Turn-on's and edible friends: an imaginal menagerie

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Turn-On’s and Edible Friends: An Imaginal Menagerie

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Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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Master of Fine Arts
In
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by
Matthew Henderson
B.F.A., West Virginia University, 2009

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Acknowledgments

I would like to start, as self-centered and egotistical as it may sound, by thanking myself. Grad school was a difficult road to traverse, and there were times I was certain that I'd never be able to do it. Yet, here I am. Of course I had so much help along the way. Danielle Burns and David Williams, thanks so much for being awesome and always making everything, no matter how awful it seemed, a little more fun. Thank you Sarah Shearer for constantly providing me with an outlet that matched my own rage at times, and even more so for your help in making the installation of the show go so smoothly! Thank you Jessie Hornbrook for being a fun and constantly unique person, who was an amazing teacher to watch and learn with. Amanda James and Molly Miller, thanks for helping with the last bits and bobs of making the show perfect; the printing, fraying and odd jobs, and for dealing with my overly stressed self at the same time. Thanks to my family for your constant support and help all of my life. A very special thanks to my mama, who was my late night “ghost rider” on many occasions. Lastly, thanks to Joe Lupo, who introduced me to the joys, thrills, and terrors of printmaking which I still enjoy more than anything else.
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Abstract

Turn-on’s and Edible Friends explores alternative sexual behavior. Societal standards have an overwhelming interest in imposing judgment upon sexual identity. The imagery is influenced by taboo and peculiar sexual fetishes. Animal personifications of the fetish are used as satire to detach the viewer from the action, and also as a metaphor for the reins with which the general public takes control over our private relationships. Thus the work becomes confrontational with the viewer and forces them to question their perceptions and comforts about sexual identity.
Chapter I: Sex: Shame and Guilt

The imagery in my work is heavily influenced by sexual fetishes, which are widely considered taboo. Our society has an overwhelmingly alarming interest in imposing judgment upon what is and is not acceptable in an individual’s sexual persona. My work confronts viewers with potentially uncomfortable and overtly sexual situations, in an effort to have them question their perception of human sexuality. The figures present in the narrative are life sized or larger, which enhances the confrontational aspect. The scale of the works creates a window into an event which allows the viewer to fully engage with the activities of the figures in a direct and provocative relationship.

What is taboo? By definition it is a prohibited association with a particular person, place, or thing. Taboo sexual acts are those that are judged abnormal and unorthodox. Thus, participating in taboo or socially unacceptable sexual behaviors usually creates a deep sense of shame in the individual. For example, homosexuality, transgenderism, and transvestism are often frowned upon and viewed as unacceptable. This was not always so; as history can attest to the fact that viewpoints on human sexuality can drastically change over time. “In highly patriarchal Greek and Roman society it wasn’t the gender of the person a male might sleep with but the role and power dynamic… Not only was same-sex sex acceptable – it might also be considered aesthetically and emotionally desirable”¹ However, by late Antiquity these acts of same-sex love were shamed by Neo-Platonists, Jewish philosophers, and Christian sects who viewed it as ‘pagan acts’. So, what is in fashion sexually may change at any given time, depending upon the standards of society. As opinions of sexual behavior change, however, that doesn’t stop these

activities from occurring; it simply makes a once acceptable activity unacceptable. This refers back to the taboo.

“All human societies through history have imposed limits on the types of sexual behavior regarded as acceptable, a degree of variation across cultures has occurred, whilst, within cultural traditions, change in sexual mores may occur over time.”

Sex is entirely intertwined with our lives both in public and in private. However, it is a topic that is often uncomfortable to discuss, or simply not taken seriously. These perpetually changing attitudes turn sex into a subject that is exploited when beneficial, but treated as an embarrassment at other times. Topics related to alternative sexual identity are especially uncomfortable. A tremendous amount of this discomfort stems from religion. Religious viewpoints dictate much of what becomes morally acceptable within our society; this often turns human sexuality into acts of *evil*, attributing negative repercussions to acts of love.

Sex as an activity is used as play, physical love, and procreation. What society considers ‘deviant sexual behavior and activity’ has become the conduit for projecting my purpose: that purpose being the broadening of horizons and the changing of sexual perceptions. While I do not believe that my work can change ingrained concepts and opinions of right and wrong on any level, whether it is sexual diversification or otherwise, I do believe that the work can at least spark an interest in or conversation about a potentially unknown aspect of human sexuality.

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Chapter II: Theme and Juxtaposition

The materials I’ve chosen for the creation of the work were chosen for their connection to the imagery or to create juxtaposition between material and subject. The overall theme of the work is juxtaposition, between that which is natural and that which is not, between that which is acceptable and that which is not.

Woodcuts have a simple and instinctual feeling, both in the creation and in the final product. I feel that using a once living and growing material to carve into and the aggressive physicality used in the creation of this work mirrors the obsessive quality of the fetishes gouged out of the surface. It is the pensive physicality that I enjoy most about the relief process. There is much time spent sitting upon the wood considering and reconsidering the image that is being created. Each cut into the wood has a powerful feeling or emotive aspect to it, and the overall process is highly autobiographical. This autobiography is conveyed through the means of carving of the wood; from the chatter that changes direction and density with the passing of time and the depth of the carving itself. It was my intention to capture the free and loose qualities of my sketches in the carving, seeking an overall loose, automatic, erratic feeling in the image creation.

My chosen printing surface of burlap is used for the storage and distribution of animal food. Burlap has an intrinsic quality of durability and strength to it. It resists tearing and is resistant to filth. This is due to the natural qualities it has. Burlap is a one hundred percent biodegradable material made from jute, hemp, flax or a combination of those materials. Burlap has a distinctive smell; natural and almost dingy. It smells like everything reminiscent of a barnyard; the animals, dirt, and hard work. It has malleability and stretch that mimics the
qualities of sexual diversity and the strain of living an alternative lifestyle. Although able to be pulled, possibly changing form a bit, it never fully loses its original shape and texture, making it an ideal support for my exploration.

Patterns from quilts and knitting are used to offset the combative nature of the imagery. Quilting, knitting, and sewing also add a quality of simplicity and unsophisticated charm which is conventional, familiar, and comfortable. So while the imagery is influenced by the shocking and taboo, the process is very humble and unpretentious; juxtaposing the unnatural images upon the natural fabric meshing the unacceptable with the homespun and universally acceptable. It also adds a level of femininity to the work that plays between the rougher masculine fabric and the softer touches of the hand stitching and quilting.

The palette I used for the creation of the works is largely natural. The rusty reds and oranges recalling weathered farm equipment or sunset. The deep rich browns and blues being earthy and neutral overall, the colors of mud and deep shadows. The natural colors and tones are important not only for their relation to the burlap, but also as metaphor for the orthodox and standard idea of human sexuality and social acceptance. By contrast, the fetishistic narratives are highlighted either through bleaching the burlap, water coloring, or being printed in a brilliantly exciting color. This colorful aspect sets the fetish apart from the more subdued contrasting natural colors of the context/environment.
Chapter III: Perversity and Discrimination

Abnormal sex is what others do that you wouldn’t enjoy.
-Money, 1986

Diversity is a word that conjures the idea of hope and acceptance. Perversity, only a few letters difference in spelling, conjures a very different connotation. There is no hope of any kind associated with the word perversity. While, in some cases I believe that these words can overlap; they more often exist as near polar opposites. That which is considered diverse is being different in a good way and perverse being regarded as being abnormal and different in a bad way.

The sexual fetishes portrayed in the prints, act as a medium to present the viewers with a situation that is possibly foreign to them. These fetishes represent a seedy underside to an already scandalous subject. They represent secret indulgences that are not uncommon in practice, but are seldom discussed. My prints are symbolic representations of the wide diversity of human sexuality. These sexual acts are shunned and misunderstood, as are most nonconformist aspects of sexuality in general.

Mass media is often one’s only exposure to fetishism. As such, every aspect of this behavior is most often portrayed as shameful, illegal, immoral, and potentially harmful or dangerous. Thus, all forms of mass media become the educators, even though they are not well informed on the subject that they portray.

For example, television is a socially driven media form that caters to a mass audience. It is strongly influenced by social norms. Television is, however, playing both ends of
interpretation in that it first uses social standards to present the issue, then strengthens the moral majorities’ viewpoint. The representation that sexual fetishism is perverse and unacceptable arises from issues of morality. So, if a mass media tool is where a person gets the majority of their information, how well informed could they be? For instance, public service announcements demonizing homosexuals as child predators were common in the 1950’s. In every case, the media portrays paraphilias as being dangerous, lewd, and immoral. The result is the creation of more prejudice, fear and persecution of the behavior and its participants.

Paraphilias are defined as a sexual disorder, and as a disorder it is believed that they also can be cured. By defining something as a disorder it also makes it seem sketchy, undesirable, and perverse. There are two main types of fetishes; preference to inanimate objects and obsessions with specific body parts. It is believed that fetishes are imprinted or learned behaviors by many experts. Kraft-Ebing, suggested that fetishes arise as symbolic representation of attraction toward another person:

Erotic fetishism makes an idol of physical or mental qualities of a person or even merely of objects used by that person, etc, because they awaken mighty associations with the beloved person, thus originating strong emotions of sexual pleasure.  

Discrimination against nonstandard sexual behavior comes from the lack of understanding of the practice. Why someone would enjoy being hurt or degraded seems so foreign to many people, as pain and humiliation are not associated with good feelings. Sigmund Freud suggested that sexual fetishes stem from the inability of men to accept the fact that their mother’s did not have a penis. So there are some rather outlandish ideas as to why these feelings

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occur. It is nearly impossible to understand another person’s way of thinking and preferences. We cannot fully appreciate the experiences that shape them.

As unique as each person is, we also feel the need to socialize and group together. As we group together though, individuality begins to take less precedence over fitting in with the group. Being on the outside of the group has potential dangers and creates isolation. People who practice fetishes live on the fringe of society. The media and religion perpetuate that status. This does have a detrimental effect upon the understanding of fetishes, and encourages the continued prejudice and discrimination.
Chapter IV: Animal Personification; Fitting the Fetish to the Fur

The use of animals in the imagery helps to create a small degree of detachment between the characters in the prints and the viewer. The interpretation of the work would be very different if, instead of animals, there were people engaging in these sexual activities. It would move further into the realm of pornography, and lose a large degree of the whimsy present.

There are many fetishes which involve elements of animal play, either through acting as an animal during foreplay/sex or through paraphilia including masks, restraints, and whips. This claiming of dominion over another person during acts of love is highly similar to the control that man claims over animals. I use this sense of physical control to create a parallel to the control that society places upon our sexual personas. Nearly all of the animals I’ve chosen to represent are animals that man uses for agrarian purposes, either for food or labor. I do this to reference the rich history of domestic animal representation through literature and mythology, and also to further reiterate a sense of control and the lack thereof. The work has qualities of fable like narrative throughout. Each of the animals engages in lewd sexual play or sexual fetish that is allegorically representational of human sexuality:

In If Wishes Were Horses, the horse has a dildo strapped onto his head. The straps are similar to the reins placed upon a horse to control its movements while riding or working. The addition of the strap-on effectively turns him into a unicorn of sorts, but also reinterprets the concept of ways in which he may be ridden. It is the outside object (the dildo) that turns the horse himself into a sexual object. He sits covering his eyes in agony over what he has become. The horse was initially a beast of burden that was used for work in the fields, and has become a
beast of burden in the labors of love. He also is the most clearly shamed of all the animals in the prints. However, even in his shame, he is still in a state of arousal.

In the top corners of the image, his process of moving from one state of being to another is shown through the plough on the left being the animal he was, to the Vaseline and condom on the right, which is what he has become. The piece represents the transition from being a "normal" part of society working alongside others, being the horse that pulls the plough, to then being, perhaps what he privately wants to be the horse that is also a sex toy. This sexual difference causes him to be stigmatized and feel ashamed. He’s sitting in a field that is fenced. Although some of the fence is beginning to fall apart, he is still, for the most part, confined. He is a prisoner of society’s viewpoint of him and of his own sense of shame.
Figure 1

Matthew Henderson, *If Wishes Were Horses*, Relief and Watercolor on Burlap, 12’x8’, 2011
\textit{Beat the Horse} shows a horse using hand puppets as a source of both gratification and shame. He has on an angel puppet which acts as his sexual shame, and a devil puppet which acts as sexual gratification. These are the most overt (if not somewhat cliché) portrayals of religious effects on society and human sexuality. Puppets have a dissociative self becoming a part of the hand that controls them but also a separate entity. While his lustful and carefree hoof engages in masturbatory acts, his fearful hoof readies a bow to shoot out his eye. This is, of course, an allusion to a common myth used to deter masturbation, which claims that engaging in this activity will lead to blindness or hairy palms. This is also why the breed of horse I chose is a Clydesdale with its tufts of hair that hang about its hooves. The abnormal sexual identity/fetish presents the use of the puppets, which is a sub-fetish of doll fetishes. The doll, in typical fetish, is used as a nonliving sexual partner. The puppets are now his lifeless sexual other, however he controls them.

The tops corners of this image reveal a broken horseshoe on the left, and a saddle on the right. He also sits in front of a fence, but this fence is completely broken. The broken fence and horseshoe represent his freedom and independence, the saddle is a symbol of societal control. The horse is no longer fully controlled, but he also is not outside of the fence, and thus he still lives in a controlled environment. The symbolism is freedom and control; the individual and society.
Figure 2

Matthew Henderson, *Beat The Horse*, Relief on Burlap, 12’x8’, 2012
The deer and the man in *Playing Parts* embody violent sexual play. The buck takes on the most human quality of all the animals in the work, due to his wearing clothing. Of course, he is not just wearing clothes, he is wearing a dress. He is representative of transgendered persons, being a male deer showing himself as a female. He holds a rifle on a man in a deer mask. This man is the only human in the entire body of work. He is handcuffed, in his underwear, and at the mercy of the buck. Their antlers are intertwined, reminiscent of deer mating habits and also entangling them physically adding more tension between the figures.

Deer are typically nonaggressive and skittish. Placing the buck in a position of dominance over his frequent and only real predator, man, furthers the role reversal present in this piece. Male and female, predator and prey, sex and violence; all lines are blurred between the distinct polar opposites in this image.

The deer head or mask upon the man also brings into mind “the furry”. Furries are people who enjoy fantasizing and playing the parts of animals. The range of this fetish varies from simple writing of animal fictions to creating full body animal suits that may be used for imaginary role play or sexual activity. The dress on the buck and the deer mask on the man are both bright orange. This is the color that hunters wear. It’s not only bright and loud; it’s also startling and violent. It’s not an inviting color, but the figures are also not in an inviting position. They vie for power and control over one another, each acting out the role most typical of the other. They are in a forest, which is where a hunt would typically occur and the trees behind them are entangling into a mass, similar to their antlers. This is the only print that has a completely free and natural setting but it’s depicted in chaos.
Figure 3

Matthew Henderson, *Playing Parts*, Relief and Watercolor on Burlap, 6’X12’, 2011
*Shorn Subservient*, depicts sheep entangled in a twisted obsessive hair fetish. The sheep are obsessed with a physical trait, the wool of another sheep. While the larger sheep cuts off his wool, the other two sit at his feet gathering pieces for their own use. The uses I’ve given for this hair are far more bizarre than an actual hair fetish which would usually involve obsessive styling or feeling of the hair, one’s own or someone else’s.

Both of the sitting sheep use the discarded wool in an obsessive way, in an attempt to become closer (physically or in resemblance) to the standing sheep. The smaller male consumes the wool, taking a part of the larger male in. The act of eating wool would offer no sustenance, so it is an act of admiration and devotion. The female sheep gathers the wool from the ground and stitches it onto her body. This is an act of obsession, but also an act of modesty, covering her nakedness.

The sheep are indicative of obsessive love and desire, and the control that one can have over others. They represent “group mentality” and the weaknesses that occur when individual thought is lost and blind faith takes over. The two smaller sitting sheep are doing what sheep do best, blindly following their leader. The fetish presented in this image is also the most superficial of these works, because while the larger sheep is offering a part of himself, he will eventually grow more wool.
Figure 4
Matthew Henderson, *Shorn Subservient*, Relief and Watercolor on Burlap with Quilting, 8’X8’, 2012
The three pigs images tell a narrative of sorts, that is not a successive narration, but nevertheless, a story. Starting with *Eat Me*, the pigs in this piece are feeders. Feeders gain weight to curb and satiate their sexual appetites. They consume food in attempts to gain as much weight as they possibly can. It’s a potentially risky fetish and leads to many health problems when practiced. It involves two people that play specific roles one being the feeder, and the other being the feedee. The feeder is often the preparer of the foods that they offer the feedee. The feedee is the consumer of the food, and the weight gainer. The pigs engaging in the feeding are obviously not in any way involved in a balanced relationship. The feedee, or the obese pig, is blindfolded, mindlessly consuming the food the other offers. The feeder on the other hand is emaciated, and gagged. The feedee is unable to see that the feeder is slowly dying; and the feeder is unable to speak about their situation. They are each becoming a victim of their obsessive devotion.

In *All of Me*, the pigs are in a pen surrounded by meat hooks. They are on the floor of the pen, engaging in acts of cannibalism. The reclined pig has had his abdomen ripped open and two other pigs are consuming him in different ways. The pig between his legs voraciously consumes the innards, yet the positioning reinforces the highly sexual nature of the act, echoing oral sex. The reclining pig offers its heart to the third pig, which is opening its mouth, readying itself to eat it.

In *Too Much*, the pig sitting at the bottom is slicing his stomach into ham, while sausages are falling out of his body and swirling upward to the pigs in the background who are consuming him. The pigs in the background wear cat masks, becoming the fat cats who are possibly in control of the situation. The deli ticket dispenser beside the pig at the bottom is shooting out tickets, depicting the infinite nature of obsession. This piece represents sex, lust, and the body as a commodity.
There are some fetishes that exist only within the minds of those who find them exciting. These are slightly more cerebral in their nature, and have little chance of actually occurring. Both Too Much and All of Me, present the only completely fantasy based fetish I’ve used, voreaphilia. Voreaphilia, or vore, is an oddly common fantasy that involves having one’s body consumed by another person. This is obviously impractical, as arousal is gained from a situation that is impossible to survive. However, while unrealistic, there is a seductive element to being consumed by another person. To become a consumable used to satiate another is a very appealing thought, offering of your life so that another can go on living.
Figure 5

Matthew Henderson, *Eat Me*, Relief on Burlap, 4’x6’, 2011
Figure 6

Matthew Henderson, *All Of Me*, Relief on Burlap, 8’x6’, 2011
Figure 7

Matthew Henderson, *Too Much*, Relief on Burlap, 4’x6’, 2011
Every pig deals with food or eating based fetishes. The pigs are highly altruistic, each one having one pig who is offering its life to the others. In each of these works, there is a giver who willingly offers its physical body as food. To counter this giving, we have the others who are taking and consuming. The relationship of giver and taker are like the sheep print. However, while they are also eating parts of each other, the sheep are eating nonessential parts of the body, the wool, which will grow back. The pigs are eating essential pieces without which the pig being eaten will lose its life.

The narrative quality in these pieces comes both from the text and presentation of the works, reading from left to right: *eat me, all of me, too much*, enforcing the excessive and progressive quality of obsession. This idea of consumption is enhanced by the frayed bottoms of each piece. In *Eat Me*, the fraying is minimal and just beginning to be pulled apart. *All of Me*, has fray that is hanging low and is beginning to pull part of the image away. In *Too Much*, the fray is less exaggerated than in the other two emphasizing the expended quality of the pigs.
Conclusion

Political trends often demonize homosexuality, which was until recently (1973) considered a mental disorder. I bring this into the discussion, to reinforce my statement that ‘while sex is not a source of “polite” conversation, it is a source of great debate, when sex is had with the “wrong” person or in the “wrong way.’

Negative proclamations of sex may be publicly announced to the world. Thusly, this creates the atmosphere of, ‘it’s okay to talk openly about sex, as long as we are shaming other people based on who they have sex with or how they have sex.” Of course, this concept of wrong vs. right in terms of sexual partners or boudoir activities is based upon societal standards that do not work for everyone. The majority rules as they always do, this is the foundation of our country. We do not readily or happily accept anything that is too far removed from the norm. We as a society are becoming more tolerant and sensitive to sexual diversity however, there are so many aspects of sexuality that are still deemed controversial and immoral.

The purpose of this work is to present a parallel to other sexual identities (i.e. homosexuality and transgenderism). However, while the work is about the extreme, rather than more standard thoughts concerning sexual diversity, ultimately the question is what is acceptable? I do not believe that the work will change the viewers’ opinions of sexuality.

Each individual contributes to the mass of beliefs and assumptions that together form our society. As long as we act in accord with a belief, be it good or bad, we perpetuate it. Most of the time, we are not aware that our actions are based on beliefs; we just “do what comes naturally.” But is it natural to blindly follow a set of beliefs and ideas forced upon us by our parents, teachers, employers, politicians, religious leaders or mass media? “They” call it natural, but it has nothing to do with nature. Blind belief is habitual and reactive rather than active. The
consequences of this blind belief lead to a sense of powerlessness when caught in the crossfire of conflicts from each of our many teachers. I hope that through viewing and discussing my work, individuals will keep an open mind and find more tolerance within themselves.


Vita

Matthew Henderson grew up wandering the woods of southwestern Pennsylvania, where he received many scrapes, bruises, and scars. He would learn later on that life was full scars. His interests always leaned toward the more creative, and he was encouraged to explore that creativity and nurture it. Throughout his elementary and high school education he realized that life can be very unforgiving to people who are “different”. He finished public school with a strong sense of morality. He began his undergraduate degree at West Virginia University in 2005, where he dabbled around with different ideas about what he wanted to do. However, once he began taking printmaking classes he knew that it was the only thing he wanted to do forever. In 2009, he received his B.F.A in fine art with a concentration in printmaking. Later that year he packed up everything he could and headed to Louisiana to start grad school. It was a long three years, of the best of good times and the worst of bad. However, he is happy that it all happened the way it did. After finishing his M.F.A. Matthew intends to move home (for a little while anyway) back to the seasons and hilly terrains of Pennsylvania.