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Symbolism of The Body

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Symbolism of the Body

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Fine Arts
Printmaking and Mixed Media

By Claire Ragland

B.A. Evergreen State College, 2011

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Abstract:

Using a variety of print mediums and mixed media processes, I create dynamic imagery derived from my own evolving mythology and symbolist language. These highly decorative pieces are rich with motifs and patterns that have emerged through my personal narratives as well as pop cultural movements. The iconic, androgenous figures in my compositions help me tell stories of queer relationality, connection with self and the natural world, and the complexities of my emotional landscape. Using different tactics to create doorways and openings around and within these pieces, I invite the viewer to step into these alternate realities to find layered meaning and insight.

Keywords: Queer, intimacy, symbolism, mythology, body, portals, utopia, printmaking, etching, aquatint, fabric, kitsch, camp, iconography, dreams

Chapter 1: Fabric

Creating works in fabric allows me the opportunity to connect with a history of women artists and working-class makers, while also aligning myself with the world of contemporary queer artists who use fabric and other 'craft' materials. Growing up with a mother who was a carpenter, seamstress, jeweler and all-around builder and maker, I have a deep reverence for the mastery of skill necessary to create finely crafted, pragmatic, decorative, or domestic objects, as well as an awareness of the ingenuity and creativity born from a working-class consciousness. The accessibility and familiarity of these materials allows my work greater relatability within popular culture. Fabric exists within nearly every facet of our lives. The human relationship with fabric is dynamic, intimate, nostalgic and invokes the themes of domesticity, femininity, and adornment. Fabric is a metaphor for connectivity. Fabric swaddles, warms, covers and protects, and offers opportunities for individual creative expression. It asks to be touched and enjoyed and shows signs of aging through its relationship with humans. As seen in my tapestry "*Release*," (Fig. 2) the quality of the material lends itself to the themes in this piece of intimacy with self and other, ancestry, and ephemerality. Printing on satin and silk allows me to incorporate luminous surfaces in my work, creating a source of light and movement, giving the viewer new ways of visually engaging with the imagery.

Chapter 2: Kitsch

The material and aesthetic quality of my works in fabric very much exists within the world of camp. In Susan Sontag's writings on camp and kitsch, she refers to this aesthetic as a "private code" or "stamp of identity." It is "a consistent sensibility that gives rise to a certain taste", and something that resists seriousness and pretentiousness. Kitsch is in praise of the intentionally exaggerated, in support of excess and a "more is more" aesthetic. While the meaning behind much of my work is at times quite serious or existential, my pieces remain highly ornamental, playful, colorful and dramatic in my use of satins, glittery fabrics and bold color schemes, as seen in my self portrait "*Broken Mirror*" (fig.2). Much of the symbolism I employ is at once personal while also existing within pop cultural movements, such as the repeating motifs of the rose, butterfly, flames, and the like. In this way, as Sontag puts it, I am speaking through this private code which contributes to my works general relatability. Marginalized groups of people, who have perhaps not had the same kind of access to traditional arts education and resources, have now emerged in the fine art world, bringing with them a legacy of craft and the ingenuity inherent in self-taught art making practices. This newfound prevalence and relevance of camp in the fine art world has not come without critique. In Clement Greenberg's 1969 essay *Avant-guard and Kitsch*, he laments the "dumbing down" of art in a society of mass production and consumer culture through the growing prevalence of kitsch in the high art world. He goes as far as to say that this shift is indicative of the bourgeoisie attempt to portray "false solidarity" with the lower classes in an attempt to prevent the masses visual identification of their class enemy. Greenberg's assertion that to encourage kitsch both makes class differences invisible based off of a new found shared aesthetic, and further reduces the funding and interest in "serious art," is an opinion which shows more than anything, Greenberg's interest in a particular legacy of art making. Today's prevalence of the kitsch aesthetic in the art world is indicative of a burgeoning inclusion of individuals from working-class and marginalized identities being granted access to these institutions, and in hand, making visible histories and experiences that were previously invisible, forging a path in which new art can follow.



Fig 1. Claire Ragland, *Release*, 2021. Screen printed and painted satin, miscellaneous fabrics 4'x4'

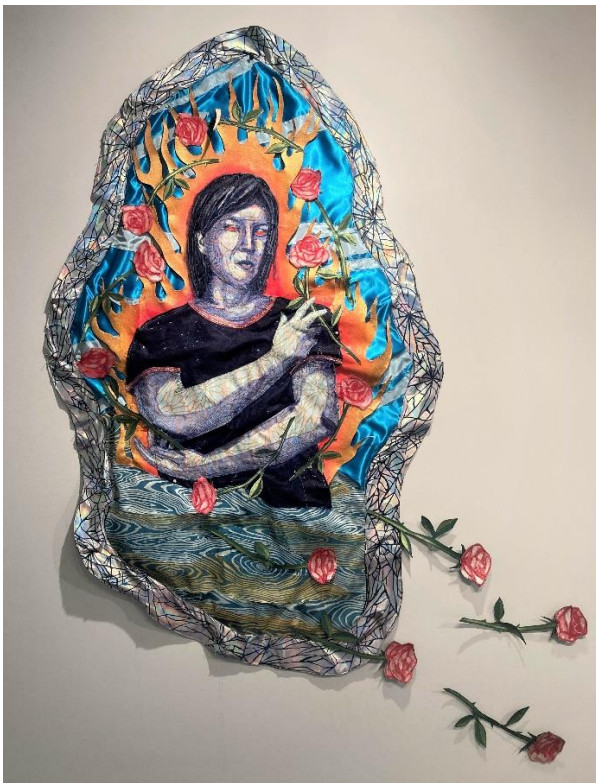


Fig 2. Claire Ragland, *Broken Mirror*, 2021, Screen printed satin, mesh, miscellaneous fabrics. 3'x4'

Chapter 3: Portals

I use the imagery of a doorway in much of my work to signify to the viewer that there is more going on than meets the eye. The visual representation of this idea is expressed through the depiction of thresholds or portals. For me, portals represent movement between the inner and the outer, the unconscious and the conscious, between the living and the dead, two separate, opposing, yet connected spaces. Creating doorways as borders around my etchings, and further making these openings within the piece itself, allows me to develop layers of context, as well as a more pronounced experience of peering into this alternate reality. The relationship between the figures in my work and these thresholds expresses a journey of personal transformation. In my aquatint "*Breakthrough*," (Fig. 3) this figure has been bound and scared, but emerges triumphantly through this threshold, their pain and renewal both represented through the flames emerging from the body. In other pieces, such as "*Eternal Sunset*" (Fig. 4) and "*No Fear*," (Fig. 5) there is the sense that these figures are at ease and settled within this reality, on the other side of the threshold entirely. In contrast, my Aquatint, "*Direct Experience is Contradicting my Fantasy*" (Fig. 6) the figure is not entirely aware that this opening even exists, however, despite their submission to a circumstance of solitude and what sometimes feels like the torment of self-reflection, there remains on the edge of their consciousness, a future promise of change and connectivity. The Ace of Hearts playing cards dancing from upright to reversed positions at the bottom of the piece, represents The Ace of Cups in tarot, further speaking to this eb and flow of our emotional and interpersonal lives. These doorways are representative of duality within the cycle of personal growth, and the perpetuality of leaving and arriving. In terms of the body, which exists as a sight of societal and interpersonal projection, portals become a mechanism for me to describe the unseen aspects of our emotional world and experience of self. Another way I think about portals is in terms of the narratives and experiences that exist outside of normative society. There are whole histories, worlds, realities that are alive while remaining simultaneously invisible. Marginalized people have had to create their own spaces and worlds within the dominant culture, moving in and out of these very separate yet connected realms.

Chapter 4: Dreamscapes and Utopias

I often refer to the environments that I create in my work as dreamscapes or utopias. Rather than creating utopias in order to escape reality, these images of my longings, emotional world, and dream life offer the opportunity for a kind of ritualized play and contemplation. The possibility of a kind of real utopian reality is highly unlikely, but we can bring moments of these ideal realities into our lives to uplift and inspire. There is a strong visual and conceptual link between mine and the work of many contemporary queer artists exploring utopia and a history of surrealism. The symbolist movement of the late 19th century was similarly interested in the "inner vision" and the rejection of the modern world as a subject for art. The 'dream,' was the art in itself, as the artist's way of communicating their subjective, felt experience or vision.¹ According to Joseph Campbell, our senses carry images to our mind from the outer world, which do not become myth, however, until they are transformed by fusion with accordant insights, awakened as imagination from the inner world of the body. Campbell believes it is the artist who can bring the images of a mythology to fruition, and that without these images there can be no mythology.²

In *Cruising Utopia; The here and now of Queer futurity*, author Jose Estabon Munez argues that queerness is essentially the rejection of the here and now and is rather the insistence on potentiality and the possibility of another world.³ I am not interested in forming 'us and them' mentality depending on particular markers of

¹ Alina Cohen, Symbolism, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-symbolisms-morbid-erotic-paintings-profoundly-influenced-modern-art> 10/20/19

² Menzies, James W. "Joseph Campbell and Myth." In *True Myth: C.S. Lewis and Joseph Campbell on the Veracity of Christianity*, 88-141. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Lutterworth Press, 201

³ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009



Fig 3. Claire Ragland, *Breakthrough*, 2021. Aquatint Etching on rag paper 11"x14"



Fig 4. Claire Ragland, *Eternal Sunset* 2021. Aquatint on rag paper 14x18



Fig 5. Claire Ragland, *No Fear*. Aquatint etching on rag paper 14"x18"

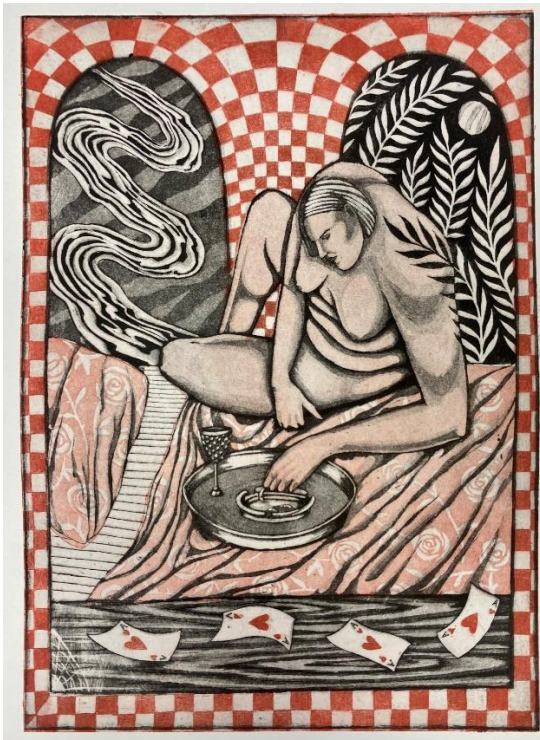


Fig 6. Claire Ragland, *Direct Experience is Contradicting my Fantasy* 2020. Two plate Aquatint etching on rag paper 10"x14

identity, or who is queer and who is not, but rather exploring the ideas that have emerged from queer theory and how they can be used to expand the collective imagination as to what is possible in terms of relationality and subjectivity. I am interested in how the liminality inherent in many queer and gender non-conforming people's lives, allows us to draw inspiration from the unknown, and uncharted spaces. Placing figures in these symbolic environments, such as in my piece "*Inevitable Expanse*" (Fig. 4) allows me to explore my desires outside of the inherently restrictive nature of this modern iteration of existence. One of my contemporaries, Shoog McDaniel (Fig. 7) is a queer photographer who creates mesmerizing utopias, photographing queer, fat bodies extending into a deep connection with each other and the natural world. There is a feeling of freedom and reverence in these photos that is in stark contrast to the ways in which mainstream society treats and feels about fat bodies. This kind of ritualized play actually has an impact on the people involved as well as those who get to view these photos, helping bring this vision of queer utopia into reality. Reading "Queer Feelings" by Ara Ahmed helped me think about the way the body is limited and effected by its environment. The signifiers of the body shift according to the kinds of spaces they inhabit. Ahmed expresses how "spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body⁴." The implications of this mentality around the body are far reaching from disability justice, trans rights, and other ways that certain bodies are deemed to be other, less then, and deserving of punishment, rarely being able to exist in spaces that reflect their desires. When we look at 'queer spaces' we see how they attempt to reproduce and make room for the possibilities of creative expression and the felt experience of queerness. The images I create become a mythical, metaphorical space that my body can inhabit. As Ahmed puts so succinctly, in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies, to be able sink into a space that has already taken your shape. I hope to achieve a sense of unity within the elements and compositions of these pieces to evoke this sense of the body shaping and being shaped by its environment.

Chapter 5: Queer Intimacy and Gaze

Queerness encompasses a spectrum of sexualities, gender experiences, and relationship models. The erotic lives of marginalized groups is something that has often been either fetishized or erased throughout history, and therefore, the act of marginalized people's reclaiming/liberating of the erotic is a transgressive act.⁵ In her novel *All About Love*, Bell Hooks helped me think about the ways in which love and care are shamed and devalued within this society. In overt and subtle ways we are taught throughout our lives who we can or cannot imprint our bodies with, who we can love and in what ways, when or with who we can share intimacy and sensuality⁶. Depicting imagery of self-love, love for others, of comfort, sensuality, of connectivity, is giving power and importance to something that has little representation in mainstream culture. The archetypal figures in my work are representative of my own self-image, as a queer, gender fluid person. I depict relationships between figures that are also fluid, dynamic and exist outside of heteronormative relationship structures, such as in my Aquatint "*Clinging*." (Fig. 8) Here, like in a number of my pieces, I accentuate and elongate the arms and broaden the shoulders of the figures to express their capacity to reach towards and hold one another. The more solitary nude figures I depict exist within a moment or an alternate reality where they are able to be fully vulnerable with themselves and their environment such as in my Aquatint "*Held*." (Fig. 9) These pieces are meant to be seen as intimate spaces, where the character is in relation entirely to themselves. Mickalene Thomas, who is best known for her large-scale multi-media paintings, uses the erotic as a way to show black women, especially queer black women, owning the erotic potential of their existence in the face of the misuse and manipulation of black female sexuality through the fetishization in mainstream media. She uses different tactics to reveal to the viewer that we are witnessing an interaction between queer women. I find that her work has its power in its utter disregard for the male gaze, as she uses the power of the erotic as a tool for self-definition and agency. I am similarly reclaiming the female nude, queering it, and revealing the complex humanity of these figures.

⁴ Ahmed, Sara. "Queer Feelings." In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 144-67. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

⁵ Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Kore Press 1978

⁶ Bell Hooks, *All About Love*, Harper Press, 2000



Fig 7. Shoog Mcdaniel *Untitled* 2018



Fig 8. Claire Ragland *Clinging* 2021. Aquatint copper etching in rag paper 11"x14"



Fig 9. Claire Ragland *Held* 2021. Two plate Aquatint copper etching on rag paper 10"x14"



Fig 10. Mickalene Thomas, *La Leçon D'amour*, 2008. Paint, fabric, crystals, rhinestones, enamel

Conclusion:

The utopian spaces I create give me the opportunity to visualize my own emotional processes as well as bring into existence a mythology of queer archetypes and deities. Creating imagery of the mundane, imbued with myth and the fantastical, gives us a space outside the harsher realities of life to contemplate our multifaceted potential as humans, not limited and bogged down by normative society. My work is a celebration of this life, which is full of color, pattern, form, of unfathomable beauty, pain, perfection, and chaos. These images are a remedy for the ways in which we internalize the toxic expectations society puts upon us, reminding us that our existence is nothing short of miraculous. My work speaks to this journey of healing the severed or skewed relationships we have with ourselves, with one another, with the natural world and spiritual realms.

Over the last three years I have utilized a variety of print mediums to express the ideas I have laid out here in my thesis. In contrast to my fabric and screen-printed pieces which are abundant in their use of materials, textures and colors, Aquatint etching has given me the chance to focus on drawing and achieving depth through predominantly black and grey tonality. With every new technique and set of materials I find a special type of alchemy, which guides my creative process and the intuitive way in which I create these images. I will continue to deepen my proficiency and understanding of Aquatint and fiber art but also wish to continue experimenting with new materials and processes. I am so very grateful for this opportunity I have had at University of New Orleans to grow in my creative practice and dedicate myself to the process of making and thinking about my work.

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Vita

New Orleans based artist Claire Ragland utilizes a variety of print mediums and mixed media materials to create fantastical narratives exploring our relationships with ourselves, one another, the natural world, and spiritual realms. Using symbolism that is both personal and derived from pop cultural movements, she creates utopian spaces, exploring her own emotional processes while bringing into existence a mythology of queer archetypes and deities. Through visually representing portals as doorways around and within her work, she builds layers of meaning and signifies to the viewer that there is more than meets the eye. Claire first began working in print at The New Orleans Community Print Shop where she became a volunteer member in 2016. She began pursuing her MFA at University of New Orleans in 2018 where she first started creating aquatints and works with fabric. She is the recipient of numerous awards including a 2019 art award for her screen-printed works from the Homer L Hitt Society, and a three-year Graduate Assistant award from the University of New Orleans. Her work has been shown throughout the North eastern United states in various galleries as part of the group show "Hanky Exhibit," an exploration of queer ecology. Her thesis exhibition, *"Slip Stream"* will be showing until May 2nd at The UNO Gallery.