Pioneer of Self: An Intimate Retrospective

2017

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PIONEER OF SELF: AN INTIMATE RETROSPECTIVE

by

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B.S. University of Central Florida, 2014

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art in the School of Visual Arts and Design in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

Reality is ever changing, and as we gain experience, our perceptions of it transform. Plato’s allegory of the cave addresses the way one person’s journey from darkness into daylight transforms his reality. My own body of work can be described through this extended metaphor, similarly benefiting from effects of education, self-reflection, and experience dramatically altering my perceptions of myself and my artwork. As projected by Plato, I was forced through an arduous confrontation with my lack of understanding of the human condition, reshaping my ideas to comprehend and adapt to the metaphorical daylight. With new understanding, I return to give a secondary assessment of my identity and previous body of work.
For my Father.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Ryan Buysens, Lisa Mills and Mark Price for guiding and encouraging me in my artistic practice and in accomplishing my goals. Your leadership and support has been unmeasurable on my journey to be the artist I work to be.
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CHAPTER ONE: THE ALLEGORY

Plato’s allegory of the cave is a useful metaphor for reality and how our reality changes because of life experiences. Plato imagines prisoners chained inside of a cave, forever facing the rear wall. They are bound by their necks and feet, unable to turn their heads or walk around. At the mouth of the cave, unseen by the cave dwellers, there is a fire, and as passers by outside cross in front of the fire, they cast shadows that flicker against the cave’s back wall. The prisoners have grown up in the cave, and the shadows are their reality. Over time the prisoners invent words to describe the shadows.

One of the prisoners is unchained and forced to stand and walk around inside the cave. The fire is harsh to his eyes at first, but once they adapt he sees the physical cave for the first time. This is painful, and everything he has known is questioned. The prisoner comes to understand that what he has perceived as real were mere shadows on a wall.

Then, the prisoner is forced out into the sunlight. The sun is blinding, and again his notion of reality shatters. After his eyes adjust, this time to the sunlight, he sees the people, animals and environment for the first time. Once the prisoner begins to see what the world can offer, he goes back into the cave to tell the other prisoners what he has seen. The prisoners, who have never been unchained, reject the idea of this new reality. The allegory ends with the enlightened prisoner being either rejected or killed by those who have never left the cave.

My own path has felt similar to the unbound prisoner. I began my artistic career in a cave of my own making. I felt driven to validate my purpose by speaking for large communities and social change. As I developed my artistic practice, I began to realize that I had become
disillusioned with the spectacle of my social activism and shock. Until then I had assumed that my inspirations should make a commentary on our culture. Soon my work became more personal, focused instead subject matter generated from my life experiences. This paper will use the metaphor of the unbound prisoner and the cave as symbols for my own personal development.
CHAPTER TWO: THE CAVE

August 2014- January 2015 artist’s statement: “My art serves as reactions and direct confrontations of past and current social issues, functioning as a method of meditation and contemplation. I am inspired by the experiences I encounter as I mature, and I continue to find the influences in my life strongly in my artwork. I do not work with one particular medium, but instead choose my medium specific to each work created. I am determined to challenge the viewer and our culture in my work.”

I grew up as the third-born in a set of triplets. My older sister, Natalie, is my identical twin and an artist studying to get her MFA in photography. My brother, Nathan, is my fraternal twin, who earned his degree from UF in Musical Theater in 2014. My parents were chiropractors and Catholics, our home loving and strict. I was always well behaved, studious, and I had an interest in culture. Sexual exploration has fascinated me since adolescence. We did not talk about it at home, and I was not permitted to attend many health and sexual education classes through middle and high school. I understood that the shame associated with such subject matter arose from assumptions about the sin of premarital sexual pleasure. I received my bachelor’s degree in sociology, studying crime, theory, culture, and minorities. Because I was inspired by these disciplines, my artwork focused on my interpretation of our culture so as to critique it. Taboos intrigued me, and I resolved to make artwork that would incite social change and a more honest discussion of our values and ideals.

My body of work was didactic, with a clear message and purpose. I wanted my work to say something undeniable and powerful. I sought to capture my audience’s attention, often using
shock, forcing viewers to address the social issue of my choice. I felt powerfully about a variety of subjects, including environmentalism, feminism, and criminology to name a few.

Here, the extended metaphor of the cave starts to take place. I begin, bound in my cave, chained to my idea of large works with the specific purpose of stimulating discussion on social change. I felt compelled to make statements which could improve public understanding in large scale perspective.

The Free the Nipple movement was my main source of inspiration for my first piece, *Chests and Breasts as They Come*. Free the Nipple is a global campaign of change, “focused on the equality, empowerment, and freedom of all human beings... we believe that the time for change is now. We believe that together, through one unified voice, we can effect change globally” ("WHAT IS FREE THE NIPPLE?"). I designed a series that served as a commentary on the hypersexualization of the female form, specifically the nipple. My classmates volunteered their bodies, allowing me to create molds, which were then cast to replicate their chest and breast forms. These replicas were painted white, alluding to marble statues, and were hung on the wall next to one another in a long line of alternating female/male breast combinations, in all different shapes and sizes.
Figure 1, Chests and Breasts as They Come, 2014
Figure 2, Chests and Breasts as They Come, 2014

The female breast form was altered, with fetishized baby bottle nipples adhered to top of the cast nipple. The baby bottle nipples were pierced, and wrapped in lace and fishnet material, which are conventionally sexualized fabrics. The series ended with one last cast, which was large and feminine. Embedded inside the breast was a glass baby bottle filled with
formula. This nipple was pink, void of piercings and fabric, freely oozing baby formula onto the floor.

Figure 3, Chests and Breasts as They Come, 2014
Figure 4, Chests and Breasts as They Come, 2014
The visual contrast between the untouched male casts and the humorously altered female breast forms poked fun at the censorship women uniquely encounter with their bodies every day, unlike their male counterparts. I asserted my stance on the objectification of the female nipple by transforming it from life sustaining to simple sexual. This work was important to me, a fitting commentary for a woman to make. I felt I was doing my part. I look back now and can identify this thought process as the shadows on the wall in my cave. I was limited, unaware of all the potential my work could provide me, and found myself fearful of encroaching upon subject matter that was more personal. The cave was not just a place of imprisonment, but a place of shelter from things I yet had not realized about myself. It was much simpler, though naive, to speak on behalf of a social injustice of women at large, and not specifically for myself as a woman.

I found a kinship in Marc Quinn, a contemporary artist questioning what it means to be a person in the world, “whether it concerns Man’s relationship with nature and how that is mediated by human desire; or what identity and beauty mean and why people are compelled to transform theirs; or representing current, social history in his work” (Quinn, 2017). I took comfort in his shocking images, desiring as well to use shock to capture people’s attention in my own work. His work makes direct reference to the classic masters, while addressing taboos about
sex, reproduction, and the human body. His sculpture *Alison Lapper Pregnant* caught my attention.

*Figure 5, Allison Lapper Pregnant by Marc Quinn, 2005*
Alison Lapper was carved from white marble, weighing 13 tons and standing 3.55 meters high. She is eight months pregnant in the sculpture, naked, and disabled. His sculpture presents her body as empowered, feminine, and as tribute to motherhood and disability. The sculpture was placed in public view in the Fourth Plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square, undeniably intended to challenge public perception of beauty, ability, disability, and their proper representation. My own sculptures were made in plaster and painted white, emulating Quinn’s statues. The public’s familiarity with the nude, in stark white and in perfect condition, allowed my audience to look past the material of the art object and to focus upon my message. The fetishized nipple was my symbolic representation of inequality in our culture, which was the greater purpose of my work.

This project also had an unintended effect. My volunteers were other students in the MFA program, individuals with whom I had yet to develop a relationship. The effect of volunteers lying half naked for an extended period of time has a way of encouraging shared intimate thoughts, as so much was already exposed. Because they agreed to loan me their bodies and give me their time to support my artistic agenda, I came to know each of them in a personal way. I found a measure of intimacy, and continued to cast more volunteers after the showing of my artwork, to add their bodies and stories to my collection.

I stumbled upon another set of sculptures by Quinn, *Buck +Allanah*. Made of bronze, these statues stand life-sized, naked, and wonderfully transsexual.
Figure 6. Buck & Allanah, by Marc Quinn, 2009
A modern age Adam and Eve, they stand together hand in hand, empowered by their bodies, and defying sexual norms with their transformed sexual identity. Another sculpture of them by Quinn shows them deeply involved in sexual intercourse, the woman, Allanah, inserting her penis into the man, Buck (Hattenstone, 2010). Both Allanah and Buck are porn stars, and their transsexual pornographic film together was the first of its kind (Hattenstone, 2010). I was inspired at the unapologetic presentation of these individuals, empowered by their transformative sex. I have been fascinated with the shaming of sexual activity, a common experience for most people, though an undiscussed topic.

*Figure 7, Allanah & Buck by Marc Quinn, 2010*
I found myself searching for a solid definition, or at least a way to differentiate fine art from pornography. I felt that most versions of either’s definitions began to fall apart after examination. The writings of Christopher Bartel shared the same sentiment, and he does not attempt to define or discuss the boundaries of pornography, but instead states that it is simply impossible to define (2012). A pornographic interest is an objectifying attitude that someone can project toward a certain object or person, wherein the consumer finds something within the artwork that elicits sexual arousal (Bartel, 2012). Bartel then goes on to say that artistic interest is more controversial, because it is more diverse than pornographic interest (2012). Pornographic interest in art is clear, in that the material becomes invisible, and the consumer looks past the media and fixates solely on one aspect of the work, while an artistic interest is intended to make us appreciate, and linger on, the formal qualities of a work (Bartel 2012).

Jeff Koons Made in Heaven series examined the love affair between Koons and Ilona Staller, who was his wife and an active porn star. The series includes statues of the couple engaged in sexual activity as well as close photographic images of their genitalia during intercourse (Reckhenrich 19). This series reiterated the theme of “guilt and shame” from his previous work, “Banality”, this time instead referring to the way people experience their body, lust and sexuality (Reckhenrich 19). First shown at the 1990 Venice Biennale, the series offered a vision of an ideal couple, presenting their actions as heavenly and performed without shame, inviting the viewer to accept their own sexuality and desires without guilt (Scotland).

The series incited responses of all kinds, some viewers calling for censorship, and some photographs were even considered illegal in some countries at the time (Glass 54). The images were indeed explicit, yet Koons defended his work, saying, “Sex with love is a higher state. It’s
an objective state, in which one lives and enters the eternal, and I believe that’s what I showed people. There was love there. That’s why it wasn’t pornographic” (Reckhenrich 23).

I next chose to explore the pornographic content in my artwork. I was curious about the response I would receive from the public and the art community. Where was the line to be made, that differentiated between fine art and pornography? Was there such a line?

My work that followed would reference the pornographic film *One Thousand and One Erotic nights*, a kitschy variation of the famous *Arabian Nights* (Marzolph 110). Every 36.8 seconds the frames on the screen were drawn on tracing paper, until 150 drawings were completed, and layered upon one another. The layered tissue abstracted the images and prevented quick recognition, and were only arguably pornographic after close inspection. Layered scenes were glazed with fleshy, pink tones, and the wrinkles of the dampened tissue mimicked the texture of scrotum skin.
Figure 8, Pink Painting, 2014
Figure 9, Pink Painting (detail), 2014
Other drawings of these scenes were overlaid upon one another with ink pen applied to arches paper. They were etched into cardboard and made into a clamshell book.

Figure 11, Clamshell Book, 2014
Figure 12, Clamshell Book, 2014

Figure 13, Clamshell Book, 2014
The resulting pieces were beautiful and not immediately offensive. At first, the images were difficult to discern, and only became pornographic after the images reveal themselves to the viewer. However, the viewer had already accepted their beauty. I found myself experimenting with the concept of blatancy and camouflage. Does an image stacked on top of another obscure it enough to remove the pornographic nature? Does a collage next to a single image then make that single image more pornographic? Through offering my audience different ways to view and enjoy the imagery, maybe I could offer an alternative approach to the poorly defined term, “pornographic.”

I feel this work represents a point in my artistic career in which I was still in the cave, chained to notions of purpose that were grandiose and self-created. I was compelled to complete projects that were unambiguous in concept or creation, but I was still looking to the back of the cave at the shadows of social issues that I thought were necessary to talk about. This was about to change.
CHAPTER THREE: WORKING WITH MYSELF INSIDE THE CAVE

January 2015- May 2015 artist’s statement: “My body of work is an exploration of material, myself, and of the society that I live in. I attempt to push myself past limits established by society upon the art community, and to challenge those norms by experimenting with what is considered acceptable and unacceptable. I want to continue to question the society and our world. We are educated to not question the things that are happening around us but to accept how they are, simply because, ‘that is just the way it is’. Our society turns a blind eye to innovative ideas. I want to explore deviancy, abnormality and anomie. My artwork is created with an abundance of materials and techniques, about which I am continuing to learn by continuing my education.”

My increasing fascination with the body and experience led me to explore performance art. I designed a performance with my identical twin sister that was based on her previous art work. Titled Perception of Contact, it explored personal awareness, contact, distance, and culture. The extended limbs of the shadows metaphorically referenced extrasensory perception.
Figure 14, Perception of Contact, by Natalie DiLenno, 2010
We designed and constructed an installation, measuring 10’x6’x6’. This rectangular box was broken into two parts, one for the performer, and the other for a backlight to project the performers shadows upon a screen. The performance, *Perception*, took place over three days at the event Nude Nite Orlando. Two close female friends and I, all varying in body shape and grace, performed in 20-minute intervals inside the box. Lit by a vibrant fuchsia light, each woman was given a needle, fabric, and wet powdered pigment. We sewed strips of fabric from the front to the back of the box, exploring the visual distortion caused by shifting distances and physical contact. We stretched out to make marks with long gestures and sharp points, using our elbows, feet, breasts, hair, and face to draw upon the screens from the inside.
Figure 15, Perception, by Natalie DiLenno and Juliet Romeo DiLenno, 2015
As our performance went on, we confronted the idea of women bound by tedious womanly callings. Our movements became more confined as we worked, inevitably tearing the sewed strips apart, or slipping and falling on the wet concrete floor. As time passed, the black pigment would visually distort the shadowed image of the woman inside, sometimes obscuring her figure entirely. Femininity, sexuality, servitude, tradition, pain, failure, and birth were all explored publicly for our audience to experience with us.

Figure 16, Perception, by Natalie Dileen and Juliet Romeo Dileen, 2015

I found myself at ease inside the box, as did my performers. The box was warm, damp, and psychologically secluded. Although the audience could see our shadows projected, we were unable to see them sitting around the box. Our movements were repetitive, which induced a trance-like state. At the end of each 20-minute shift, when performers changed places, we felt
reborn as we left the enclosed box and entered the fresh, cold air. No longer secluded in the illuminated womb of the box, we emerged bruised, dirty, and at peace.

I took an interest in Marina Abramovic, because of her sociological relevance, revealed through her performances. When researching her performance, *The Artist is Present*, I identified with what was described as her durational work, which “sought to transport artist and participants to a state of suspended time” (Hynes 812).

I was fascinated with that same phenomenon, reflecting upon the mental and emotive space that I experienced during my own performance. The time that elapsed during the performance was a key component in my performance, akin to Abramovic’s. Henri Bergson is quoted saying “Marina is an artist that visualizes time, using her body in the space with the audience. By the mere duration, she brings time in as a weight, a weight on the performers shoulders, taking a piece out of the performer’s life as a value” (Hynes 812).

Otherwise, I feel distant from Abramovic, as she has become quite removed from her work, physically. She is quoted saying, “I wanted to make a big change because I understand that actually you can’t get any experience by me doing it for you… so I am completely shifting the paradigm, changing the rules” (Bergson 13). I disagree that the audience does not get valuable experience because of their lack physical participation. I believe it is the role of the artist to offer his or her work as a tool for others to reach better understanding, which does not necessarily require the bodily interaction of others. Many have been touched by something as non-interactive as a painting, or a simple line drawing. A recent work, *Marina Abramovic: In Residence* engages the audience as the performers, while she disappears almost entirely from the work (Bergson 13).
The audience was asked to participate in different meditative practices as a better way to understand themselves in this 12-day installation on a public pier (Bergson 13). Using my body as a tool for communicating my ideas is inspiring to me. I find power in body language, using it as a means for understanding my personal life and artwork.

I took my photographs of the performance, fascinated with how these images compressed artist and artwork into the same images. I took the photographs and printed them 45”x45”, mounting them on the sides of two large boxes. The boxes were hung from the ceiling, lit from inside to acknowledge the lighting of the performance, one cube in a warm orange, and the other a cool periwinkle blue.
Figure 17, Artist Orange, 2015
Figure 18. Artist Blue, 2015
The complementary colors alluded to the fiery energy and cool meditative states experienced by the performers and audience during the performance. Some figures seem trapped in the box, others like they were dancing, with their shadows and drawn marks becoming indistinguishable from one another. Although these figures were not moving, body language and positioning offered context and a narrative was formed based on the order in which the images of
the installation were seen. To continue exploring my interest in the physical body in art, I returned to it.

Again, I would use the bodies of close friends, this time creating costumes and bodypainting to transform them. I was fascinated with turning them into new creatures or into space. I realize that this drove me to repeat these body paintings, to revisit my interest in the different paintings and experiences between model, the audience, and me. I would read their energies to place images of galaxies and nebulas in areas of the body that responded. Each body painting was unique and specific to the model and her mood. This art began as a personal endeavor about the body as canvas, and led me to change my approach to my artwork entirely. The physical body reinforced itself as my medium for transmitting ideas and emotions, and was a perfect instrument of communication. Body language does not need explanation or translation. The body can communicate a feeling in an instant. Words fall short. According to Tracey Warr, “no amount of critical contextualizing or artists’ intention can stabilize the language of the body” (13). The body is a universal communicator; more is said than can be accounted for. When performance is the artwork, time is then a major component of the piece. I agree with Peggy Phlan, who says “performance is about disappearance, rather than preservation, about tracelessness and valuing what is lost” (Warr 14).
Figure 20. Understanding, (Self-Portrait), 2015
Figure 21. Understanding, 2015
Figure 22, The Lifecycle of the Universe, (Finishing Kelli), 2015
I was fascinated with the transformation of each individual into another being. As I painted, my models and I meditated on the process, focusing on each of the senses to increase body awareness: the soft bristles, the repetitive cycle of wet and dry, softly scented paint, the intense visual evolution. When the models could no longer recognize themselves, they became something different in their own eyes. Their posture changed as their identities became those of a different body, ostensibly, for example, a celestial body. All the performers reported feeling cathartic and at complete peace, acutely in tune with their senses, and possessing a connection to the earth and environment around them. Unlike my previous work, I was not working to convey a socially driven message, and was instead focusing upon the body, the senses, and the performative experience. These performances were done in both intimate and public settings, my viewers being invited to watch, sometimes to dance with us, and becoming more aware of their senses as they were encouraged to focus on the moment. They would watch as a human body aspired to take on the responsibility of representing the heavens, and the experience asking my audience to examine their own places inside themselves and in the world. Once again, I found myself inspired by the intimate experience of working with others, coming to understand them and myself through the lens of my art.

It is at this point I refer back to the allegory of the cave. Because of my new fascination with bodies close to me, our transformations, and our performances, I abandoned my previous strict adherence to creating artworks with explicit social purpose. I no longer felt that I had to validate my work under the guise of social activism, nor did I have to prove myself to be an artist who has personal preconceived notions of an artist’s purpose.
I found myself here, unbound in the cave, just beginning to move my head and limbs around. My work was starting to evolve into something that involved more self-reflection and self-awareness, my processes more personal than before as I turned to my body, and to the bodies of those around me. I was driven to create experiences, fascinated with the experiential and the temporal. I wanted to generate an opportunity for enlightenment in myself, my performers, and my audience.

Self-awareness becomes a core component of my ideology. Referencing Freudian theory, Jacques Lacan offers a different and intense theoretical vision of the human condition, seeing desire grounded in bodily impulse and need as the essence of human reality (Sass 412). According to Lacanian theory, self-consciousness comes about in the mirror stage (Sass 418). “This would be the time of a baby’s life in which they see their reflections for the first time…probably in a mirror, and this is the first time it recognizes itself as an object, no longer identifying with the breast,” (Fry). The child will also learn that, while they recognize their image, they are not that image, and that insecurity will always be in the experience of what Lacan calls the register of the Imagery (Sass419).

“It sees itself as an object of desire, thinking they are desired by their mother…as the baby falls into language, and is no longer able to see itself as ideal, but comes to recognize that it has no identity, and its own competition as the object of desire, with the father. According to Lacan, this lack is not something physical, disagreeing with Freud, it is not the penis, but rather something that by nature is symbolic. This desire is not about what we have, but what we identify as lacking by nature of language. This category of language is not meant simply in a sense of communication by word, but includes symbols
and signifiers of all kinds, and because of this symbolic language it is impossible to realize an object of desire in reality. The awareness of the lack of an object of desire is expressed in a displaced manner (Fry).

When language is learned, the child becomes immersed in feelings of chaos and identifies with its reflection in its own mirror image, laying the foundation for ego, or for self (Sass 418). This is where the symbolic and the imaginary merge, as one finds a guide beyond the imaginary in a symbolic place (Sass 425). Lacan uses the term ‘objet petit a’ to refer to what is most inaccessible in the object of desire… something that ‘falls out’ of the symbolic order, as a ‘remainder’ (Johnston, 2013)

I wanted to explore the concept of the partial object, because I was curious about the different answers I would receive when asking, “What is this”? I decided to approach the investigation into the minds of my audience through non-representational abstract photography, which I shot alone. No specific body part was identifiable, though the images alluded to its fleshiness. The audience was first invited to study five small, matted photographs. The delicate size and presentation brought the audience close to the image, thus entering the viewers’ personal space for their inspection and assessment.
Figure 25, Partial Object 3, 2015
Figure 27, Partial Object 5, 2015
The next space was large and almost entirely enclosed, made up of three walls and an opening. One large scale image of 44”x65” hung on each wall, creating an environment of abstract tones of flesh and fluid movement. Through these images, I explored Lacan’s object of desire and allowed my audience to project their desires onto the image. When asked to name what they saw, some saw knees, others elbows, breasts, tummy, and other parts of the body. I was fascinated with the answers, and looked to understand my audience as individuals when they shared their interpretation of the abstracted images.
Figure 28, Installation of images, 2015
My desire to continue to use the body and to become more self-aware elevated my level of inspiration, and I began to work collaboratively with my sister again. Our desire to make work together was special, and we combined our ideas in a series of photographs. Our images show us together, surrounded in darkness. Interestingly, our initial goals were different, but parallel. My sister’s health is poor, and she suffers severe pain in her lower abdomen due to a condition called neuralgia. Her perspective is different, causing her to focus more on the Lacanian death drive. I went into the project focusing on life, creation, experience, and the body. Ours were two sides to the same coin-- Eros and Thanatos. Our images were our interpretations of the space in which we are complete, the moment right before life and right after death. According to Natalie,

“Identical figures refuse the possibility of being experienced as one thing in and of itself, bringing attention to the doubled forms and the spaces between them. This series recreates a spectacle of the twin unit and confronts myself, my twin sister, and the viewer with the uncanniness of the double. The photographs serve as documentation of the performative act. The repetitive act of tying oneself in a bag and stretching it becomes a secondary idea to the primary one, which is the intimate closeness the identical women in the photographs share. We are pictured as doubles of the same, nude body sharing a space. In this space we fight and share, merge and split. The membrane encloses us in our space of personal identity, an identity which is (also) sometimes shared. The bag is evocative of an embryo, representing life, and of asphyxiation or a body pulling apart, representing death. These two oppositions perfectly parallel the uncanny confrontation with the double” (DiLenno).
Figure 32, Symbiotic Simulacra P1, by Natalie Dilieno and Juliet Romeo Dilieno, 2015
Figure 33, Symbiotic Simulacra P2, by Natalie DiLenno and Juliet Romeo DiLenno, 2015
Figure 34, Symbiotic Simulacra P3, by Natalie DiLenno and Juliet Romeo DiLenno, 2015
My private performance with my sister was documented through the use of a camera, tripod, and remote trigger. Repeatedly, we tied ourselves inside our plastic membranes, and stretched and pushed our way through them in a symbolic rebirthing. Against a black background, we floated in a space of apparent nothingness, protected, and trapped. The darkness suggested Natalie’s desire to be removed from her body, to be whole in death, and it matched my interpretation of the essence of creation and energy. Over and over we repeated the physical process, and my sister became increasingly weak. She struggled more and more when ripping through the plastic, a struggle I was not having. My series of photographs of me ripping through Natalie's plastic and pulling her out identify me as the more powerful twin. This was the first time I noticed how powerfully my artwork was mirroring my life.
Figure 36, Symbiotic Simulacra P6, by Natalie DiLenno and Julian Romeo DiLenno, 2015
Figure 37, Symbiotic Simulacra P7, by Natalie Dilenno and Juliet Romeo Dilenno, 2015
My subject matter and my work were becoming increasingly personal and emotional, something with which I struggled. I was raised to believe in the separation of my personal and my professional life. I felt uneasy sharing some subject matter, often avoiding the mention of personal or identifying details of inspiration. My fear was that I would reveal extremely personal issues and struggles and thus invalidate or alienate myself among my peers and my family. I was not ashamed of my past, but I believed these were things that were not to be talked about. Nevertheless, I found myself artistically investigating and exploring personal ideas to share with others. I wanted to offer my audience a glimpse into my perspective on the world, human relationships, and myself.
CHAPTER FOUR: FREE FROM BONDAGE

December 2015- October 2016 artists statement: “My artwork explores notions of self-control, and experience of the physical and mental body forming our personal realities. Due to the nature of my work, I move through a variety of mediums, including performance, photography, and costuming.

Let us return to the allegory of the cave. Although I had previously loosened my chains, I had only begun to move my head and extremities. At this point I found myself exploring the cave freely. I was invigorated by my experience and the journey towards self-understanding, for myself and those around me. My eyes had come to adjust to the light of the fire, and I can see more of my surroundings. I had not yet left refuge of the cave, but remained inside

In an emotional response to accusatory conversations in my personal life, I found myself wanting to proclaim my perspective and a call for understanding. I developed a performance based on my experiences as a victim of sexual assault, and about my struggle with my identity. I needed to share the things that I had kept secret; I am a woman, blamed for her appearance, simultaneously a victim, a person in control, and a person in doubt. I wrote a poem about the different outfits I wore growing up, the way I was told to behave, and the things I should do to keep me safe. Despite wearing long pants and high collars, the sexual assaults happened anyway. I began my performance in a jumper, much like the one I wore in kindergarten, I dressed and undressed until I removed my clothing representing my college experiences.
Figure 38, Covered up, (First performance), 2015
Figure 39. Covered Up (Second Performance), 2017
Figure 40, Covered Up (First Performance), 2015
Figure 41, Covered Up (Second Performance), 2017
Figure 42, Covered Up (First Performance), 2015
As I covered and bared my body, I repeated things I had heard from adults and peers, and the self-blame and my perceived responsibility I shared with the perpetrators. Viewers could watch and relate, sometimes with me as the victim and other times with the remembered warnings.

![Covered Up (Second Performance), 2017](image)

My performance ended with me standing in my underwear, demanding to be taken seriously regardless of my physical appearance, sexual identity, or age. My bodily presence forced others reflection more effectively and for a longer period of time than if they had simply been told about my experiences. Witnessing a live performance, rather than looking at the resulting documentation, leaves the viewer with a very different impression (Warr4).
Figure 44, Covered Up (First Performance), 2015
Since the 1960’s, artists using their bodies have explored the constructed visual and linguistic identities of gender, sexuality and race, offering up these representation as hierarchies of power (Warr 13). The way in which we as women present ourselves, from our dresses to our hairstyles, reflects the controlling social norms and expectations in our culture. Female artists have sought to show the constructed identity of femininity, like Hannah Wilke and Cindy Sherman, employing costumes and disguise to challenge feminine stereotypes (Warr13). Artists have used their bodies to dismantle the parameters of these norms and to disrupt accepted signifiers of identity (Warr 13). Tracey Warr notes that the body is a fluid signifying system that is continuously undergoing challenging and liberating transformations. The notions of the individual self shift constantly as the boundaries between public and private change (14).

Tracey Emin is known for her autobiographical and confessional art that focuses on subject matter, including sex, substance, adolescence, self-neglect, rape, and abuse (Fanthome 30). I identified with her journey into the representation of self, her lived experience, the creation of the artwork, and the role of the spectators (Fanthome 32). According to Christine Fanthome, Emin searches to confront and ask, “do viewers seek to identify with the artist and empathize with the situation, distance themselves from her, or simply try to analyze her? Are they merely voyeurs whose gratifications are wholly selfish, or do they provide some therapeutic function for the artist by dialogic engagement? How is the artist’s future work affected by the precise nature of the viewer’s’ engagement with, and response to, individual projects?” (Fanthome 32). When considering Top Spot, Emin’s first feature film, she explains that the film is “about the moment of understanding that you are not innocent anymore, understanding that you are walking into an adult world which means sex, which means often violence, which means that you may suddenly
have some perspective on your own life that you never had before,” (Fanthome 35). I too had sought to force my audience to consider my personal perspective and their own participation in our now shared experience. My audience had become part of my experience through their actions and awkward silences, forced to consider each spoken stanza of my story. I appreciated Emin’s approach to organizing personal experiences to create meaning for others, hopefully inspiring examination and change (35). The power derived from honesty and a personal perspective deepens one’s communication, and I felt encouraged by her to continue drawing inspiration from personal subject matter.

I was fascinated by the effects my performances had on me, comparing the mental clarity when performing to the release that I felt after extensive meditation, or severe pain. I explored bondage, discipline, domination, submission, and sadomasochism in my artistic practice. The euphoric sensation that I experienced during pain play felt very much like mental clarity and peace after performances.

While in a BDSM scene, sometimes the participants enter a trance like state, whether top or sub-space. The top in is the one doing the actions in the scene, the sub, or the bottom, experiencing the actions done to them. Sub-space has characteristics including a diminished ego awareness, less active cognitive behavior, and the surrendering of will (Baker 9). Participants in sub-space experience increases in cortisol, decreased psychological stress, altered states of consciousness comparable to trances in ritual participants (Sagarin51). This state is marked by feelings similar to out-of-body experiences, and they often include a powerful energetic link between the bottom the top in the scene (Baker 9). A willing surrender of ego is required, the experience allowing a self-transcended state of consciousness, and heightened awareness,
described as an energetic force experienced in an embodied sense (Baker 5). This altered state of consciousness can be difficult to describe, as it engages the pre-verbal part of the brain, triggering deep psychological, emotional, sexual, and spiritual associations (Baker 5). I felt empowered in my surrendering and because of my altered state of consciousness, something “beyond pain, the sensation of being alive and feeling everything” (Baker 6) My change in perspective inevitably began to affect my artwork. Tracey Warr states, “(artists) have explored the notion of consciousness, reaching to express the self that is invisible, formless, and liminal. They have addressed issues of risk, fear, death, danger, sexuality, at times when the body has been most threatened by these things” (Warr 11). A powerful and inspiring experience, it is very difficult to imagine the crossing of BDSM and spiritual experience without this intense embodiment of eros, psyche and spirit (Baker 9). My own personal BDSM scenes led me to great personal growth, changing my perspective of myself, spirituality, and my purpose in life. As described by Alexzandria Baker, these scenes are intense and deeply personal, and leave lasting impressions (2). I experienced great personal insight upon the return of my consciousness to a normal state. Baker has proposed that BDSM might serve, for some practitioners, as a path toward self-transformation and connection with that which is held sacred (Baker5).

I designed a private performance, drawing from the series with my twin sister. I performed first, followed by my partner, Samantha. Our rigger served as my photographer, assuring safe practice throughout the performance. Samantha and I were suspended in rope harnesses, encased in a plastic membrane, and surrounded in blackness. In a recurring and symbolic rebirthing, our forms became distorted as they pushed through the membrane, our movements limited by the suspension. The intense activity brought about the rush of endorphins
and altered states of consciousness dominant in subspace. This is the state of mind I needed to produce and photograph, to share with my audience. The performance ended after 10 rebirthings.

The images selected were the most indicative of my concept, capturing the exquisite nature of the release, and directly reasserting my consent and participation in the act.

The largest printed image shows Samantha, hanging from her harness with her eyes closed, and her face soft. She has just broken free of her metaphoric embryonic sac, looking as if at peace. Samantha was printed life-sized, the photo measuring 9’x11’. The surface of the photograph is distressed, torn, and bent, though her image is not. By destroying the paper, I remove the desire to call it a photograph or treat it as a precious object. This reduces the image to its basic elements, forcing the viewer to look at the naked female form, ironically juxtaposing the viewers perceptions of physical restriction and mental freedom.
Figure 45, Samantha, 2016
Three images of me are shown together, as a triptych because I am a triplet. In the photos, I look away from and directly at my audience, acknowledging their voyeurism. The black background is ambiguous and subjective to the viewer, my demeanor is calm, and my face is soft when juxtaposed with my bound, naked body. The plastic around me represents embryonic sacs, transformation, and suffocation.
Figure 47, Juliet (Tryptic), 2016
Figure 48, Juliet (Tryptic), 2016
Figure 49. Juliet (Tryptic), 2016
Inside the cave, I begin to reestablish my reality. My artistic practice is predominantly method-based, multidisciplinary in nature, and often performative or action-based. The body is my major tool of communication, allowing me to draw more upon my life for inspiration.

Carolee Scheenmann is known for artwork committed to self-documentation, collaboration, and performance. Her work and life have become inseparable and mutually interdependent (Barratt 283). I related to her habit of inviting others to document her performances, editing, reframing, and incorporating the documentation in her new pieces (Barratt 288). I think back to my first performance *Perception*, which was documented by others and then used by me to create new work. I also admire her use of the nude body, “her nudity serve(ing) as a conduit between discourse and lived experience, simultaneously a baring of Scheenmann’s corporeal vulnerability and assumption of power of herself and her audience,” (White 27).

Scheenmann is also known for her emphasis on collaboration in much of her work (Barratt 294). One of her best-known performances, *Meat Joy*, allowed for extensive analysis in terms of the performance itself, collaboration, and documentation in writing and the generation of photographs (Barratt 283).

Michael Smith reviewed the 1964 performance for the Village Voice in New York, in one extended overwhelming sentence, when attempting to describe it.

“what he saw, the fleeting nature of the images, and the density with which they were layered: Images: a brilliantly lit, vast cascade of paper pouring, pouring down from the balcony to the floor of the church; two pairs of embracing bodies clad in bikinis and paper and rolling, rolling about the floor … girls buried in paper, only their legs waving in the open air; darkness, red and green lights rolled wildly like bolas, then strange
membraneous creatures emerging squirming from the floor, girls in plastic wrappings silhouetted in the dim, creeping, pouncing light; a woman painting a man … men arranging girls’ bodies, improvising patterns, four and four; and then the meat, principally flesh and fowl, dead fish and plucked chickens and I think sausages from a serving tray thrown into a pile of bikini-clad male and female bodies … and finally painting, the men painting the women, painting themselves, all of them jumbled together with the fish and chickens and sausages on the huge plastic sheets covering the floor of the church with an audience of hundreds watching from a ring of pews” (Barratt 285).

The fragmented sentences and repetitions of verbs reflect the raw intensity of the experience, connecting the audience to the performers, and I was inspired by the uncensored display of human emotion and the body (Barratt 285). In her personal texts *More than Meat Joy*, she says we must understand “our lives as material, stuff for our art,” and I relate to her inspiration through experience (Barratt 285).

In another work of hers, *Eye Body*, a series of performative actions was done in her studio in New York in 1963 (Barratt 293). Set in an environment resembling a painted background, her naked body became an element, “within an expanded painting, physically and psychically marked with streaks of ritualistic dark paint and imagery of the ancient and mythological ‘snake-goddess,’ while snakes twisted over,” (Barratt 293). This was not “performed” in the traditional sense of live actions before an audience, but the actions were carried out in order to be documented (Barratt 293). At this point in my practice, my own work was not performed in the traditional sense, but was meant instead, to be photographed. Instead of wriggling snakes, I was
breaking through confinement, our bodies providing the language of our performative image making.

By chance, I met a photographer also familiar with BDSM and the kink community. Our first time working together became an exploration of boundaries between the mental and the physical, and we explored the ideas of membrane and perception. Our resulting photograph is a striking high-key portrait of me wrapped tightly in a transparent membrane. The dynamic in the photograph is compelling, because at first glance the photograph seems so cheery. I brandish a large smile, the white background a high-energy, distraction-free environment. Upon further study, the image becomes unsettling. My smile grows eerie, with my eyes squeezed tight, and my grin simultaneously represents genuine happiness and nervous panic. It is unclear if I am being protected or suffocated by the plastic cocoon.

When this image was displayed, it was part of a sound installation, and was projected onto a large piece of visqueen. The portrait was rear projected, and a small fan moved the plastic, recreating the sound in the warehouse in which we shot our photographs. The rustling plastic sounded like a soothing breeze, heard perhaps the shoreline on a beach, adding another dimension. The movement of air caused the plastic sheet being projected upon to move, causing my face to come towards the viewer, almost aggressively, and to eventually retreat with the reversal of the airflow. The resulting installation drew upon the theme of juxtaposition, combining soothing and uneasy elements into an experiential metaphor for my own difficulties in establishing and accepting my identity.
Figure 50, Portrait, by Chris Bankhead and Juliet Romeo Dilenno, 2017
Following a conversation about a girl’s behavior that we observed at a restaurant, Chris and I developed a character, Sara. Sara became the way for him and me to separate from ourselves and talk about the world from her perspective. It also offered us an escape to the darkest sides of our psyches, without us saying "This is me, this is my insecurity, this is my darkness.”

The first photos of the series show Sara in the bathroom of a rotting house that reeks of history. Grimy yellow wallpaper is peeling away, an old razor still rests upon the shower, and dirt and scum coat the space. She is impassive and seems unaware of the decay in the room. She stands in an elaborate gown, perhaps a wedding dress, which captures the attention of the viewer. The lacy dress reference alternatively represents a dream and a tradition, its sleeves long and its collar high. A ghost image surrounds her, as she exists in a haze, and unaware of anything outside herself. We see she wears white combat boots under her gown, contrasting with the delicate dress, in a narrative outside of time. She holds a torch ablaze in the tiny room. She looks at the flame, and her ponytailed image is mirrored on the door of the shower next to a loosely hanging piece of transparent fabric. The scene alludes to her future, in which she is unable to separate the imaginary and the real. In another image she sits on a filthy floor of the bathroom, like a fallen princess. Her hair has come loose, yet her facial expression still shows no distress. Large in the photograph’s frame, Sara resembles Lewis Carroll’s Alice in a shrinking room.
Figure 51, Sara in the Bathroom, by Chris Bankhead and Juliet Romeo Dilenno, 2017
Figure 52, Sara on the Bathroom Floor, by Chris Bankhead and Juliet Romeo Dilenno, 2017
Each image was designed to characterize Sara, with references to art history, as seen through the lens of our own personal anxieties. The narrative developed as we manipulated old and new symbols. Sara is finally portrayed outside, surrounded by pointy palms and darkness. This is the only image in which she makes eye contact with the viewer, but her thoughts are elsewhere. The viewer is forced to identify the place Sara exists, both mentally and physically. Is she safe? Has she run away? Is she sane?

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 53, Sara surrounded with Palms, by Chris Bankhead and Juliet Romeo Dilenno, 2017*

The mystery of her mental state continues. Sara is always depicted alone, in settings in which she could not long survive. She is no one’s prisoner, yet she seems trapped. She occupies a spiral of white, while sitting on broken floorboards and eating a pie with her hands, which recalls Jupiter devouring his children.
Figure 54, Sara eating Pie, by Chris Bankhead and Juliet Romeo Dilenno, 2017
Gregory Crewdson is renowned for his elaborately devised photographs, which are haunting, surreal, and profoundly unnerving (Loh). Crewdson searches out his scenes like a location scout, but then alters the scene with symbolism and a psychoanalytical subtext (Pincus 457). For Crewdson, catastrophe looms in a narrative of love, death, seclusion, and explosion. In distressed landscapes, his figures reach out to comfort one another or to gaze as if in a trance; each image capturing a private psychological moment, “exploring contradictions inherent to the human condition, where repulsion becomes attraction and fear meets desire,” (Homes 70). Crewdson’s combination of visual detail and narrative restraint invites each viewer to project her or his own anxieties and desires in their own narratives (Loh). He is quoted as saying,

“my pictures are about anything at all, I think it’s about trying to make a connection in the world. I see them as more optimistic in a certain way. Even though it’s very clear there’s a level of sadness and disconnection, I think that they’re really about trying to make a connection and almost the impossibility of doing so. And I think maybe the figure…in my pictures are stand-ins for my own need to make a connection” (Loh).

In one of his famous photographs, a woman sits in a motel room. Viewing her room through a window, we see her with a baby lying beside her.
Crewdson takes great care with his light, establishing a solid foreground, middle ground and background in the photographs. Every detail is carefully planned, but he offers only a partial story, which the audience will complete when viewing (Loh). He admits that the bathroom in this photograph is a reconstruction of the bathroom in the movie Psycho, but describes it as a recognizable symbol (Loh). Instead, it is, “just a starting point, and through the process of making the picture, the picture changed. I think subconsciously we all have a connection to that imagery and a certain kind of dread. It’s very hard to describe what I’m looking for—something that feels both familiar and strange at the same time. It’s not enough for it just to be strange or mysterious, it also has to feel very ordinary, very familiar, and very nondescript,” (Loh). I felt kinship with Crewdson’s imagery in my series depicting Sara, because her story starts from a
conversation about observed behavior and develops into a narrative that is open to imaginative projection by the viewer. Crewdson believes in a separation of himself from the subject, saying that he doesn’t even have a desire to know them, in order to not pump plot into the image, a method which is quite different in my own practice (Loh). Although Crewdson believes that the disconnect between artist and model offers a greater opportunity for the viewer to project, I disagree. Chris’s and my series on Sara grew as Chris’s and my relationship grew and as our discussion over Sara’s mental, emotional, and physical state progressed.

Sara’s apparel eventually changes from a ball gown to a nightgown, and the setting remains surreal. She occupies a closed, flooded room, while sitting in a little boat. The room is raw, with wooden studs and exposed electrical wiring. Sara appears to be sailing, yet there is nowhere for her to go or for her to have come from. The boat is tied in place, attached to pulleys and suspended anchors. This is the first image in which we introduce rope, simultaneously a symbol of self-control, restraint, power, and exchange. Although Sara is not bound by rope, there are faint impressions of rope in her wrists and legs, alluding to recent bondage that is both mental and real.
Figure 56, Sara in the Boat, by Chris Bankhead and Juliet Romeo Dilenno, 2017
The last images of Sara depict her in a jagged wooded setting. She appears first in a superhero pose, the camera is low, and her face is stoic. Her profile is directed towards the sky as she grooms her hair with a brush made of wood and nails. Despite her powerful stance, she is restrained by a neck rope that is tied to three trees.

Figure 57, Sara brushing her hair, by Chris Bankhead and Juliet Romeo Dilenno, 2017
Finally, she is seen tiptoeing along the path, still restrained by a neck rope, the rope hanging like snakes off tree branches. She looks down, soft, pretty and clean. No perpetrator or monster holding her against her will is visible. The audience is forced to consider Sara’s mental and physical confinement, and whether it is forced upon her or is self-inflicted.

*Figure 58, Sara Tip Toeing, by Chris Bankhead and Juliet Romeo Dilenno, 2017*
I wanted to return to body painting and costuming, by way of an interactive performance. This performance was created to be a visual and performative representation of the physical and spiritual aspects of our existence. Therefore, I designed elaborate costumes that would manifest animal and spiritual characteristics. Each costume was designed as a personalized portrait of the performer who would wear it, each of whom I knew intimately. I directed a team, giving instructions to costume creators and working alongside them. The performance was to take place in the city streets of Orlando, at the Creative City Project. We would go about in public, prowling and stalking one another, growling, purring, roaring, meditating, hiding, chanting, and speaking in tongues. I felt empowered as a human, a woman, and artist, and was excited to gather with my group and to bring to life our personas.
Figure 60, Synthesis Species- Bree, 2016

Figure 61, Synthesis Species- Chealsea, 2016
Figure 62, Synthesis Species - Sassy, 2016

Figure 63, Synthesis Species - Travis, 2016
While designing and creating these costumes, I began to work with my sister again. We revisited our unique relationship as identical twins, and we explored ourselves through the lens of Lacanian theory. Per Natalie,

“These repetitive compulsions, which include the compromising performative acts photographed, are attributed to Freud’s death drive and emphasize returning to the state preceding birth and proceeding death. Both of these inanimate states imply a removal from symbolic order. Repetition plays an important role in all activities centered on sublimation, the subconscious transformation of these impulses into creative or constructive actions, and consequently on artistic creation.

Being a twin has been the impetus in exploring my own identity and has reinforced the notion that a subject becomes aware of oneself only through the dramatic confrontation with another form of the self... (we) have always had a strong attraction to the ability of photography to create a double, a reflection, a self-outside-of-self, an association of the self as other. The double refers to an embodied manifestation of the ego which assumes different forms. It is found as a narcissistic extension due to its fundamental origins in the original self but is also an extension in which, with the removal of narcissism becomes a source of “self”-criticism and a foreshadowing of death. The identical double creates a paradox of identity versus alterity. This introspective and observed examination of the self leads to the mental establishment of the concept of the “I”. Freud explains that the double poses the convoluted encountering of the self as other, with the realistically impossible notion that the “I” and “Not-I” are somehow identical, facilitating the action of taking oneself as the other and the other as oneself.
My interest in the double, the twin, and the photographic mirror image, propels me to try to establish and solidify my own identity. I reflect on and I try to rationalize being a part of a whole, a piece of a unit identity of “the twins” as opposed to an independent self. Perhaps my relation with myself is not an “I / my” self but rather a “we / our” self. Perhaps as a child, when distinguishing myself from other people, I did not separate myself from my twin. Perhaps she is my first love object, a representation of myself as love object, an external form of my own narcissism materialized, and one which I have not yet resolved” (DiLenno).
Figure 64, Symbiotic Simulacra N1, by Natalie Dileen and Juliet Romeo Dileen, 2016
Figure 65, Symbiotic Simulacra N2, by Natalie DiLenno and Juliet Romeo DiLenno, 2016
Figure 66, Symbiotic Simulacra N3, by Natalie Dileen and Juliet Romeo Dileen, 2016
Figure 67, Symbiotic Simulacra N4, by Natalie Dileen and Juliet Romeo Dileen, 2016
In our study of ourselves as our own doubles, Natalie and I were attempting to understand ourselves also as individuals. We float again in that subjective blackness, our placenta-like sac modified to be a membranous skin, the effect of the new material giving the illusion of cells at mitosis. This is the moment in which we are still a unit, sharing one embryonic sac, about to split into two individuals. The gold color palette feels warm and organic, and our bodies merge into one another, our individual ownership of limbs difficult to identify.
CHAPTER FIVE: OUT OF THE CAVE

October 6th, 2016 – December 2016, no statement.

My Father died. It happened suddenly and without warning.

I have been pushed out of the cave and into the blinding sunlight. My entire being aches, and I find myself in a haze. Things don’t make much sense to me anymore, as I am forced to learn how to live my life without him. He was an important point of reference in my existence.

Had it not been for my deep involvement with my Synthesis Species performance, I may have stopped working entirely. The date of the performance came before I realized how much time had passed. I found refuge in my character, with cloven hooves, a long flowing skirt, and spindly, retracting wings like those of a massive dragonfly. The only English spoken the entire night was from my mouth, as my herd of performers embraced our primal communication and spiritual interaction.
Figure 68, Synthesis Species (documentation), 2017
Figure 69. Synthesis Species (documentation), 2017
For hours, we roamed the streets of Orlando, with me leading the group. I found myself entranced through our performance, the spiritual peace soothing me. Our audience responded positively and acceptingly, even answering our primal callings with their own roars and growls.

The performance was successful and beautiful, as each of the portrait-like costumes suited the personality of each performer. Our performance required endurance, as our journey through the city continued for hours and over great distances. My performers described the same trance-like meditative state that I had come to treasure. I assumed the status of my creature as completely as possible, finding solace in identifying as another. I felt powerful and at peace at the head of our pack, embracing the animal creature inside me. Yet once the performance was finished, and the makeup was removed, I was reduced back to myself. It did not matter what persona I had assumed; at the end of it I needed to face my new life.
I had previously believed that I was coming to a new level of self-awareness, and instead realized how flawed I was in my naïveté. The work in which I had searched for enlightenment felt shallow now. My exploration of the human condition fell short, trivial in the grand scheme of human experience, because the human condition encompasses life and creation as much as it does darkness, depression, and death.

The Lacanian trinity of the human condition is separated into the distinction and interaction of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real (Sass 426). In the imaginary, simplicity is thought felt to be grounded in that which has perceptible form, while the symbolic is that which can be distinguished verbally and conceptually from other things (Sass 433). The real is that which is authentic, the unchangeable truth about being, emerging outside of language and imagination (Sass 430). The real is impossible because it is impossible to imagine, and impossible to integrate in a symbolic order, and is experienced as traumatic gaps in the symbolic (Sass 432). “It is an experience of the real, therefore, that lies at the heart of trauma… also to be associated with the active need of the unconscious of the body,” (Fry). The Lacanian death drive has its origin in the tension between the imaginary ego and the real of the body that is only partly encompassed by the ego. For Lacan, the traumatic force of the death drive aims not at the biological organism but at the unity of the ego (Sass 432). The death drive was subject matter that I had learned about through working with my sister, she striving towards the unity of the ego through death in our images. I found myself attempting to bridge my own gap, my words and symbols unable to define my experience.

Death is not unique to me, nor are my feelings I have special. The holidays are difficult for anyone who is struggling or without someone. After a lonely holiday with people who were
not my father, I designed a photograph, my private narrative encoded in my symbols in the image. With similar rawness and the visual perspective employed in Carrie Mae Weems *Kitchen Table Series*, I invite my audience into an intimate space.

*Figure 71. Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled (Eating Lobster), 1990, silver print 28 ¼ x 28 ¼ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.*
At first glance, it seems to be a photograph of myself sitting, eating at a work bench instead of at a dinner table. The table is set for one, and I hold a fork in my hand as if I am eating. Yet I am not eating, for there is no trace of food on my plate or the table. Eventually it becomes clear that I am not just sitting but am bound to the table and chair by my wrists and ankles. The viewer’s eye darts between the light above the table, my face, and the tiny urn at the end of the table. The urn contains the ashes of my dead father. The fallen chair, kicked over and broken, references the violent end of his life. The clue to the loss of a parent is in the booster seat I sit upon; which I sat on in my childhood. My face is stoic, yet the aftermath of crying is apparent on my face, and my nose is red and my cheeks wet with tears. The dramatic lighting and the rotting room allude to the decomposition of my reality. I am alone, a hostage of myself and my mind. In agreement with Gregory Crewdson, “the whole reason I make these pictures is for those moments of clarity. For that single moment, everything seems to make sense in my world. And I think we all look for that in our lives, because our lives are generally filled with chaos and confusion and disorder and complication. And we all strive to find moments of clarity, of order,” (Loh).
Figure 72, Untitled, 2017
I acknowledge the inseparable link between my artistic practice and personal experience, with my art mimicking life and my life mimicking art. By making this photograph I was able to take the urn containing my father from the box it came in, and to begin to learn to live with it.

I designed a performance to be experienced through video, which would allow me to represent myself without physically being present, because the discomfort caused by my rawness would otherwise distract my viewer. The video is multilayered, a visual and auditory montage of shared intimate experiences. A projection of collaged greeting cards and yearbook photos, ranging from middle and high school, shines upon my body and the floor around me. The camera looks down at me as I lie on the floor. In frame with me is my cat, which is a symbol of my childhood and the associated comfort, and which simultaneously offers a visual break from the intensity of my performance. When my father passed away, I still possessed many unheard voicemails from him, and chose one per month, beginning in January and ending in October, when he passed. In front of the camera, I listen to his voicemails for the first time since he died.
Figure 73, Daddy's Voicemails, Kitty, and Projection (still), 2017
Figure 74, Daddy's Voicemails, Kitty, and Projection (still), 2017
Figure 75, Daddy's Voicemails, Kitty, and Projection (still), 2017
Figure 76, Daddy’s Voicemails, Kitty, and Projection (still), 2017
The resulting piece lasts about seven minutes, and my expressions range from smiles to tears. In my distress, I moved up within the frame, sometimes cutting the top of the image of my head off, almost a relief to my audience, a break from the anguish on my face. The projection fades into and out of focus, like a memory, my body framing my yearbook portraits or fragmented by imagery while it is projected upon. The voicemails from my father eerily allude to mortality by speaking about my mother needing her medication, arranging a birthday, and the impending hurricane, Hurricane Matthew, which was about to hit Orlando on the day my father died. Although the word “death,” is never spoken, aging and violence are.

Upon completion of my video performance project I saw an uncanny resemblance with the thought process and method employed in my piece and one by my sister, *Running-In Place (Virtually Inside Myself and Outside Myself Where it Hurts)*. Made in December 2015, it coincided with one of my sister’s lowest moments, which were caused by her medical condition.
Figure 77, Running In Place (Virtually Inside Myself and Outside Myself Where it Hurts), by Natalie DiLenno, 2015
Over a film of an exhausting jog with Natalie, a superimposed collaged image of her exploratory surgery and CAT scans. This portrayal reveals her physical pain, which we see for the first time. Her pain had never been perceivable outside her body, and we come to understand her a little more. We both had used performances to externalize our ailments, which until then eluded words and needed public expression both performances in our search for understanding.
CHAPTER SIX: RETURN TO THE CAVE

December 2016–March 2017, artists statement: I am fascinated with the human condition, using the body as a symbolic tool to explore self-control and my existence. Through images and performances, I publicly explore my personal perspective, to inspire passion and self-reflection.

Consistent with Plato’s allegory, I return to my cave. Instead of going back to share my story with the other prisoners, I return to reassess my old artworks through my new experience of reality. Everything is different. My fascination with self-control and personal boundaries have become central to my perspective, and so my old works reveal new meanings. My old artwork drawn from experience which once felt so full of life, now seems darker and more honest. At the time the old works were created, I was striving for self-understanding, and was in pursuit of enlightenment and self-knowledge. Ironically, Lacan was skeptical of solving the riddles of human life and knowledge, even suggesting that we should be careful to not “understand” too much too readily, and that what counts most will often be what one does not and cannot understand (Sass 425).

I no longer relate to powerfully to some of my earlier works, my artful wall sculptures of the breasts now seeming so long ago, and my imagery inspired by pornography now appearing to be a stepping stone towards a more satisfying journey of self-inspiration. My definition of pornography has continued to develop. I argue that my work can be perceived erotically but is not pornographic. Pornography is created to have specific content for arousing sexual energy in the viewer. Pornographic material offers limited means to stimulate intellectual or emotional
thoughts and ideas, and does not promote contemplation about subject matter outside of sexual gratification. In addition, pornography is made for mass media and audience consumption, and for widespread reproduction.

My artwork shows figures where no action is being performed upon them, no sexual interaction is taking place and the question of female objectification is quieted. My work is deeply informed by theory and personal experiences. The content of my artwork encompasses a wide array of human emotional outputs and perceptions. I will not argue that my work does not have erotic roots, and in fact I welcome that emotional response as it is powerful and primal. My images offer many opportunities for my viewer to identify with the figure, and emotional responses have included from fear, melancholy, lust, empathy, joy, and courage.

My first performance now resonates as primarily symbolic, its feminine shadows offered to my viewers so they would project their thoughts onto us—their objects of desire. The performance was confined to the safety of the constructed box for an audience I could not see, and in which I shared myself incompletely—still while keeping secrets. As my performances developed I found myself unashamedly sharing myself with my audience, and I began to use my life for honest inspiration. I now recognize my difficulties in drawing upon personal and intimate experiences in my earlier work, due to my fear of seeming self-indulgent, or narcissistic and self-absorbed. Yet I have found comfort and connection in my confessional artworks. Again I reference Tracey Emin, because I identify with her use of her own biography more as a way of sharing than as evidence of narcissism (Reilly 520). The purpose of her work, as well as my own, is to “show others what (we have) experienced and these confrontations can be both uncomfortable and exhilarating for the spectators. By forcing viewers to face (our) traumas and
sexual escapades, the audience is placed into the position of voyeur, confidant, and witness” (Reilly 520).

My own artwork, which I had previously believed to be so emphatically about life, creation, and enlightenment, now appears different. Due to the passing of my father, my youthful assumption of immortality has changed. I always felt that my figures were strong and in control, but my mature perspective provides me with new insights into my figurative work. A female subject is almost always present, and she is alone. Only the photographs with my sister include two figures, but their individuality is absent and we are not psychologically separate forms. These images portray us as one, the embryo before the split. Another thread running through my figurative work is the desolate environment in which my women exist. The women occupy lonely apartments, rotting houses, overgrown vegetation, or an existential dark void. Although my view of the women has not changed, each is a figure that appears stoically, even in the direst situations. My work, revealing so much more about myself than I anticipated when I created it, both inspires and saddens. My female figures, notably the photographed images of myself, are isolated. These images of females present me as stoic and idealized, and either unaware or resigned to their bonds, but appearing to be in control and well poised. This creates a visual and conceptual paradox. The women may be emotionally in control, yet physically they are not, because they are constrained by plastic and rope. This juxtaposition makes the work more compelling, combining soothing and uneasy elements into an experimental metaphor for my difficulties in establishing and accepting my own identity. This comparison also establishes an opportunity for my audience to seriously consider the emotions and messages behind my work. Moreover, this alludes to the paradox inherent in BDSM between the top and bottom in a scene.
Although the bottom is the one having actions performed in them, often while being bound, they are in complete control of the situation. The subordinate is to decide what is to be done during the scene, and when it will end. These seeming contradictions and ambiguities comprise an aesthetic that adds appeal and alludes to death, by testing the contradictions between physical restriction and mental freedom.

Plato’s metaphor of the cave ends with the enlightened prisoner being killed at the hands of the other prisoners, or being banished from the cave forever. Here I separate myself from Plato’s cave, and my path deviates from that in his allegory. I will not be destroyed or outcast by my new perceptions of identity, existence, and understanding. I have reached a new point in my work in which I resolve to move forward, using my experiences to inform my decision-making. Some of my old artworks continue to inspire new ideas, creations, and experiences, while others have been left behind as a finished journey. Undoubtedly, my life experiences will continue to inspire a desire to share myself and create art. I accept and welcome the endless loop of my art mimicking my life.
APPENDIX: COPYRIGHT PERMISSION LETTERS
Re: Use of images, MFA Thesis

Juliet

I agree to the specific conditions of reproducing our images to illustrate your thesis paper at the University of Central Florida. Permission is granted given that proper credit is given, and failure to do so will result in revoked permissions. There is to be no additional cropping, bledding, cutting, or altering of the images in any way. The image must not be reproduced in any other manner than as specifically described in the above, upent upon.

Good Luck,
Crista Sasekhead

Sent from my iPhone

On Apr 19, 2011, at 11:33 PM, julietklo@bishopsu.edu wrote

Hello Mr. Sasekhead,

As you already know, my name is Juliet Kloer-Dziemio, and I am an MFA candidate at the University of Central Florida. I’ve been writing my thesis paper, and list our collaborative images in my writing. In order to meet university standards, I need your permission to publish your images in my paper digital and physically in the university’s library collections. This is purely for aesthetic use, and will not be used commercially in any way.

Your images are included in the thesis paper.

Please let me know if you have any questions about the process or would like to discuss these permissions any further.

Thank you much,

Juliet Kloer-Dziemio
On Apr 19, 2017 11:36 PM, "juletto" <juletto@ignitionfactory.com> wrote:

Hi Natalie,

I wanted to confirm that I also have the permission to use your collaborative images in my thesis paper. The conditions are the same as listed.

Thank you,

Juliet

Natalie Diener <candlesdiener@gmail.com> wrote:

On Apr 19, 2017 1:57 PM, "juletto" <juletto@ignitionfactory.com> wrote:

Hello Mr. Diener

My name is Juletto Filamone, and I am an MFA candidate at the University of Florida. I’ve been writing my thesis paper, and I’d like your help in my writing. In order to meet university standards, I need your permission to publish your images in my paper digitally and photographically. This is purely for academic use, and will not be used commercially or otherwise.

In my paper, I included these images:
http://contentfactory.com/60thanniversary-of-peace
[Image use request] Message from the website from Juliet Romeo Dilenno <julietdno@knights.ucf.edu>

Elizabeth Wayne <elizabeth@marcquinn.com>  
Today, 4:09 PM

No problem, good luck!

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julietdno  
Today, 4:09 PM

Thank you so much!  
I have downloaded the images from the website for the sake of my paper, and that worked perfectly.  
I appreciate it!  
Juliet

Elizabeth Wayne <elizabeth@marcquinn.com>  
Today, 4:07 PM

Dear Juliet,

This is absolutely fine, do you need a high res image or do you have an adequate one already?

Best wishes,
Lizzie

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Welcome to the official website of the Kitchen Table Series.
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