

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

ScholarWorks@UARK

Graduate Theses and Dissertations

5-2021

Turning Tides

Lauren Whitmore

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), and the [Printmaking Commons](#)

Citation

Whitmore, L. (2021). Turning Tides. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/3989>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu.

Turning Tides

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

by

Lauren Whitmore
Hendrix College
Bachelor of Arts in French, 2012

May 2021
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Sean P. Morrissey, M.F.A.
Thesis Director

Rebecca Ann Drolen, M.F.A.
Committee Member

Jeannie Hulen, M.F.A.
Committee Member

Janine A. Sytsma, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Abstract

Synthesizing personal narrative, sociological phenomenon, and art historical analysis, *Turning Tides* examines the relationship between power dynamics and sexual assault. Inequities and injustices with regard to the handling of sexual assault, and the norms that allow this issue to be pervasive, are woven throughout the cultural fabric of the United States. Feminists and feminist activist artists in the 1970s brought the matters women, and other marginalized groups, were facing to the forefront of political and social dialogue. The resulting work left an indelible mark on public perceptions and allowed for other activists and artists to build upon the foundations; creating their own work and spaces from which to further examine, and to a degree ameliorate in some capacity, topics of concern. Using selected methods and practices of printmaking, papermaking, sewing, embroidery, painting, and digital image manipulations served as points of investigation into the vast and interconnected facets concerning the societal landscape affected by sexual assault, harassment, and interpersonal imbalances of power that allow for these circumstances to perpetuate themselves.

©2021 by Lauren Whitmore
All Rights Reserved

Dedication

Turning Tides is dedicated to all survivors of abuse. May the reckoning continue until those in power can no longer exploit their authority in order to harm and silence others.

For Allie, without whom I would not have had the courage.

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Body Count.....	7
III.	Self Reflection.....	10
IV.	What Did You Do.....	17
V.	Untitled (Rugs with Eyes).....	21
VI.	Blinded.....	32
VII.	Re-Write.....	34
VIII.	Conclusion.....	35
IX.	Bibliography.....	39
X.	Figures.....	42

List of Figures

Figure 1	<i>Turning Tides</i> (Gallery View).....	42
Figure 2	<i>Body Count</i>	43
Figure 3	<i>Self Reflection</i> (What Have You Done).....	44
Figure 4	<i>Self Reflection</i> (What Haven't You Done).....	45
Figure 5	<i>What Did You Do</i>	46
Figure 6	<i>Untitled (Rugs with Eyes)</i>	47
Figure 7	<i>Untitled (Rugs with Eyes)</i> (Detail).....	48
Figure 8	<i>Blinded</i> (Detail 1).....	49
Figure 9	<i>Blinded</i> (Detail 2).....	50
Figure 10	<i>Blinded</i> (Detail 3).....	51
Figure 11	<i>Blinded</i> (Detail 4).....	52
Figure 12	<i>Blinded</i> (Detail 5).....	53
Figure 13	<i>Re-Write</i>	54
Figure 14	<i>Re-Write</i> (Detail).....	55

Introduction

To be seen can be dangerous. As a youth, the vague awareness of this began to take root in my subconscious as I noticed boys looking up my dress as I played on the monkey bars or when my father told me I needed to cross my legs when sitting down in public. Despite these strange occurrences I was quite the vivacious child who grew into a brightly clad, multi-patterned, costume jewelry wearing, teenager whose superlative award in the ninth grade was most unique style. Needless to say I stood out amongst the other winners who were bedecked in classic Goth attire, surly faces with eyes practically rolled. It was not until I began my freshman year of college that the weight of being seen could carry with it consequences of which I had been warned but had yet to experience firsthand.

My first college boyfriend caused this yet uncovered peril to become vastly apparent. Our relationship began in a whirlwind that quickly became a waking nightmare. He would hack into my social media accounts and read my private messages, he was constantly aware of who I was hanging out with, tried to make me relinquish some of my closest male friendships, started rumors about me in an attempt to keep my social circle small, and he repeatedly assaulted me. The circumstances I faced are widely recognized as tactics used by abusers to, “maintain control through a pattern of coercive behavior, instilling in their partners a terror of violent punishment,” and includes, “forced isolation from friends and family.”¹ When I inevitably tried cutting ties between us the emotional abuse began, until I fought back by being the worst girlfriend I could imagine; it worked marvelously. He broke up with me within weeks citing that I had changed

¹ Westlund, “Pre-Modern and Modern Power”, 1047.

fundamentally and was not good for him. I sighed with relief and cried myself hoarse, thanking whatever power allowed this scheme to work.

Until a few days later when he decided he wanted to give our relationship another go and I refused, which is when the stalking began. Little text messages detailing the outfits I was wearing with macabre endings saying that I would never be able to locate him even though he was always watching me caused a panic unbeknownst to me previously. Leaving what he called “surprises” duct taped on my front door in plastic zipped bags with pages long notes attached. Circumstances continued to become progressively worse and nearly twelve years later he still holds the belief that I truly want to be with him, cutting me off from a place I once loved, and forever altering my reality. Actions of such a nature, “can have a complex temporality...the impact can last a much longer time, including the injury and harm to physical and/or mental health, fear and consequent coercion and control.”² As a result of his actions and the lingering effects taking a toll on my mind and body, I no longer wanted to be seen. I allowed myself to gain nearly 60 pounds because in my adolescence I was taught that being overweight was equated with being undesirable, and my once marvelous attire was exchanged for muted and oversized clothing that was utilitarian.

My story, while unique to me in certain ways, could easily be that of innumerable other survivors. I know this because I have spoken with survivors from all walks of life, and because recent research indicates that is the reality in the United States. “A Pew Research Center survey found that 92 percent of people ages eighteen to twenty-nine have been harassed online, and that

² Balderston et al., “CONCEPTUALISING VIOLENCE AND GENDER”, 39-40.

young women are most likely to experience sexual harassment and stalking.”³ While young women have a disproportionate likelihood to experience these transgressions that does not mean that any and all communities and people could be affected. In doing research for *Turning Tides* I came across a plethora of definitions about sexual harassment but the prevailing social definitions of sexual harassment is described as, “the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power,” that, “most scholarly definitions of sexual harassment specify conduct that is unwelcome or unsolicited, is sexual in nature, and is deliberate or repeated.”⁴ Throughout and after personal experiences those close to me noticed the differences and asked me what was wrong, but I did not want to divulge most of the details for fear of being ostracized or thought of in a negative light. While I let the administration of the college I attended know the particulars, and after over a year and a half of judiciary proceedings and self-advocating, he was subsequently expelled from campus for sexual harassment.

Most around me were unaware of what had occurred until the 2016 presidential election cycle. My nightmares personified in a reality television host running for president, news cycles filled with recordings of his voice, bragging about violating the bodies of others with his physical touch and his gaze caused me perpetual strife. I nearly dropped out of graduate school from the enormous mental and physical toll it was taking on my body and mind. Until one day I saw my social media newsfeed flooded with stories eerily similar to my own. It was then that I resolved to tell my truth if not for myself, for the benefit of others, so they might not feel so alone. I had an exigency to help bring awareness to the clearly systemic societal issues surrounding survivors and their assaulters. This years-long suffering and subsequent realization that I was clearly not

³ Crossley, “Where Have All the Feminists Gone?”, 10.

⁴ Blackstone and Uggen, “Sexual Harassment as a Gendered Expression of Power”, 66.

alone, in reconciling what happened to me with who I believed myself to be, was the impetus for the work I created for the exhibition *Turning Tides*.

One cannot always know by simply looking at a human that they are dangerous or are hiding their dark impulses underneath a seemingly earnest smile, a high-powered job, philanthropy, humor, or any number of other qualities and circumstances. It is something lurking beneath the surface that impacts all areas of life and all manners of people. This has been allowed to happen for such a lengthy period of time without many repercussions for the perpetrators due to the pervasiveness of the issue and the inequitable power discourse surrounding assault.⁵ It is a secret hiding in plain sight, a topic that affects innumerable people and yet is hardly discussed openly. In particular, it is not often discussed with the intent to dismantle the foundations upon which it rests because it has been largely labeled as impolite or taboo. Even the language associated with the topic, “focuses on the [survivor] in a violent relationship rather than the [perpetrator]...it creates a tendency to see the [survivor] as the problem,” which makes it, “difficult to motivate critical discussion...”⁶ It is something that happens to other people, not the ones we know and love because how could such a terrible thing come to pass? Though it may be impossible to discern with absolute certainty that anyone is capable of committing such atrocities, it only takes one glance from a dangerous person to create the circumstances for terrible happenings.

The individual and collective works created for the exhibition explore not only my personal narrative, but the incidents in the lives of others intrinsically tied to the issue of assault and its after effects. There is no individual or place to which one can point sole blame for how these

⁵ Cahill, “Foucault, rape, and the Construction”, 58.

⁶ Westlund, “Pre-Modern and Modern Power”, 1051.

circumstances arise, are ignored, mishandled, are allowed to perpetuate, or remain largely unresolved in our society. Sexual assault and power dynamics are so pervasive within our culture in America that it is a prevalent cinematic motif, “fraught with issues of power and its abuse.”⁷ Therefore I found it important to investigate specific topics within the whole in order to illustrate the wide scope of this subject. It is multifaceted and as such required an approach that reflected the breadth as well as specifics instances and machinations; the pieces served both purposes in order to highlight how interwoven the individuals are to the whole.

Personal and societal narratives have not only informed my work for the exhibition; feminism, feminist activist art, as well as individual artists, throughout the decades have affected the way in which I approached making. In looking for a concrete definition of feminism I found as many interpretations as I did sources, but the one that seemed to encompass the foundations of most of the definitions stated that, “Feminism, broadly speaking, is a movement to end gender and interrelated inequalities such as those that are race, class, and sexuality based.”⁸ Researching feminist activist art, beginning with the inception of mainstream feminist activist art in the 1970s, defined feminist artists as those who, “...have pursued activism around a wide range of issues pertaining to race, gender, and sexuality and their intersections with social, political, and cultural forms of oppression.”⁹ They believe in the power of art to create a catalyst for social reforms, to raise consciousness about topics whose perspectives should be shifted to benefit those who might be suffering. This is art that not only seeks to reform but also serves as an historical reminder of the issues faced by those responding to them.

⁷ Strong, “The Rape of Lucretia”, 133.

⁸ Crossley, “Where Have All the Feminists Gone?”, 6.

⁹ Agerstoun and Auther, “Considering Feminist Activist Art”, vii.

It was seeing Suzanne Lacy's project *Three Weeks in May* [1977] that codified my captivation with work that was reframing judicial and cultural views pertaining to complex subjects such as sexual assault and power dynamics.¹⁰ As a result, I began researching and learning about other feminist activist artists and their work. I found that, "The theme of bodies...was central to the advances of the 1970s feminist movement," which is an important component to the work I made for the exhibition.¹¹ This is not only due to the fact that my work concerns the body, but also because of the foundations laid by feminist activist artists in the 1970s that allowed the space for my work to exist. Through research about the characteristics of feminist art as being "...designed to provoke and undermine the prevailing power structure," and I believe that addressing the subject of sexual assault and power dynamics fit within that framework.¹² This made a lasting impression upon me and assuaged my fears about addressing topics with such breadth in my own artistic practice. When speaking about the first surge of feminist activist art Lacy states that artists working within this sphere, "saw feminism as an aspect of a larger set of social justice and equity concerns...so is activism" and during this newest phase of art activism, feminist activist artists were creating work, "to contribute to a larger voice and to foster a broader sense of social equity and inclusion," which are fundamental motivations behind *Turning Tides*.¹³

¹⁰ Aagerstoun and Auther, "Considering Feminist Activist Art", ix.

¹¹ Crossley, "The Bonds of Feminism," 114.

¹² Brand, "Feminist Art Epistemologies", 170.

¹³ Bowers, Lacy, and Buszek, "'Necessary Positions' in Feminist Art", 149; Flanagan and Looui, "Rethinking the F Word", 182.

Body Count

These plush objects were placed at the front of the gallery, spilling out of a corner and into the shared floor space occupied by the rugs bearing the eyes of others who had wielded their power in order to gain control over another's body. While my experience is personal, it is not an uncommon occurrence and therefore is intrinsically tied to the actions of the other abusers in the room. They were placed at the entry to the gallery space because my personal narrative served as an entry in to the exploration of the topic. Additionally, opening the show with these storied, plush, creatures was actively inviting the viewers an opportunity to make a more personal connection with the work, and me, in order to draw viewers into the gallery and the subjects represented therein.

The surface design upon the stuffed forms is that of my assaulter and stalker. His eyes are nondescript, yet specific, referencing my traumatic experience while also allowing them to serve as a stand-in for other survivors' assailants. The eyes are forever imprinted on my brain as those of an attacker, the person who took away some of my innocence and replaced it with a sense of heightened awareness about what might lurk beneath the exterior of a seemingly unremarkable face and glance. It is also representative of a pattern of assault that our society has allowed to perpetuate through the neglect of survivors and willful ignorance of abusers' existence throughout the fabric of our culture. Currently in the United States there are an estimated hundreds of thousands of untested rape kits, which means there are at least that many people

awaiting justice because we as a nation have not considered this issue to be of enough significance.¹⁴

Just as the pattern on the plush animals provides a duality, so do the forms. The multiple serves the purpose of visually representing the growing number of people who are facing the issue of assault and its after effects. My attacker kept one of my stuffed animals, which I held dear in my youth, as a way of exerting power and control over me even as I was desperately trying to deconstruct said power. He physically, and metaphorically, held onto a part of my childhood innocence for himself in order to keep himself tethered to me and illustrate that I could not regain complete control of the situation. While I no longer have to endure the constant burden of his presence in my life, he has imprinted himself upon me in a way that forces me to continually regulate my mental and bodily actions so that I can function in the quotidian.

The plush forms of cats and bears represent a particular narrative from my life but they also lend themselves as representations of other people's loss of control over particular situation, those who are forced to withstand similar hardships that irrevocably altered their lives. They are physical manifestations of innocence that have been marked by the actions of others. Some of them are patterned with a more vivid shade of pink while on others the pattern is hardly visible because the color is closer to that of the fabric used; this was done particularly to highlight the ways survivors deal with their experiences. Some individuals wear their stories brightly upon themselves, allowing other people to see what has happened to them or because the wounds are so fresh that it is apparent things are awry. Others have dealt with the burdens thrust upon them,

¹⁴ "What Is the Rape Kit Backlog?", END THE BACKLOG, n.d., <https://www.endthebacklog.org/backlog/what-rape-kit-backlog>.

or suppressed them, leaving only faint markings upon the surface detectable only upon closer inspection.

The plush form was chosen because at first glance it has aesthetic and haptic features that draw the viewer toward it. This was done using pink colors ranging from fluorescent to pale, soft fabrics, and the ineffable quality with which stuffed animals are imbued. But upon realizing what the figures represent, viewers have a visceral reaction that causes them to be repelled by the stuffed form. Similar reactions occur when someone reveals to another person that they have experienced assault; many people do not know how to respond when they encounter such openness about a disturbing occurrence. Oftentimes there is an oscillation between the desire to comfort a friend or loved one but also to extricate oneself from a distressing situation. Our society has not developed adequate methods to discuss significant social topics without cultivating divisive conversations. Civil discourse is frequently discarded when the crucial element of human uneasiness is present.

This piece allows for viewers to examine how they react to uncomfortable narratives; one may believe themselves to be allies and receptive to what survivors have to say while their actions do the opposite. Discomfort can be a critical means by which to enter into a dialogue with oneself, and others, about why we react a certain way, and potentially how we might modify our behaviors in order to be better allies. Particular subjects and situations cause more uneasiness than others and it is our responsibility to examine the source.

Self Reflection

This dark red area rug was placed in the center of the gallery in order to draw the attention of viewers, and urges them to focus on the two questions posed by the rug, “What have you done?” and, “What haven’t you done?” The two questions are both inviting and compelling to the viewer and ask how they fit into the cultural narrative concerning sexual assault. Whether knowingly or not, each person has a role to play in the cultural shift surrounding this issue. They may not have committed a crime per se, but might have made comments that caused survivors to feel ashamed or uncomfortable about sharing their experiences, or they might have ignored a plea for assistance. For those whose actions have harmed another person the question “What have you done?” implores them to reflect on how their behavior has negatively affected others while the question “What haven’t you done?” implores them to reflect on how they might make amends for their wrongdoing. In order for significant changes to occur for the benefit of those who might be more vulnerable, and become codified, it is crucial that we examine how our actions impact those around us.

So often I hear or read about people discussing this divisive issue as though it is separate from them, that it concerns other people but that they have no part in it. Divorcing oneself from the issue, allowing for existing legislation and the humanity of others to dictate how the issue of assault is being handled, “reinforces the notion that sexual violence is just a problem involving a few bad actors.”¹⁵ Some people believe simply being aware of this issue is enough, while others become so uncomfortable that they become defensive and either negate the experiences of others, or believe they are being attacked. Even with the Me Too movement that had people

¹⁵ de Jonge Oudraat and Kuehnst, “Peace and Security”, 368.

sharing their personal stories in a brave and public way, to substantiate how widespread sexual assault and harassment are within the United States, willful ignorance still abounds.

In the text based works of artists Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, phrasing and questions query the viewer about societal issues and how we respond to or ignore them. Holzer and Kruger create type-based works that exist in both public and gallery spaces using a diverse range of media, and both use their pieces to provide cultural critiques. While Kruger also employs images with type overlaid; Holzer overlays type onto buildings, plastered to walls, and slowly glowing across signs. Each artist utilizes minimal color in their work, further drawing the viewer's gaze into their pieces. Red is the color of choice for Kruger, a particularly salient example being *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* (1989), adding a highlight in her black and white pieces; and in Jenny Holzer's piece, *Don't Talk Down to Me*, from her series *Inflammatory Essays* (1979-81) the pink is captivating. In choosing the colors for the pieces I created in *Turning Tides*, I was particularly drawn to these works not only because of their concepts, but because their sparing use of color is able to draw added focus to their work. The colors pink, red, black, and white were chosen to be featured most prominently originate from conceptual framework of the exhibition as well as stemming from my research into female artists creating work pertaining to the subject I chose for my thesis.

In Jenny Holzer's *Inflammatory Essays* (1979-81) the short form writing broaches subjects such as abuse, socially constructed control, power, and sex. The most dynamic aspect of Holzer's work is her ability to beckon the viewer to ask important questions without having to state them outright; her word choice is both succinct while also leaving room for interpretation. Particularly

during the period *Inflammatory Essays* (1979-81) was developed and produced, feminist art was coming to exist more in public spheres, pushing issues facing women and marginalized groups to the forefront. This method of publicly providing social commentary paved the way for other artists to employ words in making work, in some instances imagery as well, and a public space to emphasize the issues. Artists such as the Guerrilla Girls, who formed in 1985, were vocal and began creating informational posters highlighting the sexism within the art world but whose artistic intentions included fighting sexism and racism on the whole. Barbara Kruger, another feminist activist artist working around the same time, created her text works to provide cultural critiques through a feminist lens. In researching for my thesis I studied these artists' work, how they utilized language to both engage the public with societal iniquities, and how they were able to leave their audience with questions. The way in which I presented my questions, one on each side of an area rug, references methods implemented by feminist activist artists in the 1980s and all those who came after. The questions I posit are presented in a stark and straightforward manner; not only do they concern issues explored in my thesis, they call attention to the fact that despite effort and intervention, some of the societal problems spotlighted by feminist activist artists still rampage our culture.

The status quo with regard to the issue of power, abuse, and how society shapes the perception of both, has permeated too deeply within our society to a point where, "...initiatives to prevent or mitigate violent acts have continued to fall short, because they have failed to examine...how such violence often attempts to perpetuate existing power dynamics within societies."¹⁶ Those who have benefitted from this prevailing convention are surely ignoring the issue precisely

¹⁶ de Jonge Oudraat and Kuehnast, "Peace and Security", 363.

because they fear what would happen once the proverbial veil has been lifted, and they are left to reckon with the consequences of their actions. It would mean a restructuring that would result in a loss of control and power for abusers and their accomplices.

Three Weeks in May (1977), an activist art project undertaken by artist Suzanne Lacy, was a multi-disciplinary approach to creating work, "...a collaborative public performance that took place in various public sites in Los Angeles involving artists, the Los Angeles police department, the local media, elected officials, self-defense instructors, rape-hotline activists, and the general public."¹⁷ The anti-rape movement within the United States was nascent in the 1970s, established by feminists seeking to change the preconceived notions about sexual assault, public policies, and the power dynamics that existed, and continue to exist, between men and women. In many cases:

"...anti-rape activists succeeded in reframing judicial and cultural views of rape from that of the act on an isolated pervert with an uncontrollable sexual urge to a crime of power and control that is part of a larger pattern of patriarchal violence against women."¹⁸

This project is one of the earliest pieces of activist art that was conceptualized in such a way, and it is still remarkable years later because it didn't examine sexual violence from a singular angle. This was a massive undertaking that proved activist art could help initiate change to the social fabric of the United States, and I think it is because of the multi-faceted approach that garnered success in facilitating change. Forward progress and the continual development of objectives are important if real change is to materialize, and it isn't an overnight solution. *Three Weeks in May* was a feat of organization and dissemination of information, narratives, and work not only by

¹⁷ Aagerstoun and Auther, "Considering Feminist Activist Art", ix.

¹⁸ Aagerstoun and Auther, "Considering Feminist Activist Art", ix.

artists but all of those involved. It is an exceptional intersection of art, activism, and feminism. In a letter to the editor of a modern art anthology Lacy queries:

“How can we work as artists on a broader scale, to create change that will penetrate and affect the institutions, public spaces, and political processes that make up our public culture?”¹⁹

Should we seek to manifest more significant change in the way sexual assault and power dynamics function in society, engaging with the issue on as many levels as possible to fully understand and ameliorate the cause is of great import.

The deeper color of red selected for this work is reminiscent of drying blood because the wounds of those who have experienced these horrific incidents cannot be fully healed, they are lingering on in multiple places. Trauma not only affects the mind, but our physical forms. The touch of another person might be enough to signal the body that danger is present even if that is not the case; time does not heal all but only dampens its lasting effects until a seemingly insignificant encounter arises, potentially sending the body and mind reeling. Rugs are present in many aspects of life going unnoticed for the most part until the mind suddenly takes note, further mirroring the ways in which one might re-experience trauma and unhealed wounds from a seemingly insignificant moment. It is natural to take for granted the existence of rugs in the quotidian much like one might be accidentally glib about the subject of assault and the experience of others.

There exists both a tenuous and substantial connection between the unseen wounds that traumatic experiences leave in their wake, and the existence of rugs in the periphery of one's

¹⁹ Dallow, “Bridging Feminist Art, Activism, and Theory”, 166.

consciousness. The colloquialism, “Don’t be a doormat,” which is to say, “Do not allow others to walk all over you,” is often said to encourage people to be more wary of their surroundings and with whom they come in contact. This advice has been widely shared and yet it does not take into account the outlying factors in what happens to a person. One can be constantly vigilant, do all of the right things so that they might live as safely as is possible, and yet also become wounded by another human. In Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964), the artist sat on stage and invited the audience to cut her clothing and take the piece with them. As pieces were removed, the Ono “...presented a situation in which the viewer was implicated in the potentially aggressive act of unveiling the female body.”²⁰ This work also “...demonstrates how viewing without responsibility has the potential to harm or even destroy the object of perception.”²¹ Being perceived, or seen, by another human has the potential for danger. *Cut Piece* achieves this in its ingenuity and its simplicity; it is both quietly intimating the message and engaging the audience in a bold way. Oftentimes we do not realize on what we are walking, like a rug in a doorway, just as we might not realize there is danger lurking in what appears to be a safe place. It is so easy to trip on a rug if one is not paying attention, it is so easy to accidentally touch an unhealed wound, it is so easy to take for granted that the spaces in which we exist are perceived to be safe.

In conceiving this exhibition I made the conscious decision to include text prominently only on this piece so as not to draw focus away from the two questions. It exists in the center of the gallery because these are questions we must all ask ourselves if cultural and systemic change is to happen. It is central to the message of the show that although someone might think the issue of

²⁰ “Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece Explained”, PHAIDON,
<https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/may/18/yoko-ono-s-cut-piece-explained/>.

²¹ “Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece Explained”, PHAIDON,
<https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/may/18/yoko-ono-s-cut-piece-explained/>.

assault is completely divorced from their world, that it is in fact not, because people are so interconnected. We may come in contact with something every day and not take serious note of it despite its looming presence because we don't know that it exists. That is why the scale of the rug was also taken into consideration; other rugs surround this central piece, but this one in particular is the largest because the questions imprinted upon them are geared toward asking about the duality of the individual and societal questions they ask. The individual rugs encircling the largest one are symptoms of much wider spread issues connected to the queries posited by the stark white lettering on the deep red of the area rug. It covers more physically and metaphorically in the space of the gallery and the space required to deeply investigate the topic of assault. The questions beg even more questions not made explicit through words depicted in the space.

When do we as a society move on from solely condemning the actions of those who abuse their power in order to gain control over others, and begin the serious process of reworking the system so that it becomes clearly and definitively not acceptable, something that we refuse to conceal or willfully ignore? When are we going to overhaul the legal system in order to make it more accessible to survivors, and so that there isn't such an extreme personal, and sometimes fiscal, cost for survivors who do come forward? Even though time has changed some attitudes on this topic, it still remains contested in many areas of life.

Survivors have everything to lose by coming forward, naming their abusers, and explaining what happened to them. They are frequently faced with public backlash that causes further loss of safety, they are offering themselves up to be morally impugned by strangers for every action

they've taken and every choice they've made, ostracized by people and communities that once held them in high regard or didn't know they existed in the first place. When do we have a responsibility to not only listen to survivors more seriously, but to also ask ourselves the difficult questions about how our actions, or inaction, deeply impact the lives of others? As our society changes and more people come forward it becomes more apparent that these questions should be asked sooner rather than later.

What Did You Do

The risograph prints of R. Kelly's face were displayed on a plain white shelf in close proximity to the gallery floor in order to illustrate that his actions do not merit his image being placed on a wall or a pedestal. His musicality does not erase the fact that he has taken young women and hidden them from their families so that he might keep them under his constant supervision and control, that he has had sex with women under the age of consent, and abuses his power as a popular musician in order to coerce them into having a relationship with him.²² He has been arrested and charged before, these stories reported in the news, and yet for years he continued to escape any real justice because of his influence and choice of victims.

This is not merely because of the gender of the people he has abused but because of their race; culturally we are more apt to take notice and be outraged when white, cisgender womxn are harmed because they are seen as beings that are in need of rescue while women of color are not

²² Cole Delbyck, "R. Kelly Allegedly Keeping Young Women In Sex 'Cult,' Parents Claim.", TheHuffington Post, TheHuffingtonPost.com, July 19, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/r-kelly-sex-cult-allegations_us_596cb1dbe4b03389bb18ca4c.

accorded this same level of concern.²³ This is exacerbated by, “The erasure of women of color in mainstream narratives about feminism,” and how it:

specifically impacts public viewpoints and the central narratives of feminism: feminism is a White women’s movement. The ramifications of this have been widely documented, and this ‘white washing,’ as Benita Roth calls it, portrays an inaccurate image of a complex movement with diverse participants. The white-washing of contemporary feminism encourages an incorrect image of the reality of the U.S. feminism movement.”²⁴

Intersectionality within feminist movements is imperative; and although some progress has been made there is much work to be done. If equality is a main tenant of feminism then creating space and awareness so that intersectionality, “a term introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 to address multiple and overlapping constructions of gender, race, class, and sexuality,” exists more fully within the definition of feminism should be prioritized.²⁵ Doing so will only strengthen the communities of those working for societal change and justice because it allows for a more fully developed concept of the, “complex nature of identity,” particularly with regard to, “the notion that there is a unified ‘woman.’”²⁶ Feminism’s emphasis on engaging a diversity of participants and practices should incorporate more fully women whose issues, in this instance with particular regard to assault and the after effects, is crucial if more progress is to be made.

The multiple is employed in this piece as a means of a visual portrayal of the enduring nature of his abuse. Additionally, I used the multiple so that viewers were able to take one of these pieces with them if they so chose. The colors (fluorescent pink and red) are inviting but the imagery portrays a darker narrative. The ink used in the risograph process never completely dries,

²³ Cahill, “Foucault, rape, and the Construction”, 51.

²⁴ Crossley, “Where Have All the Feminists Gone?”, 12.

²⁵ Fields, “Frontiers in Feminist Art”, 8.

²⁶ Crossley, “The Bonds of Feminism,” 109.

depending on the concentration of it on the paper, so when viewers take the piece with them it also rubs off onto their skin. They are physically bringing this person with them in the form of the risograph print, and they are also carrying part of this image away with them on their own bodies that symbolize the subtle way in which issues of this magnitude affect everyone whether or not they are cognizant of it.

I made this series of prints depicting R. Kelly specifically because of his continual misconduct and the blatant refusal by our justice system to investigate further and take notice, until fairly recently, due to the diligence and bravery of those he harmed. In coming forward these survivors put themselves and their personal ordeals in the court of public opinion knowing that despite their efforts R. Kelly's misconduct could again be dismissed. Our court system plays a significant role in the longevity of the ongoing abuse, which is why I used an image of R. Kelly in court for this risograph.

The language and laws inherent in the courts is inherently biased against survivors so that it makes it that much more difficult to find legal recourse in the wake of the atrocities perpetrated against others.

“More specifically, analysts and policy makers need to begin to recognize that gender roles are a reflection of power dynamics within societies and are continuously redefined and renegotiated. A Rebalancing of gender roles will require express policy actions to favor women.”²⁷

Cultural perceptions about survivors exacerbate the difficulties in the legal system because those involved in the process, judges and juries in particular, often posit that the survivor stayed because there is something inherently wrong with them instead of focusing on why the

²⁷ de Jonge Oudraat and Kuehnast, “Peace and Security”, 363.

perpetrator acted with violence.²⁸ “Clearly, the legal world is a source of considerable political and social power, as well as a reflection and extension of the dominant discourses,” but the legal sphere isn’t monolithic as a source of power working for and against survivors, “...it is but one node in a complex matrix of relationships and institutions. It not only expresses dominant discourses, but is subject to them.”²⁹ The legal system is both a space where societal beliefs are upheld, in innumerable cases, while conjunctively existing to provide survivors with agency in regard to justice. This duality creates difficulty in finding parity between deconstructing cultural norms and the struggle to achieve more equity within the justice system. While R Kelly was initially indicted in 2002, he was acquitted of all charges in 2008.

Upon the release of a Lifetime documentary series entitled “Surviving R Kelly,” in January 2019 public pressure began to mount significantly in terms of finally bringing charges against him. The willingness of survivors to verbalize their experiences is resulting in more current social movements to believe those who have suffered in such a manner. These women had nothing to gain from coming forward and everything to lose because of R. Kelly’s status in the music world. As public sentiments have slowly shifted over time to give a more equal voice to survivors as those who have harmed them, and despite the dwindling public attitudes that sow dubiousness about survivors, he now faces 22 federal counts and is currently incarcerated while awaiting trial. He continues to make and release music from prison at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Chicago; whether this speaks to his opinions about the fervent denials of

²⁸ Westlund, “Pre-Modern and Modern Power”, 1053; Hollander and Rodgers, “Constructing Victims”, 345.

²⁹ Cahill, “Foucault, rape, and the Construction”, 57.

his accusers or to his refusal to accept that as time passes the less likely it is that he will again be acquitted is unclear.

The ongoing nature of this project is important because once the images of R. Kelly have been depleted another abuser will replace him. There are endless amounts of people to select from whose actions help illustrate the serial and extensive nature of abuse. Our patriarchal culture allows for the protection of abusers, which means a not insignificant number of them are hiding in plain sight. We are more concerned with whether or not survivors are actually telling the truth about abusers than we are with figuring out how deeply rooted this issue is, and who the abusers are in our society. That further illustrates the power these people wield; they are able to misdirect focus, conceal their wrongdoings, and sow doubt into the public so that they might escape the consequences of their actions. In addition, the public is unwilling to accept that this problem is so far reaching because it could mean that someone they care about has potentially irrevocably harmed another human being, causing them to have to reconcile the deeds with the person they see as being inherently good and incapable of such atrocities. While attitudes are slowly changing in favor of believing survivors in certain cases, there are still deeply rooted societal beliefs about this issue that need to be resolved so that we might further grow and find a way to prevent these abuses from happening.

Untitled (Rugs with Eyes)

Each rug in this series represents someone who has used their power in order to sexually exploit others, including: Donald Trump, Bill Clinton, Bill Cosby, Woody Allen, Al Franken, Chuck Close, Kevin Spacey, Clarence Thomas, Larry Nassar, Jerry Sandusky, Harvey Weinstein, and

Louis CK. I chose people who are well known for the rugs so that they would be easily recognizable and because they are all representations of how it is not one specific type of person who takes advantage of other people. I specifically chose all men not only because my abuser was male but also because the overwhelming majority of people who perpetrate this type of abuse are male. In order for real and substantive change to occur this demographic must examine their role in the dynamics that allow for such abuses to go mostly unchecked. Despite knowing what these people have done, many of those chosen to be represented on the rugs still have careers and have dealt with very few negative consequences.

Before he was arrested, put on trial, and sentenced to three to ten years in state prison, Bill Cosby was seen as a wholesome father figure and comedian from *The Cosby Show* as well as from other endeavors within the entertainment industry; all the while he was taking advantage of young women who respected and trusted him. I remember this case in particular because I grew up watching *The Cosby Show* and had fond memories of late nights cozied up by myself laughing, and experienced a difficult time reconciling who I thought this Hollywood star was versus who he was in reality. It was the first time I can recall that I was completely taken aback by the news of a celebrity being exposed of doing something diametrically opposed to the notions I had of them. It shook me not only because someone would take advantage of another person in such a manner but also because Cosby was considered a wholesome father figure and depicted himself that way on television. This was the first case that sowed real doubts in me about how society represented survivors of abuse in the media.

But Bill Cosby was not the first person with celebrity status that had been accused of harming another human in a moment of vulnerability. As a youth who enjoyed movies I was often encouraged to watch films made by Woody Allen but never really had an interest in his work. I've only seen two, and will undoubtedly not view another because of the accusations brought against him by his adopted daughter and his ex-wife. Despite these assertions made repeatedly, and over many decades, Woody Allen's career continues to thrive. In fact, many people who appear in his movies and work with him continue to defend him publicly and say that they couldn't imagine that he would do anything to hurt someone else. I think that he continues to have a slew of famous actors agree to be in his films because he portrays himself to be non-threatening, and has made a career being self-deprecating, which does not go along with the cultural image of who an abuser is; a clever use of his leverage as a celebrity and odd personality. In the newly released HBO documentary series entitled *Allen V. Farrow* the case against Allen is re-examined with documents, interviews, unseen footage, and other methods (Allen declined to be a part of the project but released a statement again proclaiming his innocence). Even with this new information divulged in the documentary I have read articles written continuing to protest the portrayal of Allen and state that there is not enough evidence to substantiate the claims made by Dylan and Mia Farrow. Even in the post Me Too and Time's Up movement America, there still exists within our society doubt about the credibility of survivors.

Woody Allen stood out to me because his use of personality as a way of deflecting accusations was eerily similar to the experiences I was made to go through during the judiciary process while dealing with the constant presence of my abuser. In the first hearing where we were made to appear in the same room together to present our cases, I was stony faced, armed with evidence,

and tissues for the sinus infection I was experiencing because I did not want my stalker to know how much his actions were affecting me. Upon entering the room the other student, in an attempt to glean mercy and clear his name, was practically bursting with tears and sentiments that he could not have possibly done or continue to be doing what I had accounted. His speech swayed at least one member of the committee so much so that she took my tissues and slid them over to my abuser without my consent and offered him comfort that was not given to me. His self-deprecating personality and marvelous tearful performance were enough to convince a committee to give him chance after chance for over a year and a half. His appearance and personality did not reflect the cultural depictions of a predator, and I did not reflect the cultural depictions of someone continually having to relive traumatic experiences (as more piled up due to his continued presence in a small college campus setting). The passage of time, my continued efforts, and one very vocal judiciary member are what inevitably drove to his expulsion from the college, but only for the time that I remained there. Despite everything that had occurred and all of the evidence against him, they were still willing to let him come back and finish his degree once I had graduated.

Another person I selected for the rugs was Larry Nassar, who was entrusted with the physical well being of countless athletes. The image of many of them standing onstage together at the ESPY's will be forever imprinted upon my brain as an enormous act of bravery but also as a visual reminder of what lengths people are willing to go to in order to ignore what is happening in front of them. He was reported more than once for lewd behavior for decades and yet he was still allowed to continue on with his medical practice until 2015. The inaction in the wake of the accusations brought against him spoke volumes and reflected the cultural norms surrounding this

issue. It wasn't until after a cultural movement sparked the people who had previously protected him to finally seriously consider the possibility that all of the humans who had come forth to speak out against him might be telling the truth. His case was of such great magnitude that thankfully he was trapped and pleaded guilty to 10 charges against him. What truly struck me toward the end of the process the judge appointed to the case, Rosemarie Aquilina, allowed Nassar's accusers the opportunity to present impact statements even though Nassar objected to this. It was remarkable to know that 156 women were given the chance to face their abuser, something that almost surely would not have been allowed to happen until society took more notice of survivors in the wake of the Me Too movement.

In 1992 artist Cindy Sherman created a series of *Sex Pictures* that were recreations of women's bodies using mannequin parts and artificial body parts, and posing them in pornographic styles. These composed, sexualized bodies confront and compel the viewer to question their awareness of playing a role in this image simply by being a viewer. The figures depicted in the *Sex Pictures* are constructed in these odd configurations to render visually the more alarming aspects of humanity. Additionally in this series of images:

“Sherman subverts the visual shorthand we use to classify the world around us, drawing attention to the artificiality and ambiguity of these stereotypes and undermining their reliability for understanding a much more complicated reality.”³⁰

In thinking about this aspect of Sherman's work, it brought the case of Larry Nassar to mind. Larry Nassar was stereotyped as being a reliable and trustworthy doctor; now we know the extent to which he does not fit in that characteristic stereotype of a “good doctor” that is drawn from the recesses of the mind. Could he have provided proper and

³⁰ “Cindy Sherman:MoMA”, The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/artists/5392>.

ethical medical care to other patients? Yes. Did he also betray the trust of young women and their families by playing upon the image of being a doctor taking excellent care of patients? Yes. There exists a deep artificiality behind this portrait of Larry Nassar because the reality is indeed much more complicated than it seems at a glance. As viewers of the news who engaged with reports about Nassar, his abuse, and the survivors, what role do we now play in how the reality is shaped? What role do we play knowing what happened and the circumstances that allowed for it to happen?

Jerry Sandusky is another insidious example of someone who utilized his public profile in order to prey upon children. He ran football camps under the guise of tutelage and support for children interested in the sport and instead caused devastation not only to the children he harmed but to an entire community that is still trying to deal with his tainted legacy. His actions were an open secret, yet he was not removed from his job until a survivor spoke up, and the subsequent evidence against Sandusky was so apparent that his actions could no longer be ignored. State College (“Happy Valley”) was in shock because his actions were not in keeping with the public’s perception of him as an excellent coach and generous mentor. Again, a seemingly trustworthy person continued his abuse for years because he didn’t look the part and he capitalized on that. In this case other people were prosecuted for failing to report Sandusky’s actions and I think that is of great import because once Sandusky was known to engage in predatory behavior he could have been stopped. Those who failed their duties of mandatory reporting are culpable and could have spared others torment and suffering. What they didn’t do was inexcusable.

Harvey Weinstein wielded his power to either coerce women into giving him what he wanted, or if they refused, to destroy their reputations and careers. One of the worst parts about this circumstance is that his actions were considered an open secret in Hollywood for such a long period of time without consequence, people knew and instead of helping these actresses protected their own careers by doing nothing. What Harvey Weinstein did and what those around him didn't do, who knew he was abusing his power to gain leverage over women, provide an unnerving example of why the questions it encircles should be considered more fully. Harvey Weinstein is now a convicted sex offender and is imprisoned; he may have gotten away with his deplorable actions for quite some time the tides are slowly turning as our society continues to grow and change.

Bill Clinton abused his power as president of the United States in order to have sex with one of his interns. This rug was the piece that garnered the most protest because a lot of people at my show argued that he was attractive, charming, and both parties were consenting adults. All the while ignoring the fact that he held the highest office within the government – how does one turn down their boss who is also one of the leaders of the free world? Unfortunately, his is a case where people are willing to overlook the more nuanced situation with clarity because he is still considered to be one of the best presidents we've had in modern history. To impugn his actions might cause those who still support him to have to reconcile that he can be both a decent president and someone whose actions reflect that he was also willing to use his influence to get what he wanted. Within that relationship there is no doubt that he held the power. He is still lauded by scores of people and I imagine that people will continue to argue that he should not be included amongst the others, but I think that it is because he is still held in high regard despite his

actions that his inclusion is important. Both major political parties within the United States are quick to impugn the actions of wrongdoers on the other side while having more difficulty fairly evaluating the wrongdoings of politicians who align with their personal political views.

Clarence Thomas, despite his actions and the brave testimony of Anita Hill, sits on the Supreme Court for the rest of his life or until he chooses to step down. Anita Hill's character was attacked and our now President, Joe Biden, had a big role to play in the handling of the hearing and the treatment of Hill. Even recently, another abuser was appointed to the Supreme Court although it had not happened until after my thesis exhibition. He surely would have been included amongst the others and particularly because of the political climate – while there is a heightened awareness for this issue and laws are changing to reflect the times his appointment to the Supreme Court is an enormous blow to survivors and decent humans everywhere. History seems to have repeated itself because those who support Kavanaugh's appointment also persecuted his accuser publicly, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, even though she was the one who presented herself in a calm manner and had evidence to support her. Progress is slowly being made and yet two people who hold one of the most influential political positions in this country have been publicly accused of sexual misconduct and still received their jobs. It is evident that much work still needs to be done with regard to how our society handles and perceives such cases.

Feminist activist art group, the Guerrilla Girls, began creating work in the 1980s that took aim at the patriarchal systems that still existed, and continue to exist, within the art world. Over time the group used their work for the purposes of, “exposing domains where gender, racial, and sexual injustice still lurk,” outside of the art world and into the more mainstream cultural and political

spheres.³¹ The Guerrilla Girls created posters after the hearing of Clarence Thomas using an image of him in the courtroom along with accompanying text that quotes Thomas while providing a critique of his actions. “Clarence Thomas claims that a person’s sex life is none of the government’s business,” which is a bolded section from the poster, is a particularly clever construction of words. Not only did it speak to gay rights issues of the day, but provided a criticism of Thomas and the hypocritical way in which the sex life of Anita Hill was discussed as opposed to his own.

The rug I made of Thomas for my exhibition features a photo of his eyes from that courtroom setting as well because it is such a salient moment in history and he is an excellent example of someone who was able to salvage their career despite accusations brought against him. While my work involving Thomas does not include text directly, the piece it helps encapsulate poses important questions about social justice as it pertains to assault. Words have to be chosen carefully in order to express an impactful message. In this case my lack of inclusion of words directly on the rugs with eyes subverts some of his, and the other men’s, power. Their voices and statements are not the focal point, rather their actions and the subsequent social and personal consequences take precedent. My work is building off of historical narratives and pieces created by artists like the Guerrilla Girls to highlight that, despite efforts made by activists, there is still much room for progress where assault is concerned.

Louis CK wrote an “apology” letter and said that he was going to sit back and listen and yet he was already back to doing stand up comedy rather quickly thereafter; he has taken charge of the

³¹ Raizada, “An Interview with the Guerrilla Girls,” 40.

narrative and has decided that he stayed silent long enough without actually saying sorry at all, or trying to make amends, or learn from what he did. His career may have slowed a bit, but he has not suffered much consequence at all and those he harmed are left to deal with the aftermath all the while seeing him continue to do what he loves and what he essentially took away from them. It is strange that some abusers are given the opportunity to continue on with their lives with little recourse or exploration of how their actions impacted others. Louis C.K.'s actions may pale in comparison to some of the others represented on the rugs; his inclusion in this group highlights that several "forms of coercion straddle the physical/non-physical boundary."³² While he may not have physically touched those he harmed his coercion during vulnerable moments exists within the same realm as physical assault. How do we as a society pick and choose whose reputation is mostly spared and how to provide justice for those who were harmed?

I chose to place their eyes on rugs because rugs are a commonplace item that people generally interact with on a daily basis. It is a part of our surroundings that we don't pay an enormous amount of attention to, which I think is an excellent metaphor for how predators have come to permeate the fabric of our culture. Instead of allowing the viewer to pass over them without a second glance, they are confronted with the stares of the men upon them. It is the viewer's choice whether or not they want to physically engage with them; quite a few viewers walked on them purposefully, others inquired about them but refused to walk on them, but it seemed as though everyone found them to be unnerving. Initially I considered placing the rugs throughout the space so that it would be almost impossible to avoid them but I ultimately decided against it

³² Balderston et al., "CONCEPTUALISING VIOLENCE AND GENDER", 36-37.

because I did not want to force the viewer unavoidable discomfort and potentially discourage them from engaging with the rest of the work.

Another artist I researched for my thesis was Ana Mendieta, who used performance, documentation, audience participation, and her body in her works. In Ana Mendieta's piece, *Untitled (People Looking at Blood, Moffitt)* (1973), the artist displayed animal viscera and blood on the sidewalk outside of her home and documented the reactions of the passersby, most of whom only gave the sight a cursory glance as they walked by. Mendieta's work revealed the way in which people avoid signs of violence even when they are at close range, illuminating the detachment viewers had toward ominous ephemera. Another feminist artist crucial to the development of dialogue about societal plights, Mendieta confronted heavy topics such as sexual abuse. This is most apparent in her piece, *Untitled (Rape Scene)* (1973), where Mendieta recreated a crime scene as described in a police report about a woman who was assaulted and murdered. Viewers were invited into her home to come across this unsuspected and graphic scene and as a result there ensued a dialogue about the atrocities of what had happened in their community. She compelled viewers to more closely scrutinize how they interacted with the world and other humans, using empathy as a tool and a driving force behind the work.

Stares are piercing and can cause extreme discomfort for everyone, but particularly for survivors of trauma. When I perceive someone staring at me I am instantly nervous and begin mentally preparing myself for something bad to happen – my hands go to my phone and keys, and if I am walking by myself I steer myself to a public place until I can be sure I am not being followed. The eyes on rugs are a source of discomfort but the viewer controls the level and type of

interaction so not all of the power lies with the abusers. The eyes are unavoidable visually, but physically they could be avoided within the space. It mimics the interactions one might have in daily life when one notices another person staring at them; they generally have the choice to confront the person or to walk away. While my work is not a performance piece like those of artist Ana Mendieta, the pieces are performative and the audience's choice about whether or not to interact with the rugs, as well as other pieces within the exhibition, are crucial to the message of the work. Additionally the interactions with these rugs serve as a metaphor for our society and its choice to confront the complex issue that is staring at them or to leave it as is, avoiding the discomfort altogether. Obviously the everyday personal interaction is much different than the reaction society has to assault, but the important distinction is one provides safety for the individual while the other perpetuates a culture where a large swath of the population is left vulnerable.

Blinded

There are 12 masks that look down upon the 12 rugs with images of specific people who have been accused, and in some instances convicted, of harming others. Some of the eyes are sewn fully closed to represent people not paying attention to what is happening around them and not realizing that they know and care about a survivor. They might be afraid to look at their past actions, or are being willfully ignorant to spare themselves the pain. Other masks have eyes that are only partially sewn to represent those who are slowly unraveling their perceived notions about the issue and are starting to take a closer look at what is happening. They are blinded but they still have the power to say what they think, which exacerbates the problems faced by those who are seeking to change the way society handles and perceives assault and all that goes with it.

Some masks have been partially unraveled to indicate that even if one is unaware of the issue it can still affect them as their attention is pulled elsewhere. One set of masks has the eyeholes sewn together so that if one were to wear it with someone else they would be looking so closely at one another as to obfuscate their view entirely. Oftentimes people are so close to an issue that they are unable to see anything.

A singular set of masks has the mouth openings sewn together. If a pair was to wear these, they could see one another but the space shared by their mouths creates a toxic echo chamber between the two. Our society has rather quickly been divided since the Reagan era politically, making significant discourse between the two major parties seemingly nonexistent. Therefore an echo chamber effect has slowly been becoming the commonplace way of discussing significant topics; many people interact almost exclusively with those most like themselves instead of finding crucial common ground with those with dissimilar opinions in order to improve the lives of others. This tactic is excellent in widening the proverbial divide between groups and obfuscates what is of paramount consequence. In most instances the openings for the mouth are left completely alone because oftentimes those who are unaware of the intricacies of the issue or who do not have a complete view still have something to say.

The varying shades of pink used in this piece are referencing the colors chosen for other pieces in the gallery. There is a hot pink used in the work made about R. Kelly, reflective of the survivors who came forward to tell their stories. The wounds are fresh; the vivid hue exists to reflect that. The plush figures and the patterns silkscreened upon them are varying intensities of pink, reminiscent of healing wounds. The way in which the various sections of masks are

embroidered closed mimic the appearance of scars one might find on the skin. Scars, physical or emotional, often hide in plain sight. The pink closures are easily identifiable against the stark black of the balaclavas to highlight them. Other masks are sewn using a black thread to conceal the altered parts while these serve as a reminder that people are suffering in silence, their scars barely visible but the memory lingers on the body. Unseen experiences can affect how one views and speaks about and topic as much as willful ignorance can.

Re-Write

The handmade paper on the back wall was made using shredded statements from abusers that are pulped and reformed into new sheets of paper. Oftentimes in the conversation surrounding sexual harassment and assault the abuser attempts to control the narrative by denying it or by offering a halfhearted apology. This can obfuscate what survivors are saying about their experiences and how best to support those who have experienced trauma. But the tides are slowly turning as more survivors come forward and as more people listen to what they're saying, the blank pages are waiting to be filled by their narratives. Continuing the effort to provide survivors the resources and platform needed in order to change the discourse is of utmost importance.

The individual pieces collectively take up a larger space than that of the rug in the middle portion of the gallery asking the viewer two physically and metaphorically large questions that are central to the work. I made this visual choice to tie together multiple aspects of the work presented. Not only do the pieces of paper outnumber the rugs with eyes, but also the accompanying masks. The thoughts and voices of survivors outnumber those who have perpetrated malicious acts against another human being and those who have yet to fully come to

terms with the scope of what is happening around them. The sheets of paper are reflective of the plush figures, but while the plush forms indicate the entry into the work and the more unfortunate consequences faced by survivors, the sheets of paper are elevated and placed at the back of the gallery where they are most prominently displayed in order to indicate that there is hope yet for systemic change.

Within this framework “...the power to reach as large and varied an audience as possible, is an important component of art concerned with social...justice.”³³ This collective of survivors and artists alike has power in numbers and the opportunity to dramatically shift perceptions should they take the chances provided by cultural movements or individual conversations with other people. Using this approach serves to emphasize that art, “could be an integral part of social and political struggle,” should artists use their agency; that the voices and stories of those already heard, and those who have yet to be heard, are also intrinsic to these societal and political struggles for reform.³⁴

Conclusion

The conceptual and making process involved in *Turning Tides* was truly a cathartic experience. I finally felt as though I had the freedom to share my personal experiences regarding assault, and a way to process what had happened to me while meditating on how this issue affects society as a whole. It allowed me to space to research other artists and movements that dealt with sexual assault and power dynamics; the foundations of which have cultivated an ever growing number of initiatives, activists, artists, feminists, and myriad other policies and people. Seeing the

³³ Cole, “Art, Activism, and Feminisms”, 175.

³⁴ Mizota, “KEEPING THE MESSAGE ALIVE”, 49.

historical foundations in the art, wider cultural spheres, and how our nation has developed, as well as forcefully backslid on occasion, has made me realize that continual effort is truly needed where activism (and art activism) is concerned.

“Perhaps the prominence in feminist discourse of the notion that change is never finally achieved, and that interminable struggle is necessary, has significantly altered how feminist artists who seek an activist role for their art currently see their practice.”³⁵

As much as feminist theory has developed, so have the machinations that perpetuate iniquities.

As much as our culture has developed and grown for the better, so much is left to be accomplished that our society be a more equitable place to live.

In my research it became clear that “...sexual violence [is] at the intersection of gender identity and power relations...”³⁶ In our culture gender is accepted by many to be more fluid in the present, but the gender binary, and the dynamics that it eschews, continue to pervade most aspects of our society. The perceived differences between men and women are “...socially constructed, but they are not inconsequential: they serve to create, justify, and reproduce structural inequalities between men and women.”³⁷ Reinforcing these constructs about gender and social hierarchies, and painting women and other marginalized groups as needing rescue as opposed to educating our citizenry about consent and bodily autonomy, creates a toxic environment where sexual assault to flourish.³⁸ In the 1970s feminism, activism, and feminist activist art laid the foundations for seeking equality for women and disenfranchised groups. Advances were made culturally, politically, and shaped policy, “But the later flood of antiwomen

³⁵ Lauter, “Feminist Activist Art”, 159-160.

³⁶ de Jonge Oudraat and Kuehnast, “Peace and Security”, 366.

³⁷ Hollander and Rodgers, “Constructing Victims”, 358.

³⁸ Hollander and Rodgers, “Constructing Victims”, 359.

sentiment and the political changes and discourses that were labeled the ‘war on women’ showed how swiftly movement gains are reversed.”³⁹ A system that benefits one group over the others only incentivizes the group with the most power to maintaining the system from which they benefit.⁴⁰

There exist metaphorical “waves” of feminism and the accompanying concerns and theory are continually developing in tandem with our culture, both influencing the other in an ebb and flow. In an article I read in researching for my thesis I found a quote that caught my interest, “A single wave does not move a sandbar, but wave after wave does.”⁴¹ I hold that as a truth, particularly with regard to social change and finding paths to justice and equity. Since my thesis exhibition in 2018, the social and political landscape has both shifted dramatically while also somehow maintaining well-worn attitudes concerning power dynamics and sexual assault. Certain individuals featured on the rugs with eyes in my exhibition have faced further consequences as a direct result of their actions and cultural movements like Me Too (and Time’s Up for Hollywood). Others still live a similar existence to the one they knew before the voices of survivors began to be believed.

Policies on all sides of the aisle are being written to simultaneously; some grant the pieces of the freedoms sought by activists and those most negatively impacted by our status quo, others seek to restrict the freedoms already granted. As a result of the social and political unrest leading up to and following the 2016 presidential election cycle, activist art is steadily regaining momentum as

³⁹ Crossley, “Where Have All the Feminists Gone?”, 16.

⁴⁰ Ridgeway, “FRAMED BEFORE WE KNOW IT”, 149.

⁴¹ Ridgeway, “FRAMED BEFORE WE KNOW IT”, 158.

hidden truths about our country and countrymen are revealed. During the period I was making work for my thesis exhibition I seriously questioned whether or not I should have chosen a topic that has been explored thoroughly by artists before me. But then I remembered how I feel when I see activist art, when I hear people sharing their stories in solidarity, and how many people's work has directly impacted me in a positive way. There is not a singular solution for complex matters; there is not a singular voice that speaks for all survivors. There are innumerable methods by which to study how and where is assault most pervasive, and implement positive changes as able. As my work regarding power dynamics and sexual assault evolves beyond my thesis exhibition, I am pursuing work that centers survivors, their voices, and how language impacts how society perceives survivors.

Bibliography

Agerstoun, Mary Jo, and Elissa Auther. "Considering Feminist Activist Art." *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): vii-xiv.

Augoustakis, Antony, Monica S. Cyrino, and Anise K Strong. "The Rape of Lucretia." Essay. In *Starz Spartacus: Reimagining an Icon on Screen*, 133–47. Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Edinburgh U.P., 2018.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London, United Kingdom: BBC and Penguin, 1972.

Bowers, Andrea, Suzanne Lacy, and Maria Elena Buszek. "'Necessary Positions' in Feminist Art: A Conversation." *Art Journal* 71, no. 1 (2012): 138–50.

Brand, Peggy Zeglin. "Feminist Art Epistemologies: Understanding Feminist Art." *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 166–89.

Cahill, Ann J. "Foucault, Rape, and the Construction of the Feminine Body." *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (2000): 43–63.

"Cindy Sherman: MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art, n.d.
<https://www.moma.org/artists/5392>.

Cole, Julie. "Art, Activism, and Feminisms: Sites of Confrontation and Change." *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 175–80.

Crossley, Alison Dahl. "The Bonds of Feminism: Collective Identities and Feminist Organizations ." Essay. In *Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution*, 91–119. New York, New York: New York University Press, 2017.

Crossley, Alison Dahl. "Where Have All the Feminists Gone? Millennials and the Unfinished Gender Revolution." Essay. In *Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution*, 1–22. New York, New York: New York University Press, 2017.

Dallow, Jessica. "Bridging Feminist Art, Activism, and Theory: A Review of Three Contemporary Texts." *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 166–74.

de Jonge Oudraat, Cantal, and Kathleen Kuehnast. "Peace and Security in the Twenty-First Century: Understanding the Gendered Nature of Power." Essay. In *Managing Conflict in a World Adrift*, edited by Chester A Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, 361–74. Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, CIGI Press, 2015.

Delbyck, Cole. "R. Kelly Allegedly Keeping Young Women In Sex 'Cult,' Parents Claim." TheHuffington Post. TheHuffingtonPost.com, July 19, 2017.
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/r-kelly-sex-cult-allegations_us_596cb1dbe4b03389bb18ca4c.

Fields, Jill. "Frontiers in Feminist Art History." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 2 (2012): 1–21.

Flanagan, Mary, and Suyin Looui. "Rethinking the F Word: A Review of Activist Art on the Internet." *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 181–200.

Fryd, Vivien Green. "Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks in May: Feminist Activist Performance Art as 'Expanded Public Pedagogy.'" *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 23–38.

Hein, Carolina. "Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Thesis, GRIN Verlag, Open Publishing GmbH, 2006.

Herlin, Jean-Noël. "Ephemera: Junk Mail Mon Amour." *Art on Paper* 12, no. 1 (2007): 44–55.

Hollander, Jocelyn A., and Katie Rodgers. "Constructing Victims: The Erasure of Women's Resistance to Sexual Assault." *Sociological Forum* 29, no. 2 (2014): 342–64.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Lacy, Suzanne. "Performance/Installation." SUZANNE LACY. Accessed April 1, 2021. <https://www.suzannelacy.com/performance-installation#/three-weeks-in-may/>.

Lauter, Estella. "Feminist Activist Art: Losing the Edge?" *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 156–65.

Mizota, Sharon. "KEEPING THE MESSAGE ALIVE." *Art on Paper* 14, no. 1 (2009): 44–55.

Phaidon. "Yoko Ono's Cut Piece Explained." PHAIDON. <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/may/18/yoko-ono-s-cut-piece-explained/>.

Princenthal, Nancy. *Unspeakable Acts: Women, Art, and Sexual Violence in the 1970s*. New York, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2019.

Raizada, Kristen. "An Interview with the Guerrilla Girls, Dyke Action Machine (DAM!), and the Toxic Titties." *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 39–58.

Ridgeway, Cecilia L. "FRAMED BEFORE WE KNOW IT: How Gender Shapes Social Relations." *Gender and Society* 23, no. 2 (April 2009): 145–60.

Sneider, Beth E. "Put up and Shut up: Workplace Sexual Assaults." *Gender & Society* 5, no. 4 (December 1991): 533–48.

Tice, Karen W. "Feminist Theory/Practice Pedagogies in a Shifting Political Climate." *Feminist Teacher* 14, no. 2 (2002): 123–33.

Uggen, Christopher, and Amy Blackstone. "Sexual Harassment as a Gendered Expression of Power." *American Sociological Review* 69, no. 1 (February 2004): 64–92.

Walby, Sylvia, Consuelo Corradi, Susan Balderston, Jude Towers, Brian Francis, Markku Heiskanen, Karin Helweg-Larsen, et al. "Conceptualizing Violence and Gender." Essay. In *The Concept and Measurement of Violence*, 31–55. Bristol, England: Bristol University Press, Policy Press, 2017.

Westlund, Andrea C. "Pre-Modern and Modern Power: Foucault and the Case of Domestic Violence." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24, no. 4 (1999): 1045–66.

"What Is the Rape Kit Backlog?" END THE BACKLOG, n.d.
<https://www.endthebacklog.org/backlog/what-rape-kit-backlog>.

Figures



Figure 1: Lauren Whitmore, *Turning Tides* (Gallery View), 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 2: Lauren Whitmore, *Body Count*, Acrylic, Silkscreen, Fabric, Thread, Polyester Fill, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 3: Lauren Whitmore, *Self Reflection (What Have You Done)* (Detail), Area Rug, Acrylic Paint, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 4: Lauren Whitmore, *Self Reflection (What Haven't You Done)* (Detail), Area Rug, Acrylic Paint, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 5: Lauren Whitmore, *What Did You Do*, Risograph on Paper, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 6: Lauren Whitmore, *Untitled (Rugs with Eyes)*, Thread, Polyvinyl Chloride, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 7: Lauren Whitmore, *Untitled (Rugs with Eyes)* (Detail), Thread, Polyvinyl Chloride, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 8: Lauren Whitmore, *Blinded* (Detail 1), Acrylic, Embroidery Floss, Thread, Balaclavas, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 9: Lauren Whitmore, *Blinded* (Detail 2), Acrylic, Embroidery Floss, Thread, Balaclavas, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 10: Lauren Whitmore, *Blinded* (Detail 3), Acrylic, Thread, Balaclava, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 11: Lauren Whitmore, *Blinded* (Detail 1), Acrylic, Embroidery Floss, Balaclava, 2018
(Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 12: Lauren Whitmore, *Blinded* (Detail 1), Acrylic, Thread, Balaclavas, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 13: Lauren Whitmore, *Re-Write, Pulped Statements, Handmade Sheets of Paper*, 2018
(Image by Taylor Hedrick)



Figure 14: Lauren Whitmore, *Re-Write* (Detail), Pulped Statements, Handmade Sheets of Paper, 2018 (Image by Taylor Hedrick)