such as film, advertisements, and social media, the "ideal body" remains hegemonic in gender, size, age, ability, and race.[12] Even plus-size and non-normative models posing in advertisements are still selective and filtered, often depicted to highlight one supposed flaw at a time: stretch marks *or* cellulite, fat *or* body hair. Through my practice, I wrangle with bodies as they are imagined in these images, through their technological lenses, and I re-imagine a more expansive virtual body for myself and my viewers.

As a person born female with gender and body dysphoria, I affectively perceive my embodiment as it see-saws between how I feel and how I look—and neither of these realities overlap through the sterile and erroneously objective lens of a camera. I wonder: if I cannot locate myself within the body I see in images of myself (those images flattened and morphed by various cultural gazes and technologies), am I even real?

Questioning the 'truth' of the body, scanning oneself, and examining fatness are established subjects within modern and contemporary artistic discourse. Elenor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (fig. 6) is one of the first self-portraits in western art to explore these subjects. In *Carving*, Antin attempts to capture a *loss* of fat, one which is nearly

imperceptible to the viewer, through a photographic 'scanning' of her body every day. Attempting to re-write the canonical narrative of a sculptor carving *his* Venus from marble, Antin re-wires *her* own subjectivity and objectivity while 'carving' herself for the viewer.
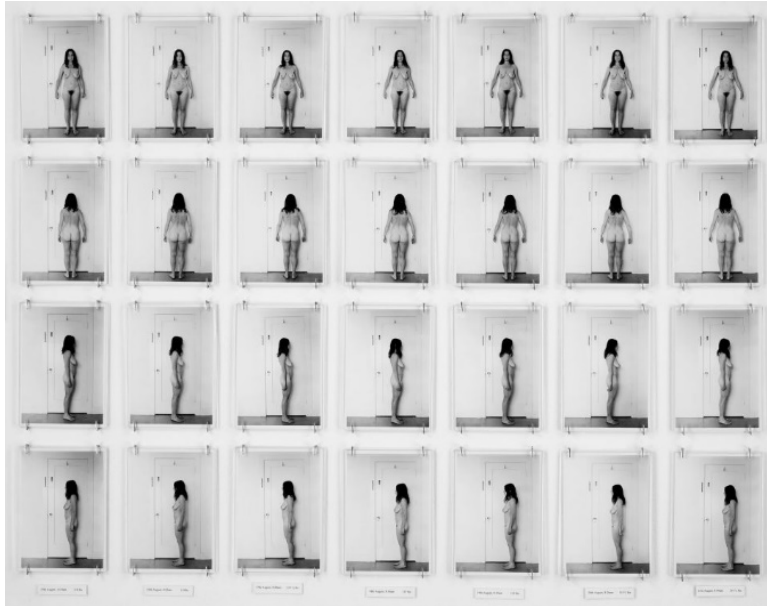
Figure 6: Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture,* 1972, 148 gelatin silver prints and text panels, each photograph 17.7 x 12.7 cm

Addressing dualisms such as Antin's subjective/objectivity is an important theme in feminist philosophy. As philosopher Donna Haraway states:

> Certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions: they have all been systematic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals — in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man. The self is the One who is not dominated, who knows that by the service of the other….[13]

Haraway's work, *The Cyborg Manifesto,* influences the way I use and discuss technology in my work. I aim to dissolve and challenge binaries, to 'queer' my bodies.[14] She argues that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion."[15] I'm influenced by

science fiction, and I speculate on futures where bodies may be represented in more expansive forms.[16]

Through the lens of speculative technology I've begun re-examining my own stylistically lumpy forms, experimenting with how a machine 'eye' sees them through its own programmatic and biased lens. I trained an image-generating AI program to output images of my own work from photos of my 'lumpy' portfolio[17]. I call it the *Lumpy AI Model (LAM)*. Artist Mario Klingemann's *Memories of Passerby I* (figure 7) generates AI portraits of people who do not exist based on a dataset of thousands of portraits from the 17th to 19th centuries. Similarly, the process I created is trained on about twenty photos from my practice.
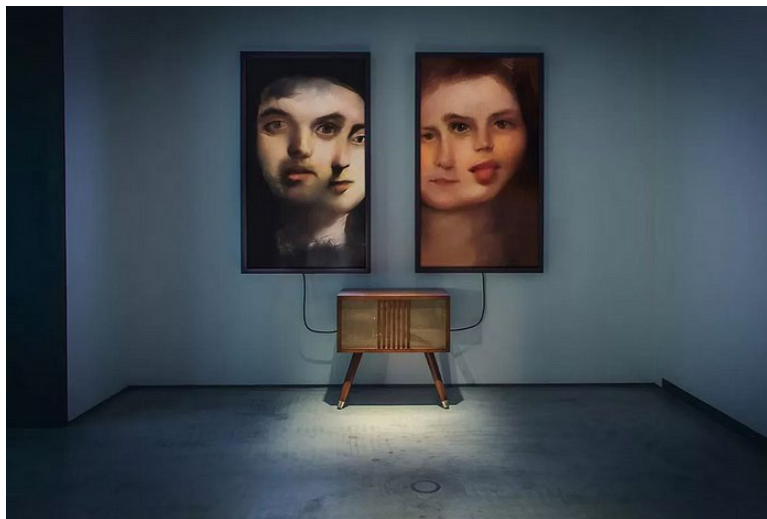
Figure 7: Mario Klingemann *Memories of Passerby I,* 2018, . Multiple GANS, two 4k screens, custom handmade chestnut wood console, which hosts AI brain and additional hardware. 27.6 x 27.6 x 15.7 in.

Through *LAM*, I image my own imagined bodies, then re-virtualize them within a machine learning algorithm. The referent, the body, is translated thrice: first through my own sculpted abstractions, then through a camera, and finally through *LAM*. In its translation, the referent is lost. I create my own hyperreal paradox in this process. Similar in operation as the medical and male gazes, I divorce bodies from their identities through multiple translations. However, my process emphasizes a sensuous, subjective eroticism in form.

LAM's output (fig. 9) has been especially useful in creating ways for me to quickly see what some of my sketches would look like as real-world objects. This is helpful as a sculptor whose studio is filled with formal and material experiments. I can use it to determine which concepts I want to move forward with, and which ones stay in the sketchbook.

Figure 8: Image of myself working in studio, surrounded by various image and material experiments. 2024. Photographed by Roy Uptain.

Figure 9: Sketches generated from *LAM, 2024.* Digital.

My playful bodily forms are inspired by various figurative artists and makers. Formally intrigued by the same bodily expressions, Michela Stark creates designer corsetry which physically constrict flesh into abstracted, nearly nonhuman shapes (fig. 10). She collaborates with photographers, like Charloette Rutherford, to re-contextualize her sculptural prosthetics

within various landscapes, enhancing an otherworldly environment where bodily beauty is redefined beyond idyllically gendered form.

Figure 10: Michela Stark and Charloette Rutherford, *Charlie wears a corset and skirt,* 2023. Photograph, unknown size.

Like Stark's re-working of 'body' through subversive corsetry, I negate prescriptive AI imagery with my own portfolio and enmeshments with my own imaged body. *CHIMERA* (fig. 11) and *The Shape of Some-Thing* (fig. 12) prints combine photographed images of my own body—emphasizing fleshy, lumpy areas such as my belly and breasts—within a landscape of AI generated imagery from *LAM*. I use the medium of photography for its implied objectivity. I collage it with digital fictions. In an undulating landscape of unreal forms, lit and shadowed from

impossible angles, my sternum and breasts emerge in spaces within *CHIMERA*. Glaze, or ooze, or mucus drips vertically from the lumpy ceramic-fabric surfaces as they extend endlessly beyond the frame of the print.

Figure 11: Emily Elhoffer, *CHIMERA,* 2023. Digital print on metal.
30 x 45 in.

Safe to Touch depicts a brighter, 'sweet and sour' color palette of highlighter-colored hands squishing fatty flesh. Semi-transparent, AI-generated lumpy forms emerge behind photographed hands. Unlike *CHIMERA*, which is printed on metal, *Safe to Touch* is printed on paper, and the printer glitched while producing its .jpeg. These errors look like striations on the page where the machine recursively striated ink, failing due to the file's enormous size. I

appreciate the digital-to-analogue mishaps which striate upon the surface, glitching its composition.
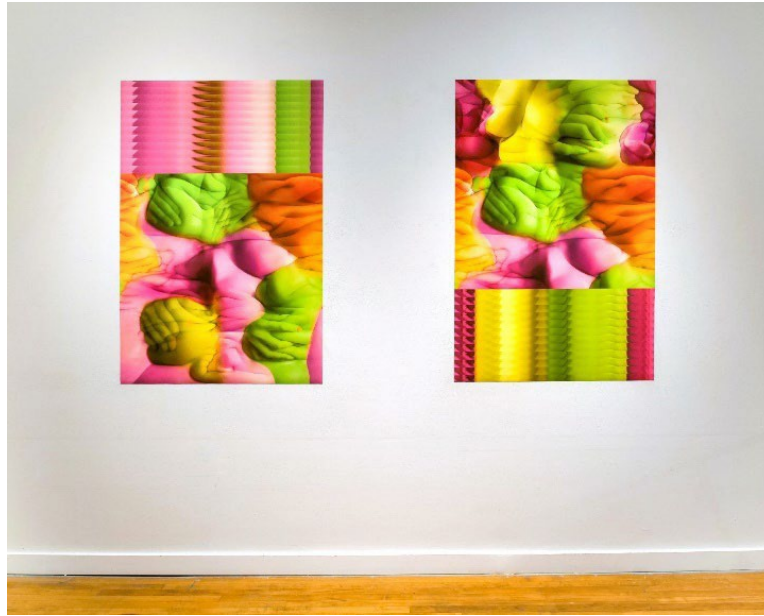

Figure 12: Emily Elhoffer, *The Shape of Some-Thing,* 2023. Diptych. Digital print on paper. 51 x 35 in. each.

Glitching is an important factor in the ways I am queering and virtualizing bodies in my practice. In *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russell argues that 'glitching' is a performance which allows us to slip between bodily binaries like male/female. They write:

> When the body is determined as a male or female individual, the body performs gender as its score, guided by a set of rules and requirements that validate and verify the humanity of that individual. A body that pushes back at the application of pronouns, or remains indecipherable within binary assignment, is a body that refuses to perform the score. This nonperformance is a glitch. This glitch is a form of refusal. … In glitch feminism, we look at the notion of *glitch -as-error* within its genesis in the realm of the machinic and the digital and consider how it can be reapplied to inform the way we see the [material] world…The process of becoming material surfaces tensions, prompting us to inquire: *Who defines the material of the body?*[18]

Glitching offers me a possible solution to my dysmorphic sense of self. In my art, I grasp at an ever-receding 'truth' of my body within cultural contexts of taboo forms, like fat, through self-imaging technologies like video, photography and AI. I attempt to bridge false binaries between

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virtual and supposedly 'real' bodies; I discuss topics of fatphobia, beauty, and health. Imaging the body is rife with complications, and through these complications, I trouble the question: *what is a real body?*

Does the Avatar Wince?

… I have never encountered an image of a human body. Images of human bodies are images of either men's bodies or women's bodies. A glance at any standard anatomical text offers graphic evidence of the problem with the phrase, 'the human body'. Representations of the human body are most often of the male body and, perhaps, around the borders, one will find insets of representations of the female reproductive system: a lactating breast, a vagina, ovaries; bits of bodies, body fragments. They appear here in a way that reminds one of the specialized pornographic magazines which show pictures of isolated, fragmented, disjointed bits: breasts, vaginas, buttocks. Female bits, fragments to be consumed, taken in a bit at a time.

-Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*[19]

My concepts begin with material. I discover my content by stretching my material in every direction, whether it is pleather, polyester, deepfake technology, or latex. I test its flexibility, its pliability, to discover where its 'body' is. Expanding Moira Gaten's theory on Imaginary Bodies, quoted above, I incorporate other theories sourced from various thinkers and artists like Jia Tolentino, Donna Haraway, Anne Friedberg, and Amelia Jones, to propose an extension for Gatens' Imagined Body via the exploration of my own Virtual Body.

I am virtualized by myself and others; I create entities which absorb and mirror back the imaginations and assumptions of myself and my viewers. All my artwork, whether sculptural, image-based, or video, aims to create bodily surrogates, aliases, metaphors, or avatars. These proxies are further complicated by the technology with/in which they are enmeshed. I want viewers to empathize with my work. Pervasive gazes, medical and male, operate to negate empathizing with *other*, and I counteract this systemic apathy by threading my audiences into an affective chord somewhere between desire and disgust. I seek to exercise my viewer's empathetic muscles with my art, while also recognizing and forever chasing the paradox that we can never fully understand what it's like to live within another's skin.

Figure 13: Emily Elhoffer, *How Do You Breathe, Betty?* 2023. Ecoplastic, medical tubing, timers, air blower. Variable sizes.

How Do You Breathe, Betty? (fig. 13) was inspired by my childhood experience with empathy. Chaotic, painful, and connective, I recall beginning to comprehend another's pain while living with family who was undergoing hospice care. In this sculpture, latex tubing webs and suspends an amorphous, oversized translucent magenta balloon in space. This balloon is connected to an air blower, hidden in the ceiling, via an umbilical four-inch-wide clear plastic tube. Like a lawn inflatable, the pink membrane expands, erecting itself as it fills with air over the course of thirty seconds. The air blower then turns off, letting the nonhuman form vent for another thirty seconds, wherein its puffy, lively shape sags and crinkles under its own weight. Inhaling, it's larger than life. Exhaling, it's pitiful and sad.

Medically, we understand the dying body as a series of failing systems—they are often augmented with machines to prolong life. Empathetically, something is lost here, and these apparatuses may merely elongate suffering.

In *How Do You Breathe, Betty?* light dances through the rustling, glowing ecoplastic, casting a pink shadow on the ground. Permeated by light, the viewer becomes aware of a thin

membrane of skin which delineates the three-dimensional contour of its "body". In my art, I transgress the material of skin: I stretch it, I make it transparent, I tuck and fold and pierce it to expose an inner body without bounds. Skin, like fat, becomes a symbol of intimacy, barrier, limitation, and identity. *How Do You Breathe, Betty?*'s skin, crinkling and puckering in its own unique ways, is the dynamic element which creates relatability and sympathy. As Art Historian Hava Aldouby succinctly writes: "…skin-related art…foster[s] a "presence effect" that serves to reawaken viewers to their own skin envelopes and embodiment therein."[20] We relate to this big breathing pink balloon because we, too, have skin which stretches, perks, and sags. Like it, our skin holds us together, and it also lets us down.

Many artists deal with the body's envelope and its barriers; Mona Hatoum's *Corps Estranger*[21] (plate 1) and Pipilotti Rist's *Mother Floor*[22] (plate 2) enact a psychological interpersonal enmeshment through bodily orifices, but few breach through skin's surface like Marilène Oliver. A British printmaker and sculptor, Oliver passes light through her virtual bodies, which are generated by medical imagery. Her 2019 *Deep Connection* (fig. 14) installation included her own MRI data rendered in laser cut sculpture and a virtual reality experience. In this work, she invites viewers to permeate her form with virtual reality: to occupy the space of her body.
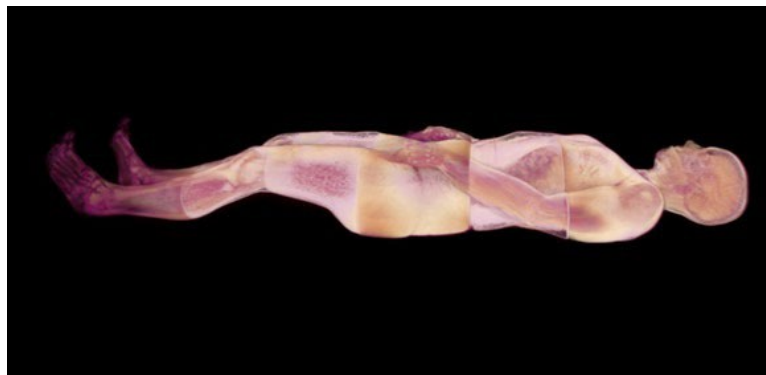

Figure 14: Marilène Oliver, still from *Deep Connection,* 2019. Lasercut black coroplast, steel, Occulus VR, 3D and 4D MR data rendered as part of a Unity VR artwork. Sound by Gary James Joynes.

Like Oliver, I want viewers to occupy the space of my imagined bodies. Empathy becomes a key player in my surrogates' performances. With empathy we imagine ourselves *as* others; we occupy the space of their body. We revel in their pleasure; we wince with their pain. I view my pieces as empathy exercises. I challenge the viewer's empathetic limits by projecting them into othered bodies, onto other's skin. I want to live in a world where false binaries such as "other" and "self" dissolve. Boundaries, like the skins of my work, become transparent.

I stretch the boundaries of skin in my art, creating a polarized affectual experience for the viewer.[23] Aversion and arousal are an orchestrated result, critical to negating abject relationships with erotics in order to generate empathy. When edging viewers with sensual forms or erotic motion, I ask them to examine their own limits—specifically, their own ability or disability to project their sexuality onto a benign object. To get the full experience of my work, the viewer must, to use feminist scholar Sara Ahmaed's phrase, "sweat" with the artwork.[24]

I play with desire and disgust, arousal and inhibition. I exploit a voyeuristic inclination in *Daily Dose* (fig. 15, plate 3), a five-minute video projected behind a peephole, staged like Marcel Duchamp's assemblage *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (fig. 16). Viewers bend over prone to peek into my peephole, peering into a video projection peep show where latex tubing wantonly gesticulates, a scalpel teases its edge along a taut latex membrane, and globular pink and orange paint-filled medical gloves roil over and thrust against each other. The motions evoke references to ASMR videos and fetish pornography. From a singular vantage point viewers experience embodied sensations of glee, confusion, repugnance, and arousal.[25]

Figure 15: Emily Elhoffer, *Daily Dose,* installation shots, 2023. Projected video on screen behind a peephole. 5m.

Figure 16: Marcel Duchamp*, Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage . . . (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas . . .),* 1946-1966. Assemblage behind a peephole.

I frequently reference surgery in my work, like the props I use in *Daily Dose*. Surgically

unwrapping skin to excavate what lurks beneath is a psychological theater I play with in *Drag*

Dissection (fig. 17, plate 4), a 10-minute video of a staged autopsy. A pair of nitrile-gloved

hands carefully cut open a patch of fuchsia 'skin' and, using stainless steel surgical implements,

the hands meticulously slice through cake and Jello-filled subdermal layers. They excavate

gummy worms, sprinkles, tinsel, and pudding. Watching the full video is an effort of endurance;

despite its sugar-filled center, the clinical lighting, surgical-style movements, and props create an

effect of abject disgust.
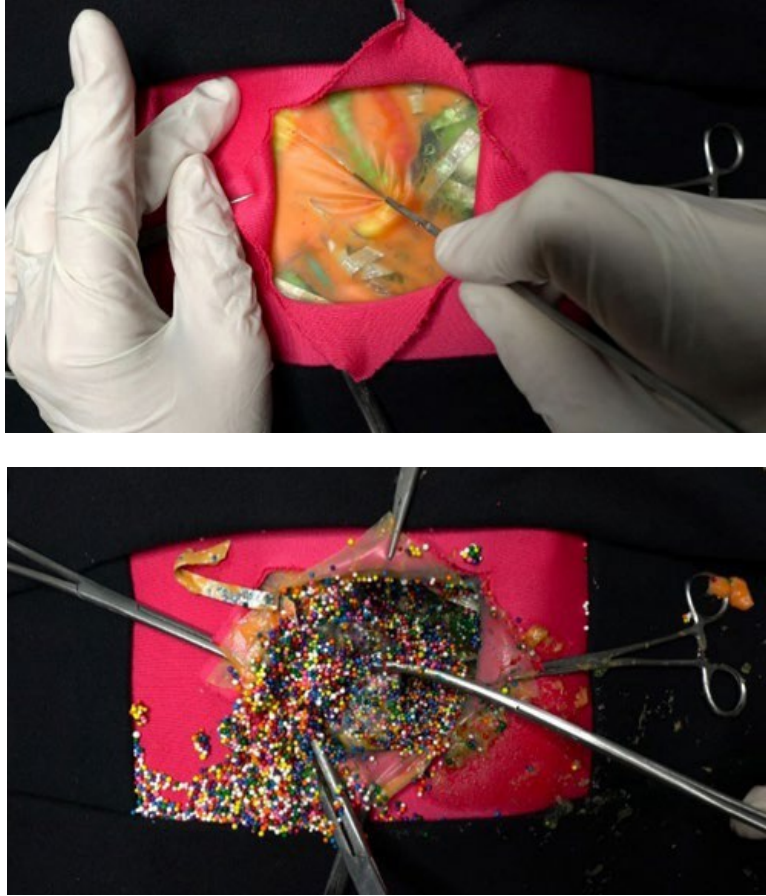
Figure 17: Emily Elhoffer, Stills from *Drag Dissection,* 2023. Single channel video with sound, 5m.

In *Drag Dissection*, I am both the surgeon's hands and the saccharine imagined, biopsied body. The viewer is placed in the role of the surgeon, while also empathizing with the medical violence inflected upon the saccharine "body". I want the viewer to feel dysphoric, to be, by proxy, surveilling their bodies in a self-excavating feedback loop. Self-surveilling what lurks beneath my virtual skin, I playfully negate its visceral realities to create a comedically dysphoric alternate experience. The title, *Drag Dissection* references my puberty-fueled struggle with gender performance; the video's subject matter, sugary foods, reflects the eating disorders I employed to cope with this struggle.

Our bodies are constantly mediated through avatars. The affects we embody while inhabiting and empathizing with these entities reflect of the attitudes, conscious or not, which we have toward hegemonic gazes. An artificial medical gaze conflates our bodies with "health", while a man-made male gaze conflates them with "beauty". We thus become mediated by fictitious representations. These surrogates are tools, technologies which corridor the *self* into the world of representation. Through my art, I exercise powerful emotions of arousal and disgust to spark empathy with these virtual bodies- I wonder: are you the contour line of your flesh—or do you just inhabit it?

Are You Me?

As the body in its contemporary context and the machines it engages becomes increasingly difficult to splice, this offers an opportunity to see that the machine is a material through which we process our bodily experience. And, as such, bodies navigating digital space are as much computational as they are flesh.

-Legacy Russell, from *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*[26]

I stretch the limits of my materials, and technology is another kind of material. Through technology, a person's bodily identity may magnify, multiply, and implode. Image-making tools allow us to re-imagine what we look like, and thus who we *are* from the outside-in—giving us novel kinds of control over how we express our visual selves from the inside-out. Eschewing my desire for an objective bodily reality, I embrace a multitude of embodied subjectivities in my work. By manipulating image-generating tools, like AI, I aim to emphasize an untethered truth to our bodily realities.

To objectify the body—to get further away from it—we use medical imagery to scan, permeate, and partialize it. Conversely, to 'touch' other bodies through our various screens, we record them in pornography—where bodies are also scanned, permeated, and partialized. It is ironic that, in attempting to better understand or simulate proximity to a body, these gazes also push it further *away*. I explore these overlapping paradoxes in my *Glazed Gaze* series (figure 18). Like *LAM*, this series is created from a custom image generation model. However, I did not make it: it was created and distributed online for people to make their own AI generated porn.[27] Instead of prompting the software with "hot blonde with her tits out", I feed it "closeup of a cold sterile surgical room, surgeon's gloved hand bisecting a belly using a scalpel."[28] A Caucasian body (which is the hegemonic 'default' which the model was likely trained upon) is wreathed by a chorus of active hands lined with surgical gloves and dubious finger counts. The main figure is globular, centralized, and lacking in limbs or a head. Its form mimics my own lumpy formal style as it references breasts, butts, and genitalia. I am captivated by the details: smooth and supple flesh under dramatic lighting, while also repulsed by the context: piercing blades imposing upon a reposing monstrous figure.

Figure 18: Emily Elhoffer, *01104*, from the *Glazed Gaze* series. Digital print on paper.

As philosopher Rosi Braidotti explains: "The monstrous body, more than an object, is a shifter, a vehicle that constructs a web of interconnected and yet potentially contradictory discourses about his or her embodied self. Gender and race are primary operators in this process."[29] The monster from *01104* is created from a system which over-objectifies femme gendered people. It internalizes societal norms within its mangled, chimeric figure. Like the glitched body, the monstrous body slips between expectations, and through its slippage it reveals how pervasive these normative expectations are.

I am inspired by a series by Penny Slinger, Polly Borland, and Bil Brown, where they jolt viewers with aging and glitched femme figures (fig. 19). They emphasize a figure that is

invisible within powerful beauty ideals, re-subjectifying its taboo form within a fluid, unfixed gender performance.

Figure 19: Penny Slinger, Polly Borland, and Bil Brown, *Mylar,* 2022.

Slinger, Borland, and Brown's portrait is funny, frightening, uncanny, and discomforting. Similarly, I revisualize taboo forms to elevate and re-subjectify them—I want to emphasize that these *othered* figures deserve identity and attention. I use a variety of strategies for this: disruptive erotics, sensuous materials, and humor. Using *LAM,* I began creating portraits of monstrous faces, imagined identities which emerge from my lumpy style. Eerily realistic,

Lumpyface 00431[30] (fig. 20) features a closely cropped portrait of a swollen, button-nosed, and gender-neutral greenish face smirking at the camera. Their puffy lips and eyeballs offer the most realistic features of a face, countered by cartoonish buccal folds and an absent philtrum.

Figure 20: Emily Elhoffer, *Lumpyface 00431,* 2024.

Figure 21*:* Emily Elhoffer, *Lumpyface 00740,* 2024.

Lumpyface 00740 (fig. 21) is less aggressive; their face angles away from the 'camera' and their eyes are soft and closed. Still bubbly and swollen, the features on their face look more plausible as a real person until the viewer notices their over-swollen right cheek, peeking from beyond rose-colored lips, or their too-consistent ivory skin tone, or their corded, lumpy skin merging into a corded hairline.

I create "lumpy portraits" of faces whose referent is copied, simulated, and abstracted to too many degrees. Inspired by the work of Nancy Burson, who uses technology-as-medium to create portraiture, my *Lumpyface* series mutates stylized faces further.

Figure 22: Nancy Burson, *First and Second Beauty Composite,* 1982. Gelatin silver print. 4.2 x 5.1 inches.

Nancy Burson pioneered facial morphing technology before AI, and before what we think of as a 'computer' today. In her *Beauty Composite* series (fig. 22), she used her own facial morphing technologies to combine portraits of pop stars and beauty icons from their respective decades of fame, pictured are the 1950s (left) and 1970s (right).[31] Burson was one of the first artists to employ technology to research idealized beauty standards. These faces lose singular ownership by their multifaced reference points and thus become both 'no one' and 'everyone'. They are virtual: their identities exist in essence as stand-ins.

Burson dislocates identity in her portraits, and from a lost body schema I work to further fragment myself. I identify myself with the faces from my *Lumpyfaces* series, partly because I authored them, partly because they synthesize my style, but also because they are like Burson's faces. They are realistic yet lacking ownership. Their virtuality opens access for projective viewers to identify with their features. They become mirrors, speculative figures. I hope for viewers to feel a contradictory otherness and kinship with *Lumpyface* portraits.

Figure 23: Emily Elhoffer, *Self Portrait,* 2024. Pleather, plastic, polyester, wood, steel, projector, and computer. 92 x 39.3 x 33in.

I push the boundaries of the viewer's relationship with my virtual bodies in my thesis work, *Self Portrait* (fig. 23). This participatory new media sculpture is a seven-foot-tall undulating upholstered white pillar with legs, with a swelling rear-projection screen housed in its undulating lumps. This projection, hooked up to a webcam and computer, comes 'alive' when the viewer approaches it. Within the glitchy, fuzzy screen resides a moving, lumpy face, which reacts and mirrors facial expressions of the viewer. The face is inspired by the faces from my *Lumpyface* series. It is created using animation software alongside a deepfaking technique— the same one used by creators of deepfaked pornography.

Deepfaked pornography is a fascinating, troubling subject which has popped up as fast as AI image generating software on the internet.[32] I spend a lot of time on the internet, and I always have, so I am keenly aware of the ways which femme bodies are de-materialized, disembodied, and virtually Frankenstein-ed for the sake of a male consumer. While deepfake pornography aims to dis-locate a femme person's identity and place their face upon the body of another, I work to reverse this intent within *Self Portrait*.[33] The viewer is invited to wear a completely artificial face, a lumpy face of my own stylistic identity, as their own. Every subtlety of their expression is picked up and mirrored; a lopsided smirk, a wink, a wincing grimace mirrors within the lumpy, reactive face on the screen. I complicate the viewer-object relationship, imploring for both empathy and humor.

Self Portrait's body schema rejects typical anatomies of relatable body landmarks; hair spurts from unexpected locations, fatty rolls chaotically puff outward. I use humor, abjection, camp, and technology to signify an awkward, self-aware form which is both mimicking its viewer while self-consciously presenting itself. In this way, *Self Portrait* means to not only trigger empathy between the viewer and my surrogate, virtual body, but also thread the viewer somewhere between 'self' and 'other'. They are not wholly themselves in performing empathy for the other; but they are never wholly the 'other' in the formal negations within its chaotic form. They are somewhere—some*one*—else.

Is Your Body Real?

…something (when the body is involved) always already escapes the signifying process.

    -Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* [34]

I challenge prescribed images of what a body 'is', imploring viewers to feel emotions which question the limited ways which one may relate to self- and other-bodies. A body which does not meet the standardized medical and male gazes' rigid categories is forever stuck in-between its desire to fit an artificial schema and its actual, haptic physicality. I wonder: if I am forever stuck in-between, is my body even real? Or am I imagined?

In her text *The Virtual Window: from Alberti to Microsoft*, art historian Anne Friedberg shares how the 'window' of a digital screen exemplifies a fractured and dematerialized reality we currently inhabit. I push her sentiments of virtuality further by incorporating Russell's glitched bodies and articulate my lumpy, irregular formal style to subvert hegemonic expectations of what a body should be. I mutilate my forms, and myself, through technology.
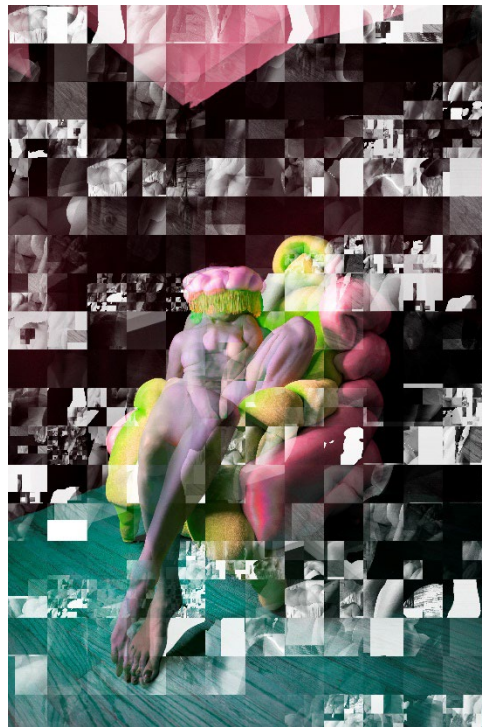

Figure 24: Emily Elhoffer, *Itch*, from the *Seated Nude* series. 2022. 36 x 26, digital print on metal.

Itch (fig. 24) exemplifies my impulse to examine embodiment, to fracture myself through a technological lens. A beautiful accident, this piece is the harbinger of a major

transition within my practice wherein I moved from primarily sculptural work into digital theory. It is a glitched self-portrait; while stacking multiple transparent layers of digitized photographs my computer crashed, and *Itch* manifested as a corrupted .jpeg. This piece is gridded by recursive fractals of layer masks which reveal and conceal a shifting body's image. This glitched body, as Russell argues, slips between binaries: it is both subject *and* object, material *and* virtual.

Virtual bodies offer us glimpses into the ways which our culture prescribes understanding our flesh-bound lives. This relationship is intimate, it is inaccessible. Its fundamental inaccessibility drives me to continue researching it; I can never understand what it is like to live within another person's body.

My practice will continue an exploration, and exploitation, into virtualization of the self. I plan to continue further research into AI, investigating subversive strategies within its image generation and facial recognition technologies while integrating my formal, lumpy figures into new iterations. I also want to include education within this research, sharing my knowledge of a burgeoning field with other artists will be paramount to continuing its discourse.

In my artistic practice, uncanny marriages of material morph into sculptural bodies, video monsters, or stretched surrogates who perform for viewers as both *self* and *other*. Flapping over, tucking in, and spilling out; their voluptuous forms flex, sag, and flinch. Whether upholstering velour folds into sculptures, inflating saggy pink balloons, or glitching self-portraits, I question how much of this body—my body—is fundamentally my own. Phasing through pixels, or plastic, or pleather, my work asks: *is your body real?*

Plates

Plate 1: Mona Hatoum, *Corps Éstranger, 1994.* Cylindrical structure, video projector, 11m color video.
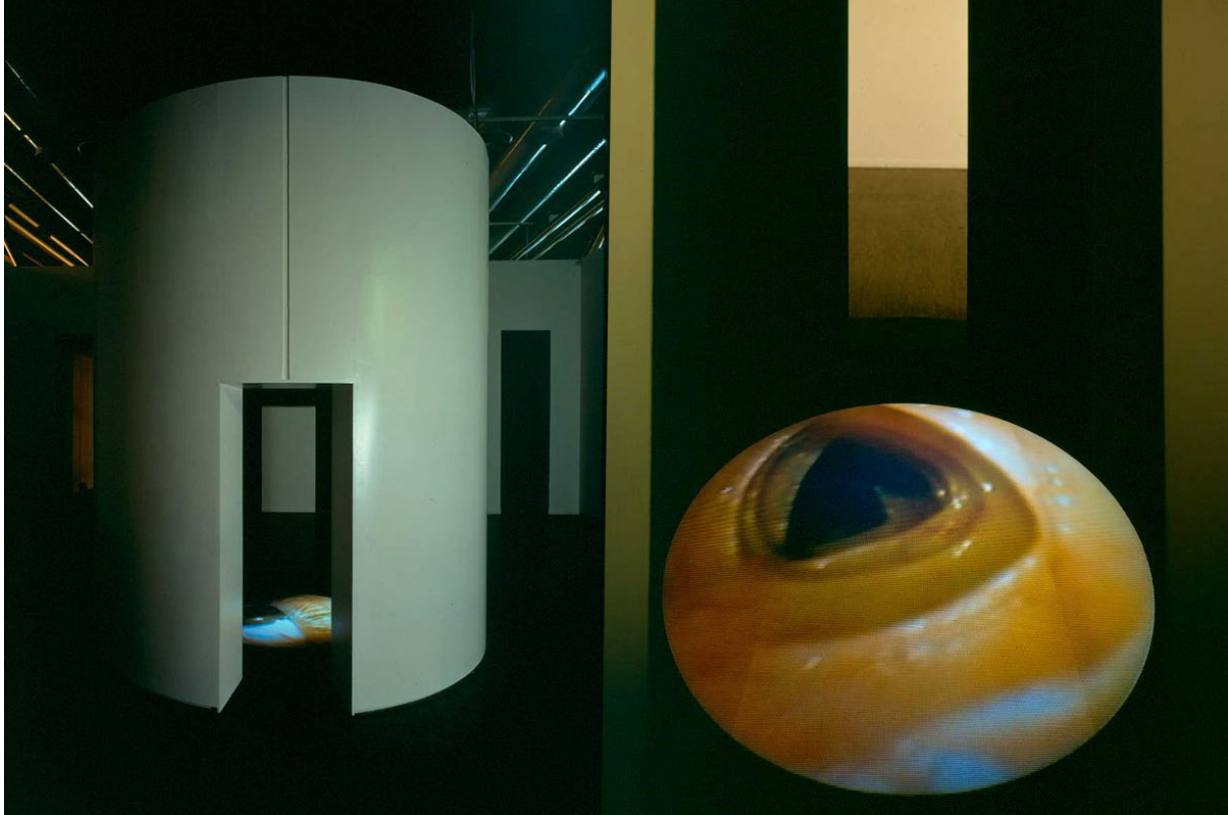
Plate 2: Pipilotti Rist, still from *Mother Floor*, 1996. Single-channel video installation, silent, color, 43 seconds.
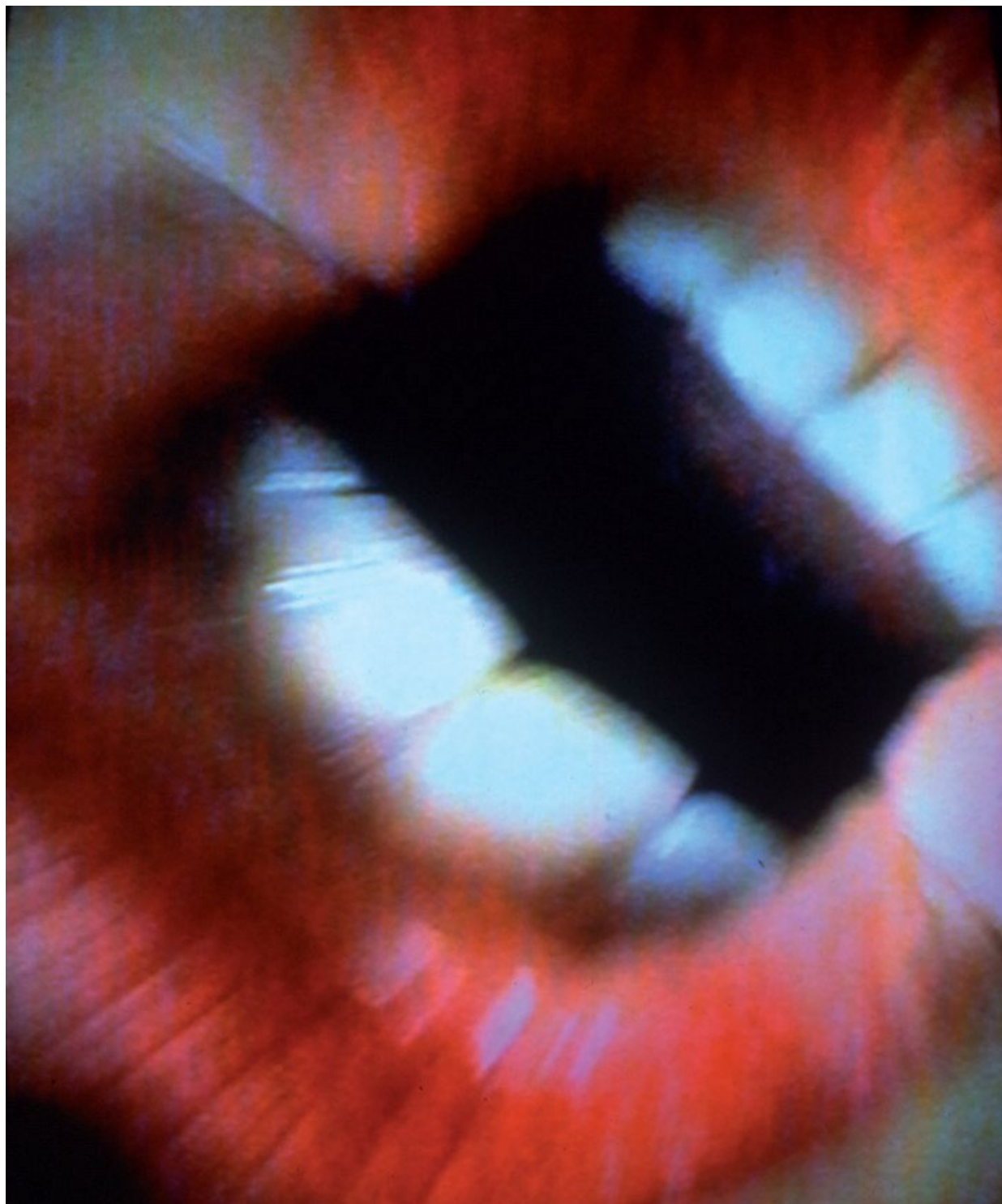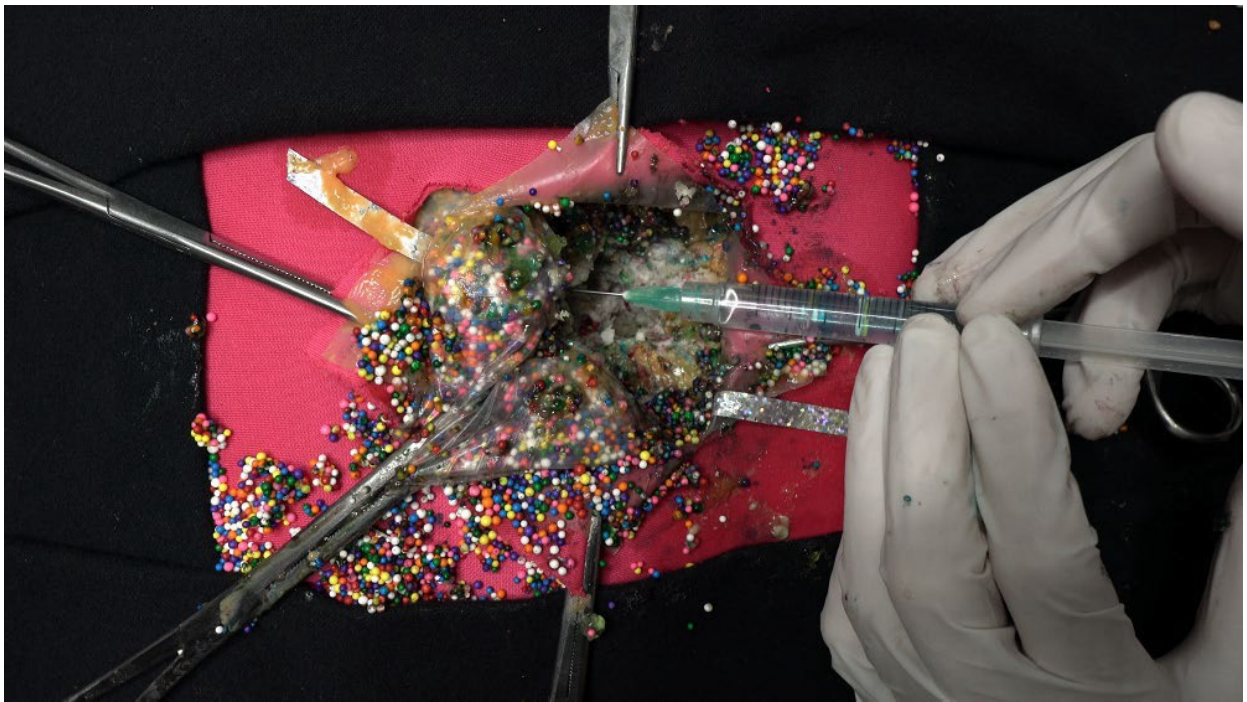
Plate 3: Emily Elhoffer, stills from *Daily Dose*, 2023. Video projection on screen behind peephole. 5.04m.

Plate 4: Emily Elhoffer, stills from *Drag Dissection*, 2022. 20m color video.

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Endnotes

1 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/virtuality

2 Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, p. 3, 16.

3 The male gaze, as initially explored in Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in 1975, is a kind of cultural lens through which femme subjects in visual media are persistently depicted through lens-based technologies. This gaze assumes a heterosexual male as the default 'viewer', often casting femme subjects within restrictive beauty standards for the assumed male viewer's objectification and sexualization.

4 Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject*, p. xv

5 Rule 34 is a pornographic website primarily used for visual erotica of cartoon characters

6 Initially defined by Foucault in *Birth of the Clinic* in 1963, the medical gaze functions in reducing a medical patient to their biological objecthood.

7 Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, p.18

8 Moira Gatens, *Imagined Bodies*: *Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*, p. 12

9 This poll was distributed on social media. Demographics of participants ranged in age from 20s to 60s, all genders and unknown sexualities, and races of African American, Asian American, and Caucasian.

10 For more on affect theory, see Brian Massumi's *The Politics of Affect*. Massumi defines affect as the pre-conscious and non-discursive aspects of our emotional experiences, which play a crucial role in shaping our beliefs and actions. Pulling from various thinkers like Spinoza and Deleuze, he defines affect as a feeling, an embodied transition where "a body passes from one state of capacitation to a diminished or augmented state of capacitation." (*The Politics of Affect,* p.47). He argues that a person's capacity for affectual range is determined by their lived experiences, or is, "completely bound up in the lived past of the body…. habits, acquired skills, inclinations, desires, even willings…which come in patterns of repetition." (p.49). He goes on to share that, "…these affective transitions are weighted for a particular body or particular situations, as more or less accessible, more or less ready to go." I find this passage to be particularly interesting, as I had (mostly) binary reactions to my *Bound* work- those who 'got it' and immediately related to the work in a mostly positive embodied fashion, and those who were entirely grossed out by it.

11 Larua Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* p. 32

12 It's worth noting the body neutrality movement, which started in 2015, and spread through social media. It promotes celebrating body utility instead of striving to "love the way one looks". Despite these movements, I've seen negligible evolution in overcoming unrealistic beauty standards within mass media. 13 Donna Haraway, "Cyborgs: A Myth of Political Identity" from *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, p.149-181.

14 For more on queering bodies, see: Butler, 2004

15 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", from *The Feminist Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones. p. 587.

16 Some science fiction which influences my expansive view of bodies include Star Trek: Next Generation's humanoid Borg species, which shares a singular consciousness through advanced technological integration, Data's daughter Lal who could assign her own gender identity, and their tri- sexual species. Alien-centric sci-fi, like *Star Wars*, also expanded my imagination on what sentient bodies might look like.

17For the technophile, I'll outline my process here. Using a custom-built computer with a good graphics card (at the time of this writing, this is a Nvidida 4080), I installed several programs on my computer. Stable Diffusion is the main AI tool I use for image generation, as I can host it locally without censorship (as one would receive through a paid service like Dalle and Midjourney) and fully customize its software using LoRAs (Low-Rank Adaptation, a technique developed by researchers at Microsoft) I both download and create. It is also incredibly fast, not only from the GPU, but also because I'm using a flowchart style

image creation software for the program to run in known as ComfyUI. I create the LoRAs, which can be understood of as small datasets for more precise images (for example, an entire LoRA might be trained on doughnuts, then plugged in with a main 'model' to create more customized images of doughnuts). Most of the LoRAs I create are based on my own portfolio, using another program called KOHYA. Within KOHYA, I use written language to describe images of my work. The word "lumpy" or phrase "lumpy sculpture" is used in every image I plug in, which creates a key token word I employ within my custom LoRA to generate more precise images.

[18] Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, p.8

[19] Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*, p. 24. I'd like to note that as of today, in 2024, we are witnessing more intersectional representation within anatomical illustrations. Gatens's quote speaks to more than just a medical gaze which restricts representation—its lack of representational diversity reflects the industry's misogynistic, racist attitudes which assume the white male as 'default'.

Two examples still seen today include sexist attitudes held by the medical community regarding women's pain (look up IUD insertion procedures, if you haven't already had the distinct displeasure of experiencing it) and a lack of sexed diversity in rat test subjects which may lead to overly prescribed drugs in human female patients (Clayton, J., Collins, F. Policy: NIH to balance sex in cell and animal studies. *Nature* **509**, 282–283 (2014). https://doi.org/10.1038/509282a)

[20] Hava Aldouby, "Ruptured Envelopes, Double Shells", from *Art Journal*, Summer 2003, p.39.

[21] Film projected within an installation, 1993: endoscopic footage from the artist, soundtracked with her heartbeat, are projected onto the floor of a column-shaped room with entryway cutouts on each side.

Images of this work may be seen in the plates of this text.

[22] Video, 1996: A constantly moving camera dives deep into Rist's mouth and pops out her anus. Images of this work may be seen in the plates of this text.

[23] A slippery term, affect, which philosopher Brian Massumi wrestles with his text *The Politics of Affect.* He argues that affect is a non-discursive and pre-conscious aspect of our emotional experiences. He believes that these experiences play a crucial role in shaping our political beliefs, and interpersonal actions, and responses. In other words, the personal is political.

[24] Sara Ahmed, "Changing Hands: Some Reflections on Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender, and Society*, presented at the *Revisiting Feminist Classics Symposium* at Cambridge University in 2013. Quoted from *Porno- Graphics and Porno Tactics: Desire, Affect, and Representation in Pornography* by Erini Avramopoulou and Irene Peano, 2016.

[25] ASMR, an abbreviation for autonomous sensory meridian response, refers to the phenomenon where certain sounds and visuals, such as whispers, noodle slurping, or crinkling paper, can evoke enjoyable sensations or feelings of euphoria, relaxation, and overall well-being in individuals. While there is considerable diversity in ASMR videos, a common aesthetic is often shared among them.

[26] Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, p. 67

[27] This model, or LoRa, was likely created using the same process as my own custom 'lumpy' model as discussed in footnote 5. While I'm not privy to its dataset, as it was created by someone else, the images it advertised on Civitai (an online forum for downloadable AI content) features a variety of pornographic scenes: mostly featuring young, white women who seemingly don't grow body hair. I felt this to be reflective of the agist (bordering pedophilic), sexist, racist, and ableist trends I see in online pornography today.

[28] There are a lot of other knobs I turn and buttons I push to create this work, but for the sake of keeping this writing jargon-light, and with artistic privilege, I will keep the finer details of my process out of this text.

[29] Rosi Braidotti, "Signs of wonder and traces of doubt", sourced from *Porno-Graphics and Porno- Tactics: Desire, Affect, and Representation in Pornography* by Erini Avamopoulou and Irene Peano, 2016, p. 28.

[30] *Lumpyface 00431* is named after its output file name. *LAM* has output hundreds of images, however I only select a handful that function well for this project.

[31] The left portrait features morphed faces of Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren, and Marilyn Monroe. The right features faces of Jane Vonda, Jacqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields, and Meryl Streep.

[32] Deepfakes, a portmanteau of "deep learning" and "fake media", are any kind of artificial media such as video, sound, or image of a person where their face or body has been digitally altered to convincingly appear behaving or performing a fictitious act.

[33] For more statistics on deepfakes, please see Home Security Heroes "2023 State of Deepfakes: Realities, Threats, and Impact".

[34] Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject*, p. xix.