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Inch by Inch

A Thesis Presented

by

Joanna Bavero

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

Stony Brook University

May 2014

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Thesis

Inch by Inch

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2014

spread out and staring off
wanderlust in chipping paint
piece by piece, inch by inch
each splinters, fractures, peels away
severing each and every part,
hour by hour, day by day

Dedication Page

My mother used to always say, writing makes you immortal. I feel the same is true about art. With every piece of art that you make, you are leaving a part of yourself for the world. I truly believe that great art comes from being honest and authentic with yourself about what drives you to create each and every day. In my mother's last days she wrote her family a goodbye letter. My mother's final words to me were "be an artist Joanna, it is in your soul." This thesis is in dedication to her for seeing who I was at my core and for always encouraging and fighting for me to be the woman that she knew I could be.



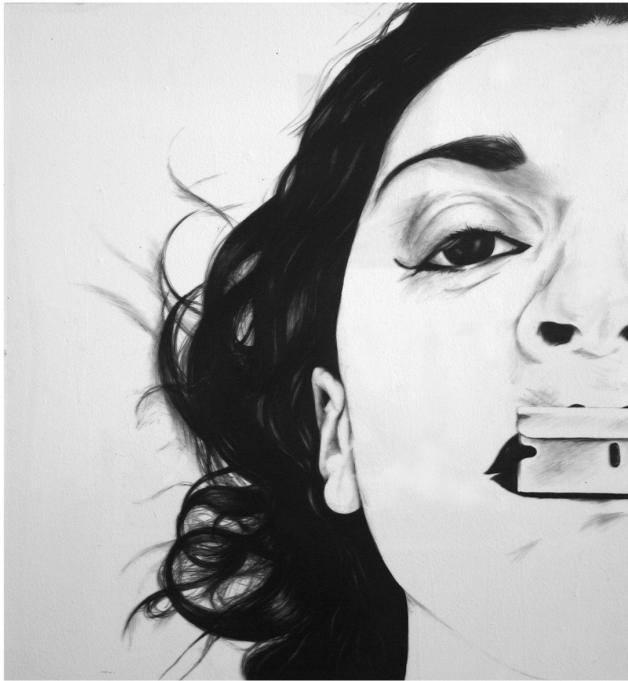
“When you make music or write or create, it's really your job to have mind-blowing, irresponsible, condomless sex with whatever idea it is you're writing about at the time.”

Lady Gaga

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Chapter I: Introduction



Emotional Razor Blade, diptych, litho pencil on plexiglass, 32.5" x 30" (each), 2013

Emotional Razor Blade

As I sat in the office wracked with anticipation, the principal spoke the words that would ultimately shape the way I would come to view myself and my sexual identity...

“When you act a certain way and dress a certain way, people are going to think a certain way about you.”

Plagued by those words, I came to associate sexuality with a sense of shame that still lingers. Shame for being a girl, for being sexual, for being a victim. Those words, delivered by a female educator, sum up the way our society views and treats women of sexual abuse. Blame the victim. What have you done to warrant this kind of behavior? Middle school can be a mine field when it comes to adolescents feeling their way to some sort of sexual understanding. Boys making crude comments, snapping bras, grabbing asses, taking liberties with girl's bodies while teachers stand idly by. I was by no means the only one, but being a 34C at the age of 12 definitely made me the more desirable target. Every day male classmates would walk up to me and stick their hands up my shirt without giving it so

much as a second thought. The scary thing is that this is not out of the ordinary, but rather a social norm that we have come to accept as “boys being boys.”

This association with shame and sexuality can have lasting effect on one’s relationship to sex and can “lead to murky sexual scenarios that are neither completely consensual nor completely coerced but somewhere in between” (Tanenbaum intro xix). I have found this to be true in my own life. After dealing with sexual abuse at school, it seemed every sexual encounter I had from then on was weighted with feelings of shame and worthlessness. I began to use sex in a way that was manipulative and I was constantly seeking some sort of validation. It eventually led me, at the age of 17, to a relationship with an older man that was nothing less than murky. Sex became a way to validate that I was lovable and worthy and also became a mechanism with which to control the relationship. I got off knowing that I had a sense of power in a powerless position. When I first started the relationship with this man, I was determined to hold out on sex for a while. Like most men he would push it as far as I would let him, his favorite line as with so many other men being “oh come on, just the tip.” Given my own ambivalence to sex and my right to sexual agency, I always operated from a place of not really knowing how to say yes or no. I would start to let it happen, then say no, then feel incredibly guilty and so the cycle would repeat. This happened for about three months until we actually had sex. The deciding factor to have sex was entangled with proving that I could have my way. I was trying to convince him to come over to my house because my parents were out of town. He was in the middle of

saying no when I said “if you come over, we can have sex.” He was at my house 10 minutes later. I had won a fucked up battle by taking advantage of my sexual “power.”

This relationship, in which I was desperately in love, was made even more complicated by the fact that during that time my mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I wanted to feel in control more than ever, and sex was the only way I knew to gain that control. My mother died two years later and I came to the realization that there was not only one death but two that took place. There was an actual death and an emotional death, a death of innocence. I had begun to use sex as an emotional razor blade, a way to inflict pain on myself and others in order to feel something.

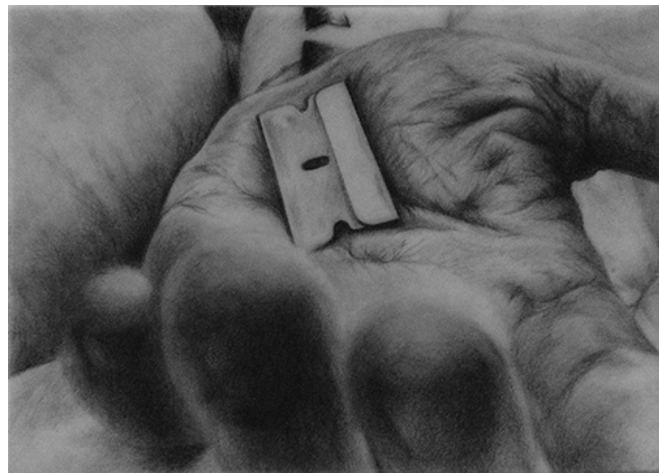
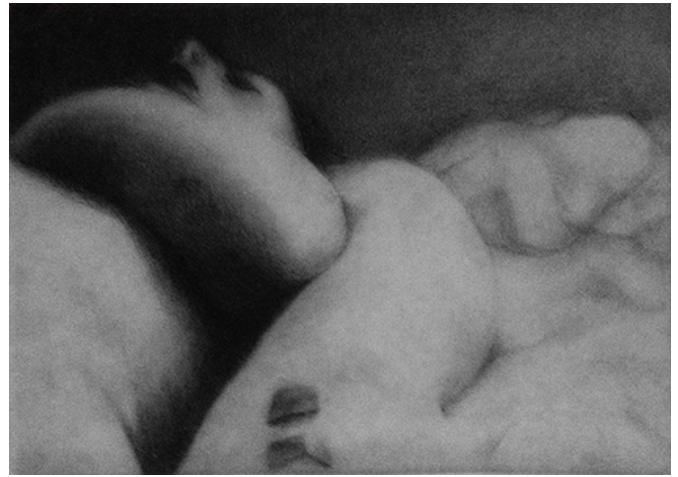
It begins with a need, a hunger for validation.

That urge that leads to degradation.

That moment of weakness, of mutilation.

A Russian Roulette of lust and longing.

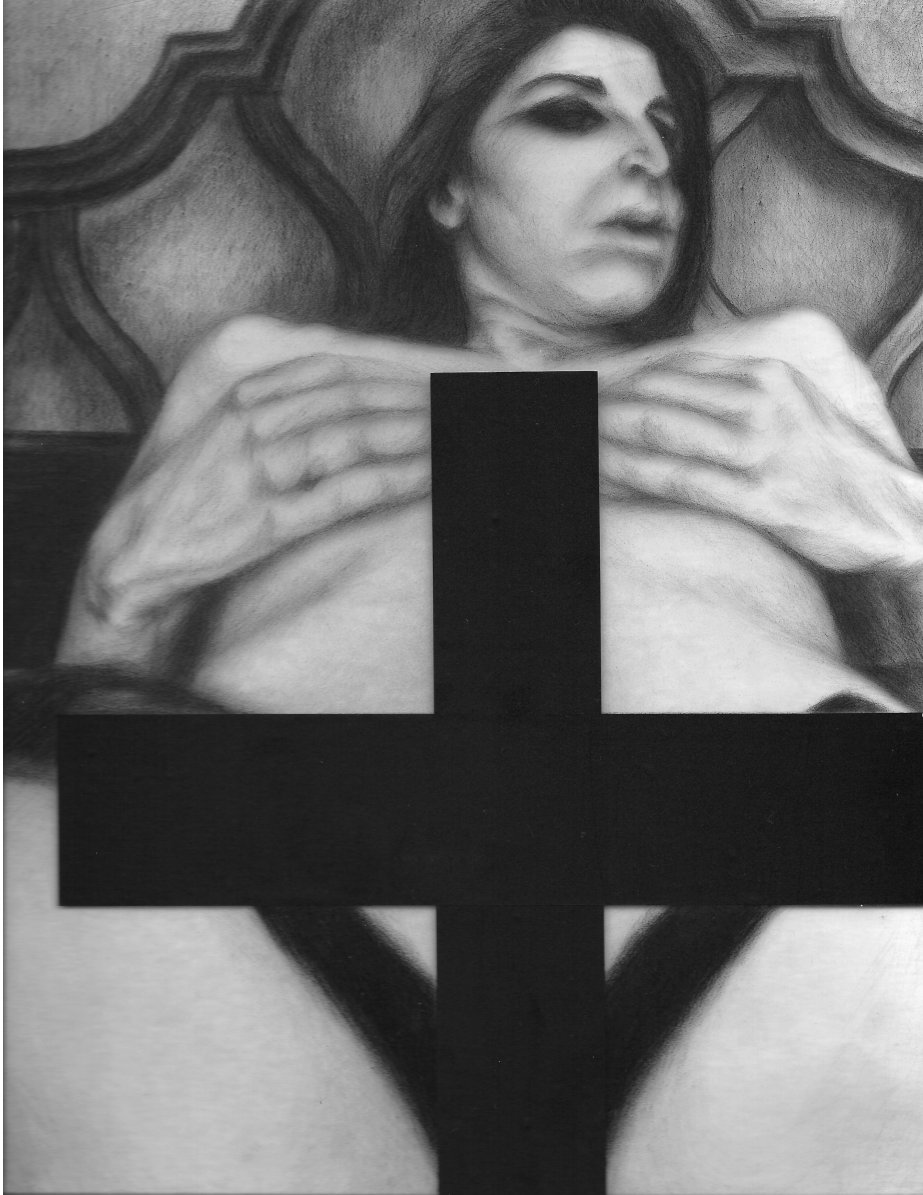
An emotional razor blade... finally calming.



Cold Hard Light, graphite on frosted glass, 5" x 7" (each), 2013

All of this history brings me to a place where I can begin to sort through what drives me to make the kind of artwork that I do. I have always felt this need to express myself through art, taking on female sexuality as subject matter. It was not until I began sorting through my feelings around sex that I was able to start making artwork that was truly authentic and honest to who I am as a person, a woman and an artist.

Chapter II: The Sociology of Slut Bashing



Resurrection, graphite and vinyl on frosted polycarbonate, 12" x 9", 2014

Are We Sluts?

The word “slut” is thrown around so often in our society that we barely take notice. It has become commonplace for both men and women to use this derogatory term in their vernacular. A focus group made up of college students refer to “women who hook up with too many people, or have casual sex readily,” as “sluts by both men and women” (Aronson and Kimmel 584). Yet perceived promiscuity is not the only factor. Girls can be branded as sluts for all kinds of reasons: jealousy, insecurity and fear of being the next target. Once branded, “there is little a ‘slut’ can do to erase her stigma” (Tanenbaum introduction xv). Women learn to internalize how others view us as a mirror for how we view ourselves. We equate our worth to our sexuality and regard our bodies as currency. This can have ramifications that last a lifetime in a woman’s relationship to sex. The lines between shame and sexuality are so blurred that we can no longer think about one without the association of the other. Girls are left to grow up and regard sex with feelings of “disgust, guilt, and squeamishness” (Tanenbaum 20).



Sinner's Delight, graphite on mylar (left), giclee print (right), 31.5" x 22.5" (each), 2012

Shame is used as a way to keep order over girls' sexual desires. In fact, "the idea that we are threatened by sexual women is itself threatening. And the idea that women as well as men like sex is alarming" (Tanenbaum 220). Shame is a powerful mechanism that keeps us locked in familiar and dysfunctional patterns. Although shame and guilt are in the same vein, the difference is that " 'shame' names the feeling that one is bad, while 'guilt' describes the recognition that one has done a bad thing" (Jensen 169). Girls begin to regard sex and sexuality not as something that they have done but something that is innately and inherently wrong with them. This confusion is made even more complicated when sexual abuse has taken place.

Victims of sexual abuse almost always blame themselves and feel that they are in a sense damaged goods. Furthermore, this stereotypical asymmetry between women and men contributes to what sociologists refer to as a “rape culture.” In America’s patriarchal society, some evolutionary biologists such as Randy Thornhill even claim that rape is a “natural and biological phenomenon that is a product of the human evolutionary heritage” (Thornhill). Many sociobiologists stand behind the evolutionary theory that men are genetically programmed to spread their seed around to as many women as possible, and rape is an unfortunate by-product. While this is a convenient and tidy explanation as to why men rape, it hardly holds water.

This is just another way of saying “boys will be boys.” In the U.S., we go as far as blatantly blaming the victim. If she was raped, she must have been asking for it. Rape is the only crime in which the victim must prove their innocence, rather than vice versa. Typically in court cases, women are placed into two categories, the Madonna or the Whore. Their entire sexual history is paraded out on a red carpet for all to see and no woman is safe. One famous court case that is particularly disturbing involved three high school boys raping a mentally retarded girl and sodomizing her with a broomstick. The boys’ defense lawyer argued that the girl, who had the mental capacity of a second-grader, was a “promiscuous lolita” who couldn’t control her sexual impulses. Sexual harassment and abuse has become a sort of social norm and rite of passage in middle and high schools across America. These incidents have become so common that boys “do it brazenly, beneath the bright glare of fluorescent lights, in full view of students and teachers”

(Tanenbaum 132). Girls commonly report that even if they do speak up, they are made to feel like sluts by their educators and teachers.



Reloaded, graphite and vinyl on frosted plexiglass, 13.5" x 10.5", 2014

This slut stigma creates a disproportionate power struggle between men and women. “The power of sexuality is asymmetrical, in part, because being seen as sexual has different consequences for women and men.” (Aronson and Kimmel 596). Slut, whore, tramp, ho, bitch, prostitute, hooker, hussy, tart, floozy and skank are just a few of the many

demeaning terms for a sexually active woman. In contrast, there are far fewer terms for a sexually active man and some might even consider them to be positive such as stud, player, stallion, ladies' man, Don Juan, Casanova and gigolo. Not to mention they're often just referred to as really great lovers. "But sex is not always inherently sexist" and despite the common misconception, it should not "transform women into dirty tramps" (Tanenbaum p 75).

Women are held to a completely different societal standard when it comes to sex. This is known as the "sexual double standard" (Aronson and Kimmel 584). Although the notion of women being virgins before marriage is outdated, "women are still held to a stricter standard, but it is fairly vague exactly what that standard is" (Aronson and Kimmel 584). Feminists, female artists and sociologists have been trying to break through this stereotype since the sexual revolution in the 1960s. Yet, even though this was a period of sexual freedom for women, "the transitional sexual double standard never went out of fashion" (Tanenbaum 66). Women today are still at odds with themselves and their sexuality, stuck between a rock and a hard place, so to speak. It seems we are doomed to forever feel ambivalent towards the duality between sexual agency and shame of our own bodies.



Closed In, graphite on frosted polycarbonate, 12" x 9", 2014

Our society places a great deal of emphasis on the ideal and perfect display of virtuous femininity. Girls are supposed to conform to impossible standards, expectations, and invisible borders without a clear roadmap of how to achieve it. “A girl’s sexual status is a metaphor for how well she fits into the American ideal of femininity” (Tanenbaum introduction xv). Femininity has become a performance. Yet, how can femininity exist without sexuality. It seems to me that the two go hand in hand. “Why should sex and femininity necessarily be at odds?” (Tanenbaum 75). This is the question we need to be asking ourselves in order to achieve sexual liberation. Can there be a bridge between these two terms in our society without the inevitable and derogative connotation. We are forced to ask the question, does acting and dressing a certain way condemn us to be seen a certain way? Are we destined to forever be deemed as sluts?

Chapter III: The Final Hour



Ghost, graphite, litho pencil and tusche on frosted plexiglass, 15.75" x 24.25", 2014

Staring Down the Barrel

I was 17 and consumed by a passionate and toxic relationship with an older man. Everything was moving so fast and so slow at the same time. My boyfriend and I were running on a continuous wheel, him constantly disappearing, and me constantly chasing after him. Everything had finally come to a head. I had reached my breaking point as I screamed into the phone, “the most important person in my life is dying. What the fuck is wrong with you?” I was beside myself. My mother came to comfort me and got into my bed to sleep next to me as she so often did when I was sad. We were both asleep when my phone rang in the middle of the night. It was him, and it was the first time he told me he loved me, after our blow out fight. The depth of our dysfunction was so deep it was a black hole. Our relationship was like pressing a blade to my skin, the pain had started to breed. I whispered something to my mother, I don’t even remember what, and I left to be with him. Of course we had sex, which had become both the razor and band aid for all my shame, despair and self-loathing.



Press the tip to the skin
the pain starts to breed
just a taste,
just one small taste
the tongue that feeds
is the tongue that bleeds
unremitting, all the waste
plagues my insides
thoughts retraced
a want unspoken,
a need displaced
burns right through me
bound and chaste

Pulse, litho pencil on polycarbonate, 22" x 30", 2013

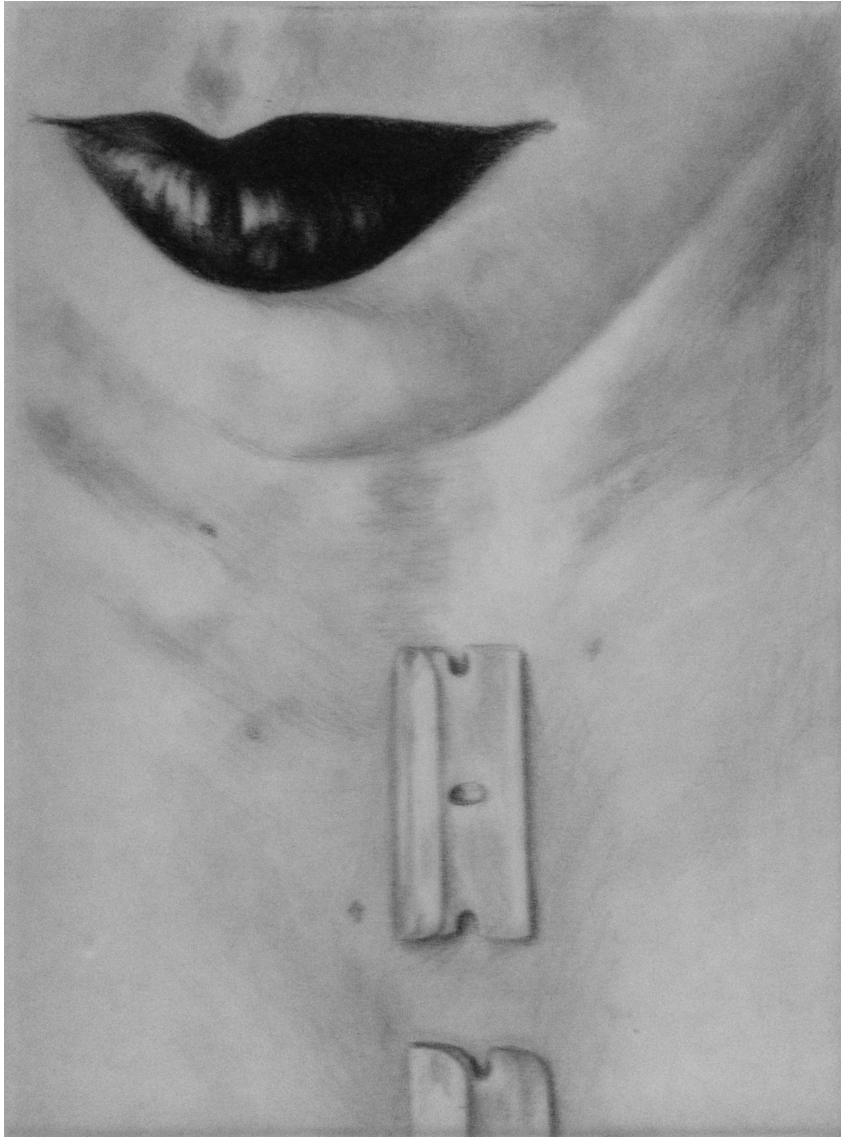


Aftermath, litho pencil on polycarbonate, 22" x 30", 2013

After almost two years and several destructive relationships later, I went away to college. I went far, from New York to Savannah, where distractions were plentiful, and I could retreat to a world of thoughtless normality. I was drinking heavily and smoking enough pot to numb pretty much everything, which might be considered normal behavior for a college freshmen, except there was one major difference. My mother was at home dying. When I went home for Thanksgiving, I had no idea what I was walking into. She was so sick, she looked so jaundiced and frail, a shell of the woman she once was. She could barely get around by herself.

December 7th, my sister and I got the call that they were bringing her to the hospital. It was raining heavily and we were not in our right minds so we were lucky to even make it to the hospital ourselves. And then we waited. We waited through the next day, which was my 19th birthday. My mother was resolute in that she would not die on my birthday. She held on until the next day and subsequently passed on the 9th. By the end she had to have an oxygen mask for her breathing. I watched her breathe in and out, slower and slower. I matched my breath to hers, until she finally took her last one.

the truth,
the metallic taste in your mouth
guttural.
visceral.
palpable.
staring down the barrel
waiting desperately for the final hour

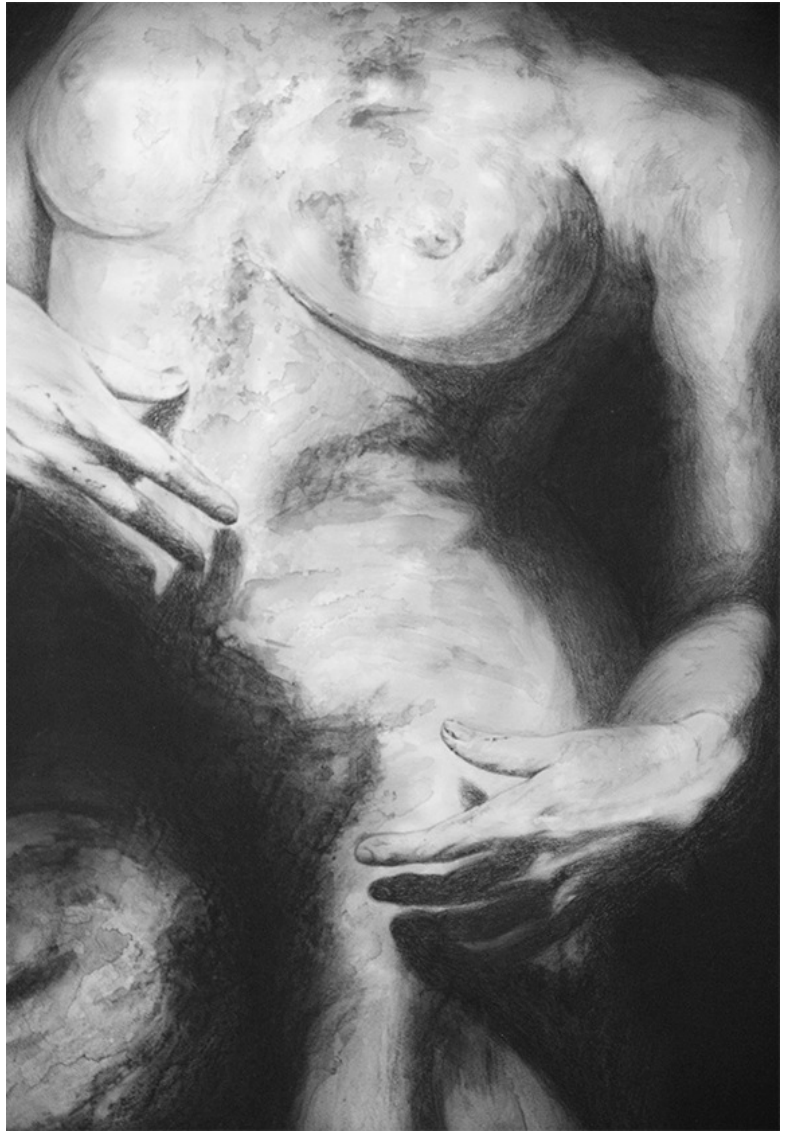


Truth, graphite on frosted glass, 7" x 5", 2014

It is through those experiences that mortality and death are ever-present in the subtext of my imagery and art practice. For me, death is innately intertwined with sex. Sex and death are inevitably interwoven in nature and philosophy. Biologist William Clark theorized about death as a cost of reproduction, without one you could not have the other. "Obligatory death as a result of senescence (natural aging) may not have come into existence for more than a billion years after life first appeared. This form of programmed cell death seems to have arisen at about the same time cells began experimenting with sex in connection with reproduction" (Clark 1996, p. xi). In nature, we see several examples of sexual cannibalism, like the female praying mantis, who devours the male during mating.

Like the mantis, I came to use sex as a weapon against myself and others. I evolved from prey to predator. I used sex as a form of validation, control and manipulation. The emotional toll that this took taxed me to the point of self-destruction. It was during this time that I severed many relationships with family members. Fortunately, the damage was not irreparable. But in punishing myself, it was the people who were closest to me that got caught in the crossfire. I began to unravel. Sex can be your demise, whether metaphorically or literally speaking. It can be your death or rebirth, depending on how you look at it.

Likewise, many of my images, are about sex and/or death, depending on how you view them. It is difficult to tell whether the subject is lying supine in death or lying in waiting for her partner. The images and their subjects alike look cold and removed from the situation. The figures are posed in a manner reminiscent to that of photos from an autopsy.



Torn, litho pencil and tusche on frosted polycarbonate, 28" x 22", 2014



The use of saran wrap adds to this narrative by introducing the concept of bindings and suffocation. My intention was for the subject to look like she is actually taking her last breath. The figure warps and distorts as if it is trapped under ice or water. This distortion creates a facade yet allows you to see through it. The saran wrap pieces give the visual experience that there are layers of shedding skin, or insides spilling out.

Wrapped, graphite on frosted glass, 7" x 5", 2013

In comparison, other pieces have figures that are segmented and pieced together, yet none of the parts quite fit. The images in and of themselves are eerie and corpselike but the projection of lights and layers purposefully create an ethereal apparition on the wall and floor. Shadows of those passing by casts a ghostly echo that adds to the fragility of the work.



Cut Deep, litho pencil on plexiglass, (left to right) 48" x 11" x 2.5",
48" x 11" x 2.5" & 10.5" x 16.5" x 2.5", 2014

It is through my artwork, that I am able to experience a sort of rebirth. Each new piece breathes life into my personal history. A history that lies dormant inside me but bubbles and spills over from time to time. Each piece has a story to tell, a narrative unknown. At times they seem estranged even to me, yet there is something universal and familiar about them. I would hope that every person who encounters them is able to take something away, as my narrative merges and melds with their own.

Chapter IV: The Evolution of Art Practice



Magic, litho pencil and tusche on frosted polycarbonate, 22" x 30", 2014

Practice and Process: Evolution and Revolution

My work has dramatically evolved in my three years at graduate school, not only in imagery and concept but also in materials. My art practice has gone through a steady evolution while my process has undergone a drastic revolution. Upon entering the MFA program, I was strictly a traditional oil painter. As my imagery began to mute in color, likewise it began to grow louder in concept. Within my first year, I began working solely in grayscale and started experimenting with mediums and processes such as solar plates as well as graphite and ink on mylar. This was the start of working on transparent materials. Through experimentation, I started working with lithography pencils, which are essentially grease sticks, on different relevant alternative materials such as steel, aluminum, plexiglass, frosted glass, fluorescent light casings and vinyl.



Scissor, litho pencil on fluorescent light casing, 24" x 36", 2013

Materials came to play a more significant role in my art. Reflective surfaces lend themselves to the voyeuristic and introspective nature of the artwork, allowing the viewer to literally see themselves in the piece. I also began to build a bridge between two-dimensional work and installation. I started building plexiglass boxes that are lit to project an image onto a wall and occupy floor space.

Photography and photoshop have become the cornerstones of my practice. Entering my first year, I had never used the computer in my work. After learning photoshop, it became an integral and imperative part of my work. I began to work in a system where I would start with a concept for a photo shoot, using myself as the subject, crop and edit the images in photoshop. I would then decide based on the image what medium and materials to work with. I became heavily influenced by photographers such as Chas Ray Krider and Akif Hakan. Both Krider and Hakan work in series and are highly narrative. My images began to look very photographic and cinematic in nature.



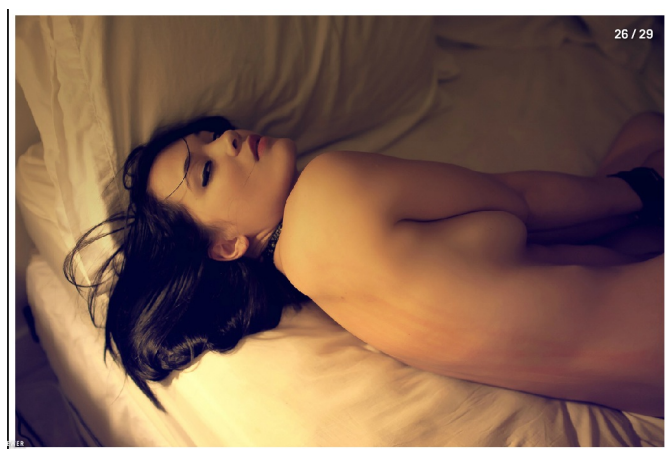
Chas Ray Krider, *Motel Fetish*, photograph, 2002



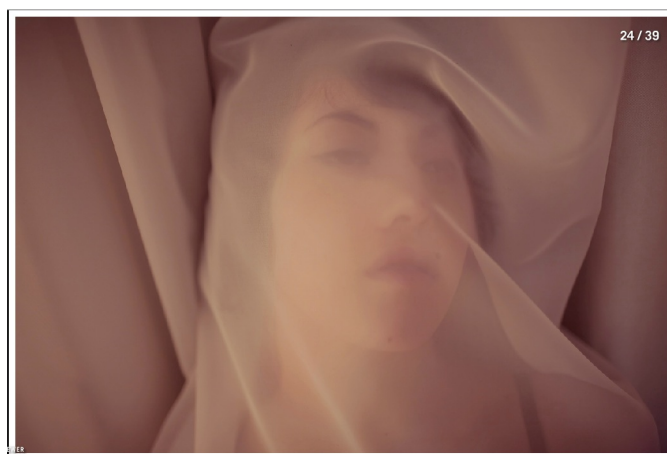
Chas Ray Krider, *Motel Fetish*, photograph, 2002



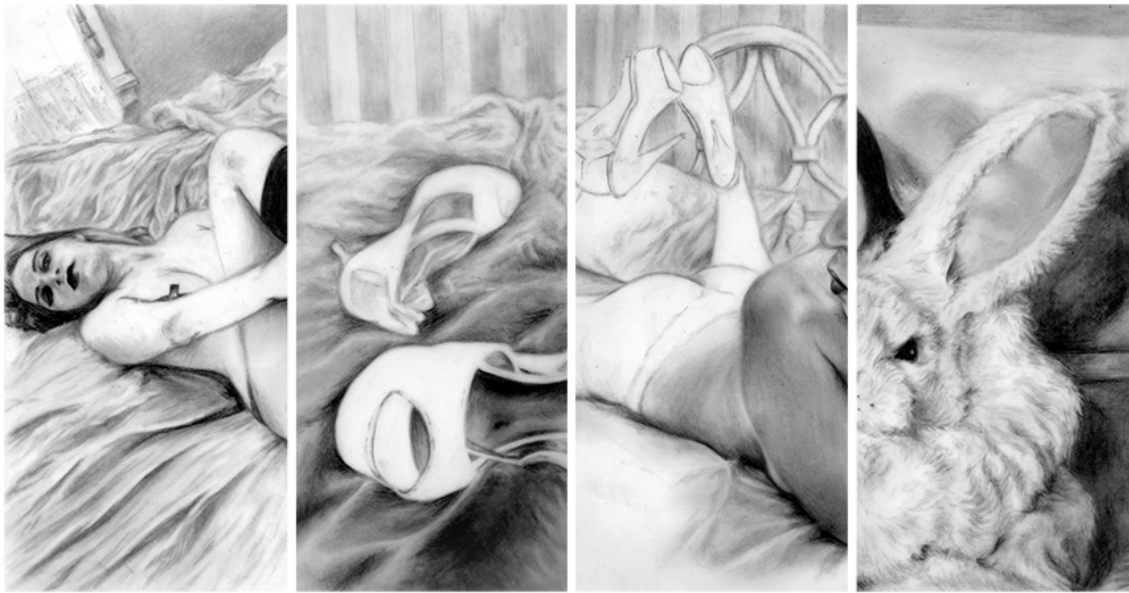
Akif Hakan, photograph, 2011



Akif Hakan, photograph, 2011



Akif Hakan, photograph, 2011



Surfaces, graphite on mylar, 5.5" x 2.875" (each), 2012

I started working in diptychs, triptychs and series in order to tell a story and build narrative.

My work aims to create a sense of tension and unease amidst images of beauty and pleasure. It fosters an environment that is uncomfortable and confrontational for many people. It speaks to the ambivalence that I and many other people feel regarding shame and sexuality. I would like to think that it hits you where it hurts, generating a visceral response from the viewer. The trajectory of my work has conceptually developed from occupying a space between images that seem performative in nature in juxtaposition with images that create a sense of vulnerability to pieces that command space with a sense of agency.

My performative pieces tell a story of victimization, longing and loathing; a capitalization of sexual status. Sex in itself is after all a performance. Women are taught to play a part, to be the object of a man's fantasy. Every woman has at one point or another faked it, pun intended, when it comes to sex. There is always a bit of a show to stroke the male ego and let him know that he is in fact the big man. "Sex is sexy because men are dominant and women are subordinate; power is eroticized" (Jensen 48). In these pieces, the subject tends to be making eye contact with the viewers, implicating them in some way, while also challenging the onlooker to confront their own feelings around sex and sexuality. The performative aspects of the work are meant to give you a feeling of someone else being in the "driver's seat," possibly exploiting the situation.



Violation, litho pencil on steel, 24" x 36", 2013

There is a power struggle happening, a show being put on, which creates a sense of inauthenticity.



In contrast, the images in my work that relinquish control create vulnerability not by making viewers merely passengers, but allowing them to enter that space for themselves. The tightness and perspective of the images are meant to give you the feeling that you are alone with that moment. These images are ones that relate more closely to a sense of mortality and death. In many of these images I use razor blades, in contrast to other weapons such as grenades and knives. Razor blades are much more personal, and rather than inflicting pain on others, they are most often used when inflicting pain on yourself.

Down, litho pencil on frosted polycarbonate, 30" x 17", 2014

I have never been someone who cuts myself, yet in talking with people who have, I understand that it is used in order to regain control and feel something; a constant struggle for agency and autonomy. That has been my relationship to sex for as long as I can remember.

In these images, the mouth tends to be a focal point, the mouth being the key to vulnerability. Words are particularly scary for me. Images are an interpretation whereas words have direct meanings and correlations. Eyes can betray you: We all perceive imagery differently, whereas words have a universal definition and connotation. They are more concrete. For a long time, I chose not to speak about my experiences around sexuality because it was just too scary and too shameful to say out loud. It made me very uncomfortable when talking about my work, but I found that until I could start talking about it, my work would not touch people in an authentic or genuine way.



Speak, litho pencil on plexiglass, 36" x 36" x 24", 2014

Chapter V: Conclusion



Feed, litho pencil on frosted polycarbonate, 30" x 28", 2014

From Here...

In opening myself up and allowing myself to be vulnerable through my artwork, I found that it allowed the viewer to have a much more honest reaction to it. Watching people interact with the work is so interesting because everyone brings their own biases and experiences when viewing it. Everyone has baggage when it comes to sexuality. What is truly fascinating to me is that as a society we are so comfortable with imagery objectifying women. We are numb to seeing women as body parts and sexual play things in the media, television and pornography, yet we are so uncomfortable with imagery that speaks to sexuality in a more complete and real sense. My work seems to strike a chord for a lot of people because it presents a broader narrative, a story in which the subject is a human being instead of a faceless object. Why do we have so much unease when seeing art and images that make us feel something emotionally? It seems to be genuinely more distressing to people than the degrading images of pornography. What kind of culture are we living in that we have become so desensitized to the subordination and degradation of women, yet we are still so uneasy with images that portray women as having any kind of sexual agency and autonomy? These are the questions that I look to explore further through my art process.

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