Delicate, with Clarity (What Others Do Not)

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Emily Cancilla

May 2, 2016

Project Board:

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Prof. Byron Rich

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Prof. Steven Prince

Pledge:

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Emily Cancilla

This work examines the inherent “flaws” and distortion in perception of human bodies, within specific realms of gender, sexuality, femininity, masculinity, and intimacy by refusing to distort or correct images of a “female” body; skin, stretch marks, pigmentation, veins, scars, pores, and

hair. Unapologetic, my bare body is strength, self-forgiveness - and by virtue, confrontational - against personal and cultural ideals, catharsis to the storm of dysmorphic self-perception and dysphoric thoughts thundering, constant. Through research and testimony, I tip-toe around the barriers: race, gender, sexuality, class, and appearance, to bring my lens into focus, and with delicate eyes I begin to see what others do not.

Thank you,

Professors Brand, Rich, and Prince
Ian F. Thomas
Sean Gannon, Alexandra Ashbrook, and Mary Emig
Becca, Maddy, Liz, Andrea, Lesly, Natalya, Kyle, and Kris

for everything.

Audre Lorde asserts a sect of society assumes the "average" body is that of a thin, white, male, young, cisgender, heterosexual, and financially stable person.[1] By assuming majority, the few that fit all of these specifications hide within an "invisible center," from which they enforce these ideals onto the rest of the population. With its influence, this center shapes culture to provide safety for "us," those who fit their strict regulations. Culture, therefore, effectively controls its populations and convinces them to attempt, stringently, to adhere to these expected norms.[2] Russell Ferguson details the power of this "mythical norm," that marginalizes based on failure to meet its idealizations, traits impossible to perceive (even if achieved) in others due to racial, ethnic, and sexist bias. The Invisible Center is a place from which oppressors act, remaining hidden (therefore protected), to retain their power and deniability. Oppressors act within mainstream Culture, categorized by its "capacity to absorb a constant flow of new elements," adopting "the rhetoric of constant progress, growth, and change.[3]" Ferguson continues to assert because of this,

> "socially subordinated groups are constantly mined for new ideas with which to energize the jaded and restless mainstream of a political and economic system based on the circulation of commodities.[4]"

In this way, the dominant Western culture actively commodifies - to enhance its own enjoyment, economy, and global standing - fragments of subordinate cultures, or marginalized peoples. This creates distance between and within marginalized groups, creating barriers within their specific realms while some adhere to "norms," participating in the oppressive behavior their

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[1] Russell Ferguson, *The Invisible Center,* (New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 9
[2] Ferguson, *Invisible Center*, 10
[3] Ferguson, *Invisible Center*, 11
[4] Ferguson, *Invisible Center,* 11

Invisible Center dictates. The glamorized "other" is seen as the pinnacle of representation of marginalized groups, causing instances of identity erasure, conflict, and self-hatred.[5]

In this way, The Invisible Center has carefully constructed a lens through which we are expected to view human bodies. We view emotional interaction, relationships, business relations, race, global issues, and crime through the lens of Patriarchy. This lens embodies the Center's prized traits, centering around masculine strength reigning superior over femininity's inherent weakness.[6] Patriarchy is the most influential, persistent worldview in human history - that grows more insidious with every legislation, every movement to confront its wrongdoings or fallouts. This means it has spread into media representations, and even interpersonal, completely "separate" individual identities. Patriarchy is the glass of this lens, that allows us to view human bodies in the critical and completely subjective ways Culture currently promotes. As the physical representation of human identity, a body is something that its owner manipulates to better portray their preferred (or necessary) personality, coding for outside human perception. When others see us physically, they perceive things about us based on cultivated codes taught and reinforced by contemporary culture. These codes are persistent, have evolved throughout years of human history, and they remain.[7] Therefore, when one turns their eyes on themselves, they see this pre-determined, culturally-constructed identity, seemingly designed to be criticized as the Patriarchal lens dictates.

So, when examining a perceivably coded "female" body, that has feminine form and sex characteristics, there are expectations as to how the body is presented. Namely, that the body is sexually and aesthetically appealing to the "average" straight, cisgender, white man. It is an expectation that these pleasing shapes and form are presented sexually, but not in a "slutty" way,

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[5] Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, (New Museum of Contemporary Art 1990), 52
[6] Ferguson, *Invisible Center*, 10
[7] Wittig, *Straight Mind,* 55

beautifully, but not in a "vain" way. The bodies must not know their beauty, but must present it for (white, cis, straight) male consumption[8]. These expectations set not only by acceptable, daily society but in pornography, internet communities, and subcultures.

These expectations are subverted in my piece *Delicate, with Clarity (What Others Do Not)* in many ways. In a dark room, two hexagonal shapes protrude from the walls on either side of the viewer, on their face is displayed high resolution, close-up images of human skin. These are not microscopic views of skin, they are merely enlarged. Behind the images, printed on transparency paper, glowing forms sway back and forth from a projector hidden within the box, and music floats in the air of the room. Subverting expectations - that skin should be a microscopic display, that we are analyzing it for disease or distress under a microscope - the viewer hears a soft acoustic lullaby, rolling reverberating bass guitar, and a voice, as if in monologue. This voice is mine, the skin is mine, and the recordings are autobiographical, from an actual phone call I made to my mother earlier in the semester. Though nude, the looping video reads as part of the still images, not entirely discernable, with cold lighting and straight, unforgiving angles. Uneven breasts, back rolls, and pale, blue-toned skin are featured, emphasizing the "imperfections" of pores, scars, stretch marks, hairs, and redness. The imprints from the underwire of my bra and tight underwear are bright against skin. Tiny, spidery veins and uneven pigmentation and texture are emphasized, idealized in the printed images, layering them into surreal, momentary portraits. These images showcase my identity and fixations at once - passed down through the Patriarchal lens, that my mother's parents viewed her through, and she views me through, as well as through culture, in media, education, politics, science, medicine, and entertainment. Consequently, I obsess over my appearance, how it codes for outsider's perceptions of and interactions with me, and what it covers up that I do not like to be.

[8] Wittig, *Straight Mind*, 53

In part, this obsession serves to learn myself thoroughly, and therefore become more whole, and more accepting of things I cannot change - of my physical appearance, my gender and sexual identities; defects I've been taught by an Invisible Center to find repulsive in myself.

The fragmentation of bodies is used to objectify, quantify, and separate identity from aesthetic pleasure. Some artists use fragmentation to emphasize its pervasive presence in our own thoughts, that Patriarchal ideals have caused feminine-identified individuals to view themselves as pieces, objects. Others use fragmentation as a tool to suggest emotional duality, turmoil, or illness. In Victoria Siemer's work, fragmentation seemingly portrays her inner emotions, as the artist. "Girl, Interrupted" implements fragmentation to suggest dualism in sense of identity, still obscuring the "female" identity of a face. In the title's referencing of the 1999 film *Girl, Interrupted,* Siemer references schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, two mental disorders with heavily stigmatized suggestions of dual-identities, or multiple personalities. By breaking apart the face of a perceived "feminine" body, Siemer effectively erases her humanity,



at the same time making the sensation of fragmentation of self

Figure 1. Victoria Siemer, Girl, Interrupted, 2015, Digital Portrait Manipulation

more accessible to the viewer. When identity is represented and intimacy is revealed viewers can relate, even more so when the identity is not immediately tied to a face or a name.

Siemer also embraces the autobiographical properties of human skin, embossing inner thoughts onto subjects in Photoshop. In one piece, a feminine form is turned away from us, and the words “This isn’t happiness” are written on her back, as if the subject is faking her success, health, or societal standing unconvincingly. The viewer, and presumably others, can all see this as soon as she turns around - a thing to be left behind, but is stuck to her no matter what.



Figure 2. Victoria Siemer, This isn’t happiness, 2016, Digital Portrait Manipulation

Similarly, I have toyed with the marks inner worries leave on skin, letting the imprint of a bra, tight pants, or shoes represent those. In reaching deeper, my piece argues that even the broken veins, uneven textures, and old scars are remnants of internal struggle. In *Delicate, with Clarity (What Others Do Not),* the imprints from my clothing are readily visibly, suggesting physical strain, while the audio track suggests that perhaps physical and emotional strain are identical for me. I present overwhelmingly personal information and looks into my life, erasing my face from the work - focusing in this instance, on my skin.

As the largest organ, skin is the most intimate way we interact with the world, ourselves, and others. The link between intimacy and disconnection is complex; in that, while viewers can relate to personal accounts, they are better able to apply another's experience to theirs when truthful emotion is presented to them abstractly. This is, in part, why I chose to display my prints so surrealistically. In this way, jutting, glowing images thrust into space for a viewer to watch, listening to a daughter's phone call to her mother, detailing her own feelings of inadequacy and ugliness, they are confronted with uncomfortably personal information, while able to lose themselves in the namelessness. There is no hint of gender in these prints, only vaguely in the video projections that are ghostly, revealing feminine breasts and form, but those are not entirely identifiable as "female." I do expect the piece will be viewed by current culture as a female, feminine work - though I do not identify at either polarization of the gender binary, and work to express personal dysphoria; with my physical appearance, psychological state, and perceived gender and sexual identities. This adds to my work as an exposition of viewers' inner biases and engages them to perceive androgyny as a uniting, valid alternative - spectral in itself, along the great spectrum of gender identity.

Androgyne: In Between dismantles the gender binary by normalizing these escapist portraits of a non-binary couple, one documenting and one documented. Through one lens, the other is represented as they wish to be, able to communicate some part of themselves in these moments. Personally, I feel unable to represent a non-binary identity outside of my feminine figure, it being so coded as "feminine," with shape, breasts, and soft features and therefore live with highly dysphoric thoughts; a disconnect between internal, perceived appearance and representation of identity with the actual outward appearance, space I take up in reality and



therefore how culture perceives me.

Figure 3. Emily Cancilla, Androgyne: In Between, 2015, Digital Portrait Manipulation

From this work I learned to apply the use of ambiguity and androgyny to create illusionary effects while increasing relatability.

Lorna Simpson is another artist working with identity, its erasure and history. She transforms biographical accounts into intensely personal classifications, honoring individuals she has not met, reaching out to more she does not know. Simpson uses abstraction and fragmentation to create uncomfortably cropped frames of human faces in *15 Mouths,* in which

fifteen mouths hum along to the song "It's Easy to Remember" by Rodgers and Hart. This video piece denies the viewer identifying features,

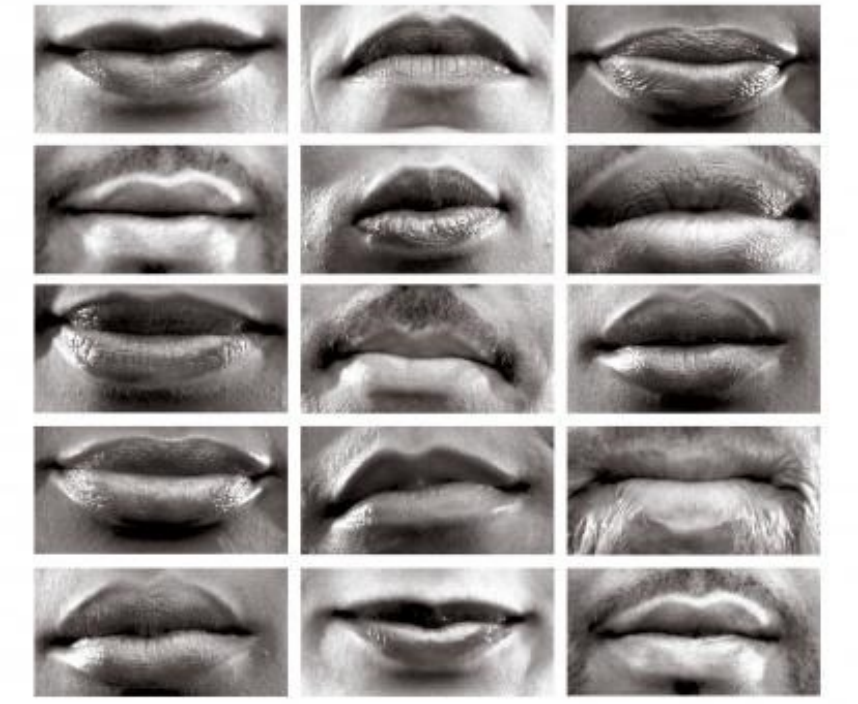


Figure 4. Lorna Simpson, 15 Mouths, 2011, Video Installation

simultaneously asking them to remember who the fragmented mouths belong to. Separating a "sensual" coded feature from its identity (eyes, face, name) removes its sensuality and makes the assumption of identity harder, but not impossible. Creases, smoothness, and other textures are character that takes its place. Their voices are the only indication of "gender," enhancing the piece's ambiguity, as the voices hum in unison, indistinguishable. This creates a united sensation, that experience can be deeper than sex and perceived gender. The reason we have to remain focused on this binary, exclusionary system is that after years of perpetuation, its barriers are so thick they must be broken down and marginalized individuals within its system demand repayment for their mistreatment.[9]

[9] Wittig, *Straight Mind,* 56

Similarly, in Simpson's piece *7 Mouths*, the image of a mouth is repeated seven times on linen. These prints detach intimacy and sexuality from the body, fragmenting this individual to only lips, repeating the image until their presence is numbed. Even the texture references the sensation of skin and touch, but the closed lips do not beckon the viewer to touch.

Like my video projections, these images deny standards of beauty and presentation put on the sexually coded pieces of a body. Fragmented, a body is easy to consume, but not when facing you confrontationally, either emotionless or resistant. In focusing on mouths, closed, Simpson seemingly emphasizes the silencing of the histories of these bodies. Ironically, in *15 Mouths,* she implores that the viewer remember these people - already nameless, faceless, erased.

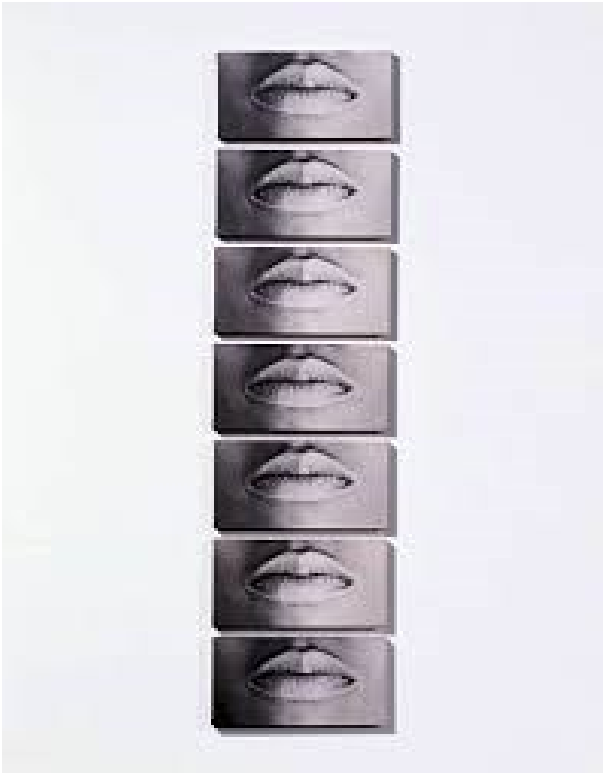


Figure 5. Lorna Simpson, 1993, 7 Mouths, 7 Photo Linen Panels

I am an amatuer sound artist, interested in musical representations of experience and emotion - my influences are many, but most primarily a genre of music called “shoegaze” in which heavy distortion effects are applied to instruments to produce an overwhelming and sometimes trance-like effect. Earlier in the year, I studied Susan Philipsz, a Burmese-Scottish sound artist, who starts with a location and bases her sound works on the site. Her recordings are low-quality, raw, and sometimes eerie echoes out into space, which feeds the loneliness, loss, and displaced themes in her work. Both autobiographical and fantasy, the quiet calling of her singing fills up railway stations, galleries, and abandoned bridgeways.[4] The rawness of her voice and droning, eerie tones are characteristics I found particularly evocative of viewer emotion, because they are stagnant enough to set a scene or wash emotion (loss), and vague enough to allow a viewer to let their reaction shape the narrative.

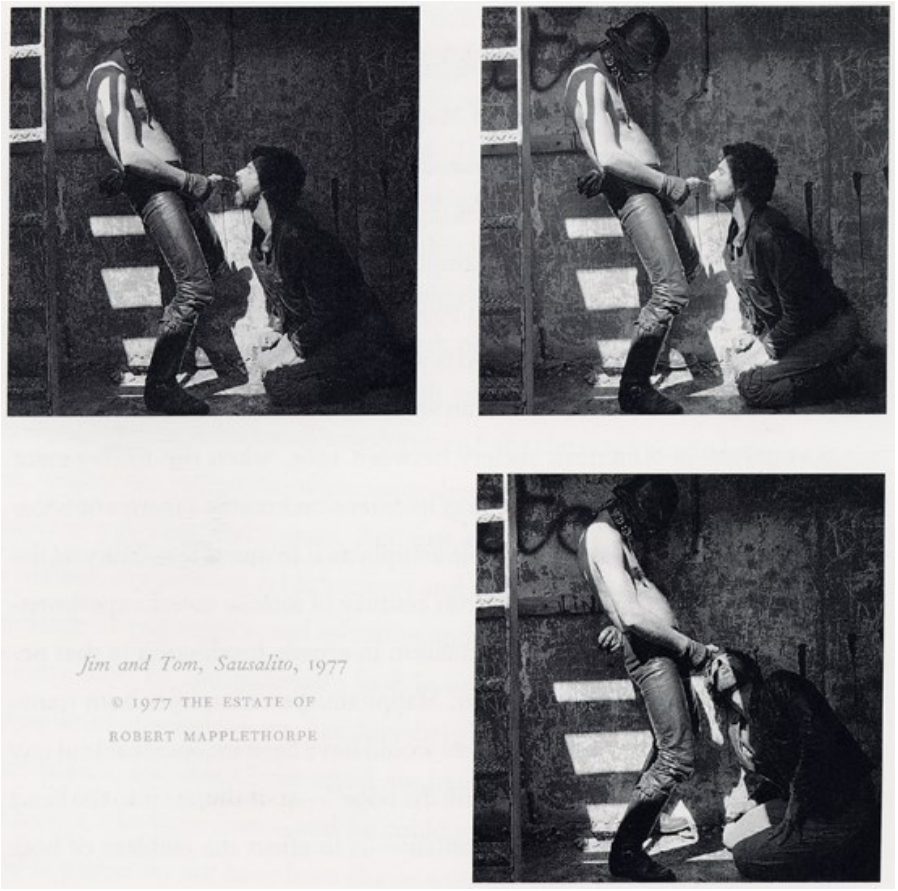


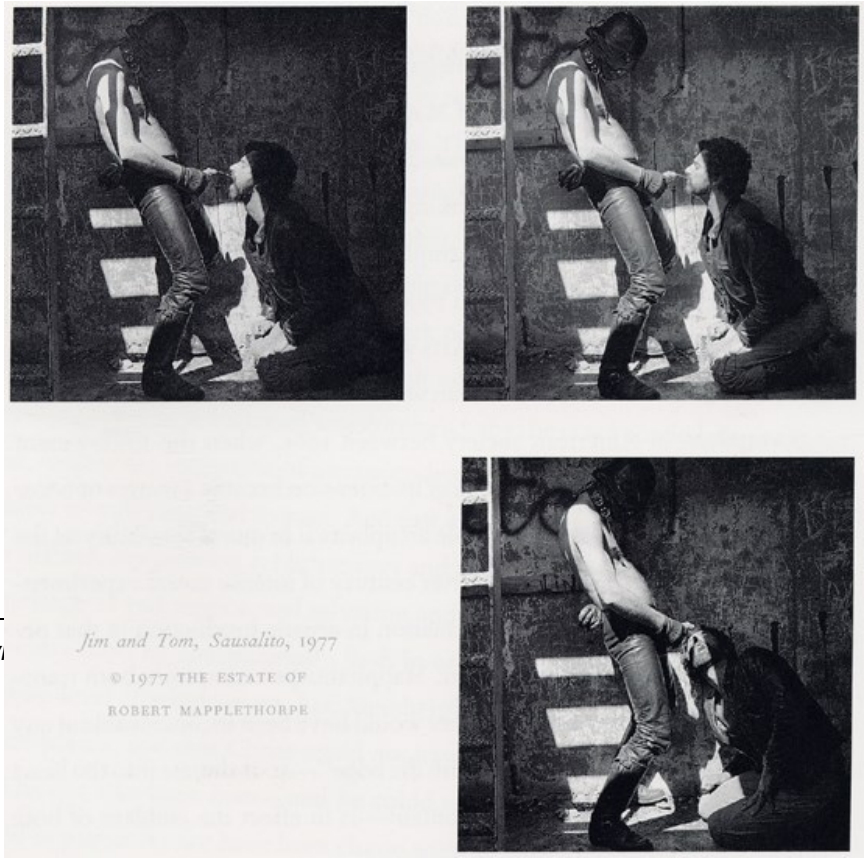
Figure 6. Susan Philipsz, The Lost Reflection, 2007, Two-Channel Sound Work Installation, Munster.

Patti Smith, performer and author of *The Coral Sea*, inspired the titling of this piece. In this poem, once performed live with musical "shoegaze" backing, there is a line "his delicate eyes saw with clarity what others did not"[10] repeated in increasing intensity. This in reference to Smith's once-lover and lifelong friend, Robert Mapplethorpe, an American Photographer who died of AIDS in the 1980s. Similarly to Mapplethorpe's work, mine explores themes of sexuality and identity, still taboo in today's culture, its inherent realities hidden behind layers of coding. As the artist, Mapplethorpe's intense scrutiny of his own sexuality and its relationship to his morality shaped his descent into explicit S&M imagery. In my work, I question what has led my compulsion - constant policing of my body and others, of my sexuality and expression or repression of it, of my perceived identities and outward coding. Mapplethorpe questioned this, by invoking seemingly "opposite" traits within femininity and masculinity, such as submission and dominance. In the series *Jim and Tom, Sausalito*, two gruff men are pictured in a S&M relationship, the dominant figure urinating into the submissive figure's mouth. Culturally shocking and sexually explicit, this photo series subverts several previously-established Invisible

[10] Patti Smith & Kevin Shields, *The Coral Sea,* (Redeye Distribution, 2008)

Center ideals: heterosexuality, masculine dominance, and femininity's inherent unworthiness.[11]





[11] Ferguson, *Inv*

Figure 7. Robert Mapplethorpe, Jim and Tom, Sausalito, 1977, Photograph.

Smith wrote *The Coral Sea* after losing Mapplethorpe and many other friends during the 1980s, so it is fraught with emotion and enlarged personas of her loved ones. In their honor, Smith combines superhuman, godly myths with their human counterparts; primarily Mapplethorpe, being her personal symbol of the conflict between good and evil. In this way, her works are ethereal and fantasy, but relatable due to human hubris. *Delicate, with Clarity (What Others Do Not)* is meant to evoke specific moods and to create ambiance, in the way of setting the scene. I intend to drive narrative and story through vocal accounts and music. In Smith's footsteps, I have elevated my own self-importance, by questioning whether I'm an interesting subject to photograph, to delve into, to create an installation about. I have made myself into art simply by wondering if I might be.

I named my piece after Smith's lines "his delicate eyes saw with clarity what others did not"[12] because in taking these photos, I looked where many do not, to see with eyes that spent years observing and absorbing human behavior, to see what they do not. By this I mean that I have dug past cultural codings to see myself in a truer light - or at least, a more positive one. There is delicacy in the intimate prints and projections of my piece, an incredibly raw honesty in the vocal account of one night when overwhelmed, that work to counteract viewer's perceived codes and biases. These prints and images are things only I can see, and with a clarity after months working on this project, I approach my body and identity much less critically. A little more in love, fascinated, seeing more beauty in myself than before.

[12] Smith and Shields, *The Coral Sea*

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