Peacocking

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“PEACOCKING”

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in

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by
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# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... iii

1. Introduction........................................................................................................................................ 1

2. Inspiration........................................................................................................................................ 3

3. Growth............................................................................................................................................ 5

4. Process........................................................................................................................................... 6

5. Paintings......................................................................................................................................... 7

6. Conclusion.................................................................................................................................... 11

Vita..................................................................................................................................................... 12
Abstract

My work attempts to express personal experiences and external observations of the present day western female ethos. Through visual depictions of forms with mixed media, my paintings convey females exposing themselves as sexual beings yet displaced in reality, as the illusion of their character is a projection based on environment and other people.

Dressed in intimate garments with different hairstyles or wigs, I reference myself and create various extensions of my persona. Through these facades I investigate aspects of womanhood dictated by a cultural paradigm. I aim to create sexually charged scenes and explore the concept of perception, the internal sense of self, and the external projection of one’s sexual identity. Lingerie and other gender specific attire are used to express inherent sexual promiscuity and vanity. They mask individuality while enabling women to assume a role, playing into a need of feeling desired. Women in a way objectify themselves in this regard as a form of empowerment.

With little or no focus on physical features, emphasis is placed on the body and its gesture. As women are expected to be graceful, elegant, and alluring, I contradict this through an awkward pose or one that may reveal insecurity. A power exchange exists between the figures despite any indication of their relationship.

Fixed within invented and abstracted spaces, interplay between chaos and harmony surrounds the figures. Intense and absurd colors evoke a sense of anxiety and sexual tension. I apply paint in a direct and impulsive way allowing erratic mark marking to comprise the forms, which gives the paintings an “in the moment” quality.
Through painting, I question the notion of sexiness and attraction and the extent women will undergo to feel desirable. I explore the contradictions of physical appearances and the internal awareness of true self. I hope to infer substance and depth that goes beyond what is seen on the surface and signify the differences between outward and inward perception.
“Art isn’t something you marry. It’s something you rape.”

—Edgar Degas

Edgar Degas, *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub*, 1885
Charcoal/pastel on paper, 32 x 22 1/8”

1. Introduction

Good art tells a story. Great art is shrouded with ambiguity but forces itself into the viewer’s mind. In my opinion, Edgar Degas was destroying something “perfect” and fighting to redesign and recreate his reality through art. To understand his quote better, I thought about marrying my paintings rather than raping them. I could never love my
paintings. Instead, painting is an act of domination. Life is a power exchange, and so is painting. I must control and dominate my paintings; otherwise they dominate me.

Edgar Degas, *Dancers in Pink I*, 1876
Oil on Canvas, 23 ¼ x 29 ¼”
2. Inspiration

Art is a means of expression to communicate something that cannot be said in words. I did not discover my artistry during the three and a half years in the MFA program at Louisiana State University. Instead, I found my womanhood and my humanity, which fuel my creativity and desire to make art. Establishing my voice and my independence as an adult woman was imperative to help establish myself as an artist and creator in this forever changing, ever struggling, eternally scintillating world. Painting and drawing are ways for me to understand gender roles, human psychology, and myself.

Alice Neel, *Margaret Evans Pregnant*, 1978
Oil on Canvas, 57 ¾ x 36”
Aside from Degas, Alice Neel is one of my favorite artists and truly inspires my work. After seeing her work in person and watching the documentary about her life and constant struggle as a woman artist, she will forever be my idol. Neel’s portraits are atypical. She does not just paint what she sees; instead she captures the essence of a person by showing him/her as sometimes unstable but always emotionally expressive. I can relate to her in terms of obsessively trying to express the psychological state of her sitters. I study her portraits intently and apply her use of line, paint quality, and compositional techniques to my own work.

Another influence derives from Darren Aronofsky’s film “Black Swan”. Aronofsky typically writes and directs movies that dive into male psychology, life, and death. This intense and disturbing movie reveals a young woman’s fight to be a “perfect, innocent flower,” driven by her mother, ballet instructors, and herself. Through bouts of exhaustion and her will to strive forward, she is cracked open and discovers her true self as an imperfect, sexual being. Aronofsky successfully portrayed the anguish of a young woman and her fall to rock bottom after being pushed to the limit.
3. Growth

My thesis exhibition “Peacocking” is an exploration of the influence of growing up in a split family and what it is to be a woman, discovering sexuality, and delving into layered emotions such as anxiety, jealousy, depression, anger, and joy. I built a repertoire of studies and paintings that I continuously worked on for the past two years. I used myself as a model, wearing different outfits and wigs. For some time, I became lost as to what I was trying to accomplish through my work. However, through intense introspection and spending hours staring at the personas I created on canvas and boards, I finally realized my paintings were indeed saying something about the mess of life. However, I do not wish for these paintings to be seen as self-portraits. Instead, they are an expression of my experience growing into a young adult woman in a country where men still hold the power.
4. Process

“Peacocking” is the act of displaying oneself ostentatiously. On the surface, my paintings reveal one or more scantily clad female figures in ambiguous settings. The figures could be strippers, prostitutes, ballerinas, or just normal girls playing dress-up. I see all the figures as projections of myself, or alter egos. I poke fun at the idea of painting a beautiful, perfect woman. Instead, I want to paint the imperfections of women and reveal how ugly female emotions can become. My paintings are violently created. I typically start with a quick sketch with acrylic and oil. All the work went through a series of angry scraping and dabbing of thick, atrociously colored paint. My artwork grew with me. For several months, I slipped into a deep, suffocating depression mostly because I was very unsatisfied with myself and my work. I could hardly paint or draw and felt completely worthless. I climbed out of my dark, suppressive hole and started repainting my work. Every day I was fixing my paintings as I fixed myself. I discovered the beauty of the world again.
5. Paintings

*Bourbon Street Lunch Meat* exemplifies the subject matter in the body of work of my exhibition. The space, however, is the most ambiguous of all the paintings. The rest are interior scenes, but as the title suggests, this painting portrays two females on the streets in the French Quarter. The main figure pulls at her stringy orange hair with a smiling
white mask concealing her face, as she staggers on the sidewalk. I am this awkward, unstable figure hoping to be gazed upon by sex-crazed men. I am also the embarrassed, ashamed figure that stands behind her.

*Saucy*, 2012
Mixed media on board, 10 x 8”

One of the smaller paintings seen in my show, *Saucy* portrays a single figure. I wore a blonde shoulder-length wig with a black corset and referenced myself in a mirror. The figure’s face is in shadow, and it is not clear if she is alone or what she is up to. Like
most of the other paintings, the space is invented. On the table I painted a vase of flowers
and two lit candles, which imply that her lover might be with her. I balanced the warmth
of the reds and yellows from the window with areas of deep and intense blues, which
envelops the figure with a nervous energy.

Another example in the exhibition is a large painting *Dance Queen in the Wings.*
Two ballerinas are depicted on stage with a couple of figures standing to the side waiting
for their cue. I have always been involved in ballet, but gave up the dream of dancing
professionally because of my height. Dancing on stage is like flying. Dancers can assume
a new persona and be admired by hundreds. Centuries ago, ballet was considered risqué,
and dancers were low class. Now it is considered an art form. I wanted to paint a stage scene that is fun and flashy, but also has an underlying tension between the girls as they fight for the spotlight. I approached this painting in a slightly different way from the others. Instead of starting with a paint sketch of one figure, I began laying down color with acrylic, pastel, and spray paint. With a performance scene in mind, I drew a few dancers in different positions until settling on one doing an attitude pose en pointe. While painting the figures I started adding glitter and feathers to their costumes, which gives the dancers liveliness.
6. Conclusion

Art is my way of life, and life is a battle. Finding balance between harmony and chaos and the compromise between two powers is a constant struggle. Human nature will always intrigue me. I will always strive to discover and communicate my beliefs about psychology, sexuality, and gender through my work. My thesis exhibition is a milestone on my life’s journey.
Vita

Margaux Hymel was born in 1987 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Besides being involved in art classes and programs, she danced, rode horses and took piano lessons. She and her family traveled extensively to Asia, Europe, and Central America. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in digital art at Southeastern Louisiana University in 2008.