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Enter the Void:
Visual and Other Pleasures

Serena Silver

Washington University in St. Louis

Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts

B.F.A. Thesis

Studio Art

2017

Abstract

My research and art practice focus on the idea of power dynamics where the female is the passive object of the active male gaze. Through the influx of digital social media platforms, these power dynamics exist in many fluid forms which is what I believe to be the relationship between the masculine and the feminine- where the masculine is inevitably always alpha. In contemporary terms, this power dynamic exists and penetrates our daily consumption of visual culture. From the art world to the fashion industry and beyond- all are feeding into consumerism and capitalism. People have become brands, or as some may call, celebrities, with the invention of the smartphone and social media. On one hand, these technologies have a seemingly positive impact on our world, but at what cost? Have things gotten out of hand? What is next? I explore these questions and more predominantly through installation and video work.

Serena Silver

Bulawski, Byron

Capstone II

Wednesday, May 2nd

Enter the Void: Visual and Other Pleasures

How does one truly take a look at themselves? A person can look at themselves in a mirror- but at no point between when the eyes open for the first time and close for the final time can a person see themselves as others do. When photographs evolved into moving image, and eventually into the projected film, cinema developed into a spectacle of voyeurism and pleasure. The human gaze, more specifically the male gaze, defines a dynamic between the person behind the lens and the subject in front of it. I have titled my thesis *Visual and Other Pleasures* as a reference to Laura Mulvey's collection of essays in which *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* appears because it has been a major influence to my practice.

My practice investigates what happens when power dynamics are disrupted and questioned. I do this through the use of a tool, the camera. I started to reverse the gender dynamics by placing myself, a female typically seen on the receiving side of the lens, behind the camera. This scenario allows for me to take complete control of the situation. I play around a lot in my studio using various media. I intuitively look for ways to influence the viewer into thinking critically through my experimental films, installations and photographs. The process for me to create an installation starts with a general concept that is developed through the search for found objects. I then curate a situation for these objects to exist in which often end up in the

form of a film set, an immersive installation or a simple still photographic image. When I laugh at my work, for example, I know when a situation I have created is complete. When I feel emotions induced by my work I can only hope that they are translated visually and sonically to viewers, which is why I make art- for this challenging task. In order to achieve such a task, I take a filmic approach to the works that I make because films are dramatized, theatrical fabrications of reality.

Symbols of Power

I present film as a structure of power dynamics involving two components, the masculine and the feminine. To paint or sculpt a feminine figure in the nude, made for a pedestal or a museum wall, is ascertaining and aestheticizing power. The artist who sculpted feminine forms that emerged from “his” voyeuristic artistic process, like the artist Rodin for example, become mere pawns retrospectively. He also sculpted men, but often depicted them in masculine roles. I say “his” because in reading art historical texts, they/them never appear as she/her. Rather, “he” and “his” are used when referencing artists and people alike.

I believe that Hollywood is the perfect example for a system in society allows for the abuse of power. The effectiveness of the system is shown in how we as society are gripped and absorbed by it. Hollywood has become its own living, breathing entity which takes women, chews them up and spits them out. Their bodies are used, recorded and then taken possession of. They can be replayed and stored. Their bodies are monetized like commodities. Women act as models and mannequins who are robbed of their voice and identity.

Symbols of power that I like to evoke in my work include the phallus as a reference to the critical theory of phallogocentrism, which is a “neologism coined by Jacques Derrida to refer to the privileging of the masculine (phallus) in the construction of meaning” (Wikipedia). The color red appears in my work to connote the power of attraction and the act of blushing.

Feminist Framework

I would like to establish an all encompassing category of feminism that acknowledges the cyclical nature of progress, or lack there of. If we as women keep going through the vicious cycle fighting for equal rights to the ultimate silencing by clichéd societal norms, in personal and professional situations, we are subject to either melancholy or madness. Melancholic woman appear in many forms of art throughout history as mad, irrational or crazy. Activism is the only way to implement change. As a supporter of the #metoo movement, one of my goals as an artist is to subvert these assumptions surrounding women. I see myself situated in a contemporary feminist movement. In many ways, social media has allowed for this to happen. The invention of the hashtag allowed for this movement to go viral, and that it did. Countless men have finally been forced to face the public as abusers of women. We, as women, will continue to be voided from history if our voices go unheard.

During my lifetime, there have been about two exhibits that specifically focused on feminist artists with names including terms like “retrospective”, which clump together years of hard work by many revolutionary female artists into a single show. I found these to be interesting exhibits because the rhetoric engages with feminism as a movement of its time.

I would like to situate myself as an artist alongside the female artists from *Bad Girls*, an

exhibit at The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York (1994), which had its opening blocks from where I was born months after. Artworks featured in the exhibit include Portia Munson's, *Pink Project*, 1994, Lynda Benglis' infamous, *advertisement*, *Artforum 13* (November 1974) and Louise Bourgeois', *Fillette*, (1968). The artists from this exhibit are classic examples of feminist art that inspires my work.



Figure 1, Portia Munson, *Pink Project*, 1994

“Language is more than just what is spoken and written; virtually all communication, social structures and systems rely in some way on language for their form. Whoever controls language- who speaks, who is listened to or heard has everything to say about how people think and feel about themselves. Language is power” (Marcia Tucker, *Bad Girls*, 1994)



Fig. 2, Louise Bourgeois, *Fillette*, (1968)

When women are more interested in language than men, then why are women portrayed to privilege and prioritize their “looks” over their abilities to communicate with confidence? As a small example, a site targeting a female audience called the invisible boyfriend- <https://invisibleboyfriend.com/> exists for women to have human-like emotional connection with someone, fake or not. This can be compared to technologies offered to men like sex dolls, which offer an emotionally numbing experience.

Experimental Video Work

The simplest way to cope with feeling meaninglessness is to see life as the surface of a silver screen, a reflection of another world where you retain authority over reality. I started with a film titled *Amorphus Amator* (2016), which I took inspiration from the films and writing of Maya Deren. While she received little recognition during her lifetime as a filmmaker, I am happy to have access to her work now. Like many of the films I make, her production was a one-woman show. We control the camera and perform for it.

This led to the investigation of “live cinema (theatre)” which I found to be very different from my investigation into performance art, but also tangentially related. Cinematic moments happen in life serendipitously, but only in films can serendipity be planned. I like exploring with lighting and set design, along with music, to create an immersive experience for the audience. *Amorphus Amator* (2016) is not quite performance art, film, acting or performing, it’s a combination of the bunch. In my work from the past two years, I have seen a progression from a focus on conceptual works to focusing on form and how playing with the viewers’ senses elicits emotions.

I have reached an overarching conceptual framework for my video work that deals with melancholy, the male gaze and female madness. Poetry is an integral part of my practice because poetics allow for language to achieve a depth of understanding beyond its original or surface meaning. In an experimental art film I made, titled *Three Acts* (2017) I took inspiration from film designed for a theatre space with live piano accompaniment as a nod to pre-cinematic forms of entertainment. The piano sonata that is the score to the film is popularly known as

Marche Funèbre composed by Frédéric Chopin in the late 1830s and is said to be the song played at his own funeral. I play around with light, pacing and superimposition to evoke what lies in our unconscious- whether it be dreams or memories. In *Three Acts* (2018), I manipulate my own body superimposed with a burning match which, as it burns, coils up like an erection. If the innuendo is missed, it is made clear in the first act, which depicts a red wax penis candle doing sex acts with fire and getting burned.



Fig. 3, *Three Acts*, Film Still, Duration: 9:08 Minutes, Size Varies

My experimental films explore how our subconscious, ego and superego inform our dreams and how our dreams inform reality. Feminism has become a taboo subject matter; therefore, I enjoy playing with cliché feminist tropes to create a new dialogue- centered around voice opposed to silence. I use humorous visual puns to make room for questions like: what does society force us to repress? I like to combat what society forces us to suppresses ourselves, which includes suppresses of speech. By undercutting and dismantling the taboo of feminine

tropes as soft, fragile, passive, frail, needing to be attached to a man- I use transgressive humor to flouts society's restrictive norms; addresses taboo subjects such as sex. Through placing myself on both sides of the camera, I am queering the gaze. It changes from male > female to female=female.

Immersive Installation Work: Entering the Void



Figures 4 and 5, Enter The Void (2018) Installation Views. Aerosol Paint, Bridal Gown, Digital Camera, Director's Chair, Feather Duster, Flowers, High Heels, Leds, Mannequin, Microphone, Plastic Wrap, Single-Channel Projection, Tripod

My installations like *Enter the Void* (2018) are inspired by my exploration of the moving image and filmic for a few reasons. The first reason is that films have fabricated narratives and

plots which are selected in a similar fashion to how we store memory. Memories are not true representations of reality because overtime we remember things differently. We dramatize or skew certain events in our lives with no sense of how our memories are filed away in our brains.

Second, parts of the installation purposely play tricks on the viewers through objects that appear to be average and real from afar, at a closer look, I change elements of these objects. For example, the use of a flower bouquet as a stand in for the mannequin's head. On one hand the bouquet appears to be red roses. However, the roses are actually fake and I bought them as white flowers and I spray painted them red as a reference to *Alice in Wonderland*. You can catch the smell of the aerosol paint from up close, but the lighting tricks the eyes. I do this because I want people to question their surroundings.

The last reason *Enter the Void* (2018) is filmic lies in the lighting. I wanted people to feel like they were in an actual movie theatre or at a photo-shoot as to not be distracted from their smartphones and to take a moment to digest the installation. Through the use of a camera with a strobe flash that was programed to go off about twice a minute, I wanted to further immerse the viewer into the space. The camera was set up implicate the viewer in the same way the bride is implicated. People were invited to pose next to the mannequin and wait patiently for the camera to go off with absolutely no idea where the pictures were going or how they were being used.

It takes about 15-30 seconds to have a basic understanding of the work. However, my goal as an artist is for the viewer to have a valuable take away, which is to leave with many unanswered questions. I chose to make a mannequin bride the subject of the exhibit as an exteriorized image. One becomes a bride when they are adorned with a wedding gown, and a

fiancée. The expectation for the female bride is to perform the duties of a wife in a construction where the bride becomes the wife to the man or husband- forever attached to Mr. and Misses. All of the individual components together give clue to the motivation behind the work. As a fun surprise for the audience, I programmed waveforms and projection mapped them in the form of red circles so they covered the bride's breasts and abdomen. The waveforms were activated by the input of sound into a phallic microphone, which picked up salient noise in the gallery space.

The "Snap" Void

Today, images are digitally reproduced and consumed at eye-blinking rates. Why has being "live" taken over being alive? Does our technology change what it means to live a meaningful life? Has being seen become more important than being heard? My creative process involves an inspection of the changes I have experienced in technology throughout my life. If you take a look at Judith Butler's writings on queer theory and the materiality of the body- she argues that gender is a sustained performance by the individual. We perform candidness essentially in all interactions we have with others- which limits meaning to a superficial level by focusing on outward, projected appearances. If gender is a performance, then masculinity is also a performance.

An example of an artist who has been working performed candidness, Cindy Sherman, is known for inventing the "selfie" in her 1997 exhibition *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills*. My ongoing series *Snapvoid* (2017-) takes a similar approach to Sherman's

contemporary work where she posts images of a theatrically distorted self leaving followers to question whether or not she is in the hospital.



Figure 6, Screenshot of Cindy Sherman’s Instagram account.

I started *Snapvoid* (2017-), which consists of experimental films made using Snapchat, in order to the further exploration of what I call “The “Image” in the Age of Technological Reproduction,” after Walter Benjamin’s: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936). Benjamin argues that once a work is reproduced, it loses its aura. What about today when people reproduce their identities through video and image shared on online social media platforms? The act of being “live” has become second nature through Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook Live. These forms of social media are filmic because they are false constructions of reality where still and moving images are curated and shared by individuals with

the world mediated through a screen. One no longer needs to leave the house to construct a public image. We can create a public spectacle from the comfort of our own homes.

Conclusion

Men have the tendency to rely on their manliness to get through life. Hyper-masculine men are always active and this is true and has remained so for the duration of my twenty-two years on this planet. For centuries women have been striving to fit an ideal; which is usually ideally beautiful and feminine. In the media, beauty and fashion are associated with women. Women are always on the receiving end of the gaze. Models are stripped of their humanity and voice and turned into objects of desire for the pleasure of the male gaze. With this in mind, I have an urge to do a photo series of nude males who identify as straight. They are the perfect target for reversing the power dynamics of the gaze.

Through immersing myself in research, I have begun to create an overarching narrative for my practice that can eventually be applied to all of the artworks I make. Areas of research I use include: contemporary artists and their practices, philosophy, psychoanalysis, film, poetry, popular culture and current events. The research goes beyond a single media or idea, and takes a comparative approach across all art. The goal is to accumulate a library of resources from many different angles and viewpoints because a narrative that is closest to the “truth” is one that brings in as many different opinions as possible.

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