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Eve Leaving the Garden

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EVE LEAVING THE GARDEN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Norma Colby
BFA, Murray State University, 2019
August, 2023

For Roxanne,

*Whose constant warmth and companionship
brought me here today. I'll love you always.*

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This body of work serves as an investigation into the concepts and burdens that, as a female millennial, impact me regularly. As the door to my education closes, I turn to a much bigger world with endless possibilities and responsibilities. With these overwhelming prospects, I find myself reflecting on how our society has progressed and worsened to arrive here today. I continue to question the passing down of systemic burdens, politics, and gender roles of women in the 21st century. *Eve Leaving the Garden* is a collection of textile works, photographs, and sculptures that serve as an exploration of these conditions that allow me to navigate where these responsibilities and difficulties come from and where they are going in order to resolve these internal conflicts of my own.

Eve Leaving the Garden: Essay

In the last hundred years, the expectations placed upon women have evolved from domestic laborer to full time careerist, and full-time mothers to outsourcing childcare. These major shifts have forced us, as a society, to examine what this means for womens' work, womens' bodies, and what it means for womens' relationships with their partners, family members, friends, and children. Women of today have a unique experience where wages remain unmoved despite inflation, student debt is at an all time high with unemployment rising, and there is a lack of access to affordable healthcare that affects millions of young Americans. From different starting points comes common frustration as these burdens and conflicts are unintentionally passed down through generations, as now mine to bare and confront. While these conflicts may have evolved and changed over time, similarities such as politics and legislation policing womens autonomy over our bodies and identity, and occupational segregation remain. While creating, I think about what former generations of women's experience with life was and how it parallels my experiences today. How did it not? By creating work that questions those perceived gender roles and experiences, I may find resolve in my own.

Feminist writer and womens' advocate, Courtney Martin said,

“we are the girls with anxiety disorders, filled appointment books, five-year plans. We take ourselves very, very seriously. We are the peacemakers, the do-gooders, the givers, the savers. We are on time, overly prepared, well read, and witty, intellectually curious, always moving...We pride ourselves on getting as little sleep as possible and thrive on self-deprivation. We drink coffee, a lot of it. We are on birth control, Prozac, and

multivitamins...We are relentless, judgmental with ourselves, and forgiving to others.

We never want to be as passive-aggressive as our mothers, never want to marry men as uninspired as our fathers...We are the daughters of the feminists who said, “you can be anything” and we heard “you have to be everything”.

My studio practice and work as an artist focuses on examining these constructs and what it means to be a woman today. I think a lot about private spaces and domestic labor such as the monotony of chores including meal prepping, but also emotional labor such as anxiety, worry, and self-care. The home is where I explore and contemplate and the place I am most honest with myself, therefore its elements are a large part of my work. My experiences with the economy of today and the insecurities that come along with it are much like many other women. In my relationship with my partner, I carry our issues and concerns as we navigate our life together. My relationships with my friends and family are directly impacted by my ability to work, study, and thrive in a male-led economy. My relationship with my body and further, femininity, is based on the constructs largely established by men and women who have come before me. This work navigates and processes those emotions and thoughts as a means to create an empathetic conversation with the viewer.

I work in multiple mediums such as sculpture, photography, needlework, printmaking, and performance. Working in this multifarious manner allows the work to take different forms and roles in the gallery space. Before making, I often envision what that work would look like in each medium and select the medium that suits the content best. Many times, I find that mediums overlap which is where I find the process most exciting. Since spring of 2020, I have concentrated much of my artwork on textiles, specifically needlework. Primarily, I have been using repurposed textiles and items specific to the home such as bed sheets, table linens, pillow

stuffing, and lace curtains because of their preconceived roles, and intimate nature. With these distinct textiles, we may find ourselves doing acts such as sleeping in them, concealing ourselves, and wiping our tears. This direct contact they have with our bodies leaves a perpetual memory that does not always leave a physical mark. While some of the linens exhibit notable stains or rips showing that interaction, others exist unmarred but still holding that notion of human touch. Many of the linens either have embroidered designs from their former owners, mysterious stains from use, and others so delicate that they were more than likely purchased for a special occasion long since passed. I began thinking about the idea of unintentionally passing down these linens, like a collaboration between myself and past generations. By creating art with a long lineage of female artists working in that medium, I am questioning those perceived gender roles and experiences.

I take an immense amount of inspiration from artists such as textile artist Billie Zangewa, Gina Osterloh's photography and live performances, and Jenny Saville's glass series. Zangewa's process and material use is commanding, while I am drawn to Osterloh and Saville's use of abstraction of the body and the performative aspects of their works. These women work in themes about identity and femininity through self-portraiture which parallels this body of work.



Image 1. Artist Inspirations. Left- Gina Osterloh, Center- Jenny Saville, Right- Billie Zangewa.

When I think about the materials that I use, it is important for me to consider their history. This includes the craft associated with the material. For example, fabric has traditionally been divided amongst the classes and can be used to show social status and wealth. This can be seen in high end couture fabrics and materials, branding and personalizing products to ensure a balance between different economic values, and, on the other end, faux materials and knock offs for middle and lower class.

In my work, I often use utilitarian materials and fabrics used by the lower and middle classes as they make up the majority and are more relatable. However, occasionally I will use more luxurious fabrics and textiles such as velvet and faux furs to highlight the juxtaposition between the upper and lower classes and their differing domestic experiences. Using more soft or pleasant textures and colors makes the viewer more inclined to a tactile experience with the work.

For my sculptural work, I used a box of women's stockings I purchased at a local thrift store. I was intrigued at the range of fabricated skin tones and textures that they held but also their intended purpose- to constrict, transform, and conceal the female body. I began stuffing them with a mixture of pillow stuffing and raw cotton, exaggerated in some and lightly in others stretching and knotting the stockings as I went. The result was a giant mass of indiscernible soft forms that resembled parts of the human body such as limbs, intestines, breasts, etc.

Over the course of making the body of work I would use these forms across multiple mediums such as drawings, embroidery works, sculpture, and various photo processes. I began by using them to create soft sculptures and still life's that incorporated domestic items such as curtain tassels, plant stands, and pearls. By using these domestic patterns, objects, and textures,

combined with the abstracted soft forms, it created an interesting narrative of opposites attracting such as hard vs. soft, and unfamiliar vs. familiar. These forms were also the beginning thoughts of using domestic items to create an empathetic environment in order to bring the viewer into a private space. That time, while very experimental, was crucial to the content and process seen in my thesis work.



Image 2-Reference Image: Nylon Stockings stuffed with raw cotton example.

I began documenting myself interacting with the soft sculpture forms, and found that the performance aspects held many artistic opportunities. In an attempt to hone in on the visual qualities of these performances I began documenting myself doing things such as balancing them on my head, breast feeding them, stuffing them into small spaces, etc. I am interacting with these unrecognizable forms that inadvertently become extensions of my body, its fat, and innards, blurring a line between reality and fiction. The compositions make the purpose of the forms ambiguous. They can be perceived as extensions of my body or invasions. Am I fighting or complying with them? In turn, this creates a narrative of overgrowth and the carrying of these forms that engages in heightened awareness of the body, notions of burden, vulnerability, and accumulation. Overgrowth and repetition are a large part of the work do to the emotive and compositional opportunities they hold. Repetition is not only seen compositionally throughout the work but throughout processes and materials. For example, the same crochet elements that are used in the sculptural works can also be seen in the photograms and some of the digital prints. This helps to achieve both consistency and uniqueness throughout the work.



Image 3. Embroidery reference photo example

My body is a fundamental part of this work. I am thinking about the role of the female figure in Fine Art throughout history as well as its debated nature. Our bodies receive and give both lust and hatred and bear much of the politics of our society and government. While the body is our common bond, it separates us through identity, race, and gender. An example of this



Image 4. *Mother*. 2023. Photo Lithograph on Cotton, 17 x 25.

historical representation can be found in John Berger's 1972 essay, *Ways of Seeing*. Berger argues that men are represented throughout art history as active, whereas women are more concerned with representation and self-presentation, or simply, “men act while women appear.” The most common example of this are nude female figures of historical European oil paintings. The nudity was a means to please the (presumably) male spectators who owned these

paintings. While female nudity through the arts has expanded and is more common than ever before, some aspects of this representation remain today through modern media such as television and social platforms. Women continue to be depicted as passive objects for male pleasure while men enjoy diverse representation across media formats.

The use of my body, while remaining ambiguous, throughout the work communicates ideas of close association and understanding of myself. Through body language and objects, my work tells a narrative of both familiarity and affection. Coming from a Catholic family, there were many idols and statues of the Virgin Mary in the homes I grew up in. It is tradition in my family that when a woman is to be married and move into her own home, she is gifted a statue of the Blessed Mother for the window sill of her future kitchen along with a Joy of Cooking cookbook. Wrapping myself in bedsheets coupled with poses indicative of Virgin Mary statues is a way to mirror her. While doing so, I reflect on where I feel I fall short as a woman in my family due to not hitting these milestones. Mary is one of the most important figures in Christianity, as the ultimate symbol of motherhood her clothing is a reflection of her virtues such as her purity, modesty, faith, and love for her children. In Christianity, she is not only the mother of Christ but also the mother of all humanity.



Image 5. My mothers Virgin Mary statue on her kitchen sill.

I have instinctively always created work that talks about the domestic space and our habituated roles in it. In earlier works, it was much more of a critique about these roles while living in a patriarchal society where the burdens of that labor are biased. My opinions on that matter have not wavered, although my relationship with my domestic space has. During the beginning months of the pandemic, I had the luxury of being able to stay safely in my home for months, something many other people around the world did not have. Soon after that, I moved away for graduate school where I would be, in so many words, homesick for another three years after that. This experience has changed my perspective about my private space and how I want to create work about it. This is communicated through material and the performative aspects of the work.

Domesticity is mainly referenced through materials such as linens, assorted domestic items, pillow stuffing, curtains, etc. in the work. These context clues help to create a reimagined

environment that connects the viewer to a more private space in the gallery setting. Using various materials intended for ingestion such as powdered milk and flour, I flock designs onto the floor around the sculptural pieces as a way to extend the composition outward. These motifs are pulled from linens throughout the exhibition as a nod to nourishing the body, but also the act of ingestion being a form of intimacy and a very direct connection with the body. The act of sifting these materials on the floor creates repetition similar to that of tasks and activities done in a home. Similar acts of repeatedly sifting sand have been used throughout various cultures and history as a meditative practice. It becomes a therapeutic way of feeding and nourishing myself through this way of making.



Image 6. *Song of My Sweet Heart*. 2022. Photo Lithograph on Linen. 19 x 26.

My goals for this work were to explore this content and different ways of making while also expanding my knowledge of textile mediums. I began looking for old vintage linens in

antique stores and estate sales. At first, I was mostly interested in their decorative patterns and how many create a frame simply as a means for the embroidery work. Many of these linens come with their own memories such as stains or rips that I found intriguing in terms of mark making and the history of each linen. The original use of the linens suggests past intimacy with our own bodies whether that be the act of consoling someone, wiping sweat or food off the face, or the ritual of setting prepared food onto them. The dated patterns and material speak to the antiquated connotations of the material, perceived former roles of the discarded linens, and the women that handled and cared for them. The domestic affiliations that these carry lead the viewer into my private space with the embroidery giving an interpretation of these engagements and emotions-such as meditation, reflection, and self-care. Where the linens hold an extensive history of customs such as consideration, preservation, and regard, the embroidered and photographic imagery of myself caring for and holding the forms on them demonstrates a narrative revealing burdens and labor which become metaphors for larger universal ideas that many of us experience.

For centuries, patriarchal dominance and power structures within the established circle of fine arts excluded female painters and sculptors while entirely excluding the domestic arts, consigning even the most intricate needlework to craft. Needlework confined women to the domestic sphere as a medium allowing them to stay in the home, be quiet, and follow a pattern; as an educational instrument, needlework reinforced standards of women's behavior, aptitudes, and conduct. Historically, samplers were created to show the needlework artists skill and stitching practice for utilitarian purposes such as making clothing and blankets. Alphabets, numerals, and basic stitches were combined into a sampler often bordered by stitched geometric designs and filled with elements of nature such as flowers and birds. They often contained

religious verses or poems and were signed and dated by the artist. However, women for centuries have silently resisted and subverted these expectations and ideals of this medium through the very same means. For centuries, women have utilized needlework during political and social unrest as both a practicality and means of expression. Starting in the second wave feminist movement, female artists fought for the recognition of needlework as high art, a category which the craft was explicitly excluded from since 1768 by The Royal Academy in the UK and has only made progress since.

Examples include, the Suffragette Handkerchief, a handkerchief with sixty-six embroidered signatures and initials of the women imprisoned in HMP Holloway for their part in the Women's Social and Political Union Suffragette window smashing demonstrations of March 1912, and Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* installation, a massive ceremonial banquet, arranged on a triangular table with a total of thirty-nine place settings, each commemorating an important woman from history. This tradition can be seen even as recently as the Oscars of 2020 where actress Natalie Portman paid tribute to women directors on the red carpet by wearing a black Dior cape with the names of those who were not nominated that year. As a female artist, I think about the history of textiles and needlework in the Fine Arts, and how I want to contribute to that powerful lineage and representation of women through my own work.

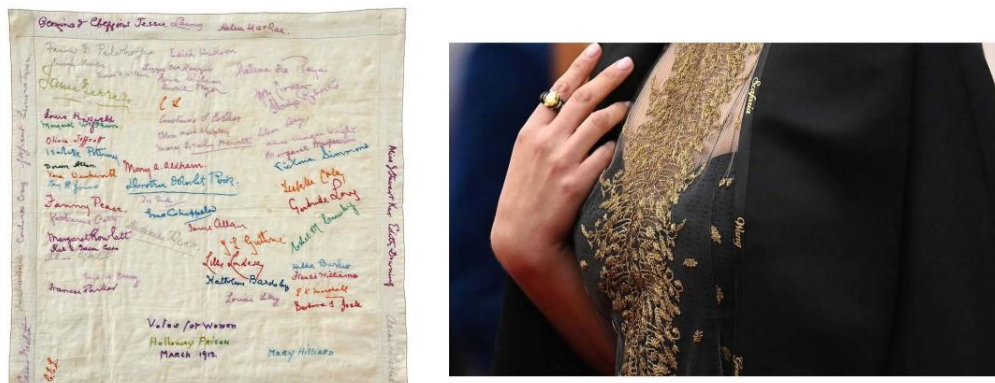


Image 7- Reference Images: Left- *Suffragette Handkerchief*, Embroidery on Linen, 1912. Right- *Dior Cape* worn by Natalie Portman at 2020 Oscars.

Photography has taken a large role in the work as well. This process started as an obvious solution for documenting the performative aspects of the work with using a camera. Throughout my time here, I have learned more about alternative photographic processes such as cyanotypes and photograms. These processes are a means of documentation using my own body and various objects to make the impressions on the paper in tandem with the traditional photographic prints and photo lithographs. The size of the photograms are also large due, in part, to the processing technique. I am interested in the dialogue that size has with the viewer. When using the body as a means of image making, there are multiple correlations the viewer has with the work. There is an immediate empathetic exchange in size when using the body. The viewer may also feel more immersed in the piece due to the homogenous relations it carries. We can also think about this in terms of anthropomorphic narcissism where the viewer relates more to the image due to our fascination with likeness and recognition of the human form. Laura Mulvey's essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, develops and expands upon the idea of the male gaze where cinema reflects the real world by incorporating content and images that are familiar and therefore creating a visual and emotional connection. Cinema and, in this case, Fine Arts create a desire of looking and would not be successful without the proverbial viewer. This interaction is an extension of our social order, and therefore inherently patriarchal. Mulvey states, "In their traditionally exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*."

The size, composition, and nature of the photograms appears almost otherworldly, as if we are looking into an abyss or alternate timeline due to the fantastical composition, shine of the

paper, as well as the deep black akin to photograms. The lace placed at the bottom resembles a sort of foliage or shrub while the crochet elements and stockings may act as a vine. Acting as a triptic, the three panels create a narrative of escapism and enigmatic activity and inspire the title of the show- *Eve Leaving the Garden*. This in conjunction to the soft and delicate nature of the photos on linens makes for an adverse yet pleasing viewing experience in the gallery space. The photograms are displayed on three movable walls in the center of the gallery to give them ample breadth and room. The movable walls are painted in a high gloss black to extend the composition of the photograms and highlight the black abyss.

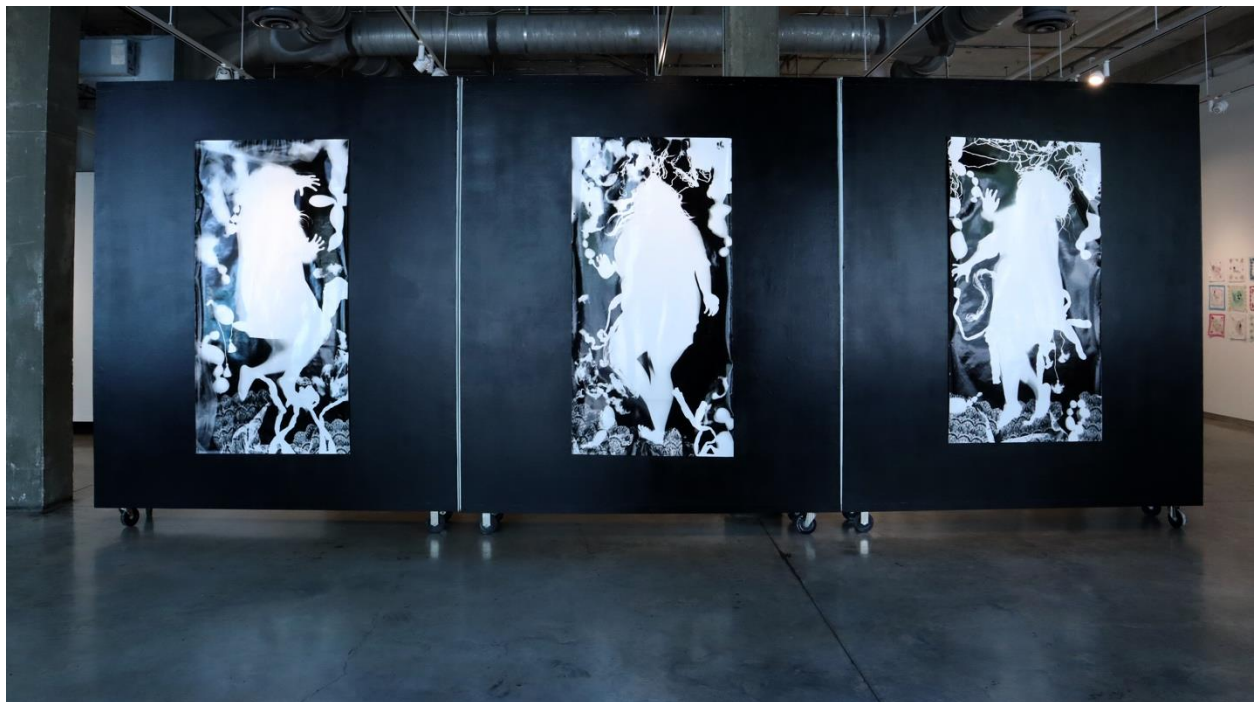


Image 8- *Eve Leaving the Garden*. 2023. Photogram. 432” x 96”.

The exhibition contains a series of digital prints at various sizes which complement the varying sizes of the linens. Several are quite large at 42 inches that serve almost as backdrops for the sculptural works throughout the gallery space. Much of the photographic work has a voyeuristic quality to it. When hung on the wall the photo lithographs on linens become almost like an assumed window into this private space. A space that, through the photograph, displays a

personal and intimate interaction between myself and the objects. This, in turn, creates an engaging experience between myself and the viewer by giving an illusion of looking into a private world and trying to decipher what is happening between myself and the forms or bed sheets. The individual works are strategically placed throughout the gallery to promote this narrative and complement one another. Multifarious forms, patterns, textures, compositions, and colors find their way throughout the various mediums to encourage a conversation between one another and the viewer.



Image 9- Gallery Installation of sculptural work and photograms.

This body of work serves as an investigation on the concepts and burdens that keep me tossing and turning at night. As the door to my education closes, a much bigger world with endless possibilities and responsibilities opens. With these overwhelming prospects, I find

myself reflecting on how our society has evolved and worsened to arrive here today. I continue to question the passing down of systemic burdens, politics, and gender roles of women in the 21st century. *Eve Leaving the Garden* is a collection of textile works, photographs, and sculptures that serve as an exploration of these conditions that allow me to navigate where these responsibilities and difficulties come from and where they are going as a means to resolve internal conflicts of my own.



Image 10- Gallery Installation View



Image 11- Gallery Installation View

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Vita

Lu Colby is a multi-media artist residing in Murray, Kentucky. She is a graduate student of LSU's Studio Arts program, and a 2019 alumni of Murray State University where she studied both printmaking and sculpture. Her work is exhibited throughout the United States with recent shows such as Print Matters Houston, Print as Object at Oklahoma City University, and Honorable Mention at the Fourth Annual Paper and Clay Exhibition at USU Caine College of the Arts in Logan, Utah.

Working in a multitude of mediums, her work relates to her personal representations of being a young woman in American society today and the pressures that parallel it. She dissects and experiments with gender roles by adding characteristics of traditional women's work such as needle work, colors, and household linens in an attempt to question these given roles to women in American society. Using textiles such as bed sheets, curtains, and linens combined with various household objects, she creates a narrative within her work for people to find a correlation between their experiences with domestic gender roles and her own.