

The Beauty in Pain: Masochism, Sexuality, and the Female Body in Art

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Artist Statement

My senior project is an investigation of power and shame associated with female sexuality. I manipulated video footage to generate a portrait of the uncomfortable familiarity I experienced growing up and being told to be less sexual. The dichotomy between empowerment and oppression in my art is designed to make the viewer question what it means to be free, as well as what it means to be whole while living in a world filled with the ever-existing double standard of sexual equality.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude and admiration for the many people who have helped me grow as an artist and most importantly as a human being in my time at Allegheny College. To Amara Geffen, who has continuously challenged me to push further and keep fighting the good fight even in the toughest of times. To Byron Rich, Heather Brand, and Darren Miller—I hope to carry some of your selflessness and care for others with me wherever I go. Thank you for always being there. Thank you to the kind technicians in the Vukovich for helping my vision manifest itself into reality. Lastly, I would like to thank the Senior Project Fund for supporting me in this journey, and providing me with the means to create.

In aiming to connect my art to the very intimate aspects of my life, I have found that complete honesty and self-awareness is an essential component in telling a story. Being brutally honest with myself has led me to discover things that I would have otherwise kept hidden and would have possibly overlooked or justified with a reasonable explanation. When discussing the topic of sexuality and sexual expression, I have sometimes censored my thoughts in fear of what others might think. This project is the result of breaking that barrier and emerging into a conversation that celebrates the freedom of self while also highlighting the daunting aspects of reality that I am faced with as a young woman.

The performative aspect of my work comes from my inherent need to move and to act. That one act itself turns into an action; the action itself then becomes the art. I am interested in the actions that we don't necessarily think twice about doing, those weird gestures that we encounter in everyday life. Broadcasting these otherwise mundane practices allows the viewer to become aware of their existence and come away from the piece with an altered perspective. Transforming these actions is what I am truly interested in, because I feel their power lies in their simplicity.

I am drawn to the way that masochism relates to objectification as well as sexuality in my piece. Masochism can be described in general as the turning of

destructive drives against the self. A sexual masochist, however, can be described in *The Journal of Sex Research* as “some one who cannot enjoy the sexual act unless it is accompanied by pain, humiliation, or submission...submission being making one’s self less than another person, which is a part of the masochism.” (Robertiello). Freud believed that the masochistic attitude was inherently instilled in women and was an essential part of the female sexual role and response. I believe that from a young age, women are drawn to idealize objectification because of their unequal status in society in addition to being socialized to believe that they are not meant to feel pleasure in the same way that a man is.

I believe that women are not meant to seek pleasure in our society in the same way that men are. Women are meant to be on the receiving end; to be granted with pleasure commonly facilitated by a man. Instead of being imprisoned by these beliefs, my work *Repentance* explores this unequal distribution of power by inflicting the pain upon myself. The empowering aspect of this becomes a statement of reclaiming my right to want to feel pain and to want to feel shame. The pain becomes a symbol for the viewer to relate to in a psychological and physical aspect. This relates to the same pain that women experience in coming to terms with their sexual freedom.

The action of repeatedly snapping tights against my own body was a way for me to act upon and express my frustration with the patriarchal society that we live in, and most importantly, to fight back against it. Fishnets are worn by what some would consider “loose” women, prostitutes, and sexually adventurous women.

While snapping myself repeatedly with my tights, I began to think about all of the times that I have felt lesser in the hands of a man throughout my life. I also thought about all of the women who have experienced similar feelings to mine, and wondered how they cope with such memories.

In Marina Abramovic's piece, *Art Must Be Beautiful Artist Must Be Beautiful*, (fig 1) she expresses her discomfort with society's notion that art is meant to aesthetically please. Abramovic confronts issues of how she identifies in the art world as a woman and expresses her ability to rebel against what she feels people expect her to be—beautiful. She begins this performance slowly, meditatively, brushing her hair chanting the words “Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful” over and over again. As the video progresses her brushing becomes increasingly aggressive, her whispers becomes shouts, and her movements become violent. Abramovic transforms an otherwise mundane action of brushing her hair into a demonstration of her otherness. I see her chanting as a way of releasing her frustration of the very narrow-minded view that art must be a certain way in order to be considered *good* art. Abramovic explains her piece stating—

I brush my hair with a metal brush held in my right hand and simultaneously comb my hair with a metal comb held in my left hand. While doing so, I continuously repeat ‘Art must be

beautiful', 'Artist must be beautiful', until I have destroyed my hair
and face. (Abramovic)



Fig. 1 Marina Abramovic. *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, Video. 1975.

The type of endurance that Abramovic exhibits in her work is something that has influenced me heavily in my own work. I think that her endurance over a thirteen-minute period in *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* is a very powerful way of going to extremities in order to make a statement. To become so

fully enveloped in a single action over an extended period of time provides the viewer with an exciting narrative to follow and reflect upon after.

The experience of a person watching another person hurt themselves undoubtedly makes them imagine themselves in that position; cringing at the thought of inflicting such pain on their body. This shocking factor that Abramovic showcases in her practice is something that I have found myself gravitating towards due to my genuine desire for people to both disgusted and challenged by a work of art.

Although I have an overwhelming respect for aesthetically pleasing art, my personal agenda is to challenge the viewer to confront art that is uncomfortable. In doing this, it is my hope that the viewer realizes that art is a lot more than aesthetics. If art truly does mimic life, then it deserves to be ugly.

In my piece *Pick*, I channel Abramovic's piece by picking out my hair with an Afro pick repeatedly, a process that I grew up being pained by. When I was younger, I vividly remember my mom picking out my hair and it bringing me to tears several times because of the pain that accompanies detangling hair. As I grew older, my tolerance for this painful action increased and I surprisingly came to like the pain of having my hair detangled. Chuck Palahniuk, one of my favorite authors, once stated, "It's so hard to forget pain, but it's even harder to remember sweetness. We have no scar to show for happiness. We learn so little from peace."

In Isaac Julien's film *The Attendant* (fig 2), a middle-aged black museum guard has sadomasochistic fantasies while strolling through the galleries in the

museum he works in. One of the pieces that he fixates upon is a 19th century painting titled, “Slaves on the West Coast of Africa”. His fantasies of sadomasochism evolve as the artist of the painting comes to life and is transformed into a leather-weathering slave master. Art critic Linda Weintraub stated—

Most viewers condemn these kind of acts as shameful and offensive, preferring to avoid contact with them. But Julien, instead of assuming an apologetic or self-recriminating posture, inserts them boldly into the dignified context of sophisticated artistry and broadcasts their existence in vivid color on the big screen

Julien’s work is confrontational in a very unique way, as it forces the viewer to take part in the conversation that is happening with the knowledge of slavery and sadomasochistic culture in mind. Weintraub goes on to explain that Julien’s work is meant to encourage tolerance, not to provoke antagonism. What I find most liberating and inspiring about Julien’s work is his ability to encourage the viewer to think about their habitual judgments of communities other than theirs. Julien states—

By destabilizing signs of race, gender, and sexuality, these artists draw critical attention to the cultural constructedness, the artifice, of the sexual roles and identity we inhabit (Julien)

By seeking to disrupt the viewer's habits of thought, Julien exposes the truth that in large part, most viewers of art are white middle-age heterosexual men. As a gay black man himself, his aim is to promote cultural change and transform biases. Isaac Julien is inspiring to me for many different reasons. His cleverness is both compelling and fascinating; he approaches the serious topic of slavery with ease and poise. This humorous approach is an effective way of inviting the viewer to express emotion while viewing art: giving them free range to laugh, cry, scream, etc...



Fig. 2. Isaac Julien. *The Attendant*. 1993. Copenhagen 10 minutes. Colour 35 mm. Sound

In my work, I similarly try to confront such taboos by embracing the concept of sexual masochism, and using it as a way to start a conversation about the beauty that I have found in pain. One of my main interests is the ways in which marginalized people express their oppression through art making and the different approaches that they take.

Carolee Schneeman's approach in discussing sexuality and gender is through live performances and photographic documentation.

Schneeman states—

I have the sense that in learning, our best developments grow from works which initially strike us as “too much”; those which are intriguing, demanding, that lead us to experiences which we feel we cannot encompass, but which simultaneously provoke and encourage our efforts. (Schneeman)

In *Interior Scroll* (fig 3), Schneeman stands on a table slowly withdrawing a scroll from her vagina while reading from it. This performance of freedom and celebration of her anatomy can most definitely be described as “too much”, yet as she has stated, this is the type of demanding confrontational work that truly changes a person especially when watching it live. Schneeman's willingness to expose her body in the fearless ways that she does in *Interior Scroll* reasserts the power and beauty of nakedness in art, something that inspires me greatly. Nakedness is a key component in my practice for a number of reasons. The act of being naked functions as a form of rebellion against the belief that the body should be covered and hidden. Nakedness

is complete vulnerability; it's a form of communication. By exposing the body in all of its flaws and all of its glory, I have found that people become more accepting of their own bodies. They see the piece of art as an opportunity to celebrate nakedness and rejoice in the beauty of the female body.

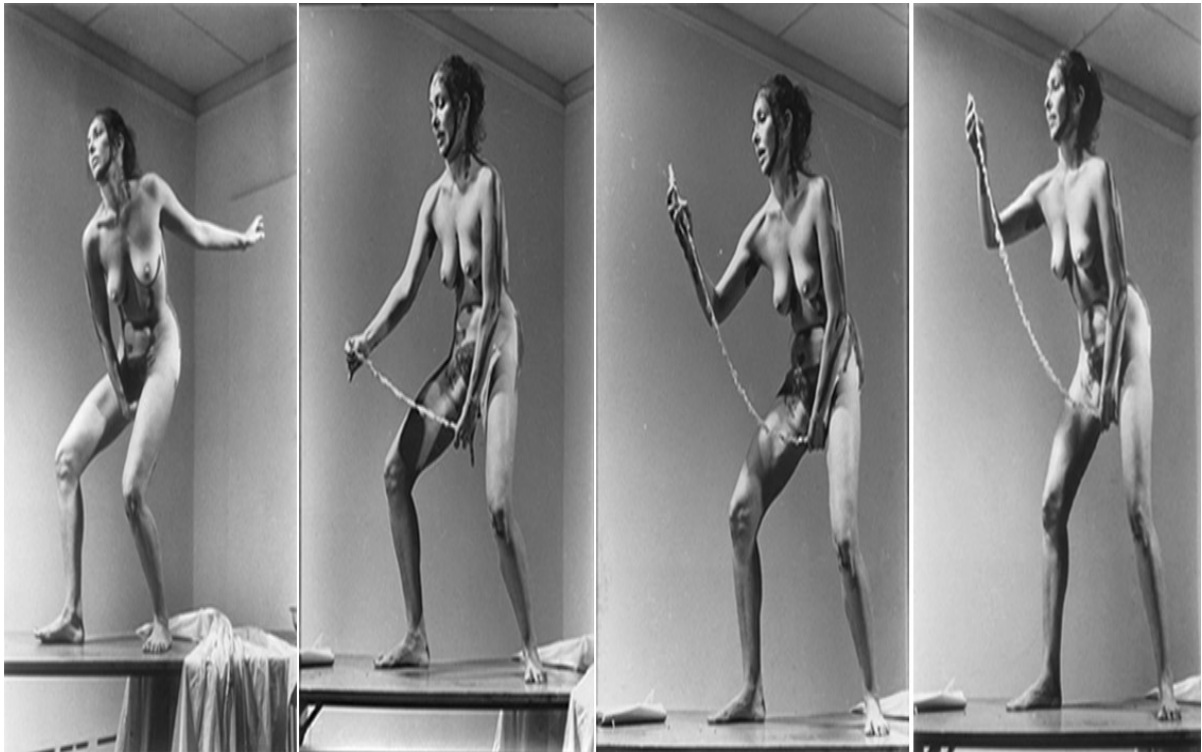


Fig. 3. Carolee Schneeman. *Interior Scroll*. 1975. Beet juice, Urine and Coffee on Screenprint on Paper

As a young woman, I have experienced the power in my naked body and my ability to enchant. In my piece *Repentance*, the action being duplicated and inversed was intended to mimic this very hypnotic quality.

The type of honesty that is present in Nan Goldin's work is something that I aim to accomplish in my work as well. Goldin's work gives us a glimpse into her life

and the lives of her friends in the post-Stonewall gay subculture of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Her work is provocative, raw, sexual, and unforgiving. A prime example of Goldin's work is *Heart Shaped Bruise* (fig 4). In an interview with Goldin she says, "I didn't care about good photography, I cared about complete honesty". When describing her friends and the many people she surrounded herself with Goldin went on to say, "We were never marginalized, we were the world." She sought to paint a picture of her reality similarly to Isaac Julien—in hopes of increasing tolerance and acceptance in the art world and general public. Goldin ended the interview by saying, "I had to take pictures to stay alive, and I believe that any artist has to do their work to stay alive." The way Goldin speaks about artistry inspired me in my project to recognize the value of sharing an uncensored visual depiction of my thoughts and questions.



Fig. 4. Nan Goldin. *Heart Shaped Bruise*. 1980. Silver dye bleach print.

What is most important to me in my practice is finding truth in authenticity. I aim to continue exploring the unequal structural status between men and women, varying views on sexuality, and masochism. I have found a correlation between these topics and my methods of endurance and repetition in my performances. It is my goal to continue to find existing relationships in unexpected places, and to fearlessly expose the many truths and lessons I have learned along the way.

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