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The Representation of Non-Traditional Bodies

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Abstract

My work largely addresses the close-minded Western ideals of the human body, particularly those related to females. Stemming from struggles with my own sense of security, I strive to create accessible works of art that both challenge and expand these ideals by representing figural imagery beyond such social constraints. Though my works may seem to serve the purpose of mockery at first, the urgency of the issues portrayed becomes apparent as the pieces are studied more carefully. I explore how exposure, vulnerability, grotesqueness, and intimacy within my work serve as a means to expand our cultural ideals for the human body.

I investigate a multitude of dualities in two dimensional forms by using oil paints, image transfers, and digital imagery. My work dances on the line between repulsion and fascination. I am also intrigued by the differences between the representation of the male nude and that of the female nude. In addition, I establish moments in which vulnerability and strength function simultaneously within the same pieces.

Introduction

In today's society, popular media has cultivated a culture which represses the perceived physical beauty of the majority of our Western population. We are constantly encouraged to make ourselves look younger or thinner, or to improve our complexion. Less is done to take the time to appreciate the wonder that is being human and instead more time is spent considering how to modify our bodies. Essentially, these standards of beauty limit our opportunity to glorify these biological masses which have lead us through the life experiences that shape us into the people we are today. There is something glorious about growing older and living in a body that

reveals traces of the lives we have endured, and living a life of truth by allowing this physical history to be exposed. My artwork is deeply rooted in portraiture and has served as a quest to depict the shell of the human body in an accessible manner. Rather than set new limits for the definition of beauty, I simply expand what one may consider to be beautiful to encompass that which lies within the natural and the inevitable of our biological processes.

I constantly wrestle with the question of whether or not it is possible to influence the audience to perceive my work in a manner that would alter their attitudes towards particular body images. In order to investigate this, I work with concepts and methods regarding exposure, intimacy, failure and vulnerability. Among each of these concepts, some of the recurring trends are my desire to take control over the subjects and the gaze of the viewers. Whether I depict the subject in a dignifying or destructive way, the non-traditional figures shock the viewers and captivate their gaze.

I draw inspiration from artists like Jenny Saville, Monica Cook, Christian Rex Van Minnen, and Lucian Freud, who each depict their subjects in compassionate but non-idealized manners. They represent non-traditional bodies that are flawed, but devote a great amount of care and tenderness to making their work, which is so apparent that it fosters a sense of fondness for the viewers towards the subjects.

PROCESS

In my earliest works, such as *Girl With Pearl*, I directly challenge specific canons of historical female portraiture by generating elements of beauty without representing smooth glowing complexions and pure flesh tones. As my work progressed, my references grew less

specific when creating works like *Big Bully* as part of a larger and more confrontational series where I started to consider how I could use the absence of men in historical nude portraiture to deconstruct ideals of power in the present. I then migrated away from canvas and explored digital collages as a means to counteract traditional expectations associated with the overweight female figure, which I will soon address in reference to my piece *Primavera*. Most recently, I combined my interest in digital imagery and my painterly skills to create a series of image transfers where I present the nude female body in a way which both protects and exposes the subjects. I will discuss this process in reference to my *Undisclosed Series* and *Maureen and Frances* (not pictured) in a later section.

My relationship with failure has informed the trajectory of my working process.

In part, failure is inevitable in my practice because society's failure to have the right kind of



Fig. 1. Elizabeth Perkins, *Primavera*, 2014. Digital collage printed on matte paper, 46x36"

ideals drives my artistic decisions. I often fear that I cannot be what I want to be, my work cannot be perceived how I want it to be perceived, yet somehow I remain hypnotized by my desire to do so anyways, and to gain a sense of control over these ideals with my

hand. Ernst von Glaserfeld asserted, "...a 'real' world only manifests itself when our

constructions fail" (Le Feuvre 84). In my own work, I take non-traditional images, defy ideals, and show real world truths. I also constantly risk the failure to effectively communicate from my mind to art, in the sense that while I see the figures as beautiful in *Primavera* (see fig.1) for

example, others find the figures to be grotesque. Consequentially the scene falls apart, and the reference to Botticelli's *Primavera* seems like a mockery. It is these very gaps of perception that drive me to continue with this type of subject matter. As Samuel Beckett once said, "To be an artist is to fail as no other dares to fail." The fact that a specific physical aesthetic is so ingrained in Western society is what motivates me to continue seeking imagery to change the way people see non-traditional bodies.

EXPOSURE & VULNERABILITY

Exposure is a multi-faceted element of my work through which I dance on the line between protecting the subjects and laying them bare. Each of us has personal boundaries, and by unmasking the subjects within my work, I violate these boundaries. Exposure manifests itself in various ways across my conceptual practice; vulnerability to the elements, subjecting someone to an influencing experience, disclosure of something secret, and unprotected.

The term exposure also contributes on a more literal level in reference to photographic long exposure of the imagery in this *Undisclosed Series*. This technique, along with others which I will discuss later on, creates a mask of the figure. The mask allows the subject to be free, and for

the viewer to draw more personal connections to this subject. In my piece *Maureen and Frances*,



Fig. 2. Elizabeth Perkins, selected piece from *Undisclosed Series*, 2015. Image transfer on raw canvas, 7x7"

the veil again takes the form of paper which has either been too much removed, or too little removed, preventing the image of the figures from being revealed completely.

For the *Undisclosed Series*, I portray both my own nude body and those of my close friends. I am driven by an internal battle in which I try to see myself as a beautiful young woman in a world where I attempt to perceive all others as beautiful too. If we publicly embrace our physical truths, our physicalities which have been culturally established as “flaws” can instead become signals of strength, experience, wisdom, and beauty. By distressing the images I contain them, and my gentle hand used for the process of the exposing the figures establishes a sense of care and respect.

GROTESQUE

Jenny Saville has been a major inspiration to the way I understand my perception of the human body, particularly that of the female (fig. 3). She asserts, “...there can be beauty in



Fig 3. Jenny Saville, *Plan*, 1993.
Oil on canvas. 108 x 84"

individualism. If there is a wart or a scar, this can be beautiful, in a sense, when you paint it. It's part of your identity” (Saville 15). When artists create idealistic representations of women, they fail to embrace their subjects' true identities. Recently, I have emphasized grotesqueness and the materiality of paint as a means for investigation. The fine line between repulsion and fascination regarding the human body is one which I constantly explore. Although my work largely portrays portraits of others, the creation of these images serves as a personal journey

towards understanding my own self-image and understanding my place within society. I hope to inspire this sort of introspection for others as well.

Historical paintings that canonize the Western female portrait such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and Johannes Vermeer's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* present beauty in the form of soft and delicate flesh illuminated with a warm and unintrusive glow. Similarly to the manner in which magazines influence readers' body images today, these canons of portraiture establish degrading and unrealistic norms for the way the body is represented in art. The grotesque plays a role in exposing and emphasizing the physical truths of the subjects. I often implement this in my work to attract attention through the shock factor, but also strive to weave my grotesqueries into something that becomes beautiful (fig. 4). "...As the German scholar Thomas Cramer explains, the grotesque is not only a vehicle of disorder but also, paradoxically, a defense against that disorder: it not only involves.... [the feeling of anxiety aroused by the comic being pushed to an extreme] but also represents [the defeat of anxiety, by the comic, in the face of the inexplicable]" (Snodgrass 202). In the "Businessmen" series, I utilize this described approach to overcome some of my discomforts with Western social constructs.



Fig. 4. Elizabeth Perkins, *Girl With Pearl* (above detail of painting), Oil and Special K on stretched found fabric, 2014. 30x40"

A challenge I often face in my creative process is balancing my instinctual drive to create humor in my work. Oftentimes it is easy for this humor to be perceived as mockery- which becomes an issue in my piece *Primavera*. If people know me as an artist and as a person when approaching my work, I fear that inevitably it is easy for them to think my work is a jab at the subjects being represented. Instead, I hope my humor just draws people into the work at a surface level (after all, people love to laugh), but ultimately it becomes quite clear that this subject matter is not really funny at all. As Christian Rex van Minnen notes in his statement, his works address the beauty in impermanence and decay, which stem from the understanding of truth. His works have the ability to disgust while maintaining the craft and creativity of subject matter to hold the viewer's gaze long enough to spark reflection. By juxtaposing grotesqueries such as oozing boils and deformations with images that recall Renaissance portraiture, he forces a reevaluation of our aesthetic ideals (Baade) (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Christian Rex van Minnen, *Romans Ate the Fetal Rabbits Zulu*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 14x11”

In order to create the grotesque “Businessmen” series, I began by working with digital collage. I took imagery of random obese men from online pornographic sources and collaged them together, along with faces of CEOs from various company websites. Connelly argues, “Photomontage has a special relationship to the grotesque, because by definition it brings together unlike things from disparate worlds more and thus transgresses and destabilizes boundaries more naturally than any other medium” (195). A grayed and slightly muddy color



Fig. 6. Elizabeth Perkins, *Big Bully* (from the “Businessmen” Series), 2015. Oil on canvas, 58x77”

palette along with chunky paint application adds to the elements of disgust. By stripping the CEOs of their powerful dress and manipulating their bodies to appear grotesque and weak, I am able to gain control over them (fig. 6). Across Western art history in portraiture, the gaze of the viewer upon the painted subject is that of a male gazing at a female subject. By painting a male nude and reversing this viewer-subject dynamic, I subvert this historical trend.

In order to create the series “Nude Women with Fruit” which includes *Primavera*, I again

collected a large assortment of found digital images, from which I experimented with developing a diverse series of compositions. I began to recognize that the sources for these nude images were strictly limited to pornographic fetish sites, which added an additional metaphorical layer to the combination of the food and figures- the juiciness of the food becomes a saliva inducing mechanism to further sexualize the juiciness of the fleshy female form. As I discovered patterns like these that intrigued me, I began to seek out more specific variations of these images.

These drawings possess an initial shock, but it isn’t the provocative nudity of the female form or even its juxtaposition with fruit that makes it shocking. These two elements have played roles for over a century in Western canons of portraiture. It is the presentation of a seemingly grotesque fat-figured nude body; more flesh, more folds, everything in excess. When we live in a

country where almost a third of our population is considered clinically obese, how is it that we are still unable to appreciate the beauty that is inherent in the curves of all female forms? Though the earliest stage of these drawings lived in the form of collages, my initial plan was to convert them into paintings in order to employ a classical painting style to further glorify the subjects. However, I quickly realized my own style and skill set as an artist prevented me from replicating such a material technique, and thus this approach would be unsuccessful. Instead, I improvised by inserting certain elements into the digital compositions that would allude to this classical age. Furthermore, the presentation of digital images of women on this matte paper references contemporary forms of popular media distribution, like magazines. These women, who are frequently judged and frowned upon because of the shape of their bodies, are now boldly taking the form of powerful, beautiful, and worthy goddesses. The large scale of these drawings and the poses of the figures, are confident and confrontational, challenging the viewers to reconsider their perceptions. This becomes especially powerful in *Primavera* (fig. 1) in which the allusion to a respectable classical image is more direct.

Monica Cook's work provides an opportunity for the viewers to explore the beauty of natural truths in a three-dimensional form with her grotesque sculptures that are so close to being human but just miss it. Her grotesque creatures "exhibit all the unexpected plasticities of having lived and been affected by life, growing, acquiring idiosyncrasies: scars and pustules, preferences, mannerisms" (Russ 2015). Meanwhile, she incorporates materials that glorify the consequential beauty of these figures, such as sequins and glitter and opalescent objects.

INTIMACY

The intimate relationship between myself and my subjects is an imperative element for much of my work. Based on my motivation to celebrate the human body in all its forms, by depicting the female nude I must deal with the challenge of protecting her from popular crude thoughts of physicality and sexuality of women, while celebrating her beauty. In the *Undisclosed Series*, the photographs are low contrast and delicate. Additionally, the blurriness of many of these works makes the nude less confrontational and forces the viewer to come up and be intimate with the piece in order to decipher the visual imagery.

I work with figures that I feel a sense of intimacy with, whether it be myself or others. The subjects' identities are protected through the use of the aforementioned paper veil, the mask created through long exposure or by the use of concealing their faces with objects that come between the camera and the face of the model. These techniques seem violent to some, and many viewers have suggested that this veil actually objectifies and sexualizes the subjects by concealing their identity and leaving only their bodies. Consequently, in my most recent piece, the entirety of the figure has been veiled, leaving only slight hints suggesting the nudity of the figure, contrasted by the revealed background. The process of creating this veil suggests intimacy as well; rather than vigorously rubbing away at the surface of the figures in a manner that seems almost violent and sexual, I use only a brief gentle caress to remove a slight amount of paper.

Martin Gayford, one of the models for Lucian Freud's work, understood the importance of honesty and intimacy in depicting the subject of each piece; "Freud's people were the reverse [of beauty]: 'naked'-poor, bare, forked creatures. Some find them shocking and ugly because

they are so clearly of real, undressed people. But the more you look at them, I believe, the richer and, in a way, more humane they become” (Howgate 13). The artist’s work then becomes more accessible, and once the viewer is able to digest the visual information, Freud has the power to break down mental barriers of his viewers. In *Leigh Bowery (seated)* (fig. 7), the pose is so confrontational that the viewer almost feels like a voyeur imposing on a moment of intimacy, and can feel a connection for the figure on a less superficial level.



Fig. 7. Lucian Freud, Leigh Bowery (seated), Oil on canvas, 1990.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

My work moves beyond simply desensitizing viewers to non-traditional bodies. Rather than depicting a specific type of figure until the audience accepts it, I incorporate color palettes and graceful craft to surpass mere tolerance and achieve a portrayal of beauty. Many members of Western society swear by the phrase “nothing succeeds like failure.” While my work thus far has challenged certain culturally established physical ideals regarding body shape and stature, there are such a vast number of bodies types that I have yet to address. In the future I will continue on this trajectory and expand upon the variety of non-traditional bodies I represent in my work.

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Image List

Figure 1: Elizabeth Perkins

Figure 2: Elizabeth Perkins

Figure 3: http://www.saatchigallery.com/aipe/jenny_saville.htm

Figure 4: Elizabeth Perkins

Figure 5: <https://beanstories.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/>

[lucian_freud_maler_seine_105_leigh_bowery__seated_20120221092011.jpg](#)

Figure 6: Elizabeth Perkins

Figure 7: <http://distortedarts.com/lucian-freud-portraits-the-national-portrait-gallery/>