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**Self-Conscious Portrait:
(Narcissism and Self-Loathing in my Life and Work)**

A Thesis Presented

by

Danielle Rago

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in

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Abstract of the Thesis

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In this thesis, I will highlight the undercurrent of narcissism and self-loathing, a.k.a. self-conscious framing, in nine of my works completed over the last three years. I will also discuss several other themes which unite my work, namely fat identity and abjection, gender identity and performance, and sexual power dynamics. I will describe the work in chronological order, grouping pieces thematically, and sequentially. This structure will allow me to explore specific elements relevant to my chosen theme in the order they were devised, thus charting my artistic development over time.

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Introduction

My work, in its current state, belongs to the tradition of video performance. Distinct from live performance in its framing, a video performer has much more control over how her performance is viewed and experienced. While every viewer brings his or her own experience to a piece, a video performer plays not to a crowd, but to one specific (imagined) spectator, embodied by the camera. After the initial performance, the work can be shaped and reshaped using a variety of editing techniques. This produces a work that is more controlled and self-conscious than a live performance where anything can happen. The artist's hand is visibly heavy, and the viewer can assume he or she is seeing exactly what the artist intended him or her to see.

This distinction is important in my work, because I never want my audience to forget, even for a moment, that they are watching my creation. In a culture vastly oversaturated with imagery, I feel it is valuable for a work to reference its own intent. This referencing calls into question the very nature of representation, a question I believe every important work of the last hundred years has posed in some way. As mass media becomes more democratic, as it has in the last twenty years or so, the question of representation is further highlighted and exposed. No reasonably sophisticated contemporary viewer fails to question the intent or origin of what is presented to them, and no reasonably sophisticated contemporary artist is unaware of this. Therefore, I believe the act of making work with the intent of presenting it to an audience is necessarily a self-conscious endeavor, and I will not let my audience forget that. To that end, I imbue all of my work with the two opposing sides of the self-conscious coin – narcissism and self-loathing.

Self-Conscious Framing, Loosely Defined

Self-conscious framing and editing in my work exists in a number of ways, both subtle and explicit. For example, in my recent work, *Troll*, a street performance is presented almost in its entirety, with very little editing after the fact. While minimal editing was used to allow the scene to unfold in the most effective way, the post-production shaping is very subtle. What is explicitly self-conscious about the piece is the framing employed in its initial production – I am a character holding a camera. My voice is heard, but I am never seen. This set-up forces the audience to identify with me, as opposed to the people I am filming.

This is different from my first video performance, *Ham*, in which I am holding a camera pointed at myself. This piece features heavy cut-and-paste editing. The result is explicitly choppy, and it is clear I have edited the footage so that a specific spoken narrative will develop at a certain rate.

In both of these works, the character of the artist/creator (me) is always present, and always commenting on her (my) own presence. In that way, I remain in dialogue with myself, and the viewer is privy to this split perspective.

Inherent in my concept of self-conscious framing is the idea that articulated ambivalence is always preferable to one-sided dogma. I define both my work and myself in these terms, always preferring loose ends to tidy stitching. This agnostic approach to life and art acknowledges multiple layers to every topic, revealing the richness and complexity that challenges and excites me more than prepackaged didacticism ever could.

Some people equate ambivalence with simple indecision, or perhaps worse, a lack of passion – I disagree. For me, ambivalence is the state of mind most conducive to creative thinking. It contains all possibilities, revealing a full spectrum of ideas and experience. Here, passion and doubt can coexist, along with any number of conflicting drives. It is in

this space where my bipolar identity, (self-loathing narcissist, self-conscious performer) makes the most sense.

With that in mind, I will apply my concept of self-conscious framing to the discussion of my work, chronologically recounting nine works completed over the last three years. In doing so, I will highlight recurring themes, namely fat identity and abjection, gender identity and performance, and sexual power dynamics, and explain their importance in my work.

Ham (2007)

My first video performance, completed in my first semester at Stony Brook University, was titled *Ham*. Simply stated, the piece consists of me walking around Times Square wearing a pig's snout, (a cheap, rubber nose with an elastic strap that can be found at many costume/novelty shops) and speaking directly to a handheld camera. Despite the public nature of this set-up, there is very little interaction between me and the crowd moving around me in the final edit. In fact, accurate to the reality of the situation, there is very little evidence that my presence in this bustling cliché of commerce and tourism was particularly noticeable to anyone around me. In this way, the piece functions as an intimate, private monologue performed in a public space. This framing is significant given the content of the spoken narrative that unfolds.

As I walk along the crowded street I address my handheld camera, recounting the plot of "Grizzly Man," a 2005 Werner Herzog documentary about nature lover and aspiring filmmaker Timothy Treadwell. Armed with only a video camera, Treadwell goes off to live with bears, a species with whom he claims to identify closely, in their natural habitat. Eventually, and somewhat predictably (especially given the framing of the documentary)

Treadwell is killed and eaten by the bears he loves, and his gruesome death is recorded, in audio form, by his ever-present video camera.

The documentary footage is culled from several hours of existing videotape of Treadwell on location, speaking directly to his video camera. Interwoven with interviews of friends and colleagues after his death, a profile emerges of a sensitive and troubled man wishing to escape the torments of modern life. He retreats to the wilderness to live amongst what he felt were gentle, misunderstood creatures with whom he felt a strong kinship. Ultimately, he misunderstood the wild animals, and was mauled to death and consumed by them.

Seemingly, the price Timothy Treadwell paid for misunderstanding his audience was a brutal and ironic death. For other artists, occupational risks may or may not literally include death, but the stakes are often comparably high.

The idea of self-sacrifice as artistic performance is not new. Gladiators in ancient Rome paid the ultimate price for public entertainment. Ana Mendieta courted death and violence throughout her career, staging scenes of rape and murder with herself in the role of victim. When she was actually murdered by her husband in 1985¹, it was as much the artistic culmination of her body of work as it was an unthinkable tragedy.

Self-sacrifice as artistic performance is dramatized in Franz Kafka's short story *A Hunger Artist*, in which a man starves himself to death as an act of public spectacle². While this fictional account can be viewed as a Swiftian social commentary, rather than a prescribed artistic formula, there is no shortage of evidence that this type of performance would be met with great public interest.

¹ While Mendieta's husband, sculptor Carl Andre, was tried and acquitted of her murder, speculation continues to surround the case. See Robert Katz, *Naked by the Window* (The Atlantic Monthly Free Press, 1990) and Sullivan, R. (1988, February, 12). Greenwich Village Sculptor Acquitted of Pushing Wife to Her Death. *New York Times*. Retrieved May 12, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com>

² Franz Kafka, *Selected Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: The Modern Library, 1993)

Throughout human history, public executions have managed to captivate audiences. As these spectacles are, for the most part, no longer publicly mandated (where capital punishment exists, it is not commonly staged for a general audience), modern society's bloodlust has been sated by fictionalized violence in entertainment. For those craving a more genuine experience, a lucrative market of underground film exists, a subgenre of that which Mikita Brottman has dubbed "*Cinema Vomitif*," in which actual death scenes are compiled and presented as entertainment. While the existence of a genuine "*Snuff Film*," in which a person is tortured and killed on film for the sole purpose of entertainment, has (thankfully) yet to be verified, its place within popular imagination is echoed in the account of a young man, Abraham K. Biggs, who in 2008 committed suicide on live web cam. While this tragedy occurred after *Ham* was produced, I allude to a similar possibility in my retelling of the Grizzly Man's story, when I facetiously suggest of his gruesome final moments "[h]e put it on his MySpace page... Me getting eaten by a bear..."

Throughout *Ham*, my ambivalent attitude toward the Grizzly Man, alternately mocking and marveling at his foolish commitment and bravery, is meant to express my ambivalent attitude toward my own work. My retelling of the story is interspersed with voiceover salutations to an imaginary audience, ("I want to thank you all for coming out tonight...") and my attempting, somewhere in the vicinity of 42nd Street, a particularly difficult Puccini aria. As I struggle to perform the song, stopping frequently to do warm-up vocal exercises, it is clear that I, as the character Ham, have overshot. Ham, the amateur performer, gluttonous for attention and praise, has underestimated the difficulty of the song, and as a result, her performance is a failure.

I strongly believe, however, that the viewer recognizes this failure as a set-up. They realize that the artist has jumped into this situation expecting to fail, and is performing the song exactly as she had planned. The artist, in turn, expects her audience to understand this, and the layers of self-conscious awareness produce a conceptual hall of mirrors, which can, if one likes, multiply to infinity. What rescues the work, I believe, from this

confusing spiral, and anchors it in a solid emotional space, is the authenticity of this ambivalent performance. Yes, metaphorically, I'm winking at the camera throughout the piece. But the trepidation and humility I express on that crowded city street is real and palpable. In some small, symbolic way, I have thrown myself to the bears.

Ham as Alter Ego

The character of Ham is one I revisit in later work, so it is important to explain her in full conceptual detail. The name Ham comes from a number of sources. First of all, the word ham is synonymous with performer, particularly of the over-the-top attention-seeking variety. Gently derogatory, this moniker, for me, calls up images of Vaudeville, Early 20th Century comedy, and similar performance traditions. A traveling preacher or snake oil salesman might be described as a ham, as might Mae West or any of the Marx Brothers. A dramatic performer can be called a ham, but the term is most always used in a comic, if derogatory sense. This distinction is important, as comedy performance has greatly influenced me, both personally and in my art practice, and I almost always use humor to some extent in my work.

Secondly, Ham derives from the biblical character of the same name, who is notable for having seen his father, Noah, naked. As the story goes, Noah is drunk, and falls asleep naked in his tent. His youngest son Ham sees him naked, and tells his two brothers, Shem and Japheth, who respectfully cover their eyes, and lay a garment across their sleeping father. When Noah awakens, he curses Ham and his entire lineage (the sons of Canaan), decreeing that they will forever be the slaves of the kin of Shem and Japheth. Therefore, Ham and his descendants are outsiders, belonging to the lowest social caste.

It is significant, I believe, that Ham is cursed for knowledge, in the same way that Adam, and especially Eve, are cursed for eating from the tree of knowledge. Knowledge, in biblical terms, is synonymous with sexuality, and Adam and Eve discover they are naked

only after eating from that tree. When Ham walks in on his father, he *sees* him naked and *learns* the truth – that his father is only a man.

This bible story resonates with me for a number of reasons. For one, the idea that Ham is an outsider because he possesses knowledge speaks to a particularly romantic concept of rebellion – one that I take pleasure in identifying with. From a feminist perspective, to rebel against patriarchal structures is the right of every woman empowered by the knowledge of her unjust oppression. That Ham is a male character in the bible is, to me, a technicality, as he seems to represent the quintessential underdog (which I believe, for all practical purposes, should be of the female sex).

Second of all, the knowledge Ham possesses is sexual. The shame Noah feels arises from the fact that he is sexualized by his own son. While nudity in general need not signify sexuality, it is almost always sexualized in particularly repressed societies, like the ancient biblical world, or the contemporary United States. Sexuality is of particular interest to me, and my work usually discusses sex in some capacity.

Thirdly, I am particularly interested in mythology, and the way ancient stories and traditions attempt to explain and improve the human condition. Often, the situations and archetypes presented are recognizable to modern audiences, but the morality is hopelessly skewed, and the allegories perhaps do not function as they were originally intended. Still, it is comforting to know that our ancestors were creating art as rich and layered as can be found in the bible, and Greek and Roman mythology, as it suggests, I believe, something complex and beautiful in our very nature.

By connecting my performance alter ego with the biblical outsider who rebels against his father and is cursed for his sexual knowledge, I am imbuing her with a range of qualities which I find enormously satisfying, and appropriate to the themes in my work.

Ham and Fat Identity

The third conceptual element important to the definition of Ham as alter ego is related to body size and its various implications. I am fat, and I consider fatness to be a fundamental part of my identity at any weight. I have constructed a definition of Fat Identity as it relates to my personal experience, which I will briefly outline:

First of all, I am considered, in medical terms, obese³. My weight in adulthood has fluctuated over a range of 120 pounds -- at the low end of the range I could be considered average weight, at the high end of the range, where I currently reside, extremely obese. This subjects me to what I believe are discriminatory attitudes upheld in popular and medical discourse, and causes me to be hyper-aware of my body size, and the space which I occupy, at all times.

Secondly, my family is fat. This suggests that there is a strong genetic component to my fatness, and that in some sense, my fatness can be thought of as a type of ethnic or racial identity. While I have, at times in my life, been able to *pass* as non-fat, the *truth* of my fatness connects me to my ancestry in an obvious way.

Finally, I was a fat child – a full foot taller and fifty pounds heavier than most of my peers. This allowed me to construct a specifically fat identity in early life, which I have carried since. Therefore, growing up White and middle-class, I have both owned, and not owned outsider status my entire life. This quasi-marginal identity gives me a somewhat ambivalent perspective on the world and my place within it. On the one hand, I embrace and romanticize difference. I always align myself with the underdog, and delight in all manner of rebellion with the fervor one might expect of an adolescent who only recently discovered oppositional power. Conversely, (and perhaps, perversely) I fully own, and do not intend to relinquish intense feelings of self-loathing, which inform my worldview in an important way. In short, there is a sadomasochistic element to my identity which

³ The CDC defines Obesity as having a body mass index of 30 or higher, or approximately, being 30 or more pounds overweight. See <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/defining.html>

most likely stems from my early experience as an object of intense physical scrutiny and ridicule.

It is important to clarify that I do not feel a person must own all of my aforementioned conditions in order to claim Fat Identity, which is, after all, a state of mind as slippery and hard to define as sexual identity. I simply construct my definition as a starting point from which to discuss Fat Identity as it relates to my experience.

Fatness as a concept is closely identified with, and symbolized by the pig. Therefore, in my construction of Ham as an alter ego, I, significantly, choose the pig as my totem. But the pig does not represent fatness alone. The pig is also associated with excess and gluttony – the pig selfishly takes more than it needs, and does so with complete disregard for the needs of others. To *hog* is to dominate – to take over, or take control. These traits are considered unbecoming in most people, but especially distasteful when attributed to women. Therefore, the female pig is a figure of particular scorn and derision.

The most famous female pig character in existence is possibly Jim Henson's Muppet diva Miss Piggy. In an essay on "comedy, the carnivalesque and body politics," Angela Stukator constructs Miss Piggy as an "unruly woman" in the feminist tradition:

"Miss Piggy... acquires oppositional power from her ambivalence: she is the object of disgust and desire, being both repellant and attractive, strong and delicate, friendly and hostile, and, most significantly, woman and animal. As an anthropomorphized pig, she accentuates the masquerade of femininity and exposes the contradictions in the ideology of "true femininity." Her performance as the passive object of desire, for example, is counterbalanced by her performance of virile masculinity; indeed, on numerous occasions Miss Piggy out-masculinizes Kermit, who out-feminizes her."⁴

⁴ Angela Stukator, "It's Not Over Until the Fat Lady Sings: Comedy, the Carnavalesque and Body Politics." *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. Ed. Jana Evans Braziel, Kathleen LeBesco. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). 197

Significantly, the character of Miss Piggy was created and voiced by a male actor, Frank Oz. In this way, Miss piggy can perhaps be more easily read as a drag queen than a woman – possessing both male and female qualities in equal measure, and lampooning gender constructs in the process.

I have tried to construct the character of Ham in a similarly gender neutral way – as a woman in female drag, both subscribing to, and satirizing conventional femininity. While this was not necessarily apparent in the first video performance, it became more obvious in subsequent performances, most notably *Ham and Her Father*, which I will discuss later in this thesis.

Divine Abjection

By describing Miss Piggy as a fat drag queen, I align her with another transgressive figure – the late Glen Milstead, a.k.a. Divine. As Michael Moon recounts:

“When Glen Milstead was in high school, his body and his effeminate way of inhabiting it infuriated people on sight: he sometimes needed a police escort merely to get to and from school. That he provided, at these moments of identity constitution and enforcement, an apt embodiment of the purely discretionary seems unlikely. When [film maker and collaborator John] Waters renamed this high school friend of his “Divine,” he both recognized Divine’s affinity with the abject and apotheosized drag heroine of [novelist and playwright Jean] Genet’s *Our Lady of the Flowers* and at the same time set the seal of a name on Divine’s dangerous and exciting, though far from arbitrary, course of cultivating and valuing his brazen effeminacy as a primary component of his identity.”⁵

⁵ Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion.” *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. Ed. Jana Evans Braziel, Kathleen LeBesco. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). 300

Like Miss Piggy, Divine possessed a powerful ambivalence. That she was both “abject and apotheosized,” makes her, like Genet’s fantasy drag queen, an embodiment of “brazen...identity.” In fact, Milstead’s alter ego, in her audacious corpulence, is perhaps more transgressive than her “Divine” predecessor, a *beautiful*, if trashy, non-fat drag queen created by the then imprisoned Genet for his own masturbatory pleasure. An utterly self-conscious text, *Our Lady of the Flowers* references its fictional quality throughout, as Genet describes his fantasy and onanism.⁶ While his Divine is an abject figure, she is perhaps less so than Milstead’s Divine, as written and directed by John Waters.



Figure 1. Miss Piggy⁷



Figure 2. Divine⁸

⁶ Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, trans. Barnard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1963)

⁷ http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Miss_Piggy

⁸ <http://www.afterelton.com/askmonkey/11-16-2009?page=0,6>

In defining Abjection, Julia Kristeva describes, “One of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.”⁹ She draws heavily on Freud’s psychoanalytic theories, particularly those espoused in *The Savage’s Dread of Incest* from *Totem and Taboo*, and maintains, “Abjection, like prohibition of incest, is a universal phenomenon.”¹⁰ Kristeva discusses the “polluting” quality of feces and menstrual blood, and defines filth as “not a quality in itself, but [one which] applies only to what it relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin.”¹¹

In *Pink Flamingos*, Milstead as Divine plays Babs Johnson, the self-proclaimed “filthiest person in the world.” As testament to her abject nature, Divine as Babs eats actual dog feces on camera, and commits incest with her son Crackers. When Babs, fellating her son, melodramatically equates the act with divine ritual, saying “let Mama receive you like Communion,” the *filthiness* of the scenario is palpable.

Divine, in his various incarnations, embraced the abjection that was thrust upon him at an early age. When those *within the boundaries* ejected him to the margins, he did not go quietly. In my many incarnations, Ham among them, I hope to honor his brazen transgressive legacy.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press). 1

¹⁰ Ibid. 68

¹¹ Ibid. 69

Lot's Daughters (2008)

The themes of incest and abjection carry through to my second video performance, *Lot's Daughters*, which retells a biblical story in a satirical fashion. Prefiguring most of my subsequent work, humor and sexual themes are employed to subvert the original text.

I conceived this 90 second piece after discovering the bible story of “Lot and His Daughters,” a typically perverse and misogynist text. The story begins after God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness, and Lot’s wife is turned into a pillar of salt for looking back on the burning city. Lot and his daughters retreat to a cave in the mountains, where they mistakenly believe they are the only humans left on earth.

It was only by the grace of God that Lot and his family escaped the holocaust in the first place, while the rest of the population was consumed by fire. They were spared only because of Lot’s generosity to the angels sent to judge the city. The angels were disguised as men, foreign travelers looking for shelter. Predictably, everyone in the city but Lot turned the men away. When Lot’s neighbors came to Lot’s house to call out the travelers so they could sodomize them (as was apparently the norm in this community), Lot offered the mob his virgin daughters instead. This was seen as enormous generosity *on Lot’s part*, and the angels spared him and his family.

While living in the cave, the two daughters conspire to get their father drunk, so they can have sex with him in order to preserve the human race. It seems this tale was meant, among other things, as a warning to men of the ancient world to beware of women and their crafty ways. When father-daughter incest is committed, the bible tells us it is because women are wicked and seductive. They tempt their fathers with their sexuality, and their fathers are powerless to resist.

This scenario, it would seem, is extremely unlikely. Father-daughter incest is generally considered sexual abuse in our society. Even if the woman is of legal age at the time, the inherently uneven power dynamic makes consent nearly impossible to establish. Current

Western morality (of the last 20 years or so) does not typically condemn rape victims for being too sexy. Although this is a relatively recent societal development, I am fairly secure that the audience I'm speaking to doesn't believe that daughters tempt their fathers into raping them. This baseline assumption supports the piece, which satirically depicts the unlikely biblical scenario.

My interpretation of *Lot's Daughters* is told with a series of meaningless household objects (a box of tissues, a women's razor, a car air freshener, a piggy bank, a thermos etc.), all in similar shades of pink and staged on a bare blue mattress with a wrought iron bed frame behind it. The vertical black bars of the bed frame suggest a prison, or cage of some sort, and the bare mattress gives the stage a somewhat institutional feel.

One by one the objects appear, static on the mattress stage, for a few seconds at a time. They are Lot's two daughters, represented by a different object in every frame, and conspiring to have sex with their father in stylized, sexy voices, which I exaggerate to comic effect.

Toward the middle of the piece, a Santa Claus doll appears in place of the pink objects. With his long white beard and jolly red suit, he is a mockery of the venerated biblical patriarchs he represents. Voiced by me, in an ostensibly male-sounding voice which is obviously female, he greets us with a hearty "Ho ho ho!"

The scene goes black for a moment, as the daughters seduce Lot/Santa. When the visual returns, Santa is in the same place, but his arms are up in mock desperation. "My daughters," he melodramatically intones, "What have you done?!"

The scene changes, and the daughters appear together for the first time. This time they are a whoopee cushion and a bottle of Pepto Bismol. They reply to their father, "We're sorry!" in a cloying, faux-sincere tone. The piece ends with an exaggerated girlish giggle.

Lot's Legacy

Author Robert Polhemus defines the “Lot complex” as “a dynamic configuration of wishes, sexual fantasies, fears and symbolic imagery that has worked to form generational relationships and structure personality, gender identity, religious faith and social organization.”¹² The symbolic power of this tale derives from problematic relationship of women to patriarchal power. If sexuality subverts this power, than the way to overthrow the powers that be is through female sexual agency. In this sense, Lot's daughters are sexual terrorists, bending society and history to their will. As Polhemus notes, “ The Lot complex... features the drive or compulsion to preserve, adapt and or expropriate the traditional paternal power to sustain, regenerate, define, represent and transmit life and civilization – the patriarchal seed of culture in history. It thus plays a central part in the high drama of the change of status of women and the liberation of female aspirations.”¹³

But whose aspirations are truly served by this construct? Whose symbolic fantasy is this? As a woman with a complex relationship to my own paternal upbringing, I find this topic charged and highly ambiguous. If women rebel against our fathers through opposition, and our opposition, that is, our difference, is primarily sexual, then the greatest aggression of all would be sexual. For me, this dynamic operates on a broader, metaphorical level, than a personal, literal one. While I discuss incest at length in this thesis, I do not desire, nor do I condone these acts outside the realm of symbolic fantasy. My interest is in the complex metaphor of the feminist movement (a young, nubile faction) against the ancient, decrepit patriarchal system that oppresses it.

¹² Robert M. Polhemus, *Lot's Daughters: Sex, Redemption and Women's Quest For Authority* (Stanford University Press, 2005). 4

¹³ *Ibid.* 4

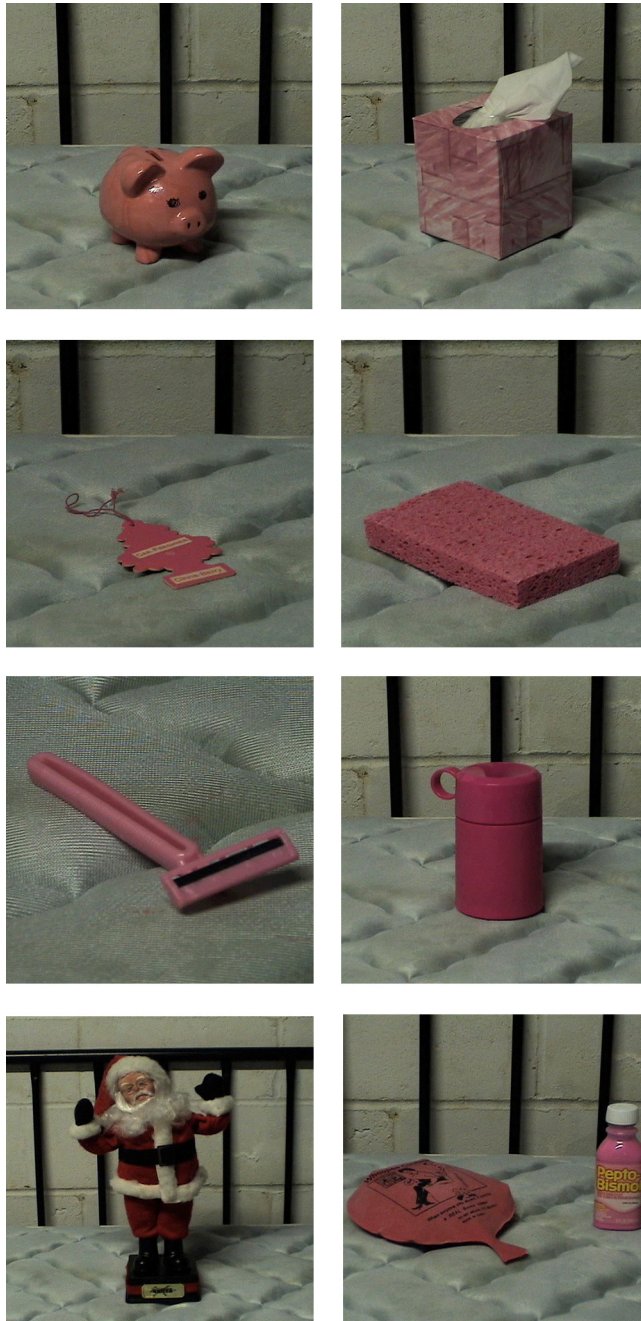


Figure 3. *Lot's Daughters*

If sexuality cannot overthrow the patriarchal regime, perhaps humor is the next best thing. I describe my *Lot's Daughters* as a joke that doesn't make sense. The structure, a 90 second story with lines of dialogue in quick succession, sets the work up as a joke in the "guy walks into a bar" tradition. The absurdity builds until the final frame, the *punch line*, in which the objects are most ridiculous, and suggest bathroom humor. The short duration of the piece, along with the swift *punch line* at the end, will the viewer into thinking he or she has just heard a joke. But what is the joke? Do the pieces add up? Is it funny or isn't it? Hopefully, they will conclude that the *joke* both does, and doesn't make sense; and that it both is, and isn't funny. As in the rest of my work, this ambivalence is essential to the overall integrity of the piece.

One might wonder why I choose to define this piece as video performance, as opposed to just video. The answer is that here, as in all my work, my hand is self-consciously, if subtly implied. When Lot/Santa speaks in a masculinized feminine voice, the viewer is forced to acknowledge the presence of the artist. Clearly, Lot and his daughters are voiced by the same performer, and she is the same person who has set up the objects on the mattress stage. While my presence is not the most important or obvious element in this work, it cannot be fully ignored or denied. Therefore, I define the work as video performance in which I perform off camera.

Self-Conscious Gender Performances

My next three pieces discuss gender identity and performance in a decidedly self-conscious way. *Stand Up Guy* (2008) was produced at the end of my second semester at Stony Brook, and was featured, along with *Ham* and *Lot's Daughters*, in the first-year group show *This Is What We Came With*. The work, in simplest terms, features a dildo as a stand up comic.



Figure 4. *Stand Up Guy*



Figure 5. *Stand Up Guy*

***Stand Up Guy* (2008)**

Under a spotlight, and wearing a miniature bowtie, the dildo stands alone in front of a black velvet curtain. He addresses an implied audience with false bravado, which is met with mild applause and laughter. My hand enters stage right, and begins to “work” the dildo like a puppet. I also provide the voice for this character – a masculinized, 1980’s stand up comic’s voice (“What’s the deal with Chinese food?!”). This angry, flailing character tells unfunny mother-in-law jokes, and is not well received by the invisible audience (who respond with silence, broken occasionally by a cough or clearing of the throat). He sweats profusely, and his confidence visibly wanes. It is only when, out of nowhere, he invokes the spirit of rabid nationalism (“But seriously ladies and gentlemen, we live in the greatest country in the world... We do...”) that he is redeemed. The scene ends with uproarious applause, and enthusiastic shouts of “U.S.A.! U.S.A.!”

The dildo character, voiced by me, is clearly a woman playing a man. While my masculinized vocals are perhaps more convincing than in *Lot’s Daughters*, I believe it is obvious to most viewers that they are watching a woman’s hand, holding a dildo with a woman’s voice, and making it move. In this way, the nature of gender performance is called into question.

The masculine poses the dildo character enacts are especially clichéd and transparent. When his failure becomes palpably uncomfortable, he adopts another pose, that of the

“Great American,” and this time his audience redeems him. The implied critique in this piece is not of masculinity, or jingoism per se, but of performance in general. By critiquing the very thing I’m engaged in, I call attention to myself as an artist/performer, and my ambivalence informs the piece.



Figure 6. *America's Funniest*



Figure 7. *America's Funniest*

America's Funniest (2008)

My next significant piece, completed early in my 2nd year in the program, was *America's Funniest*. Again discussing identity and gender performance, this work blends *high* and *low* culture to expose the pretenses in each. It also discusses the concept of failure, and questions what it means to fail.

Dressed in high female drag, with make-up caking my face, eyebrows drawn an inch above their natural placement, and an ambiguously retro hairstyle, I perform as a stylized torch singer – feather boa and all. My song, anachronistic and inappropriate to the scene, is the undeniably silly theme song to the 1990's television series *America's Funniest Home Videos*. I perform this song a capella, in a manner so morose and sincere as to make the viewer embarrassed and uncomfortable. Beginning the piece, and in between verses, I check my image intently in the *mirror* of the camera's LCD screen, underscored

by a series of especially cheesy comic sound effects (comedy horns, a slide whistle, fart noises, animal sounds etc.) and canned laughter. It is thus implied that I am being laughed at and ridiculed by an imaginary studio audience, as I perform my ultra-serious song.

Again, as in *Ham*, I have set myself up as a failure in a particularly self-conscious way. My failures are myriad, and compete for rank in my performed pathos, making it hard to determine where I (as my character) have failed the most. Have I failed as a singer? Clearly I have, as my performance is amateur and awkward. Have I failed as a woman? My over-the-top make-up and close attention to my appearance suggest a labored and unnatural performance of femininity. My imagined audience senses this pretense, and I am ridiculed for it. Have I failed to fool my *real* audience? Of course I have. My *real* audience knows I am a performer playing the role of a pathetic, comic spectacle, and not a sincere singer awaiting their approval. And yet, as in *Ham*, my insecurity on camera is real and palpable. In this way, my *actual* failure helps bolster the enacted failure, and the piece retains authentic emotional weight.



Figure 8. *A Sexy Pose*



Figure 9. *A Sexy Pose*

A Sexy Pose (2008)

Immediately following *America's Funniest*, I created a similar piece titled *A Sexy Pose*. Reprising the role of the stylized torch singer, I am again framed head and shoulders under a searing spotlight. The piece begins with a drum roll, as I look into the camera, my face grotesquely caked with heavy theatrical make up. As the drum roll continues, I

slowly and dramatically scratch both sides of my face with my long, sharp acrylic fingernails. Underneath the heavy foundation make up, there is a layer of bright red face paint; as I scratch the top layer off, the red *bleeds* through to the surface, and I create an amateurish illusion that I have scratched through my skin.

The next shots are cut and sequenced to create the illusion that I am bleeding profusely. As I pose for the camera in a stylized, *sexy* way, fake blood drips from the initial *wounds*. As the shots progress, more and more blood is added off camera, until it is so heavy and thick that it drips off my face.

I created a sound piece to score this scene, using samples from existing pieces I felt related to the piece in some way. I layered Edith Piaf's recording of *L'Etranger* over a generic sounding porn soundtrack, its rhythm and instrumentation making it immediately identifiable as such. I sampled some female moans and screams from existing porn footage, and the resulting audio track mad an interesting counterpoint to the visual.

The next scene begins as the soundtrack fades out, and the frame is expanded slightly to reveal more of the actual set. A man leans into the frame and applies fake blood to my face as one would apply cosmetics, while I once again check my image closely in the LCD screen. Casual banter ensues as I direct my helper in the application of the cosmetic blood.

The third and final scene returns to the original cropping, and a fake audience applause track plays in the background. I respond to my imaginary audience with over-acted pride and gratitude, *hamming up* the scene considerably.

Again, the important elements discussed here are gender, sexuality and performance, as I discuss conventional feminine sexuality in terms of narcissism and self-loathing – dual components of self-conscious experience. The trope of victimized femininity as titillation is lampooned, as my self-violence is explicitly revealed as theater. My direction of the

male character suggests a reclaiming of the female body; this man has bloodied my face *at my own insistence*. I may be bleeding, but I am no one's victim.

My reward for performing this self-directed, theatrical masochism is the imagined respect and adulation of my imaginary audience. In this way I suggest that there are rewards for performing femininity, but they may be only imaginary, and therefore not worth the effort.

Failure and Success

In the first few months of my Stony Brook career, I struggled considerably, producing nothing significant until the end of my first semester. In fact, my first few months at Stony Brook were spent making small, unsuccessful sculptures in polymer clay, and generally just “playing around” with unfamiliar media. Coming from a photography background, I was determined to leave my comfort zone and explore new ways of working, despite my utter lack of related experience or ability.

This desire to “work without a net” is one I’ve followed consistently throughout my life. For instance, my early interest in street performance and improvisational theater inspired me, in my early teenage years, to stage public performances in the small town where I grew up. These *happenings* were, to say the least, not well received. I was often targeted by aggressive, confused bystanders, or picked up by the police (though thankfully never charged) and taken home by squad car to my angry and humiliated parents. At this early stage, courting risk and rebellion were my prime motivators, and I’m sure some of this has carried into my present work.

Immediately out of high school, I entered an undergraduate program at a small, private school, where I attempted to study classical music, despite having no musical background or aptitude. Lacking the ability to play an instrument, or read music, I studied theory and composition with a group of accomplished musicians and composers who naturally thought I was completely insane and delusional. For two years I struggled through,

predictably failing every assignment, and to this day I still cannot play an instrument, or read or write music.

I recount these early experiences to highlight the importance of failure to my process, both personal and artistic. Undoubtedly, I count my willingness to take risks as an important asset to my work, even though this willingness yields at least as many failures as successes. While these designations are highly subjective, I believe the success or failure of a work is largely determined by its audience, on whom it relies to attain meaning. I define my art as video performance to highlight the importance of the audience, both real and imagined, within my concept of self-conscious framing. Because the work is made with the intent to publish it in some capacity, the work cannot be truly complete until it is received by an audience.

Given these conditions, it is reasonable to say that success may be determined by how closely the viewer's response aligns with the artist's intent. If the audience responds to a piece as the artist had hoped, the piece can be considered successful. If the work is not received in the way it was intended, then the piece, and the artist have failed. Midway through my second year at Stony Brook, the halfway point of my graduate career, I failed with a piece called *Party Girl*.

Party Girl (2008)

Party Girl was born of frustration at a time when I began feeling more cynical about the direction and importance of my work, and of art in general. I had created a string of pieces which I felt were moving in the right direction, but I was becoming increasingly resistant to the demands of producing work for an audience. I created a piece which was less conceptually grounded than my previous work, and which basically functioned as a pure expression of my emotional state at the time.

For this video performance, I donned a rainbow clown wig, and a black turtleneck that reminded me of 1960's beat era performance. I wore my usual copious make-up, not grotesquely caked on as I had worn in my two prior videos, but more in line with the way I wear make-up in my everyday life – noticeably excessive, but not dramatic enough to pass as street performance. I feel that this reference to my everyday dress made the work more personal for me as I performed it, even though this detail would not be meaningful to most viewers. The video set was lit with a particularly sickly yellow cast, which sets an appropriate mood for the piece.

I begin the piece facing the camera, with a blue bucket on my lap. I present my index finger in an ambiguous gesture, which seems to say, “hold on just a moment.” In that brief space, I'm assuring the viewer that something worth seeing is about to happen, and if they can wait just a moment, I will give them what they want.

I believe the audience, having seen the bucket in my lap, knows what is about to happen, or it least senses its possibility. I bring my finger up and past my lips, changing its function from gesture to tool, and gag myself with it. After a few tries, I begin vomiting into the bucket. Throughout the piece I am visibly suffering through the unpleasant act.

My reasons for creating this piece were largely unknown to me at the time. I knew I was talking about the performer/audience relationship, but I wasn't sure why I had chosen this particular set-up, beyond that I thought it might be interesting to watch. When I played the footage back for the first time, the reality of the performance appealed to me in a way my more affected performances did not. Unlike in *A Sexy Pose*, the self-injury here was real, and the performance it yielded held an authentic, meaningful quality that went beyond camp cheekiness. I was attracted to the piece, but I wasn't really sure why.

When I presented the piece in my department, it was generally not well received, and my intent, while not entirely clear to me, was especially unclear to my audience. Much of the feedback I received centered on the piece being stupid, lazy and directionless – an expression of narcissism, and nothing else. Other critiques focused on the seriousness of

bulimia, which some suggested I was making fun of. As became clear after the fact, none of these critiques were without merit, but my intentions had not been clear, and were therefore not understood by viewers. Because of this disconnect, the piece failed.

When I watch *Party Girl* now, the piece and its meaning are much clearer to me. While the topic of bulimia is relevant, especially given my fat identity, what I was really making fun of, once again, was the self-conscious relationship between performer and audience. An aggressive gesture toward the audience (real and imagined) who milks the performer dry, my vomiting scene was meant to both excite the audience, and also to spit themselves back at themselves, critiquing their demanding voyeurism, and lack of concern for fellow human welfare. It was a deeply personal statement, meant both as a gift and a challenge to my audience. Ultimately, they just thought it was stupid and gross.



Figure 10. *Party Girl*



Figure 11. *Party Girl*

Breaking Character (2009)

By the middle of my 2nd year at Stony Brook, I was fully invested in exploring the concept of performance, especially in relation to gender and identity construction. I was also investigating the relationship between performer and audience, and questioning the power dynamic within that relationship. At this point, I felt it important to delve into yet another aspect of video performance by taking on a different role – that of director.

Produced for my 2nd year solo show of the same name, *Breaking Character* marked my first time directing other performers. The piece features 15 non-professional actors (mostly my friends and colleagues) reading short monologues about identity, power and sexuality directly to the camera. Presented in the Lawrence Alloway Memorial Gallery as a multi-channel video installation, the taped performances were simultaneously projected large on three walls, and the audio tracks (piped in through speakers in the ceiling) were allowed to compete and overlap.

Once again, I am a character in the video who never appears onscreen. In my role as self-conscious director, I am heard off screen instructing and interacting with the performers from behind the camera. Written by me, the monologues express my own deeply personal thoughts, feelings and experiences, which I then project onto the other performers. By reading my words, the actors, each carefully chosen to reflect certain qualities, take on my voice and make it their own.

In this video, the power dynamic between me (as director) and the other players is explicitly performed. I am putting words in their mouths; they are taking on my persona, and thereby submitting to my will. And yet, the burden of confession still belongs to me. The other actors are simply mirrors, and I am the only one who is truly exposed.

Michel Foucault describes confession as “a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession,

prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile.”¹⁴ In *Breaking Character*, I split into multiple people, becoming a witness to my own confessions, and acting as my own judge, jury and executioner.

Significantly, all of the confessions I project onto others have undeniable erotic undertones. The equation of sexuality with shame, and the subsequent eroticization of shame, are important themes in my life and work. While this equation is generally considered backward and unhealthy, it is almost universally persistent nonetheless. As Foucault observes, “the confession...remains the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex.”¹⁵

The title *Breaking Character* suggests an interrupted illusion. When the mask slips, the character is exposed as such, revealing the *truth* behind the mask. When my actors break character, as they frequently do (stumbling over lines, asking for direction) they appear to be revealing their true selves, and exposing the artifice of the dramatic set-up. But what is the authentic self, and how do we know when we perceive it? It is my belief that all identity is constructed and performed, and can never be verified as authentic or original. Therefore, I believe the characters revealed behind the mask are equally as illusory as the mask itself.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978). 62

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 63

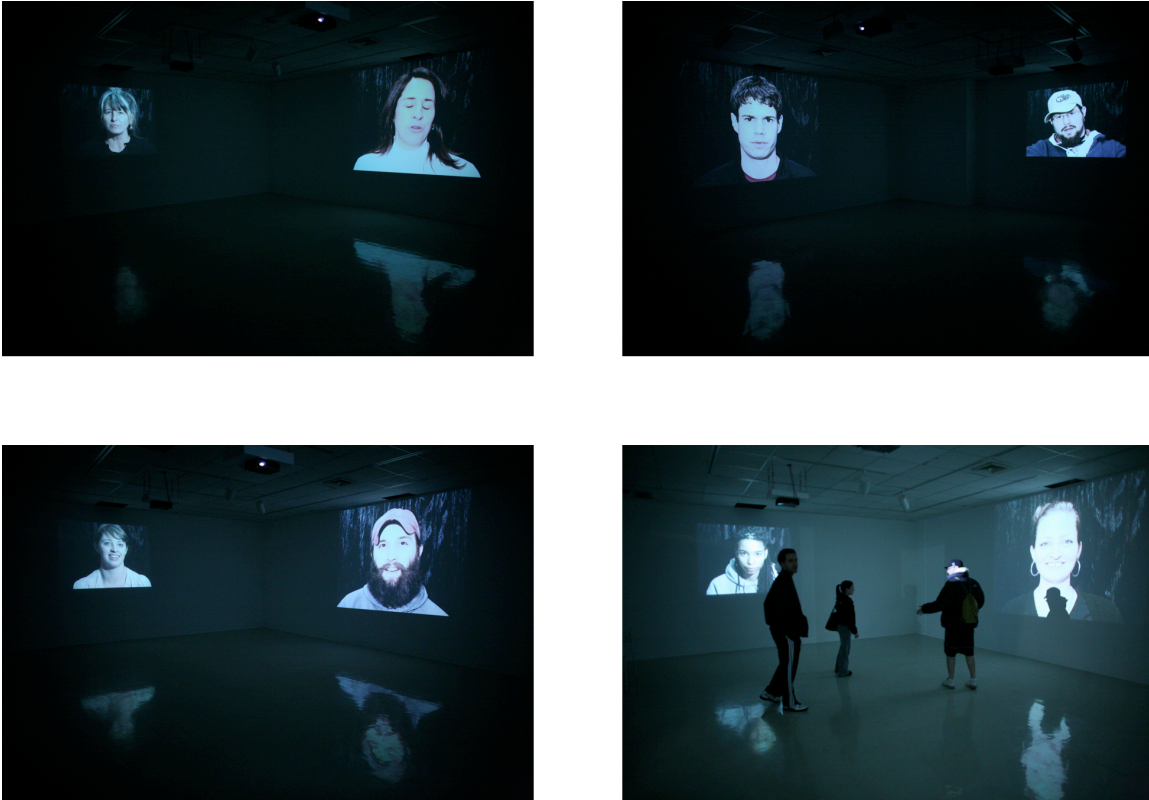


Figure 12. *Breaking Character* (installation views)

Troll (2009)

In my 3rd year at Stony Brook, I produced two significant works, the first of which was titled *Troll*. As in *Ham*, the piece centers on an impromptu performance in a public space.

A guerilla style video that investigates sexualized power dynamics in male/female interaction, *Troll* begins as I drive up to a group of young men standing idly on a street corner at night, and shout, “Does anybody wanna be in a movie?” What follows is five minutes of sexual negotiation, and shifting power dynamics.

In preparation for this video, I drove around until I found a group of young men standing in an open public area. The street corner, with its accessibility by car and inherent sex/commerce connotations, was an ideal setting. Once I found my target, I turned on the

camera and jumped into character. From that point, I was a fearless sexual predator, intent on engaging the men in some form of sexual act on camera.

Throughout the video, the power dynamics shift, and it is never clear who is truly in control of the situation. On the one hand, I am actively baiting the men (from the safety of my car). On the other hand, I am physically vulnerable because of my gender, and the fact that I, alone in my car on a darkened street corner, am vastly outnumbered. Despite the apparent danger of the situation, my character never reveals any obvious trepidation, and therefore appears to have a legitimate, if unstable, claim on the upper hand.

Further problematizing the situation, there is undoubtedly a class component to this structure. The car, besides being a place of relative safety, is a class marker. While the viewer knows virtually nothing about me, or the men on the corner, it can be easily surmised that the person in the car is on socio-economic higher ground. In addition, my active stance behind the camera (which, like the car, can be viewed as a luxury item) privileges my point of view, and turns the gaze outward toward the (underprivileged) men. Throughout the piece, the men remain ignorant of my intentions, and most seem to participate only out of curiosity or confusion. In this way, my gaze is highly exploitative, and the balance of power can be seen to shift in my favor.

At the start of the piece, most of the young men react to me suspiciously, cautiously speculating about my intentions. One young man, however, is undeterred by the unusual circumstances, and flexes his manhood by engaging in sexualized banter with me. The exchange that follows can be read as a customary sexual negotiation, where each side lays out their conditions, all the while trying to maintain a position of power over the opponent.

At a certain point in the video, the tone changes slightly, and I appear to be in a more vulnerable position than before. I have engaged a group of slightly older men, who swarm the car in a more threatening way. These men own their male entitlement in a way the younger men don't. They are comfortably self-assured where the younger men

are anxious and insecure, and their empowerment reflects the gaze back on me. This shift is made visible by the fact that the older men appear on the opposite side of the car. By appearing on the driver's side, physically closer to the camera and me, the older men present a more palpable threat.

Eventually all of the men back down, and I am left calling out "No one wants to play with me?" Finally, I give up, and drive away. "Okay guys, goodnight," I say as I leave, sounding like a stand up comedian finishing her set.



Figure 13. *Troll*

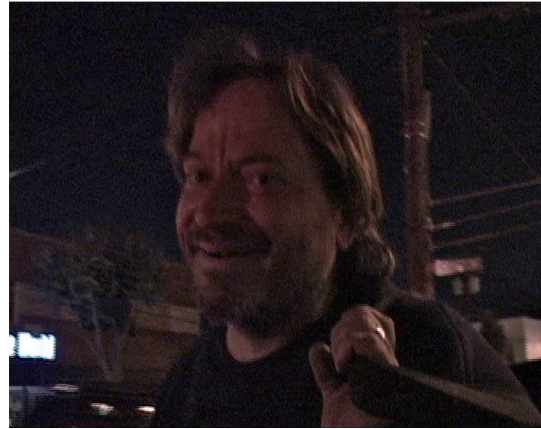


Figure 14. *Troll*

Ham and Her Father (2009)

In my most recent work, I reprise my Ham character for a loose retelling of the bible story of Ham and Noah. Dressed in a cheap, fairy tale inspired Bavarian dress and rubber pig nose, my Ham appears in an improvised scene with Noah, who is dressed in a long, white Santa Claus beard and wig, and a long trench coat with nothing underneath (suggesting a flasher's disguise). This Noah is played by nine alternating performers, both male and female. Throughout the piece, Ham and Noah always occupy the frame together, and interact in an awkward, amateur performance style. As in my other work, the actors are repeatedly shown *breaking character*, and the already loose narrative is broken by frequent bursts of nervous laughter. The scenes are culled from over seven hours of improvised footage, which has been self-consciously reshaped in the editing process.

In preparation for this piece, I asked my actors (again, friends and colleagues) to come to my studio to participate in a video performance. I told them nothing about the piece, except that they would be improvising a scene with me. When they got to the studio, they would find me dressed as Ham. They were then given the Noah costume, and told they could either undress completely, or roll up their sleeves and pant legs in order to appear naked under the costume. (Only one actor agreed to be naked under the coat; this same (male) actor also agreed to appear nude in the video, which was advantageous because it further sexualized Noah, and provided an opportunity for male objectification through my female gaze).

I would then disclose the parameters of the piece, which I can be heard explaining to the actors (and viewers) at the start of the video: "My Name is Ham. Your name is Noah. You are my father. We're talking about shame". Afterwards, we would improvise as father and daughter, touching on such shame related topics as sex, self-loathing, degradation and pain. Frequently, the fourth wall (deliberately flimsy, as in all my work) would break, and Ham would be revealed as the director of the scene, as well as a player within it.

Essentially, the video contains seven minutes of awkward sexual negotiation and banter between the two figures. Here, patriarchal morality is satirized to the point of absurdity, as Ham and Noah enact a perverse power struggle in which no one wins.

The relationship between bodies onscreen is an important element in this piece. While my fat, female body is a constant, the character of Noah is played by several actors of various shapes and sizes. Noah's multiple bodies are set up in contrast to my own; therefore, the relationship between the bodies within the frame is always in flux. This physical contrast is alternately undermined and exaggerated by the position of the actors onscreen. In some frames, I dwarf the other player – in others I seem somewhat diminutive. This effect is meant to represent shifting power dynamics within the Ham/Noah relationship, itself a metaphor intended to describe other, more widely recognizable relationships, namely: Parent/Child, Male/Female, Patriarchy/Feminism.



Figure 15. *Ham and Her Father*



Figure 16. *Ham and Her Father*

This work appeared in my 3rd year solo show of the same name, where it was shown as a single channel video projection in the Lawrence Alloway Memorial Gallery. A dark, comic fairy tale, *Ham and Her Father* reconciles several themes which have dominated my work over the last three years. In this piece, fat heroine Ham returns to critique patriarchal authority and gender inequality, self-consciously addressing her own narcissism and self-loathing in the process. While this work was met with mixed reviews by faculty and colleagues, I consider it successful in its scope and content, if not its execution.

Conclusion

Over the last three years, I have explored issues of great personal importance to me through my work, learning much about myself in the process. In fact, my passion for self-exploration is what compels me to identify as a self-loathing narcissist – a title which, I believe, can be applied to anyone involved in the pursuit of self-discovery through art. It is my goal to both make great art through self-examination, and examine myself more closely through the creation of great art.

My relationship to my own body has inspired me to explore fat identity and abjection through works such as *Ham* and *Party Girl*. My interest in gender performance in the construction of my own identity has led to works like *Lot's Daughters*, *Stand Up Guy*, *America's Funniest*, and *A Sexy Pose*. Finally, my simultaneous fear of, and aggression toward authority on multiple levels motivated me to investigate sexual power dynamics in works like *Troll*, *Breaking Character* and *Ham and Her Father*.

While I've separated my work in categories related to their most obvious thematic elements, it is important to note that every theme I've identified shows up, in varying degrees, in every work I've done. I always strive to produce rich, layered work which is meaningful on multiple levels, and to that end, I try to put all that I know into all that I do.

When Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection, it was at the expense of all else. He stared at himself incessantly, unable to tear himself from his own image, and eventually wasted away to nothing. In embarking on my own self-conscious voyage through my artwork, I am careful to avoid the pitfalls of self-romance. One who examines herself too closely runs the risk of getting lost in her own reflection, or in my case, in her own head.

With that in mind, I'll conclude by saying that the most exciting possibility within the production of art, in my opinion, is the ability to communicate ideas and emotions outside of oneself. In creating my Self-Conscious Portrait, I hope to illuminate facets of my own experience which may be helpful or interesting to someone else at some point in time. Art is not philanthropy – it doesn't feed needy children or save wildlife from extinction, but it does have the power to inspire people and enrich lives.

My hope for the future is that I will continue to make work that challenges and excites me, and that the work will reach a greater audience who will find it meaningful. My studies at Stony Brook University have prepared me to move my work to the next level, and I look forward to applying what I've learned to my future work.

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