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A Contemporary Exploration of Fairy Tales and Social Identity Through Visual Language

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Abstract

This body of artwork seeks to use symbolism and visual language to explore contemporary construction of identity as influenced by fairy tales and folklore. At the center of this inquiry is the way in which identity and selfhood is created in a social context. Thus, the study of social constructionism as well as theories of identity construction underpins the work, with a particular focus on looking at how narratives play a part in the shaping of identity. The lens of visual culture serves as the platform for this exploration, which is processed and informed by the visual as well as narrative canon of historical fairytale and folklore, as well as contemporary more colloquial 'fairytale' (ie. fictionalized hyperbolic social narrative). The written word, as one artifact of these narratives, plays prominently in the research as well as final execution of each piece. Additionally, the spoken word is utilized in the research of many pieces, as direct dialogue and interviews with the subjects of the works inform the conceptual direction. Using a variety of media (primarily but not entirely 2D), this series is a collection of voices and identities that have been shaped by the social narratives of western culture. It asks the viewer to question which narratives they subscribe to, which they break free from, and how those decisions shape their world.

1. Introduction

The exploration of identity formation in the context of culture is a prominent component to many social sciences fields, and particularly those of sociology and anthropology. One of the core principles of sociological theory is the concept of social construction of reality. According to social constructionism, "reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always *embodied*, that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality" [2.] With individuals acting in such a crucial capacity in creating a social definition of reality, the conception of self becomes integral to how reality is constructed and understood. Further, one subset of identity theory focuses on narrative construction of self, and the role of narrative in defining subjective experience. By looking at these narrative frameworks of identity in the context of social constructionism, we begin to see how much reality defining power cultural narratives carry. While there have been a good number of scholarly (theoretical as well as data driven) explorations of these concepts and their implications, their application in the world of visual art is markedly less present in existing discourse. Explorations of these concepts in relation to visual culture, as well as their exploration *through* visual culture are thus valuable not only as further deepening understandings of the construction of self, reality, and social identity, but also as bridge to a portion of cultural discourse, that of fine art, which has been underrepresented in its role in the broader discourse.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Construction of Identity

The project of identity construction is multifaceted and extremely complex, and put in concise terms can be seen as the dialectic between internal sense of self and how this sense of self is received by the external environment. A continually evolving understanding, this sense of identity cannot exist solely in a vacuum of self contemplation, but shifts in response to and is shaped by social interaction, new stimuli and physical space (to name but a fraction of influencing factors). As highlighted in Callero's discussion of the theoretical sociological understanding of self, "self and identity are constructed within, not outside discourse" [3]. This understanding carries with it the logical extrapolation that the self is never static and never truly individually chosen. Further; this concept extends to not only interpersonal human relationships, but also to interactions with objects and cultural artifacts, and as such, a great deal more identity-creating power lies in external cultural forces than many people realize.

2.2 Fairytale and the Role of Narrative

One such external cultural force with a particularly powerful capacity for identity creation is that of story. Narratives, especially those embedded deeply in our society, provide an easily replicable cultural structure for understanding identity. The more they are repeated and retold, the more ingrained they become in the fabric of socially defined reality. One set of stories that perfectly embodies this idea is the set of narratives we refer to as classic fairy tales. Many fairy tales that are a part of contemporary American culture have roots reaching hundreds of years back through multiple variations. The commonality of fairy tales in American culture, and especially their association with childhood, contribute to the high degree to which they have been culturally internalized. As described by Ahn, "by helping to mold personality and establish a basis of identification, these stories encourage children to internalize individual values" [1]. Not only do many people recall fairy tales with fondness from their own childhood, but the codes of morality, worth, and entitlement continue to inform how people as adults interact with and understand the world. "Narrative identity discloses itself in the dialectic of selfhood and sameness. What is more, in the plural world, stories are key to understanding who we are" [1]. There is value, then, in not taking these narratives on face value as 'just' children's stories, but in looking at them with more of a critical lens to understand the ways in which their influence does not stop on the pages that contain them. These narratives gain further strength in identity formation and manipulation when compounded by elements of visual culture that reify identity categories containing complementary socially prescribed scripts of selfhood. For instance, a narrative of gendered passivity from a fairytale about a 'damsel in distress' saved by a heroic male protagonist may reinforce a similar broader identity category as the visuals of a billboard of a woman's image in an advertisement for a home security system or a painting of a nude female body reclining in a vulnerable position hung on the walls of a gallery.

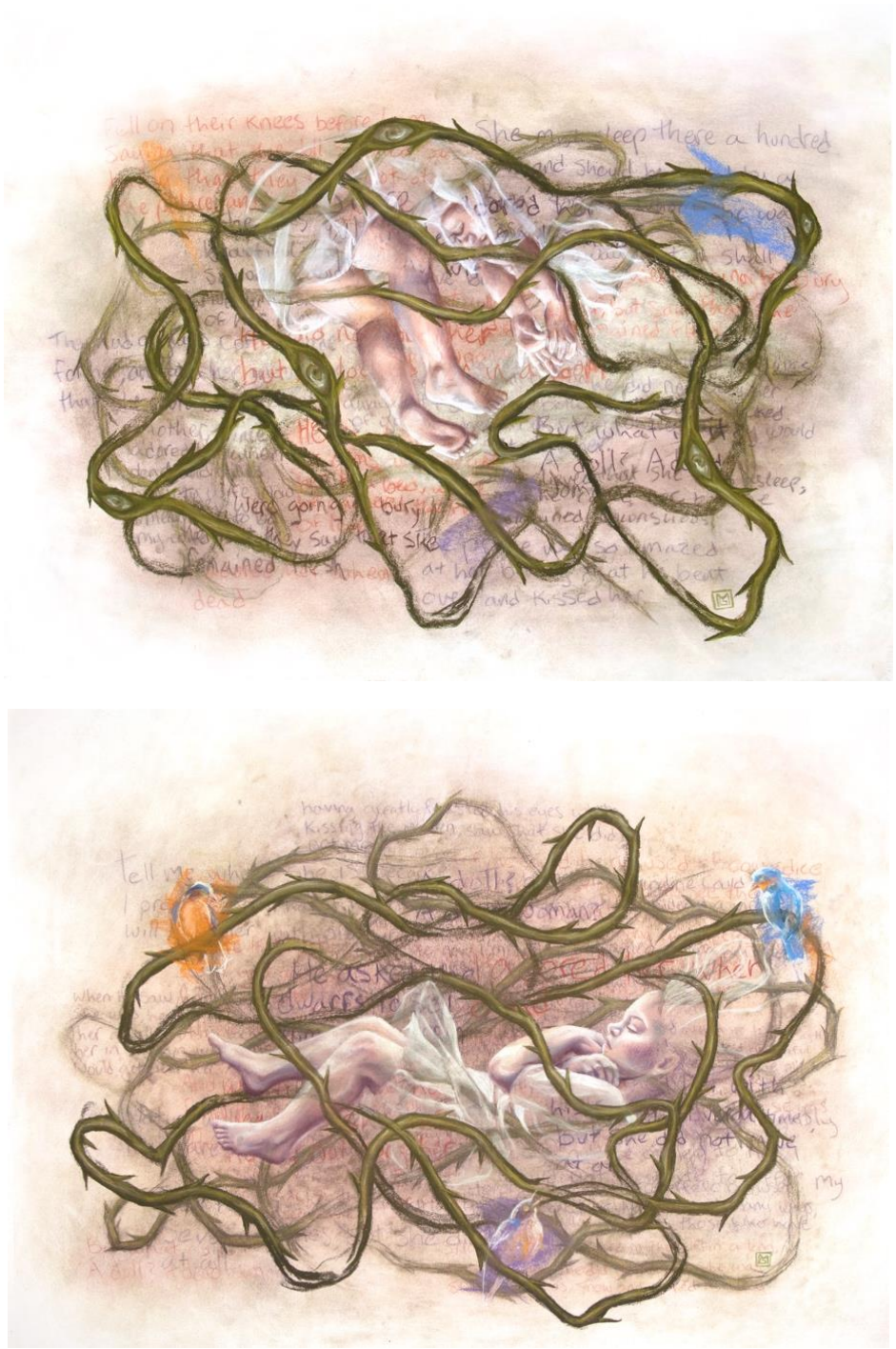


Figure 1. “Sleep”

2.3 Visual Culture and Narrative

Visual culture then, is a facet of identity construction which through a rather different avenue has the potential to contribute to some of the same conceptions of selfhood and identity that narrative constructs through language and story. Garoian, in their exploration of visual culture through spectacle pedagogy defines visual culture in dualistic terms, the first definition being “a ubiquitous form of representation, which constitutes the pedagogical objectives of mass-mediated culture and corporate capitalism to manufacture our desires and determine our choices” [5]. In this first

portion of their definition, the power to dictate and shape socialized identity and interaction is inherent to visual culture itself. This is a perspective not unique to Garoian, but one reflected to varying degrees through many other scholars on the subject. Denys frames the concept in terms more grounded to daily life; “not only do advertisements, books, television, film and art encourage expected behavior, they often contain underlying themes that reflect and enforce how we are structured as a society” [4]. In the same way identity construction and the construction of identity through narrative are dialectic processes, so too does visual culture both shape identity groups and shape itself in response to those groups. With the shifts in technology and globalization that have come to define the trek towards modernity however, visual culture has become more accessible, prevalent, rapid in evolution, and importantly, more commercially linked. These shifts have led some scholars such as Cetina to argue that visual culture has gained heightened importance in the processes of socialization and identity formation. “Knorr Cetina (2001) examines the sociological implications of a post social environment, where the individualization process of modernity empties out traditional forms of sociality but creates space for nonhuman social resources. It is her position that "the modern untying of identities has been accompanied by an expansion of object-centered environments which situate and stabilize selves, define individual identity just as much as communities and families used to do"” [3]. Following this train of thinking then, visual culture may indeed be less of a side note in understanding the process of identity formation and more of a powerful player in and of itself, with valuable perspectives to lend to narrative identity.

2.4 The Body as a Tool of Narrative Identity and Visual Culture

One symbol and tool that is almost unparalleled in its omnipresence in visual culture is the human body. The body also plays a crucial role in identity formation, socialization, and even the degree to which narratives are able to impact a sense of self. The ways in which bodies are raced, gendered, sexed, and grouped into varying degrees of ablebodied and neurotypical from the moment of birth onwards create a specific set of identity groups and lenses through which identity is formed. The framework for ingrouping and outgrouping as a means of identity construction is established such that narrative and visual culture alike are filtered increasingly by the notion that an external cultural factor does or does not ‘look like me’. In a strikingly similar argument to many in the field of dialectic identity construction, Grosz approaches the body’s place in visual culture from the stance that “the investments and significances attributed to the different regions of the body image are not simply the consequence of the subject’s sensations or the subject’s relations to others but also result from the significance of body parts for others (their own as well as the subject’s). In this sense, they are never self-determined, voluntarily adopted, or easily shaken off, for they are to a large extent a function of socially shared significances” [6]. As a result, we can come to see the body as not only a container for the self as it is dialectically constructed through interaction, external stimulus and narrative, but as an active conduit for those processes, a social construction itself that shapes the receiving of information, expression of information, and the contextualization of information in a world where visual culture increasingly shapes our social existence. Grosz takes this idea further, to argue that “bodies are fictionalized, that is, positioned by various cultural narratives and discourses which are themselves embodiments of culturally established canons, norms, and representational forms, so that they can be seen as living narratives, narratives not always or even usually transparent to themselves. Bodies become emblems, heralds, badges, theaters, tableaux, of social laws and rights, illustrations and exemplifications of law, informing and rendering pliable flesh into determinate bodies, producing the flesh as a point of departure and a locus of incision, a point of “reality” or “nature” understood (fictionally) as prior to, and as the raw material of, social practices” [6]. This last point, that the body is commonly (mis)conceived as artifact of a more objective kind of reality separate from the socially defined one, has particular weight when viewed in the context of art criticism and visual culture.

2.5 Visual Culture and the Shortfalls of Art Criticism

If understood in these contexts, the body becomes an incredibly powerful tool of visual culture and the capacity it carries for socially coded language, which should not be understated. Because of the ubiquity with which the human form takes up pages in magazines, square footage on billboards, posts on social media, screen time on television, and wall space in a gallery, the phenomenon arises that with this ever increasing frequency we find an ever decreasing critical analysis of the information transmitted. As opposed to balancing it, this phenomenon serves to only reify Grosz’s above assertion, that bodies are perceived as at least partially separate from the social dialectic and untouched by discourse. This pattern of separation between the visual world and the intellectually critiqueable world sets up then a fascinating set of frameworks for critiquing visual culture, and more precisely (for my interests, anyways) for critiquing visual art. This has implications for the field in a variety of capacities, from art education curriculum that

fixates on proportion, color and rendering as prescribed by a canon of primarily white primarily male artists, to art critics who view themselves as having transcended those hurdles to speak a visual language that is more 'genuine' and deeply contemplative in ways that other non-visual non-artistic discourses could never hope to quite attain. Vogel articulates this in a way rather reflective of previous discussions on visual culture and the body; "The inhabitants of the art world frequently treat art as a faithful mirroring of reality: the image of a thing is assumed to be identical with, and perhaps more "true" to, its actual being. Thus art is often presented as not only autonomous but also somehow more real than the social experience it is supposed to portray" [7]. This establishes a fascinating dynamic in which historically art is created and critiqued inside of discourses that establish themselves many times as somehow insular and distinct from the broader social dialectic, which if understood in the context of the scholars mentioned up to this point, would be a perspective that modifies internal behaviors far more than it reflects any absolute truth that has any control over the discourse's reach. In art movements that rose to prominence largely in the 20th century however, it can be argued that this mindset began to be challenged through a greater intentional engagement with broader social dialogues. "Visual artists beginning with the Cubists, Futurists, Dadaists, and Constructivists at the beginning of the century through to the performance and installation artists of the 1980s and 1990s understood the power of visual culture and the need to contextualize the allure of its spectacle within art in order to problematize the authority of its capitalist ideology" [5]. By this reasoning, it is the self-aware contextualization of both the broader society and the social coding of visual culture itself that mark these movements as distinct and more effective players in cultural discourse. For the sake of my purposes, I would clarify (modify) Garoian's stance out of concern that any artist within these movements might get a 'pass' which might ultimately reroute them right back to the pitfall of Vogel's 'more true' art fallacy. Rather, I would assert that individual artists have been able to create work that is varying degrees of effectively contextualized, and within more recent movements, installation artists for example, the full set of participants (artists, audiences, critics, etc.) have been more focused on having direct discourses about the context of power as being inherently crucial to the work itself.

2.6 Alternative Frameworks for Visual Culture and Critique

If visual culture is omnipresent in shaping our experiences, and the frameworks of art and art criticism frequently insulate visual discourse from its broader contexts, the question becomes from what position can we engage in visual dialogue and criticism in a more effective manner? Garoian proposes one potential approach through the concept of spectacle pedagogy which embraces these hindrances in order to navigate around them; "we characterize the spectacle pedagogy of visual culture in two opposing ways ..: first, as a ubiquitous form of representation, which constitutes the pedagogical objectives of mass-mediated culture and corporate capitalism to manufacture our desires and determine our choices; and second, as a democratic form of practice that enables a critical examination of visual cultural codes and ideologies to resist social injustice" [5]. In the spirit of this kind of approach then, the focus of this work is an engagement with narratives, in particular with fairytales and folklore, and the construction of identity in western society in a way that not only portrays these issues but the resistance of those individuals portrayed. By choosing not just to create work about culture, but work that directly engages with it, work that is painted across and drawn into the direct artifacts of everyday life, work that is shaped by the words of those sitting in the frame, this research seeks to make more porous the bounds between the work produced and the realms of culture it critiques. In this way, there is also an attempt to make the discussion a more open one, not so much any one definitive statement but more a contribution to a larger ongoing dialogue in a way that critiques and responds to socially constructed identity, and hopefully leaves the viewer with yet another perspective to then respond to themselves and further their own version of that discourse.

3. Results and Discussion

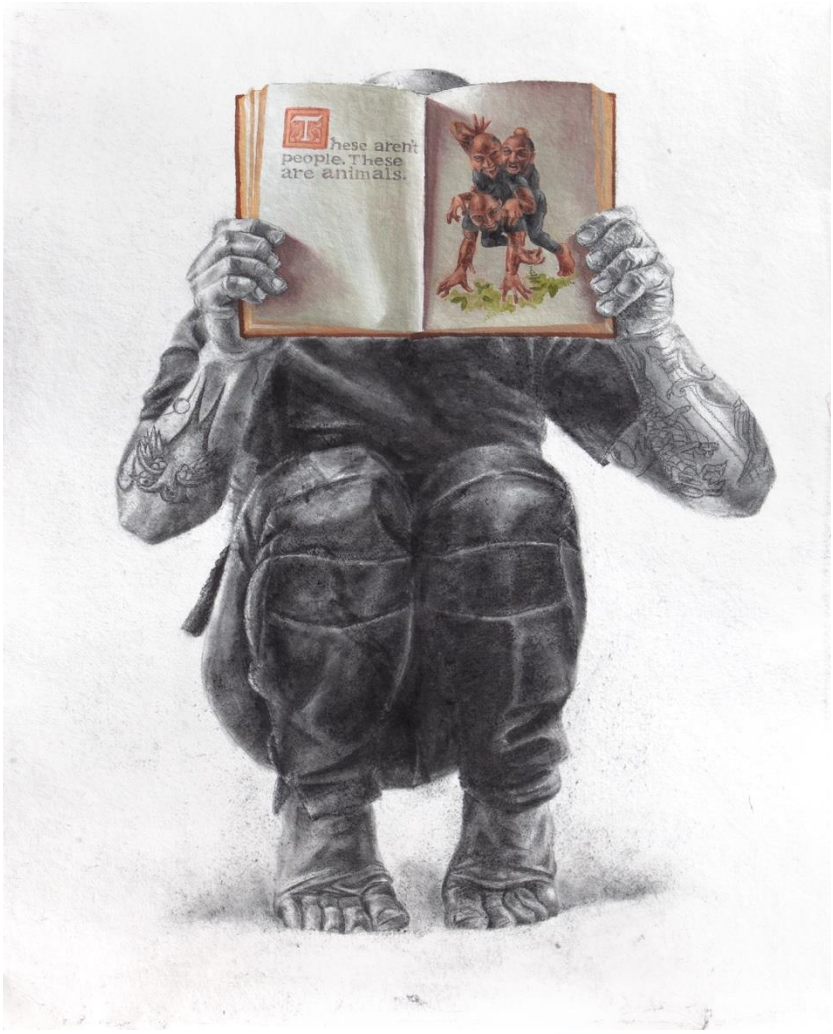
This research seeks to critically analyze the construction of identity through the lens of fairytales. Or to be more precise, through the lens of visual culture, which is then processed and informed in a dialectic sense by the visual as well as narrative canon of historical fairytale and folklore, as well as contemporary more colloquial 'fairytale' (ie. fictionalized hyperbolic social narrative). With a specific emphasis on how these narratives affect formation of identity and thereby influence the creation of reality, this series tries to make the bridge between roles as they are defined in the fairy-tale context and roles as they exist in the everyday context. The first piece that was prepared for display through this research was *Fairytale and Whitespace* (Figure 2), one in which the figure was constructed fictionally,

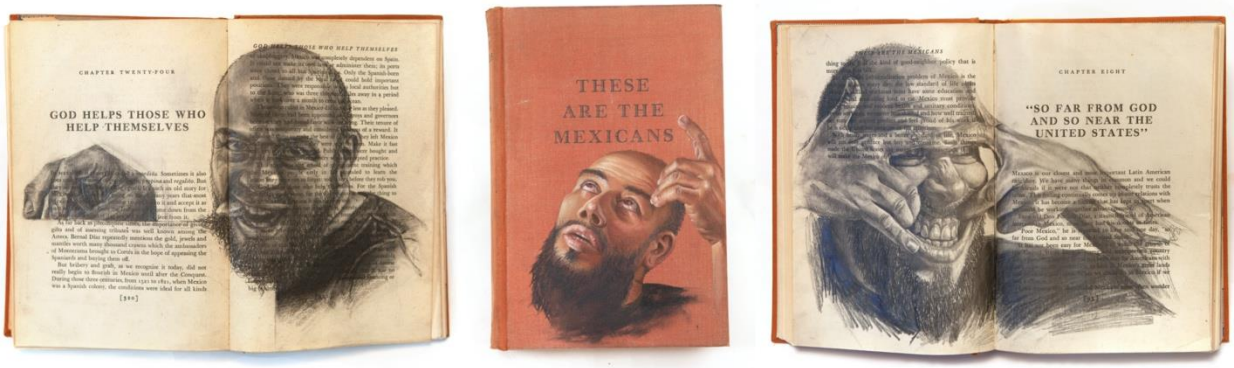
based more on publicly available interviews, scholarly articles, and the like related to fictional narrative spaces in relation to inclusion and exclusion of specific kinds of bodies and identities.

Figure 2. “Fairytale and Whitespace”

This piece is reflective of my journey towards a more effective form of visual discourse, particularly in reference to involvement of the subject. While it pulled from various voices speaking to the issues portrayed, these voices all existed in a context where they did not have a chance to respond to or participate in how they were portrayed- and in discussing the erasure of bodies and narratives, it has become clear that I participated in the erasure of voices and

consent by highlighting voices that did not have a say in how they were highlighted. The second piece prepared for display, *Fairytales of Mexico (*Figures 3 and 4*)*, marks an important step in this evolution- direct interaction with not only the subject, but also materials and narratives the subject is deeply affected by. Through developing a more full and dialectic understanding of an individual's feelings of place within visual and narrative culture, a grounds for more compassionate as well as critical discourse is formed. Not only were there spaces to explore the narratives of fearmongering and racially coded moralizing that exist in the current political climate towards Latinx people and particularly those from Mexico, but by engaging with the found materials provided by the subject, Herbert Cerwin's *These are the Mexicans*, there was also space created to trace these narratives through decades of historical literary variation. Through these discussions and avenues of exploration, the specific political and social inscriptions on the body of my subject became an active player in the work, allowing for both a more intentional and more effective portrayal of the individual involved.





Figures 3 and 4. "Fairytales of Mexico"

The newer works (Figures 5-9) take a further step, instead of conducting new research and then discussing it afterwards with a subject to find intersections, these works were approached with an initial discussion of overarching themes in the series, but no specific narrative research until an interview had been conducted. Interviews took place (one in person and one digitally) first, and then more specific research into narrative traditions and contemporary social grouping took place in response to the interview, followed by a discussion of the research and a photoshoot to collect reference material. This process allowed for one step deeper involvement in the overall process of artmaking

in relation to the subject- as not only was their own perception of their experience able to be a starting point that carried with it a perspective more in integrity with what they live every day, but it also provided them a chance to respond to how I interpreted what they had shared without having to be put 'on the spot' but rather to sit with it and then later provide critiques before the reference material itself was collected.

Figures 5 and 6. "Cloaks of Selective Visibility"

Themes of segmented identity and a lack of agency in how perception dismisses or overemphasizes mutable vs immutable identity characteristics arose from the interview conducted for *Cloaks of Selective Visibility* (Figures 5-7) -leading me to focus the work around the fairytale heroic device of a cloak of invisibility, something that (in that particular form) only really shows up in western folklore and fairytale. One particularly poignant set of experiences that illuminates these themes, that of being seen only for the subject's blackness in a way that invalidated their Judaism, created a fascinating dialogue with the visual segmentation of the body, cut at odd angles by the drapery of an unseen cloth. Further, by taking this fragmented image and layering the image itself across transparent fabrics, the visual identity of the figure becomes dynamic, shifting in response to the location of the viewer. The ability to align the layers into a single clarified image is a task unto itself, and one which the viewer rapidly realizes is only able to be achieved for one section at a time, meeting the gaze of the figure perhaps or looking at a hand laid in a lap at the cost of the rest of the figure escaping focus. These layers are hung from a clothing store display rack and oversized clothes hangers, an allusion to the seemingly frivolous ways in which those with dominant invisibility (ie. to be white, male, straight, christian, etc. being the normal / status quo / not in need of explicitly stating) can choose which mutable

identity groups to display as if choosing clothing from a rack, as it serves them in whatever space they choose to inhabit. Choosing one layer over another in this case however does not change the fact that the figure has been fragmented- here invisibility is not a heroic plot device tossed on and off as they choose, but rather a selective visibility placed by white hands on a body not afforded the agency to determine their own visibility.

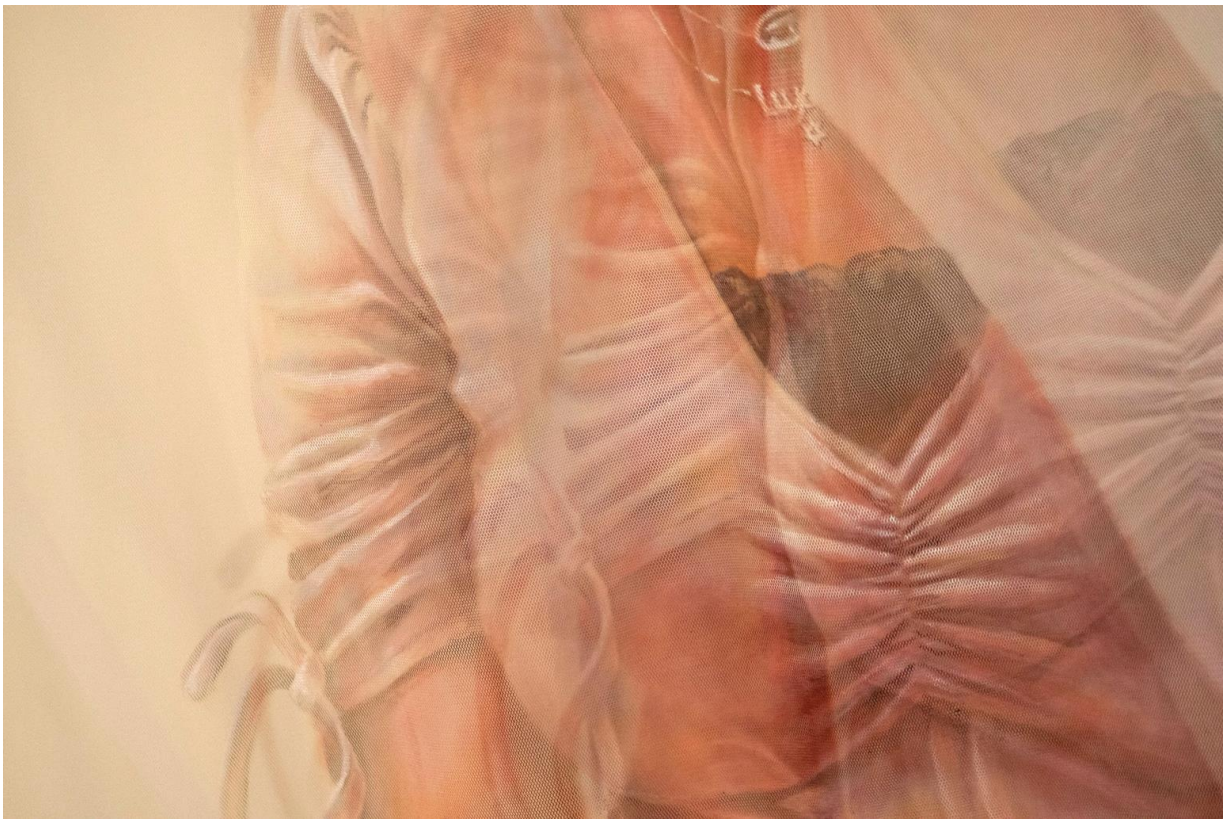


Figure 7. “Cloaks of Selective Visibility (detail)”

In *Consumed* (Figures 8 and 9), themes from the interview centered around a gendered silencing and removal of credibility from someone’s resistance on the basis of misogyny, as well as a sense of being handed an issue one did not choose but whose consequences are directly impactful regardless. This subject, an activist and public speaker in the movement to address climate change, faces daily various warpings of the narratives of the bible used in order to justify the ‘nonexistence’ of global warming, the ‘natural’ right to consume and prosper off of fossil fuels, and the ‘moral’ justification to not have to listen to opposition from youth or from women. As such, my work with their piece pulled imagery from biblical associations with women, such as the apple that tempted Eve, and the serpent (many times also portrayed as female) causing her ultimate downfall. Here however, the apple remains unbitten, and is placed not in the subject’s hand but atop her head, as the snakes wrap around her in the shape of an archery target. This individual neither desired to take the fruit, nor chose to bite into it, but is still left with it nonetheless. It rests balanced in a position meant for the sport of target practice, the masculine display of physical skill using someone else’s body as proof of the ability to narrowly avoid disaster. But in addition to the passivity of a figure trying simply not to be struck down themselves, to hold some degree of dignity while oil drips off the apple and down her shirt, there is also a ghost of her hands snapping the thin shaft of the arrow itself. By straddling both agency and lack of agency in the same figure, this piece seeks to present a window into the experience of being pushed to act in spaces where the expectation is your silence and complicity.

Figure 8. Consumed

Figure 9. “Consumed (detail)”

4. Conclusion

In the individualized focus of each of these works, an attempt is made to bring the broader structural theories into a space of tangible inter-relatability. The juxtaposition of large identity categories and social narratives that many times serve to abstract and dehumanize issues and individuals placed against the bodies directly inscribed by such narratives contextualizes in a more immediate sense the implications of such categorizations. This may not cause every one of those narratives to be unlearned, but in the situating of these works in the broader visual culture, these pieces are intended to at least open the door for discussion. More a question mark than a statement, the most important contribution to that discussion here is the questioning of the status quo, even if only in a minute capacity. And whether or not these works are effective in that aim remains yet to be seen- and cannot be determined by my hand as the artist so much as by the eye of whichever viewer decides it is worth their time to answer.

5. Acknowledgements

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All images included are photos of original work by Gillian Maurer