

Desire: The Status of Women Through the Male and Female Gazes

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College, in partial fulfillment
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Artist Statement

Throughout art history, women have been portrayed through the “male gaze”. Men, more often than not, will depict women and their bodies through their own view of masculinity and heterosexuality, usually referring to women as objects of their own pleasure. The male gaze usually focuses on the appropriation woman’s body, beauty, and sexuality, also known as infantilization. Because of this, women, tend to make changes to their appearance and enhance their sexuality in order to be more desirable to heterosexual men.

In contemporary times, there has been a shift from the male gaze, to the female gaze. While the “female gaze” does not have definitive meaning, the viewpoint of the art shifts itself when in the hands of a woman. The female gaze allows the artist to demonstrate how it feels to be an object of infantilization, and in return, reflects the gaze back onto cisgender, heterosexual males.

I have created a three-channel video installation that uncannily demonstrates the status of women through the male and female gazes. The themes of the content are according to humor, eroticism, and discomfort of women, in order to become more desirable to their male counterparts. I have used conventional beauty products, such as makeup and Spanx, as well as unconventional materials, such as corn syrup, glitter, and paint, to create the content.

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The Exhibition

I have created a projection installation for my senior comprehensive project consisting of a three-dimensional triangle hanging freely from the ceiling. This installation has been fabricated from flat stock of steel, with projections onto glassine. The content is then projected using three pico projectors, each on their own tripod, and then placed around the installation. The content consists of still images and videos of women in their twenties. Only one person is to stand inside the installation at a time, in order to provide a fully immersive experience for the audience. Three projections are happening at once, all in relation to each other. For example, there will be three different projections of fake eyelash application and removal happening simultaneously for a period time, and then changing to the next set of videos, remaining in relation to each other.

The purpose of my project is to uncannily demonstrate the status of women through male, and female, gazes. The themes of the content are according to humor, eroticism, and discomfort of women. The content has been created using beauty products, clothing, and unconventional items such as paint, frosting, and corn syrup.

The content created has been inspired by Ana Teresa Fernandez, Pipilotti Rist, Leah Schrager, and Marilyn Minter. I am referencing themes of Carolee Schneemann, Lauren Greenfield, Sara Shakeel, and feminine discourse for the content and background of my project as well.

Feminist Art Rhetoric

Feminist art and gender consciousness started receiving more attention at different times in history, especially post World War Two (Kalb, 2014). These female artists were influenced by many postwar artistic movements such as Fluxus, Actionism, and Gutai, while adding their own personal experience as a woman in society (Kalb, 2014). Artists were beginning to combine

art with politics, as well as the social and the individual (Kalb, 2014). By the 1970's these ideas were as important to the artists' practice just as much as making the art was (Kalb, 2014). As the third wave of feminism came around, intersectionality became an important aspect to feminist art (Fields, 2012). The hardships women faced, as they still do, were not limited to upper class, cisgender, heterosexual, white women (Fields, 2012). So, this intersectional way of thinking then influenced more art to be created. This period of time during the 1970s also aided gender identity and sexuality investigation through art (Fields, 2012). Broadly speaking, feminist artists wanted to clarify the relevance of the political and social standpoint of their ideas in order to understand their message as well (Kalb, 2014). These "artists and critics began a process of redefining artistic production as a significant strand of intellectual and political history" (Kalb, 2014). The art created by these women ranged from implicit to explicit actions (Kalb, 2014). A more implicit, simple action, was Yoko Ono's performance piece of watching a fly (Kalb, 2014). An explicit example was the performance piece, *Genital Panic*, created by the artists who were a part of Austrian Actionism standing, who stood in front of an audience wearing crotchless pants (Kalb, 2014). While these works were created to express their identities as when in a male-dominated society, the aid to change is not to place more attention on women, yet to situate women's art in relation to an already established structure, the patriarchy (Kalb, 2014).

Most depictions of women in art, throughout history to current times, are usually created by men and their ideals of the female form (Brand, 2006). Yet, the men who create these representations of women have not had the experiences that women do, in order to correctly portray their stance in society (Brand, 2006). That does not suggest that men cannot make feminist-based art, but encourages the creators to have a pro-female ideology in order to strengthen ideals of self-empowerment, positivity, power, and independence in being a woman

(Brand, 2006). More-over, women who create female-centered work have more legitimacy to their intent, because they have experienced these themes personally. Yet, because of the patriarchal control over socially-constructed hierarchies, institutionalized bias against women has become a cultural norm time after time (Brand, 2006). As women have fought to have their voices and ideas be heard, they still struggle with the lack of legitimacy and respect for their work due to this institutionalized bias, constituting them as a minority (Brand, 2006). This can be seen in many aspects of life, but especially throughout the world of art (Brand, 2006). This patriarchal stance on society has withheld opportunities for women to succeed, such as education and grounds for creating their art (Brand, 2006). As stated by Linda Nochlin, art historian, “educational opportunities, the customs of workshops and studios, not to mention the venues for patronage, exhibition, and sales were all shaped to suit men. The few women who did ‘make it’ were exceptions whose success often relied on help from a male guide” (Kalb, p. 38, 2014). This then results in women’s successes to be diminished or deprecated (Brand, 2006). The continuation of this insensitivity and inexperience of men allows the patriarchy to hold power over women not only in the arts, but also in the sense of religion, politics, science, economics, and philosophy (Brand, 2006). This type of power in Western society, as interpreted by the European historian Althusser, is that social norms are not created by assumptions of that particular society, rather by ideologies and happenings that create products of how that society was organized (Kalb, 2014).

Male representations of women in art history have more often than not depicted women as not only physically attractive, but also weak, inferior, and passive (Brand, 2006). But on the other hand, some men portray their female subjects as a threat to men due to their lust that cannot be restrained, which creates a sort of domination over the man (Brand, 2006). Yet, as women try

to counteract these themes through their own female-centered art, it is usually looked down upon because of its provocative nature, such as *Genital Panic*, or because it is bringing these issues of patriarchal hierarchies to light, such as Leah Schrager's *Barcode* series. (Brand, 2006). That is why feminist art's directive has two components (Brand, 2006). For one, the art attempts to defy the historical traditions of how women are portrayed in art by men, as well as advocate for the successes of women, as well as their independence and empowerment (Brand, 2006).

These male representations in art, are also known as the "male gaze" (Cohen, 2017). In regards to film and photography, the male gaze has three facets (Cohen, 2017). These are how the camera is positioned to capture the subject, how the models, actors, or participants interact with each other, and how the audience views the final product (Cohen, 2017). Laura Mulvey, a British film theorist, describes the male gaze as feeding political and intellectual understanding of the work at hand (Cohen, 2017). She states, "'male gaze', much like 'white privilege' and 'heteronormative,' is a phrase utilized most by those who seek to destroy the phenomenon it identifies" (Cohen, p. 2, 2017). Yet, the "female gaze" is beginning to become a popular term in mainstream culture, such as art and television (Cohen, 2017). While the term, "female gaze" does not yet have a conclusive definition, it can be categorized as women making the art themselves, throughout their own vision and experiences (Cohen, 2017). With women in control of the art, a new aesthetic can come into play (Cohen, 2017). "The female gaze reclaims the body to evoke feeling, uses the camera to show how it feels to be the object of the gaze, and returns the gaze onto cis males" (Cohen, p. 5, 2017). Overall, in contemporary culture, women can, and do, use the "female gaze" to best suit the point they are trying to get across (Cohen, 2017).

In order to understand feminist art more concisely, feminist art epistemologies, or FAEs, are crucial to the artists' work (Brand, 2006). FAEs are especially helpful to viewers understand hidden themes throughout the works (Brand, 2006). Feminist art epistemologies can be identified from the works of art directly, or they can be taken from outside sources (Brand, 2006). If outside sources need to be identified, the viewer must have previous knowledge of the art or satiation of the art in order to fully understand the meaning (Brand, 2006). But, sometimes this knowledge is communal, based on the artists and viewers communication with each other about the content and messages (Brand, 2006). FAEs can be identified in many different ways, considering that feminism is intersectional (Brand, 2006). These epistemologies can change due to geographic region, culture, time period, politics, and psycho-analyzations (Brand, 2006). In that sense, FAEs can sometimes be seen as contradictory (Brand, 2006). One woman may find that having provocative images of herself displayed is a sense of empowerment, while another woman may see that as contributing to the male gaze. Also, feminist art epistemologies do not only apply to feminist art (Brand, 2006). A female viewpoint on artwork can be used when critiquing other artists' work. Overall, these epistemologies are crucial to a full understanding and appreciation of the intent of the artists' work (Brand, 2006). Without intent, the work has less of an impact on the audience, and possibly society as a whole.

Artistic Influences

As I have been creating my senior comprehensive project, I have looked at several female artists who create feminist-based works. All of these artists' works have been influential to my own processes. An artist that has been one of the largest influences to my current work is Pipilotti Rist. Rist is a video artist who creates female-centered, usually using herself of the

muse, to create video installations (Weintraub, 2003). Many of her works have included themes



Figure 1 Pipilotti Rist, Tribute - open my glade, 2000, video installation, Times Square, NYC.

of female gullibility, seduction, affection, intimacy, fantasy, and psychic turmoil (Weintraub, 2003). Her work was first criticized for being too experimental

(Kennedy, 2009). Her

videos contain an array

of colors and visuals that

were not commonly seen in video production when she first began creating works (Kennedy, 2009). Inspiration from Rist's work can be seen in my videos of a woman kissing a glass, and applying lipstick all over the model's face.

I used this content to show women either breaking the social norms of using beauty products, and also to bring about a sense of seduction and affection through the lips and tongue.



Figure 2 Cali Banks, 2018, Desire, Video Documentation.

Individuals may not appreciate Rist's work, due to it seeming like she is wallowing in self pity for relationships gone wrong, or for feeling insecure as a woman that society had deemed "beautiful" (Weintraub, 2003). Yet, Rist continued to make work that she could imagine fitting into everyday life (Kennedy, 2009). She considers herself a service worker, in regards to what her art can bring to individuals' lives (Kennedy, 2009).

My structure, inspired by Pipilotti Rist's work, relates to the content and themes of my work as well. The structure is hanging from the ceiling, allowing the audience to view the video content from the outside, and the inside. The way the content is being projected will cause the videos



Figure 3 Pipilotti Rist, 2016, Pixel Forest, 2nd floor at the New Museum, installation view. Image: New York



Figure 4 Cali Banks, 2018, Desire, Bowman~Penelec~Megahan Art Galleries, Allegheny College.

to look different on the outside of the structure, versus the inside. When the viewer is inside the structure, they are confined in a small space, being forced to look at the content in front of them. That is the purpose of the size

of the structure; so the viewer cannot look away from what is right in front of them. The structure also

plays into the idea of physically entering a space to understand what is at hand; and in this case, it is a woman.

Leah Schrager is another feminist artist that has inspired my work. Her work is inspired by the ideals of man-made work in regards to women and their nude bodies (Banks, 2017). Schrager states that men are able to eroticize and appropriate female bodies, for art or personal reasons, but women are looked down upon for embracing their bodies and sexuality, and that is



Figure 5 Leah Schrager, 2016, Glitter 2, C Print, 30'' x 20''.

she is using her own body, yet these same individuals see the sexualization of women in everyday commercials and male art, and don't have an issue with it (Banks, 2017). Schrager states that when a male eroticizes a female body, it's art, but when a female does it to herself, it is no longer

considered that (Banks, 2017). At the

same time, all of these negative

comments towards her work are what she is trying to fight against (Banks, 2017).

Leah Schrager's influence on my work can be seen with my glitter sequences. In one example, I used glitter to represent hair on a woman's body. She is trying to shave it off, to be more desirable to man through themes of infantilization, but it can't come off completely. This also represents how these standards of beauty can also be considered a burden. I also use glitter

why she creates the work she does (Banks, 2017).

She also states that while women's bodies are

being appropriated and capitalized, their own

voices are being quieted (Banks, 2017). But,

Schrager receives a lot of backlash for her work.

Many individuals criticize her work for having too

much play with sexuality, especially considering



Figure 6 Leah Schrager, 2016, The Goldfinger Suite, C Print.

in one sequence as makeup, such as foundation, blush, and eyebrow fillers. I also use glitter and corn syrup as a sort of spit-up, which can be directly related to Schrager's work.



Figure 7 Cali Banks, 2018, *Desire*, Video Documentation.

Marilyn Minter has also been a large inspiration to my current project. Her work consists of paintings and images of bodies covered in substances such as makeup and glitter (Wilkinson, 2013). Wilkinson describes her



Figure 8 Marilyn Minter, 2009, *Wangechi Gold 3*, C Print.

work as looking like a large spill, but her art is in fact, not accidental (Wilkinson, 2013). Minter starts her process with photography, either analog or digital, and then starts to edit in Photoshop (Wilkinson, 2013). She then has many rounds of placing that image under an object such as glass, or adding a substance, re-photographing and editing, and the process continues until she has reached the final product

(Wilkinson, 2013). Early images taken

of her mother that lead to her current

work with oozing and glittery

materials have shown Minter's thought process behind her idea of beauty and glamour being skewed (Wilkinson, 2013). Just like Leah Schrager, Minter has received much criticism in regards to the themes of her work, yet she sees those hardships as what aided her career to

success (Wilkinson, 2013). Minter states “I sort of feel like if you’re slightly marginalized, you’re hungrier, and you can take more risks and be more playful” (Wilkinson, p. 6, 2013).

Marilyn Minter’s influence on my work can be seen in my glitter sequences, as well as the frosting sequence. I referenced her oozing and gritty works to inspire the glitter spit-up images. These can be viewed as erotic or grotesque, depending on the viewer. Minter also inspired me to use



Figure 9 Marilyn Minter, 2009, Green Pink Caviar, HD



Figure 10 Cali Banks, 2018, Desire, Video Documentation.

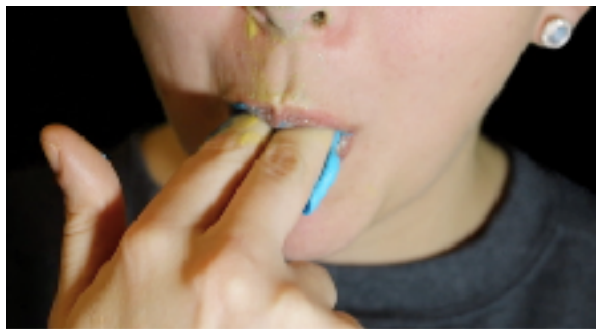


Figure 11 Cali Banks, 2018, Desire, Video Documentation.

frosting as the medium for a performance action to bring about eroticism to my project. The medium trends to be unidentifiable to the viewer based on its color and texture, yet the action can be blatantly viewed as erotic.

Along with many artists I have referenced, Ana Teresa Fernandez’s work focuses largely on gender politics (Isern, 2011). She uses the notions of growing up in a conservative, Mexican household that made her aware of power dynamics in gender at a young age in all of her work (Isern, 2011). Fernandez also illustrates how these notions of power struggles are also present in

the United States (Isern, 2011).

Because of these issues, she believes that women have an obstructed view of themselves, especially in the realm of



Figure 13 Ana Teresa Fernandez, Untitled (Performance Documentation), oil on canvas, 72'' x 48''.

Ana Teresa Fernandez's influence on my work can be seen with using conventional beauty products how they are supposed to be used, such as the Spanx sequence or false eyelash sequence. This relates to her wearing a black cocktail dress in all of her works. These are showing how everyday products that make the body more appealing to men, can also bring a sense of power to the woman



Figure 12 Ana Teresa Fernandez, 2016, Erasure (Performance Documentation), oil on canvas, 72'' x 98''.

intelligence and their personal sexuality (Isern, 2011). These are the themes that push Fernandez to create her works, and forces the audience to question why she's doing what she is (Isern, 2011).

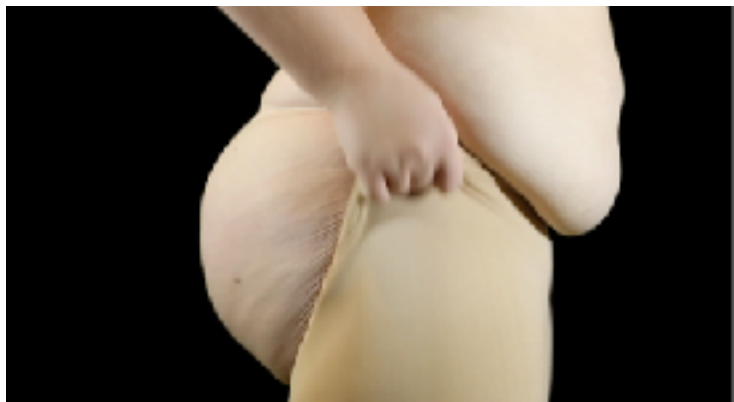


Figure 14 Cali Banks, 2018, Desire, Video Documentation.

using it. Her performance, *Erasure*, also inspired my self-painting sequence. While her original meaning is completely different than my idea, they are both representing the idea of covering yourself for a certain purpose. Mine was in relation to women “panting their faces” to appear better looking to their male counterparts, while using the socially-constructed color to represent females.



Figure 15 Cali Banks, 2018, *Desire*, Video Documentation.

Other artists that I have referenced to create the content of my work are Lauren Greenfield, Carolee Schneemann, and Sara Shakeel. For these artists, I referenced the themes and ideas of their work. Some of Lauren Greenfield’s past work has dealt with social pressures that women, especially young girls, experience daily in the United States (McGovern, 2003). In her series, *Girl Culture*, Greenfield sifts away from the overly staged techniques of photography, and created images that were more organic and realistic (McGovern, 2003). Some images are from a weight-loss camp, some are taken in upscale boutiques, others are girls getting ready to go to a school dance (McGovern, 2003). She uses young girls as her muse because they are at the most vulnerable times in their lives (McGovern, 2003). Through this series she is illustrating how young females react to these social pressures, and how that affects their appearances and sense of self (McGovern, 2003). This series not only comments on the “burden of beauty”, but also relates this back to greed and consumerism (McGovern, 2003).

Carolee Schneemann is another artist who I have looked to for inspiration. During the 1970s, eroticism became a popular theme in feminist art (Wentrack, 2014). Schneemann is known for defying common traditions of the patriarchy in regards to the female body and sexuality (Wentrack, 2014). She used these themes in her film, photographic, and performance pieces. Schneemann used female sexuality and pleasure to confront the audience with a powerful female figure (Wentrack, 2014). She also will use women and bodies that may not conform to patriarchal ideals of the body and sexuality (Wentrack, 2014). Schneemann creates work of strong, powerful women to inspire women (Wentrack, 2014).

Another artist's themes that I have referenced for inspiration is Sarah Shakeel. Sara Shakeel is a digital artist, mostly creating collages, that are shared through Instagram. Shakeel's most popular trend at the moment is using glitter to create stretch marks on female bodies (Roelich, 2017). Sara Shakeel is a strong proponent of body positivity and empowerment for all women, and this glitter stretch mark trend was a powerful start for her (Roelich, 2017). Women have begun to create versions of this trend using their own body, and then tagging Shakeel on their posts to spread the movement (Roelich, 2017). Shakeel believes that female empowerment is equal amongst us all, and that our achievements in life should not be equated to wealth, fame or beauty (Roelich, 2017). Shakeel also discusses the fashion industry, and believes that the industry needs to be more inclusive of women, and not normalize different body shapes as the beauty standard (Roelich, 2017). She discusses how her art flourished after making peace with herself and body, and wishes to continue that in future works (Roelich, 2017).

Personal Process

My process through the course of this project has incorporated all of these female artists, whether it is by specific works, or their ideologies and themes behind their art. At first, I only wanted to use myself as the model. Many of the artists I have referenced have used solely themselves, and I wanted to have more of a personal connection to the content itself. Many of my previous works have been seen as self-portraiture in other women's bodies, so I wanted to try something new. But after researching and starting to film the content, I realized I wanted to be more inclusive of all women. I wanted to include people of color, as well as different body types and shapes, throughout my work. Although I would've had a direct connection to my own experiences as a woman in today's society by using just myself, I am only one person. While I have disadvantages in contemporary times as a woman, I have advantages that other women do not, and vice versa. That is why I chose to use multiple women to complete my content.

While women of all ages receive criticism and stigmatization for their bodies and sexuality, I believe women in their twenties are target the most, at this time. During their twenties, women's bodies are changing from when they were an adolescent, which may cause dissatisfaction within themselves. This is especially prevalent with the influence of the media, in regards to the sexualization of young, slender, predominantly white models, known as infantilization. This is seen in advertisements for clothing, fragrance, makeup, and sometimes food and automobile services. These types of "ideal" women are also seen in fields such as dance, film, and modeling. The look of these women are socially-constructed, primarily by men. Women tend to believe that if they can uphold these standards of beauty and sexuality, then they will be seen as more desirable as a whole.

When creating the content of my project, I wanted each separate section of the installation to show a different woman, completing a completely different action than the video played before, and after it. Yet, all of the videos are able to relate to each other aesthetically and content wise. For aesthetics, most of the videos, except if they are an extreme close-up shot, contain black background. I did this purposely, to show all of the women in a void. Also, when viewing my installation from the inside, it will force the viewer to feel like they are in this void with the model participant. While the content ranges from beauty and appearance enhancing products to eroticism, they all have a common theme of women trying to be more desirable.

I wanted to use unconventional materials, as well as conventional products to enhance a woman's appearance, to uncannily demonstrate the status of women through societal standards. For one, I used colors such as pink, because that is the socially-constructed label for girls, or females in general. I also used glitter, for the idea that only women should wear or use it, and

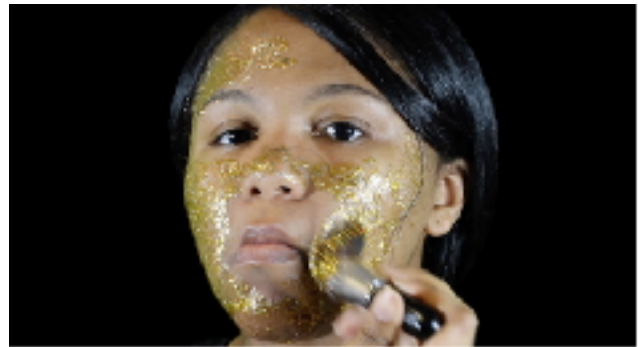


Figure 16 Cali Banks, 2018, Desire, Video Documentation.

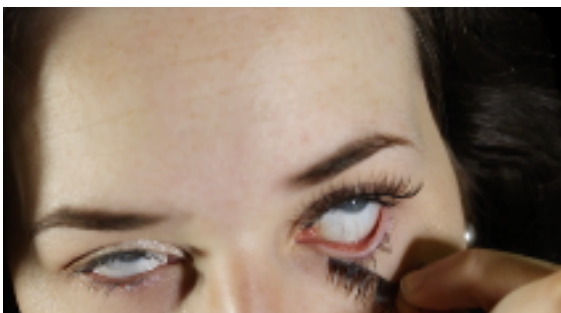


Figure 17 Cali Banks, 2018, Desire, Video Documentation.

the fact that it captures someone's attention. When using common beauty products, such as fake eyelashes or lipstick, I wanted to show how these products could uncannily be used to show how beauty can quickly turn into something grotesque, or odd. I used the Spanx product as it should have been, but it shows, in a slower speed,

how much one item can alter a women's body to look smoother and more slender.

Working with different women to create the content added to the importance of my work. When I used myself as the model, I knew exactly what I wanted it to look like, so it was an easier process than working with another individual. When I used other women for to create the rest of the content, each person was very concerned about how they looked, or making sure they weren't doing anything "wrong." I realized then that even though the concept of my project was to show these standards in an uncanny, humorous way, these women were still uneasy about their appearance. Every female involved said something to the effect to "this is your senior project, I don't want to mess it up," yet that is the premise of the entire work.

Conclusion

As the media and the patriarchy still exist, so will these socially-constructed ideals of beauty and sexuality. But since the 1970s, women were able to express themselves and their experiences more through their art, which brought attention to them that was first not given (Brand, 2006). While some of this attention may be negative due to the provocative nature of the art or because it is bringing patriarchal issues to light, women are continuing to demonstrate their stance on male-dominated art and points of view (Brand, 2006). As the male gaze shifts into the female gaze, women are able to create a new aesthetic to art that brings about their point of view, and in return reflects that gaze back onto their male counterparts (Cohen, 2017). So, because patriarchal hierarchies are still present in contemporary society, my project is important for the progression of feminist art. My work is making a statement on the social-construction of beauty and sexuality standards of women as well. This is especially important as young adult women are an apparent target for these standards, which can take a toll on their physical and psychological

health. By researching feminine discourse, as well as feminist artists, I was inspired to create an inclusive body of work that fits well into the themes of contemporary art, and issues these artists are addressing.

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Works Consulted

Ana Teresa Fernandez, 2016, Erasure (Performance Documentation), oil on canvas, 72" x 98".

Ana Teresa Fernandez, Untitled (Performance Documentation), oil in canvas, 72" x 48".

Leah Schrager, 2016, The Goldfinger Suite, C Print.

Leah Schrager, 2016, Glitter 2, C Print, 30" x 20".

Marilyn Minter, 2009, Green Pink Caviar, HD Digital Video, 7:45 minutes.

Marilyn Minter, 2009, Wangechi Gold 3, C Print.

Pipilotti Rist, 2016, Pixel Forest, 2nd floor at the New Museum, installation view. Image: New York Times.

Pipilotti Rist, Tribute - open my glade, 2000, HD Digital Video Installation, Times Square, NYC.