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Give Up the Ghost

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

by

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Mississippi State University
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art, 2011

May 2019
University of Arkansas

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Abstract:

Give Up the Ghost is a series of six paintings created in Fall 2018 and Spring 2019. The paintings are an introspective examination of transgender subjectivity in visual narrative.

In this paper, I separate the personal and research through first and third person, similarly to how I separate imagery and mark making in my paintings. The paper is broken up into a description of the project, the history and theory which informs the work, and why painting is used to describe bodies and spaces.

Give Up the Ghost refers to giving up social expectations as determined by gender. The paintings hint at the unexamined experiences one encounters through a transgender perspective. My aim is to show the interconnections between an experience and the social which allows experiences to transpire. Using impasto and layered paint, I slowly build bodies and spaces, to show a deeper subjectivity in how bodies and spaces relate with one another.

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Give Up the Ghost

Give Up the Ghost consists of paintings and drawings related to experiences from my life. In the series, I compose versions of an event through sketching and bring in models who reenact the scene based on the sketches. Once I've taken an image of the scene I project the photograph onto a canvas, which provides a blueprint for the painting. The blueprint acts as frames for me to work with painting decisions. Larger shapes and objects are blocked in with a reduced color palette. I work through multiple layers to find the correct colors, tones, and shapes. Throughout this process, I revise my understanding of what the work needs based on my original concept, and compare it to how it has changed. In this way the work begins to inform me of the required information to finish the piece.

I create multiple sketches to keep a sense of tension in the images and to work through compositional possibilities. Light, implied movement, and activated negative space are central in developing the works. I am interested in light for its ability to create a feeling of depth and life in the painting.

My goal in these works is not to illustrate what happened but to use the logic of representation to infuse the paintings with a nuanced understanding of being and flesh. I want the bodies in my paintings to have a more complex reading in how flesh can be described in unexpected ways and to change a viewers perspective of how bodies are traditionally rendered. This understanding comes from a viewer's relationship with the works as well as their own history. An LGBTQ+ individual would have the easiest relationship with the works, while a white, cis, straight, male could find difficulty relating with the imagery. One of my goals is not

to distance or alienate camps that could learn from the paintings. The works are open enough to allow for multiple interpretations, or for an individual to enjoy the paintings' ambiguities.

With these works, I am interested in how imagined spaces can contain actual events and present themselves in a cohesive manner. More so, I am interested in how allegory can produce meanings where traditionally there has not been representation for transgender communities. Images of positive trans representation where trans people exist without stigmatization are becoming more common. However, there is not enough representation to replace the many negative roles of trans people in film and stories.

These pieces contain moments from my life as a transwoman. Those moments can be understood in a different way than cis people. The paintings can be understood as the experience of a transgender woman, whose restrictive upbringing imbues the narrative with moments of longing, sadness, hope, and most importantly, becoming. I grew up in Mississippi where restrictions on how gender and identity were constructed and performed limited the ways I could express my identity. Restrictions on identity construction are not unique to the trans community. I want to emphasize that I do not speak for the trans community. The paintings are about my perspective, which makes the context unique. I make a point in my personal life to not emphasize a particular gender which puts me in the nonbinary category. Making paintings is similar to how I create meaning and how I am formed and understood in social contexts in my personal life. For me, painting is a tool for reflecting on moments from my life.

Two Year Hymn

When I started my medical transition from male to female, I started a series that would capture my features and emotions in painting. I created a self-portrait every month, for two years.

Every portrait was done in one month on a 10" x 10" canvas, and depicted a reflection of myself based from a mirror. The goal of the "Two Year Hymn" was to record how I looked, how I felt in that space, and the emotional quality of that given time. The last part was hard to depict, since it relied on the manner in which the painting was made and not the expression of my face. The earlier sets of paintings appeared worn in the depiction of my face in how the paint was heaped on without regard for a primary image. Because of this, the faces in the earlier sets did not accurately portray me. They reflected the fear, depression, and anxiety that I experienced at that time. The series was documenting the emotion and uncertainty in transitioning often seen through the way I painted. The self portraits became a way of seeing my image over the course of my medical transition.

For me, trans implies going towards a gender or sex, but arriving there is not guaranteed. There is always a history or biology that keeps one from being a "woman" or an abstracted idea of "woman." For me, trans marks this awkward consciousness in the images, always existing in relation to a body, a history, an Other. The portraits were a way to point to this relational dispute of myself and the constant realization of an image or self.

In the portraits the description of my face revealed "Other" moving away from white cis male towards the space between "male" and "female". The paintings attempted to trace this space, which persisted in memory and physical place, through the possibility of a truth of that reality within my face. I was trying to find a way to articulate the experience of transitioning as organically as possible, something that could be experienced as "real" captured in portraiture.

Cis denotes an individual who is assigned a certain sex at birth and has no issue with their sex throughout his, her, or their life. Because their lives are not complicated by the subtleties of

gender and sex, they sometimes have difficulty processing and accepting individuals who do not fit the traditional categories of male and female.

The portraits were tracking my gender and not my sex. Sex and gender are confused as similar in nature and definition but incorporate a broader field of study. Ephraim Das Janssen an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Chicago State University, in their book *Phenomenal Gender* explains what this misunderstanding entails.

“The sex-gender distinction is an effect of the radical distinction between mind and body, *a historical method of classification*, which is exclusionary in character but which also allows for the distinction between the corporeal aspects of human bodies and the relation aspects of human experience... it enacts a kind of harmful *Gestell* (enframing) on such people, which excludes their very existence from the sphere of intelligibility” (Janssen 99).

Coding Trans Narratives

The *Gestell* is experienced in racial, ethnic, and gender diverse groups. Once there is a difference between two parties those differences are classified and acted upon based on that particular history of treatment for that particular party. Generally, homophobia is expressed through words of anger. Often an explicative like “faggot” is used in protest of another’s perceived sexuality, perhaps accompanied by implementing physical violence to that person’s body.

Most important is the complication of race with the basic dynamic of gender and sex. Roger Brubaker is a Professor of Sociology at the University of California. He writes that policing

“occurs when identity claims are expressly challenged is a reminder that identity is a social relation, not an individual property, and that it depends on recognition and validation from others and is therefore vulnerable to challenge and disruption. All social identities involve the interplay of self-identification and categorization by the other; the explicit policing of identity claims is just one – conspicuous and conflictual – form taken by that interplay” (Brubaker 57).

Perception of my identity depends on the social space. What is stable is the color of my skin, which protects me in most social interactions. I am limited to only making work about my experiences and cannot fully depict the experiences of people of color.. This social reading or construction, Janssen writes, “is not to say that each individual has absolute choice regarding his or her gender. Rather, it is to say that any given culture’s understanding of gender is the site of what is and what is not possible within that culture” (Janssen 105).

By tracking this social identity within the self-portraits, I began to develop the work for *Give Up the Ghost*. I wanted to turn away from naming the narrative within language and focus on what the painting was in relation to the way I worked and how I needed it to function (both figuratively and literally). In this way I wanted to make scenes where bodies could navigate or be seen in moments of socially defined narratives.

At the beginning of my thesis I thought trans representation was not important. In hindsight, I was hesitant to speak about trans bodies in representational imagery. Any mention of my body was obscured by the decisions I made in the editing process while developing works. In “Picnic,” my figure is there only in the use of the gradient silhouette at the left of the group. This painting was about my exclusion from all white cis female groups. Knowing this basic intention for the work I made a decision to remove my figure through a colored screen which mimicked the forest behind the group. The colored form was an absence of my physical body and stand in for my image

The silhouette of my frame in “Ghost” came from the figures in Devan Shimoyama’s paintings of black queer identity. Devan is a black queer artist living in Pittsburgh. His work allows for an allegory of experience to exist in a counternarrative inclusion of queer identity. Counternarrative imagery is an alternative perspective of a particular group usually reflecting a

positive viewpoint. There is a consciousness in this type of imagery that allows black queer identity to exist and function in an imaginary space via his paintings. What I want in my paintings is similar but follows a white trans female experience. The signifiers of my experience originate from myself but are informed by a larger social understanding of what trans is.

The creation of my paintings does not require a study of transgender history or theory. The paintings are a viewpoint into my life—specifically, how an awareness of my body in a social space produces awkward moments that can be understood through the images. The identification and disidentification with the Other and myself, who is the Other is a complicated mesh of social interactions. Otherness is the state of being different from the social identity of a person and the identity of the self. As a transwoman, I am often seen as the Other which influences how I recognize myself. For an individual to identify as someone who is alien to themselves because of a societal relationship produces an uncomfortable relationship with the self. The situations in the paintings create an echo chamber which amplifies feelings of dysphoria, isolation, and alienation, allowing one the chance to recognize these moments and engage with the paintings on a deeper level.

In the thesis series, there are six paintings which chronicle the relationship between myself, others, and the moments that define certain brief encounters. As a whole, these paintings can be understood as allegories of transgender experience performed through counternarrative events in my life. To explore these experiences, I chose myself as the central character. My role as a character was to perform the effects of gendered conflicts in relational moments. Judith Butler, the Maine Elliot Professor of Comparative Literature at UC Berkeley, in her 2015 text *Giving an Account of Oneself* explains performance as:

“Giving an account thus takes a narrative form, which not only depends upon the ability to relay a set of sequential events with plausible transitions but also draws upon narrative

voice and authority, being directed toward an audience with the aim of persuasion” (Butler 12).

Giving an Account

It is worth examining the brief summation of narrative in the traditions of postmodernism. I use Paul Taberham, a researcher into cognitive psychology and the avant-garde. Taberham in “*The Specters of Narrative in Lessons in Perspective*” explains the issues of narrative within Avant-Garde film by outlining the differences in narrative, story, and plot. He writes, “Within a cognitive context, narrative is understood as a mode of thought, rather than as a text structure. Both of these ways of looking at narrative enable and give form to the other.” (Taberham 30). A visual mode of thought would not be the overall image nor the object contained in a two-dimensional surface. The narrative or mode of thought would be the relationships of the forms and images. To further break down these definitions, stories are “the product of inferential elaboration that the spectator constructs while engaging with the plot... while plot refers to the information that is imparted, style refers to the way that the information is framed within the use of cinematic techniques...” (Taberham 31).

The paintings communicate distinct stories, and are unified in style. Style in this way can be understood as the medium of paint within a narrative image. This approach to image making was intentional to direct the viewer’s attention to the medium that frames the schemata – “organized clusters of knowledge that guide [our] thought processes” (Taberham 31), in an attempt to show the illusion to be framed under a visually compelling medium. Explained later, painting acts like flesh which contours the forms of an object enfolding the tactile quality of subliminal subjects. I am not interested in the rendering of flesh, but how paint creates and moves flesh across and through the pictorial frame. In “Slip Away,” I am interested in how the

body moves from flesh to water without any hierarchy in the rendering of flesh and water. Both the water and body are important in the overall aim of the work but the narrative uses these two objects and merges them together until they are identical through the style or treatment of the painting. I am interested in the relationship between flesh and paint and how these elements frame and define the overall painting. Through this relationship, the narrative requirements change the way the paint needs to be used. Paint in this way becomes a performative vehicle for meaning. “Slip Away” is more about the literal performance of flesh, which informs the coding of identity, and how this performance becomes comical in its inability to fully evoke the desired form. An identity performed through an undesired body is summed up by Janssen in that:

“...*human identity takes the form of a fixed, coherent, subject is rejected...*The performative model leaves room for the subject to retain its complexity and plural identifications, while also maintaining its integrity as a subject that performs these identities, even when he or she falls prey to the all too common human foible of being inconsistent” (Janssen 103).

The inconsistency in identity becomes the way for a person’s character to be understood in its fullest. Harvey Brown, a professor of the Sociology Department at the University of Maryland, writes about the difficulties of constructing narratives in *The Position of the Narrative in Contemporary Society*. He writes that the irregular nature of postmodern society does not allow for a full understanding of a being’s history or biography. He states:

“Such inconstancy of roles and intentions are central features of postmodern society, a society characterized by instability of identity, the impossibility of achieving an integral biography, the reduction of the person to a factor of production – all conditions inhospitable to the conceiving or comprehending of texts about the unfolding of the character and destiny of agents” (Brown 546).

"The idea for these paintings is best explained by Butler's theory on naming. In *An Account of Oneself*, Butler examines how subjects who obey the law navigate historical and social situations where their identity is given to them, through exchanges." Exchange is used as

the day-to-day interpersonal exchanges between individuals. Because of this, an individual navigates the nuances of their surroundings, often challenging the law and forming a conscience, which is then challenged by others. The imagery in these paintings references life events and are coded through my identity without reducing anything to a single signifier in the hopes to visually show the complexities of gender and sexual identity. Coding and signifiers are ways of producing meaning for individuals within the LGBTQ community. They can be simple signs that can signal to another member their status. Coding identity uses colloquial and cultural ideas of identity to express an individual's idea of themselves.

This idea of a self is located in the Other, often a literal other, but as Butler explains that "... other is always found outside; at least, it is *first* found outside and only later recognized to be constitutive of the subject"(Butler 27). This compares the subject, formed by the recognition of the Other but who is not fully dependent on this process, to thought which is formed by language. But to ask how might *I* as a subject locate myself outside of myself, relies on this Other which requires and produces a continuing circuit of locating oneself. Recognizing myself, through the formation of imagery, is a way of identity construction through introspection.

"The dyadic exchange refers to a set of norms that exceed the perspectives of those engaged in the struggle for recognition. When we ask what makes recognition possible, we find that it cannot merely be the other who is able to know and to recognize me as possessing a special talent or capacity, since that other will also have to rely, if only implicitly, upon certain criteria to establish what will and will not be recognizable about the self to anyone, a framework for seeing and judging who I am as well... the other confers recognition – and we have yet to know precisely in what that consists -- primarily by virtue of special internal capacities to discern who I may be, to read my face" (Butler 29).

My person—specifically, my face, body, and genitalia—does not fit into a standard matrix of man and woman. Instead, it is between these two genders, and requires a constant

renegotiation. When I am not recognizable to another person, the problem becomes what to do with me.

bell hooks is a feminist theorist and writer whose work on Otherness was an influence in making the series. hooks' theory of Otherness and difference echoes Butler's take on social formation but carries it further by writing "the acknowledged Other must assume recognizable forms" (hooks 370). As a transwoman, there are points in social interactions where I must produce the signs and signifiers of a white cis woman, such as the speech patterns, dress, walk, and mannerisms. If these signifiers are not produced in an immediate or clear way, confusion sets in with the individual I am interacting with at that time, most often times a cis person. What hooks points out is the reinforcement of the Other's forms. A transwoman's recognizable forms include sex reassignment surgery, vocal speech therapy, hormone replacement therapy, and behavior similar in manner to cis women. This idea follows the traditional path transwomen have followed to transition from one gender/sex to another. Transitioning physically (not just socially) affirms the recognizable form of white female, and reinforces the acceptable path of transitioning. Most often in trans-related pornographic films, transwomen (regardless of their race) perform behaviors and roles associated with white cis women. What these women do not wish to produce is Otherness. In effect, identity is produced again and again as it is renegotiated through social interactions.

The transition in transgender, for me, is not the transition of gender but the everyday transition between relationships with others (political, racial, sexual, etc.) and the spaces where these meet (memory, physical, implied, actual). Transition is the relationship between these forces. It is the continual negotiations of hierarchy, sentience, and rationale of belonging to

humanity's understanding of being in the world. These paintings serve as a history of my being and becoming, which is constantly re-inscribed and renegotiated into my perception of who I am.

Painting Flesh

I looked at Arthur Rackham's paintings when I was younger, imagining the formation of marks which become the image. I would sneak peeks during class, trying to understand the creation of these paintings and my own emotional attachment to the history of the works. My interest in Rackham would lead to Alphonse Mucha, followed by Jenny Saville. Mucha, like Rackham, was illustrative in his use of paint. Both painters were from an era when illustration was prioritized over Expressionism in painting. Saville started painting during the 1990s in Britain. She was a major influence for me, in understanding how expressionism and imagery could be used together. The forms in her painting can be broken into singular marks describing a figure. The way she paints the figure is what attracted me to painting. There is a balance of craft and expressionist mark making in my work that come through Rackham's and Saville's influence. These influences can be understood as illustration and painting respectively. The history of paint is, is a continual uncovering of history and techniques with each painting that is encountered in a museum or gallery. This subjective history is the back bone to my studio practice; tracing and remapping the locations of thought and discipline.

My paintings are often described as sculptural. What this often means is the paintings have a realistic level of color, form, and light which allows someone to understand what individual objects are in relation to the whole composition. How much information is needed and what can be reduced or eliminated? The paintings I am often attracted to have an energy that comes from the way they are painted. There can be a meatiness in the paint, where it is thick and

piled up, or the paint could be thin enough to slide off the canvas. In the painting world, “meat” or “meatiness” is often used to describe the painted forms in paintings.

When I am painting, I am simplifying complex visual forms into a cohesive two-dimensional surface. In my painting, these complex forms become coded into understandable and complex visual forms through the medium. Texture in painting is utilized to describe the subject. The chunky paint describing the form of an arm can be read as an arm with severe scarring, while the smooth painted surface of a child’s head can be read as youthful.

In 2012, Frist Art Museum produced *Paint Made Flesh*, an exhibition that included works by Jenny Saville, Lucian Freud, William de Kooning, and more. Emily Braun is a distinguished Professor at Hunter College and contributor for the catalogue. In Braun’s essay, the descriptions of how flesh comes to be translates into how paintings can be felt through the personal. Braun describes mark making as a form of surgery, referring both to Jenny Saville’s depictions of bodies under the surgeon’s knife, and to Saville’s painterly style. In an interview with Suzie Mackenzie, Saville recounts her residency with the surgical team as seeing flesh moved with the tact of the surgeon’s hand (Mackenzie). For her, the physical movement of the scalpel was like the movement of the brush.

Braun describes the negotiation of images and medium that make up a painting which refuses to situate into a comfortable read of understood or recognizable forms. Often this

“aim is a shock of recognition, the disturbance of the cognitive flow. Painting the flesh is not a purely optical investigation into the mechanics of representation – how we see what we see... it neither abstracts fully from nature in the manner of *art concrete* nor plunges the viewer into the undifferentiated morass of material as does *Art informel*. Instead, it dissects the physiology of perception by foregrounding and intensifying the experience of form coming into being, seemingly out of the most random correlations” (Braun 30).

The flesh is never settled into a comfortable understanding in painting. It always describes the history of its making. History, here, is the actual history of painting. This history is always changing and evolving, requiring a nuanced knowledge of painted representations of flesh.

Lucian Freud, a well-known British painter from the 20th century, had a way of making paint feel and look like flesh. Through his observation from life and thick and thin impasto marks, he was able to convey not merely how flesh appears, but how it could feel. Braun writes, “Making the paint *as* flesh, not *like* it, as Freud would have it the canvas becomes a tactile, cutaneous surface, formed by layers of pigment subjected to peeling and surgical cuts and bearing all the organic traces of its making” (Braun 29).

As I paint, I am asking a simple question: when does paint become flesh? Asking this postulates two things. First that paint is a medium which is fully fluid and incapable of assuming autonomy. However, it does inform the painter who handles said paint. Secondly there is a transition from paint to flesh which has a metaphorical and visual path. There are assumed ideas of how bodies present and are understood. If a drawing of a wrist is contorted and bulging, the artist may have failed in depicting the way the hand connects into the forearm.

Physical features of paint or representation of a self serve a form of “presenting,” which is similar to how someone “presents” an identity or self. For me presenting as a woman requires culturally specific meanings. I think of these two ways of presenting similarly in terms of how a subject is painted. Certain physical features convey “woman,” which relates to how complex layering of paint on canvas can resemble flesh.

There are visual indicators of how the body fits into a colloquial understanding. Showing a body and the way it moves from one gender to another is not a simple path, especially in

painting. It is a path marked by unrecognizable signs always complicated through the history it reveals. It is my job as a painter to produce these signs to show the viewer something meaningful. The paintings become a way to encode flesh with meaning. For me, painting serves as a way to read and understand the sensation of how a body conveys identity and emotion. Still images require the eye to unpack the surface of the image over a period of time to understand the meaning of the work.

Closing

In my thesis, outside of theory and painting, is the personal. *Give Up the Ghost* is an attempt to put all my frustrations, fantasies, and fears into a series of paintings that can be recognized and felt. What I could not say about love and loss was expressed through painting. I made these paintings to tell myself that even while things are not perfect, there is poetry in the day-to-day struggle of being out and in the world. For me, *Give Up the Ghost* is a love letter to myself, for anyone to read and take as their own.

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