The Immaculate Condemnation

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THE IMMACULATE CONDEMNATION

by

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B.F.A. Florida Atlantic University, 2009

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

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ABSTRACT

My work is a continuously evolving self portrait formulated by a combination of past experiences and influences. The Immaculate Condemnation body of work is a cathartic reaction that confronts Catholic Sin and rebels against gender conformity. As both a confirmed Catholic and transgender woman, I speak from an authentic voice that seeks open conversation regarding these topics. I also hope to demystify the transsexual body for the non-transgendered viewer. Additionally, I use allegoric imagery to communicate my interpretation of beauty, power, horror, and sex. I combine performance, photography, sculpture, video, audio, and graphic design to execute my installations. I intentionally develop environments that both attract and repulse the viewer in order to mimic the relationship I have with Catholicism and Gender Issues.
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INTRODUCTION

From as early as seven years old I remember questioning my sexuality and its relationship to my religion, Catholicism. I felt an attraction to boys and repulsion towards the Catholic Church. These thoughts instilled fear in me, as they were considered sinful and punishable in the eyes of my church and my family. My parents were physically and verbally abusive; they condemned the possibility of me being gay. My church also used intimidation tactics to convert me into being straight. Little did they both know that this lifestyle was not a choice, but rather something I was born with. Since recently transitioning from a male to female transsexual I feel I have an obligation to create art that initiates a conversation on these topics.

It is my hope to follow in the footsteps of pioneering gay artists such as David Wojnarowicz, Andres Serrano, and Robert Mapplethorpe. Their works have broken boundaries and confronted societal fears, paving the way for artists like myself to create art about our gender and religion openly and freely. They all have specific works that has inspired me to take risks in my art making. David Wojnarowicz’s video piece titled “Fire in my Belly” piques my interest because it’s often interpreted as pornographic and blasphemous nature. The work included depictions of a bloodied Jesus on a Crucifix with ants crawling over him collaged with other self performed nudity. I find this work to be fearless because it makes a social statement that most would never have the courage to do. Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ” depicts a small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist's urine. Some may also consider this work his blasphemous.

While this work is not intended to denounce religion, it alludes to a perceived commercializing
or cheapening of Christian icons in contemporary culture. Like these artists, I too am interested in showing a subject matter from a new and personal point of view. I strive for similar concepts in regards to the cheapening of Catholic icons in contemporary culture. Unlike Serrano, I intend on denouncing religion through committing sin via the characters I created for the “Seven Sins” series. Robert Mapplethorpe’s work titled “Self Portrait, 1978” is equally intriguing and inspiring for its confronting qualities towards gender and sexuality. I admire his works rawness and uninhibited ability to celebrate the body regardless of your gender.

Fear was introduced into my life through horror films in the 1980’s and 1990’s. I found myself attracted to both the psychological and aesthetic aspects of horror films. I could often relate to the role of the victim being abused, chased and killed for committing sinful acts such as sex and drug use. My life was often like living a horror story, constantly being ridiculed and beaten up for being effeminate. I found an interesting correlation between the bloodshed seen in horror films and the bloodshed described in biblical stories of Catholicism. I was also confused as to why blood symbolized murder and death in films while Catholic’s use blood to celebrate the remembrance of Jesus Christ.

Andy Warhol work has influenced my work. He was also a gay artist that worked with portraiture and transgender women as subject matter. I am drawn to his fearlessness to create art during a time period that society condemned such work. I am also drawn to his use of simple, yet richly colored portraiture work with celebrities of the nineteen eighties.
I have always had an interest for Theatre and the Performing Arts. Acting in my high school play ignited my passion for performing and working in the entertainment industry. After obtaining my associate degree in Theatre and Entertainment I worked for Universal Studios Entertainment Department for 5 years where I grew and perfected my skills and knowledge of the stage. During this time I also began performing in drag under the name “Mizz Cori”. The experience of performing of front of live crowds excited me. I find parallels between theatre and performance art in relationship to the rituals that take place in the Catholic Church like baptism, communion and marriage. Just like theatre, these rituals are rehearsed; they follow a script, and include elaborate costuming, ornate props, live singing and music.

The Baroque and Renaissance Art periods have both conceptually and aesthetically influenced my art making. I am attracted to the rich colors, intense emotion, dramatic body gestures, and ornate detail that is often depicted in works by Michelangelo, Leonardo Divinci, and Lorenzo Bernini. I have always been drawn towards the ambiguous triangle shape often seen in this periods work. I find myself using similar techniques in my work in order to lead the viewer around the work. I am intrigued with the term transfiguration and the history behind it. I am drawn to the biblical stories of how Jesus was transfigured. I find an interesting connection between transitioning from male to female and the concept of being physically and spiritually transfigured. I am visually interested in the luminescent light that is present in most artwork that illustrates transfiguration. Artist David Lachepelle has worked with similar ideas and themes, although his work more about the beauty of the moment and his contemporary interpretation of
art history, religion and pop culture. His work clearly shows interest in the transconfiguration, religion and gender.

I admire artist David LaChapelle’s unique ability to capture a single beautiful moment in time which comments on social and political issues. I am primarily drawn to his work titled “Thy Kingdom Come”, “Heaven To Hell”, and “Jesus is my Homeboy”. I enjoy that there is a theatrical presence within these series. I’m intrigued by his use of luminescent lighting and elaborate costuming and make-up. While creating “Seven Sins” I aimed for a similar aesthetic with the lighting, costuming and make-up. LaChapelle prefers to celebrate the freedom and liberate the representation of the body. LaChapelle wants to break free from erroneous interpretation and association of nakedness with sin. I seek to celebrate and demystify the transsexual body for the non-transgendered viewer. My work is also inspired by Chapelle’s interest in working with transsexual performance artist Amanda Lepore. His portraiture work with her has helped me cross boundaries in my work. It has motivated me to use my own body as canvas and to have the courage to work with religion and sexuality. As I grow as a transsexual I will also grow as an artist.

Since my work is partly driven by exploration of my sexuality I find it necessary to incorporate sexuality into my work. I often find myself looking at the world around me through a phallic eye. I use phallic imagery and nudity in my work to represent my interpretation of sexuality. I find the work of artist Matthew Barney to be intriguing. I am I fascinated at his interpretation of sexuality and use of phallic representation. I relate to needing to incorporate such aspects in my work. I find it beautiful to look at a human figure that literally displays both breasts and a penis.
However I am equally seduced by sexuality seen in found and created objects. Barney also inspires me to push the limits off performance art, video art, and installation work. I admire and draw from his unique ability to combine several mediums to produce a single piece.

The concept of ideal beauty plagued me as a young person. Society constantly compared me to male ideal beauty and I constantly compared myself to female ideal beauty. Artists such as Orlan denounce the historic male version of ideal female beauty. I celebrate the beauty of the transgender body, hoping to demystify it for the non-transgendered viewer. I find a beauty in human bodies that have both breasts and a penis. I believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, however through art, education and multi-gender acceptance more people are will be able to perceive beauty on a more personal and authentic level. I will continue to document future body modifications as I search for my ideal beauty. Orlan is an artist that has inspired me to work with both self image and how others perceive your image. Her performance work is based upon classic ideals of beauty from Western Art History. Much like Orlan I too am interested in working with the concept of image. Like Orlan, I have a unique interpretation of beauty, and I am interested in society’s perception, acceptance and differences in gender. I am also especially interested in Orlan’s Philosophy of Carnal Art. She believes Carnal Art is a self-portraiture in the classical sense, yet realized through the technology of its time. I’m interested in the disfiguration, re-figuration and transfiguration; Carnal Art loves the baroque and parody; the grotesque, and other such styles that have been left behind, because Carnal Art opposes the social pressures that are exerted upon both the human body and the corpus of art. I am engrossed
by her work with the iconic image of the Madonna. I have a distinct attraction towards the icon Madonna, in part because she is considered an strong woman figure in many cultures, but also because there is controversy surrounding concerning who she really was. I enjoy Orlan’s many representations of the Madonna because they all vastly differ. Some depict the Madonna in a comedic baroque-type setting while others have her in a everyday-type setting such as a garage. Like Orlando I find it important to include nudity juxtaposed with classic religious figures in order to rebel against contemporary catholic ideals while embracing the style of the artists of the Baroque and Renaissance periods. There are several passages in the bible that I disagree with and that I feel need further conversation. There are two passages that have specifically motivated me to create art cathartically about gender and religion:

“Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.”
Leviticus 18:22

“If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”
Leviticus 20:13
THE IMMACULATE CONDEMNATION

Figure 1: The Immaculate Condemnation Installation One, Photo by Author, 2012
The first works that were created for this installation are titled “Seven Sins”. They are seven 24x36 digital photographs of me dressed in what I perceive as the seven the most influential figures within the Catholic Church: Priest, Nun, Pope, Mary, Jesus, Lucifer, and an Angel. I have decided to work with the number seven throughout this installation for several reasons. I remember having gender identity conflict when I was seven, there were seven boys molested by priests in my church, there are seven cardinal sins, there are seven sacred sacraments, Jesus said
seven last words before he was crucified on the cross and according to the catholic religion the earth was created in seven days.

The “Seven Sins” series primary purpose is to confront my personal sins as a reformed Catholic. They are also intended to celebrate the transgender body and to inform the uninformed that there is a strong transgender presence in today’s society. As a transgender woman, I feel obligated as an artist to create artwork that opens up honest conversation on these topics.

I approached this series with the idea of wanting to continue working with self portraiture as I feel most of the work I create is about me. Since I have an extensive background and passion for theatre, I feel compelled to incorporate theatricalities in my art work such as elaborate staging, costuming and lighting I draw an interesting parallel between theatricalities and the rituals seen in Catholic Mass. The ornate robes and sashes that the priests use to wear, the rehearsed choreography of prayer, communion and preaching, and lastly the low light cathedral with brightly colored beams of light shining through from the stain glass windows and candles everywhere. “Seven Sins” is also inspired by Renaissance period art such as Michelangelo’s Sistine chapel, The Last Judgment and David. Raw emotion, dramatic body movement, rich colors, ornate and nudity are all aspects that I too wanted to emulate. I find a sense of beauty and repulsion within the work of Michelangelo. Depictions of torture and suffering were as much intriguing as they were disturbing. I want to capture similar juxtapositions within my work by juxtaposing forbidden ideas with the figures that condemn them.
SEVEN SINS

The first piece created in the “Seven Sins” series titled “Priest”, (figure 3). I created this piece first because it was the first sin that I committed as a Catholic male. Additionally the priest’s figure was the first catholic figures that I remember coming into contact with as he was the one who brought me into the religion through baptism. This piece represents my way of confronting sin that is associated with having sexual desires towards another male. I wanted to further represent the relationship that I see between Catholic priests and Altar boys. I find it hypocritical for such figures in the church to discriminate against homosexuals, while there are so many allegations of homosexual abuse against them. By using allegoric imagery such as little boy’s underwear and a child’s stuffed teddy bear, it would offer the viewer the opportunity to read into the image further. I made sure to have the priest’s shirt unbuttoned and have the pants down to represent a sexual act is either about to take place or has taken place. I find the relationship to be unhealthy and feel that the sexual repression that Priests endure often effect others. I feel it is unhealthy to deprive a human of something that is considered a natural act. If it was not a natural act, then there would not be procreation. I placed a rosary in the priests hand to represent the repentance of the priest for being both hypocritical and sinful. The priest is also holding the Bible to show that there is still a devotedness that exists to the catholic religion by priests that go undetected for sexual abuse. I feel that they feel that since all sin is forgiven in the eyes of the catholic religion, that it is in part ok to sexually abuse little boys. Like all the figures in this series they are looking upward to the sky to represent their fear and sorrow towards God.
Figure 3: Priest, Photo by Author, 2012
The next piece I created in the series was “Angel”, (figure 4). I wanted to capture the ambiguity that lies between good and evil. I used the color white throughout most of composition to represent purity, holiness and all things heavenly. The angel wings, flared collar, and lace gloves give a contemporary reference to both the classic and stereotypical cherubs and angels that have been depicted throughout art history and Catholicism. The costuming is not meant to appear to be realistic but theatrical which alludes to my thoughts of how I feel the Catholic rituals and art often exude. Like all the pieces in this series I bring focus onto the breasts and penis regions in order to celebrate the transgender body. The white powdery substance that is all over the nose, mouth, breasts, and penis of represents intended to represent cocaine and how I sinned for turning to drugs as a young person. The white tears on the face represent all the sorrow one endures while committing this sinful act as well as fearing the consequences of committing sin. I made sure to pose the figure in a typical cherub style that is often depicted in Baroque period art. My first reaction as a graphic designer was to Photoshop the figure to perfection, but after much contemplation I wanted to keep the body as raw as possible to emulate the figures also seen in the Baroque and Renaissance periods.
Figure 4: Angel, Photo by Author, 2012
The third piece I created in the series “Nun”, (figure 5), is intended to directly comment on sins that is associated with sexuality, the act of sex itself and committing murder. This piece utilized blood in order to reference several ways I personally have related to blood in the past. As I child I associated blood with pain from an injury or such, but also associated it with being powerful in that I was told to drink it symbolically though red wine during weekly catholic mass. I thought that as long as I kept drinking this “blood of Christ” that I would saved from going to hell from committing sin in regards to having homosexual thoughts. I again associate blood with its use in horror movies in regards to protagonist committing sin in some capacity and getting punished for it through murder. I also intended for a majority of the blood on figure 10 to be mostly located on the pelvic area to give ambiguous reference to a female’s menstrual cycle and the breaking of the hymen when a female is no longer a virgin. The condom on the penis in this piece alludes to the possibility that a sexual act has just taken place. This was done to show blatant disregard for a nun’s vow to Celibacy. I feel like nun’s are human, they have sexual thoughts and urges, and I wanted to depict my interpretation of what fearful situation a catholic nun would internally be sentenced to if they were ever to act upon such sexual thoughts or urges. Additionally, I used the condom to reference the controversy over safe sex education to young adults and its relationship to the Catholic Church threatening to cut funding or even close catholic hospitals if accessibility to such resources through all hospitals is passed through mandated government legislation. Lastly I wanted to dress this character in a fetish costume referencing the perversion that is often associated with having or indulging in homosexual and or transsexual sex acts.
Figure 5: Nun, Photo by Author, 2012
In the fourth piece “Mary”, (figure 6), it was necessary to reference several personal interpretations of what the word and image of “Mary” meant to me both historically and contemporarily. The “Mary” that was described to me through the teachings of the Catholic Church depicted a virgin woman that conceived Jesus through the Immaculate Conception by the power of god. It was important for me to use specific costuming that referenced the historical depiction of her, but with a contemporary twist. I used the symbolic blue and white colors in the wind-blown head veil costume to convey this. This wind blowing effect on the costume directly references the same fabric flowing seen in many paintings from the Baroque and Renaissance periods. There is something theatrical I find about this style of painting and depiction of clothing that I find attractive. I feel that intensifies the emotion of the scene much like inclement weather does. This piece also appropriates from the historically stories of Jesus’s most celebrated disciples, Mary Magdalene. Through my research I found it interesting that Jesus had cleansed her of seven demons,

“And also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out”. (Luke 8:2)

In September of 591 Pope Gregory the Great first suggested that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, and since then several other stories have been told of similar nature. I wanted to reference these stories by depicting my version of a contemporary Mary, through the representation of the garter belt sweltering with twenty dollar bills much like you would see if you had seen a stripper selling their body for monetary gain. I found all these interpretations particularly interesting when combined. I also wanted to reference transsexual women today and
the sexual solicitation they currently turn towards to in order to make a living due to the lack of equality in the workplace.
Figure 6: Mary, Photo by Author, 2012
“Jesus”, (figure 7), was created with an initial notion of wanting to resurrect my childhood interest in working with imagery representing Jesus on the cross. In my opinion this iconic display of Jesus has always been one of the most controversial ones throughout catholic art history for its many interpretations and representations. I have always found this depiction of Jesus on the cross to be both beautiful and repulsive. There is something poetic about a human, male, female or transgender that believes in something so much that they are willing to sacrifice their own life over. My intention was to relay this message, but specifically for transgender people. I feel that as a transgender person in today’s society we are constantly being ostracized for standing up for what we look like on the outside, and constantly having to defend who we are on the inside. This visceral, yet political position I take is essential to taking steps towards the progress of equality and acceptance for the transgender community. Just like most artists that have depicted Jesus on the cross, I too felt the need to downplay the spectacle and accentuate the pureness of the body positioned in the shape of a crucifix. I felt it important to keep with historically depictions of Christ, by keeping the approximate same length of tattered hair and crown of thorns. The expression on the face of “Jesus” in figure 7 was intended to convey a ambiguous sense of fearlessness towards the potentially discriminatory viewer, unlike figures 8-11, which were intended to convey a sense of fear for committing sinful acts in the eyes of the both the Catholic Church and other anti-gender nonconformist viewers. All the pieces in this series were intending to show that the human body should be celebrated not judged based upon which genitalia one has. This piece also represents my personal transconfiguration from my past being confirmed as a catholic male to now a non-catholic transsexual female.
Figure 7: Jesus, Photo by Author, 2012
In “Lucifer”, (figure 8), I wanted to play off the idea of stereotypical representations of Satan derived from stories within the catholic religion. The name “Lucifer” is none other than another name for Satan or the devil, and is regarded as the originator and ruler of all evil. Often black is associated with death, and evil. Some may argue that the color black is a mysterious color; however I relate it to fear, death, evil and the unknown. It can also have a negative connotation, while denoting strength and authority. In viewing films I have noticed there’s usually an creature-like quality about characters associated with being evil. Some good example of this depiction would be Linda Blair in the film “The Exorcist”, Tim Curry in the film “Legend”, and Rosalinda Celentano in “The Passion of the Christ”. The black angel wings and feather headpiece are intended to represent similar half-human half-animal qualities in Figure 8. I also had the character “Lucifer” in this piece specifically looking and pointing upward as to represent a sinister plan to rise up and challenge potential opponents in regards to be out casted from society for reasons of committing sin in the eyes of others. I too seek the opportunity to challenge what others, specifically religious authorities can find grounds on for out casting and condemning for committing sin. Again, I intended to bring focus to the breasts and penis regions though use of makeup and feathers was to accentuate both the attraction and repulsion that exists within sexual ambiguity. I do this not to mask or persuade the viewer’s opinion about being a transsexual but more importantly to display the transgender body in such a way that allows the viewer to draw their own conclusions regarding gender, sexuality and religion.
Figure 8: Lucifer, Photo by Author, 2012
While creating “Pope”, (figure 9), my intention was to depict a Roman Catholic Pope that was engulfed in feces. I interpret the Pope’s role in the Catholic religion to be of the highest ranking authority. I feel that this authority is too often associated with the same authority with that of god. I have difficulties excepting this in that I feel that no one person should ever have the power to condemn a human based upon sin, specifically the act of being homosexual or transgender. I feel that through the evolution of Catholicism it should be the responsibility of the person with the highest ranking authority to transcend this dated discriminatory behavior. I also feel that once again there is an absurd amount of hypocrisy that reflects the role of a pope in today’s society. Typically a Catholic Pope is seen wearing a pristine white robe and hat, I wanted to desecrate this iconic image with feces in order to show my lack of respect for the Pope’s role and authority to judge people based upon sexual orientation, especially when there have been so many recent allegations of male Priests sexually abusing young boys. This piece was directly meant to represent the same lack of respect that is consistently aimed towards the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual community. The dramatic positioning of the characters body, legs and arms was intended to mimic the same dramatic body movements often seen in historical catholic art making, specifically that of paintings in the Baroque and Renaissance periods.
Figure 9: Pope, Photo by Author, 2012
Figure 10 is a video piece in the installation titled “Church Sex” was created to provide an intimate view into my mindset while in an actual church setting. My intention is to depict the fear, confusion, and excitement and that I go through while contemplating my sexuality, gender and commitment to being a Catholic. Since as early as seven years old, I can remember being attracted to males and living in fear for having these feelings. Both the church and my parents were told me it was unnatural to have sexual thoughts of others of the same sex. I was worried that if I acted upon these natural feelings that I not normal and would be punished, and potentially spend eternity burning in hell. Even though these pressures plagued me for most of my childhood, they also gave me motivation to question their validity and challenge their authority. Everywhere I looked, I find fallacies within the Catholic Church. I find that ironic that there is such persuasion to be non-sexual till you are married. Like the other works in this installation I felt compelled to work with the number seven again, the most obvious is at the beginning of the video when there is a church bell that rings seven times. There are also seven overlapping video clips that are used to create one unified video. I also choose to overlap a priest’s sermon seven times to depict the chaos that my mind goes through when listening to sermons. I chose a sermon that specifically addresses sex and power within the Catholic Church.
Figure 10: Church Sex, Photo by Author, 2012
Figure 11: Church Sex One, Photo by Author, 2012
Figure 12: Church Sex Two, Photo by Author, 2012
Figure 13: Church Sex Three, Photo by Author, 2012
FUCK PEW

The third and final piece created for the installation “Fuck Pew”, (figure 13), was intended to represent the fear I had while contemplating my gender and the precautions of committing sin as a young person while in church mass. This contemplation plagued me for many years; I feel that by burning the pew it was making a statement that I am not afraid of the precautions of sin anymore. It is a therapeutic means of sexually liberating myself and embracing being a transsexual woman. The typography that is etched into the pew represents all the derogatory labels I’ve been labeled as. The imagery etched in the pew represents the imagery that goes through my head while sitting in church mass. I got expelled from school for drawing life size nude portraits of a man and woman facing each other. In addition to the many slang words that are etched into the pew, there are seven words that are specifically repeated on this sculpture, (faggot, homo, queer, freak, tranny, transvestite, and cocksucker) I would like for the viewer to remember when they were labeled something derogatory and how it affected them. I would also like the viewer to remember a time when they might have labeled someone else one or more of these derogatory terms and how it affected them. I burned most of the pew to represent the idea of burning in hell for committing sin. Although the act of burning a holy object would be considered blasphemous, I consider it to be therapeutic being able to return some of the pain back onto the catholic religion. This piece has transcended my work into a sculptural realm, and has helped unify the installation as one piece. While this piece completes the installation it is intended to also stand alone if the situation presents itself.
Figure 14: Fuck Pew, Photo by Author
CONCLUSION

The Immaculate Condemnation body of work has become the stepping stone for my future as an artist and activist for equality representing the GLBT community. I consider myself as a transgender artist, not an artist that creates art work about transgender people. I am proud to create work that continues a conversation that is long overdue and far from being finished. This work has also helped me transcend into a multi media artist capable of combining several mediums to achieve my concept. I feel that this work has empowered me to continue working with installation art on an even larger scale. This work has helped me confront and resolve personal conflict with both religion and gender issues. I feel a sense of liberation from the confines in which these issues which in the past have held me captive. Through research of other artists working with similar subject matter and medium, I have built a strong foundation in which I have learned and grown from. The evolution of my work is based upon every new question and new experience that I will confront as I go through in life. I plan to develop my performance art and installation art. I plan to expose my work to a much larger audience through these mediums. Research into Philosopher Judith Butler’s and her contributions to queer theory have inspired me to pursue similar studies and create art focusing even more on gender issues. Her book “Gender Trouble”, analyzes and challenges her readers' assumptions about the distinction often made between sex and gender. While I grow as a transsexual I will also grow as an artist that enforces the same challenges upon my viewer. Through art and research I will contribute my findings towards fostering a more progressive society that embraces gender equality for all.
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