

# **The Binary Absurd: Still Life Drawings as Visual Metaphors for Gendered Experiences**

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## **Abstract**

Gender stereotypes and ideas related to traditional gender roles are often responsible for influencing personal experiences and perceptions of gender identity. Partially a consequence of the propagation of masculine and feminine stereotypes in contemporary marketing, mass media and education systems, this omnipresence of gendered biases in mainstream culture is underpinned by a definite lack of existing intersubjectivity between individuals directly aware and individuals not directly aware of gender-related issues. As a result of this, attempts at discussing the impacts of gendered experiences are frequently overshadowed or met with general disregard. Research concerned with semiotics, gender issues, the use of metaphor in visual art, and symbols of gender identity informs a series of highly colorful large-scale still life drawings which function to communicate an awareness and understanding of issues related to gender identity, gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles. Referencing stylistic choices and practices of artists affiliated with movements such as Photorealism and Pop-art (including artists such as Audrey Flack, Cindy Wright, Andy Warhol, and Claes Oldenburg), this body of work manipulates distinctly familiar and absurd gendered imagery in an effort to create a set of universally relatable visual metaphors that encourage audiences to examine the current discourse surrounding gender-related issues.

## **1. The Historical and Contemporary Functions of Gender-Related Stereotypes in Popular Culture, Marketing and Systems of Education**

Ideas and images of masculinity and femininity permeate many aspects of life in the 21st century, with popular products, media, fashion, and politics often attempting to define the lines between genders. It is evident that these ideas and images, which are continually referenced in marketing campaigns, popular media, and education systems, are derived from historically rooted gender stereotypes which research has since been disproven.<sup>1</sup> While it is apparent that societal gender norms have developed over time to become less restrictive, it is also clear that the presence of gender-related stereotypes in popular culture has not disappeared entirely. On the contrary, gender-based stereotypes are still heavily relied on as a means of communicating ideas to individuals in school curriculums, marketing campaigns, and the household environment. As a result of this sustained use of gender-related stereotypes as a vehicle for the marketing and consumption of popular culture, many individuals struggle with the process of discovering individual gender identity.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, gender related biases in popular culture have such an overbearing presence that they are often difficult to disregard, as these biases are visible even in gender identity-inclusive marketing campaigns and school curriculums.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Symbols of Gender

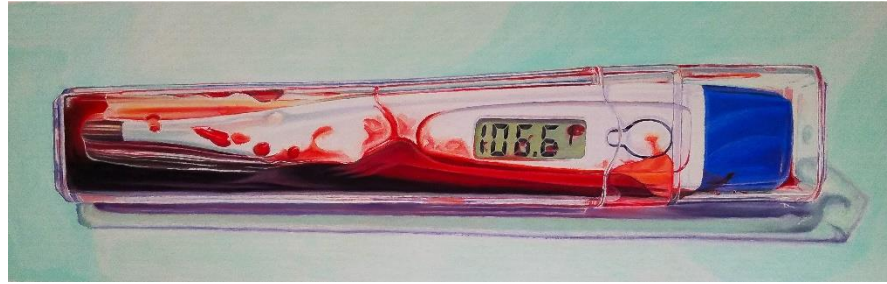
The continual use of gender-related stereotypes as a means of marketing and advertising products has had a significant impact on the ways in which gender is identified in the mainstream. Specifically, gendered marketing and advertising tends to adhere to a specific archetype and color palette when representing different genders— products marketed towards men typically include darker, less vibrant colors (light and dark shades of blue, dark greens, and shades of black are among the most common colors used in men’s advertising) as well as wording and iconography which recalls ideas of harsh natural environments and physical labor, while products with advertising campaigns geared towards women often utilize lighter and more saturated colors (such as light pinks, yellows, and greens) in addition to imagery and vocabulary relating to calm natural and household environments.<sup>4</sup> Other gender demographics, such as non-binary and gender nonconforming individuals, receive little representation in product marketing and advertisements, and oftentimes this representation is formulaic and/or offensive as a result of the use of imagery and ideas which perpetuate stereotypes— an example of this can be found in the frequent use of neutral colors (such as grey and black) in marketing campaigns which are targeted towards non-binary and/or gender nonconforming individuals.<sup>5</sup> With the consumption of media maintaining a steady increase alongside the pace of the 21st century, it becomes increasingly apparent that representations of gender in advertising are significant to the ways in which gender identity is learned, symbolized and identified by groups and individuals.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of the overwhelming integration of gender stereotypes into our daily life, certain imagery, colors, vocabulary and themes have become “charged” with gendered or sexually-related meaning— common examples of this include body hair, blood, medication/medical instruments, cookware, eggs, dairy products, and personal hygiene/health products.<sup>7</sup> In an effort to address issues related to the formation of individual gender identity, the artworks created for *The Binary Absurd* reference, manipulate, and juxtapose this “charged” imagery and language against distinctly absurd themes with the intention of identifying the oftentimes nonsensical nature of issues related to gender. Examples of these absurd themes include: the incorrect or nonsensical use of an object, the abusive manipulation/destruction of mundane objects, and the appearance of visual representations of disgust and futility in conjunction with the appearance of objects which are not typically associated with these descriptors.

## 3. Metaphor, Constructing Meaning, and Purposeful Ambiguity

It is common for arguments against gender-related biases to be outrightly labeled as such, and categorized with specific words that inform all parties of the argument’s gender related content (such as *feminist*, *queer*, and *liberal*, for example).<sup>8</sup> As a result of advertising this categorization, arguments in this genre often go unnoticed or are deliberately ignored by individuals who are aligned with ideals related to gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles. This negative reaction can be navigated by responding with a *foot-in-the-door* technique, where in this instance to create an understanding of a gender related issue it must first appear that a separate and unrelated issue is under review, and only after further inspection is the intended nature of the argument understood.<sup>9</sup> Relatable imagery, ambiguity, and metaphor can often function together to this end, as a means of circumventing pre-existing biases, as people are often drawn to items and ideas that are quickly recognizable or familiar.<sup>10</sup> By allowing the metaphors in my drawings to appear ambiguous, I enable the viewer to connect their own narrative to each artwork, opening up an avenue of relatability between the viewer and the intended meaning whilst increasing the chances for a successful understanding of the issues depicted in this body of work.

Careful thought is taken in the construction of meaning across this body of work. Objects which appear in these still life drawings undergo a rigorous selection process prior to their use in a composition. This selection process is comprised of many considerations, including: the object’s ability to be viewed as familiar by a wide audience, the presence of gendered imagery/vocabulary/themes in the object, and the object’s relationship to the semiotics of gender as well as its ability to function in a semiotic sense.<sup>11</sup> These considerations work along with the repetition of imagery, objects and themes (such as blood, hair, eggs, clear plastic, common kitchen items and medical/hygiene products) throughout this series to create a sense of relatability between the viewer and the drawings, which is intended to strengthen the possibility that the intended meaning of the artwork will be received well by the viewer regardless of personal bias.<sup>12</sup>



*Second Opinion*, Isabella Losskarn, Soft Pastel on Paper, 50" x 16 1/2" 2021

The appearance of absurdly thematized imagery of specific household objects is used in these drawings to help achieve metaphorical meaning, and is intended to directly mirror the nonsensical aspects of gender-related issues which each artwork discusses. A sense of absurdity is created in this series of work through unusual juxtapositions and interactions of gender-related objects, the accentuation and exaggeration of color, and the blatantly deliberate misuse/mutilation of gendered and/or gender related objects.<sup>13</sup> Themes such as futility, disgust, frustration, disappointment, and realization are hyperbolized in an absurd manner throughout the whole of this series of work. Pairing this illogically hyperbolized thematic imagery with gender-related symbols allows a cursory meaning to exist alongside complex meaning, which increases chances for stimulating individuals' understanding of new topics with visual imagery.<sup>14</sup> A close reading of *Will You Cut That Up for Her*, a pastel drawing created for the *Binary Absurd*, exemplifies how the use of metaphor, symbolism, semiotics, color and relatable imagery coalesce in this series of work to create meaning. The imagery in *Will You Cut That Up for Her* — a colorfully rendered raw egg spreading across a plate as it is incised by a plastic fork and knife — is intended to recall the familiar and all too frequent childhood experience of parents and other authority figures operating under the assumption that their children cannot do certain things because of their age and/or gender. Elements of the drawing, such as the specific shape and fluid nature of the egg yolk and the precarious positioning of the knife and fork, are accentuated and imbued with meaning to create a sense of tension and disappointment, intended to mirror the emotions that often accompany the familiar developmental experience of the classification of skill based on gender. Specifically, the egg yolk takes on the shape of a human fetus as a result of the penetration enacted by the knife and fork, and is intended to act as a symbol of life, creating a feeling of peril within the composition. Like the other artworks in this series, clear plastic is used here as a symbol for gender as, like gender, it is a distortive lens through which many different things may be viewed.



*Will You Cut That Up for Her*, Isabella Losskarn, Pastel on Sanded Paper, 34" x 41", 2021

By offering the viewer images of undesirable circumstances, the artworks in *The Binary Absurd* can be understood as a recognizable and relatable visual representation of how it feels to have individual freedoms revoked as a result of the choice to adhere to a specific gender or sexual identity. In *Will You Cut That Up for Her*, this unappealing imagery is intended to act as a metaphor which addresses this notion in relation to parental figures' differing treatment of children based on the gender or sexual identity of the child.

#### 4. Process

Soft pastel and pastel pencil are used in the rendering of this series of still life drawings, as engaging in the time-consuming process of layering color creates a space for mental reflection and elicits a sense of catharsis within me. As I make decisions regarding the layering and application of color, I feel as if I am rectifying aspects of my personal experience. With each new layer of pastel there is the opportunity to re-create an object, or alter its existence, which provides comfort and diminishes feelings of restraint or forced conformity that can arise from gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles.<sup>15</sup>

Compositions for this series are constructed through the use of photography, as oftentimes for my drawings I will seek out a specific moment or interaction between objects which cannot exist for longer than a short period of time. The exact or precarious placement of objects in relation to acts of destruction, acts of insertion, and the use of flowing liquids or substances (such as blood, or the contents of a freshly-cracked egg) can be considered examples of these time-sensitive elements which necessitate the use of photography for the formulation of compositions in this body of work. Additionally, reliance on photography allows me to retain total control over image-making, as I can use it to navigate to viewpoints which are inaccessible via traditional life-drawing techniques.

The use of an enlarged scale is also a significant factor in the creation of this series of drawings, as it functions as a means of bringing increased attention to gendered issues, in an effort to ensure that these issues are fully recognized and no longer ignored. Additionally, the use of a large scale in this series of works increases the ways in which metaphoric meaning can be constructed visually, by allowing for minute details and specific undulations of color to become more prominent aspects of each composition.<sup>16</sup>

## 5. Influences: Photo-realism & Pop-art

This series of pastel drawings is largely informed by Audrey Flack's photorealistic still-life paintings. In addition to Flack's approach to rendering, the drawings created for *The Binary Absurd* are also influenced by Flack's juxtaposition of carefully considered gendered and feminine imagery with vanitas themes to create meaningful statements about beauty. While this series of work does not reference *vanitas* themes, the drawings in *The Binary Absurd* make use of gendered imagery, colors, and themes in a way that is similar to Audrey Flack's still-life works, in an effort to stimulate a metaphorical interpretation of the works created for this series.<sup>17</sup>

Similar to the work of Audrey Flack, Cindy Wright's work has also been influential in the creation of this series of drawings. Painting on an incredibly large scale, Wright creates still-life artworks which also evoke the tradition of *vanitas* paintings. Through the utilization of absurd and disturbing imagery, Wright strives to persuade the viewer to consider the immediate reality of life, death and decline.<sup>18</sup> While Wright's work does not employ the use of symbol or metaphor, her approach to creating meaning through the manipulation of illogical imagery has been heavily influential in the creation of this series of work.

In addition to the work of photorealists such as Audrey Flack and Cindy Wright, the imagery in this drawing series also bears a striking resemblance to artworks produced during the Pop-art movement. Specifically, works representing everyday objects by artists such as Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg have influenced the appearance and positioning of objects within my compositions, as well as the overall scale of this body of work.<sup>19</sup> As the Pop-art movement was characterized by the creation of artworks which are intended to be viewed as nothing more than images of mundane and ubiquitous items, artworks affiliated with the Pop-art movement function as a comparative tool for this series of artwork, allowing for an informed construction of metaphorical meaning within each composition created for *The Binary Absurd*.<sup>20</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Marketing and product consumerism have a profound effect on the processes of forming individual and societal identities with relation to the idea of gender. A study of gender issues and gendered experiences recognizes a parallel between stereotypical representations of gender in marketing campaigns and the state of gender issues, throughout both the historical and contemporary. As such, this series of still life drawings has referenced familiar imagery and objects that are commonly gendered in marketing campaigns and popular media to create distinctly absurd artworks which utilize metaphor to make gender-related issues more relatable to a wider audience.

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## 8. Endnotes

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