The Individual Behind The Image Female Idols In Their Various Forms

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THE INDIVIDUAL BEHIND THE IMAGE: FEMALE IDOLS IN THEIR VARIOUS FORMS

by

PATRICIA LOIS NUSS
B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2008

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

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ABSTRACT

Figure 1: Venus in Waves, Mourning Series, Photo by Author, 2010

The research investigated the artistic and photographic processes corresponding with two studies motivated by the artist’s personal history and focused on the role, affect, and history of various female idols represented in art history, religion, and modern American popular media. The first part of the study documented female models as they were simultaneously asked by the artist to think of a range of personal but nonspecific moments from her life, the women were asked not to share their thoughts, only the moment spent thinking, with the artist. The second part of the study documented aspiring models as they awoke during sunrise in the nightwear they slept in (fig 1). This study incorporated landscapes near the models home. A similar notion is
exemplified between the two studies as the models are asked to procure an intimacy with the photographer and in consequence with the viewer.

The written part of the study gathered information regarding the female idols presence in a variety of cultures and eras, which transitioned to question the female idols current role in western culture. Findings showed that all idols stress an approved appearance, behavior and morality; furthermore research shows that the modern female idol stresses an importance on appearance more than any other factor. The research continued by breaking down the importance of a viewer-subject relationship in iconography and other artworks. A focus was made on what factors might create this viewer-subject relationship, and furthermore what do the subtleties of the subject tell the viewer. Reference of the artist’s memories of an inconsistent female role model in her own life combined with the idols that were constantly solicited by the media resulted in this investigation. A positive relationship was found between the photographic process and the study of models in personal moments.
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WHERE IT STARTS

My interest in female idols began at a young age, though at that time I was more in search of a woman I could look up to, a woman that could take the place of my mother. My mother gave birth to me at age 22 and as a very little girl, I remember her being very pretty. A violent custody battle ensued about a year after I was born, but I was eventually, at the age of five or six, the one who made the final decision to live with my father. I never wanted my mother out of my life, but somehow that happened.

The image of the Madonna from religion and art history has been an important influence on my work. She was chosen due to her preeminent mother role. However, unlike most artists who have wrestled with this image before me, I am not attempting to recreate the mother of Christ, or a mother at all, but rather I am trying to create someone who could take on a role that could be as strong and valid as that of the traditional Madonna for me.

When I was very young, I thought of my mother in the same way as many people think of a goddess, I felt she could do no wrong and I wanted to be just like her. I remember feeling a good deal of regret and guilt during the custody battle, primarily due to a concern for my parents love for me and because I didn’t want to lose either one of them. Regardless, my mother was out of my life by age 8.

At that time I began to look to my baby sitters, television, and magazines for female guidance. Throughout my college experiences, I became interested in female idols of various cultures and their effects on the people of those places and times. Eventually, I realized I was most interested in the visual aspects of these women, so when I began photographing seriously, I wanted to create my own versions.
The lack of a mother figure in my life has resulted in an uncomfortable vulnerability and an uneasy level of confrontation between myself and the subject whom I have come to recognize, empathize with, and use in the creation of my photographic series. This complex combination of knowledge and feelings that I employ in creating and editing my series, and that I look for in the models I work with, results in a realization that my images do not quite allow us to locate the full identity of the women whose gaze we are meeting.
FEMALE IDOLS IN ART HISTORY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GAZE

An idol is a glorified human-like depiction to which uncritical devotion is expected (Idol, Dictionary). Humans have long worshipped both sacred and secular idols and their accompanying iconography. Historically, these powerful human-like images in their various incarnations have influenced a vast diversity of societies elevating the authority of their idols to the status of role models while measuring what is culturally valuable and beautiful based on the idol’s ability to inspire and eventually to persuade.

Religion has long used the power of idols to stress the approved morals, attitudes and behavior worshippers should embrace. Christianity has set forth a number of female idols for its followers, with Mary (mother of Jesus) being the primary model. The Madonna, as she is commonly referred to, is distinguished as the dominant female in her society by being the chosen mortal Theotókos, or the one who has begotten God (Pope John Paul II). While there are various Christian perspectives of the Virgin Mary, Madonna is always displayed as a beautiful, modest, pious, and loyal woman.

Both the Greek and Roman religions include a diverse assembly of female idols, with each exemplifying important values to the people of their societies. I have chosen Venus (or the Greek equivalent, Aphrodite) as a focus when looking at female idols from theology for her great youth, beauty and sexuality - qualities that are also highly revered in 21st century western culture and media (Kleiner 195).

The idols of Madonna and Venus have been particularly influential in my research because both are still powerful and recognizable in the 21st century and they spark my long held interest in art history and anthropology. Knowing that these idols held great significance to the
people of their times, the evolution of their many and varied depictions throughout history have been a great source of interest to me. I am particularly intrigued with how the images and concepts of these original idols have influenced female idols in the 21st century.

Figure 3: The Venus of Willendorf, Figurine, 24,000 - 22,000 BCE, Museum of Natural History, Austria.

One of the first idyllic female figurines studied and considered extensively in the context of human culture is The Venus of Willendorf (fig 3), which was carved between 24,000 and 22,000 BCE. This figurine was a fertility symbol (Kleiner 3-4). The naming of the faceless figurine as “Venus” by western historians illustrates how female idols are ascribed specific roles
that change slightly depending on the needs and cultural shifts of the civilization that keeps the idol alive (Kleiner 3-4, 195).

It is important to note that Madonna and Venus are contrasting entities. The Madonna is virginal, while Venus is sexual - although often maintaining her modesty. We only have to look at popular media today, to realize that the expectations of young women continue to embrace such a contrast (Kilbourne, Ch 4).

When looking at a painting or photograph, the gaze of the subject becomes one of the major relationship builders between viewer and subject. Whether the subject’s gaze and body language is vulnerable, confident, confrontational, morose, ecstatic or any other emotion, suggests the character of the person we may have never met. We, as viewers, reference multiple sources such as personal history and popular media in an effort to further solidify this relationship with the subject by constructing the character of an unknown individual.

When images of individuals, such as celebrities, are looked at often enough, humans can develop a parasocial relationship with the figures presented. “The term “parasocial interaction” describes one-sided relationships in which one party knows a great deal about the other, but the relationship is not reciprocal (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Rubin, Perse and Powell, 1985)” (Ashe and McCutcheon). The gaze a portrait maker of any medium assigns or captures in their subject initiates the tone of such a relationship.
Figure 4: Sandro Botticelli, Madonna of the Pomegranate, Painting, 1487, Uffizi Gallery, Italy.

Compare the painting *Madonna of the Pomegranate* by Botticelli (fig 4) to the painting *Olympia* by Manet (fig 5). Initial observations of contrasts may be clothed vs. nude, religious vs. secular, but more notable to the identity of these subjects is the difference in their gaze. Botticelli’s Madonna gazes downward with tight lips. She allows the gaze of the angels and child to speak more of her role and identity than she herself does. Madonna in this painting seems distant and morose. Olympia looks directly at the viewer, head frontal and erect. She is confident, cynical, and unapologetic.

The importance of the gaze can also be observed when comparing *Olympia* to her predecessor, *Venus of Urbino*, painted by Titian (fig 6)(Goffen). Both women have a certain confidence, unashamed of their nudity. However, Olympia appears stiff and confrontational, while Venus is relaxed and inviting. The subject’s character lies in the way she speaks to the viewer and whether she implies questions to the viewer in return.
Figure 5: Édouard Manet, Olympia, Painting, 1863, Musée d'Orsay, France.

Figure 6: Venus of Urbino, Titian, Painting, 1538, Uffizi Gallery, Italy.
The lack of eye contact is also important to the relationship created between viewer and subject. The expression of the subject can suggest discomfort, distraction, or absence of mind. It can also mean the subject is consciously denying the viewer access to her identity. If the subject’s face is blurred or missing, as it is in *The Venus of Willendorf* (fig 3) and *Venus at Her Mirror* by Velazquez (not shown), it can insinuate the identity of the subject is trivial and secondary to other aspects of this image or it can be an effort by the artist to universalize the subject. In the case of the *Venus of Willendorf* (fig 3), we do not actually know its true meaning, but the fact that this and figurines like it have concentric horizontal bands that encircle the head and face suggests an importance of the hair and body over the figurine’s identity (Kleiner 3-4).
CREATING THE IMAGE: GAZE AND POSE

Figure 7: Untitled 16, Madonna Series, Photo by Author, 2010

A direct gaze is something I often try to elicit from the subject I am photographing. The images, together in a series tend to create a more complete story than when they are viewed separately. However, when viewed separately the photographs may tell the viewer something about the actual woman in the image, something about the viewer themselves, or they may suggest a unique narrative within the frame. In images such as *untitled 16* from the series *Madonnas* (fig 7) the subject communicates directly with the viewer, wide-eyed and emotional. She expresses something that appears intimate but she remains vastly unknown as an individual.
A second example of an uninterrupted gaze can be found in the image *Venus in Snow* (fig 8) as well as *Venus in Waves* (fig 1), both from the series *Mourning*, but in these the gaze is less emotional. In *Venus in Waves* (fig 1) an intimate quality can be discerned because she is wearing a lace nightgown, except her gaze is almost empty and she seems mesmerized by the viewer, either unaware or somehow unable to notice the ocean that encircles her.

In contrast, I also deliberately photograph a subject’s lack of eye contact or otherwise obstruct her identity. In the piece *untitled 14* from the series *Madonnas* (fig 9), I selected an image where the subject’s gaze is downward, so much so that there is no eye contact with the viewer at all. This communication may lead the viewer to feel the subject is deep in thought or reflecting upon herself. Research on eye accessing cues suggests this downward gaze could
indicate the subject is having an internal dialogue or referencing remembered feelings (Ellerton). The amount of eye contact and/or direction an individual allocates is also influenced by the culture they hail from (McCarthy, et al).

Figure 9: Untitled 14, Madonna Series, Photo by Author, 2010
Figure 10: Venus Breaking into Pieces, Mourning Series, Photo by Author, 2010

From the series *Mourning*, the image *Venus Breaking into Pieces* (fig 10) utilizes an intentional obstruction of identity through use of the sun and silhouette. In the image, *Venus Deserted Near Home* (not shown), the subject’s identity is slightly obscured by a fog. Furthermore, the model’s face appears vacant of emotion and looks over the head of the viewer as though not granting the viewer any importance whatsoever.

*Venus Absorbed and Reclining* (fig 11) references a pose used repeatedly in art history. However, in my photograph, the subject turns her back to the viewer with her head down. Her body language suggests she is possibly reflective. Her dress is intimate and slightly provocative, but her placement on a suburban sidewalk is in contrast to her implied intimacy and references a mundane American landscape.
The women I work with have a variety of distinctly different features and fluctuate in skin tone, but they all possess a certain beauty that I find indefinable. Almost all the women are aspiring models. Some I have worked with before and others I have found while searching through a modeling social-network. I often search for models that live in the location in which I plan to conduct the photographic shoot. I also search for my own emotional response to their faces. This emotional response is based on inclinations I have absorbed from my exposure to women in popular American media, art influences, and personal history. In both of these series, the images portray a range of feelings that can be characterized as morose, lost, strangely definitive or even fragile. The sadness apparent in many of them is self-reflective; other times it’s a search for something indefinite. No matter the feeling triggered by the images, beauty is constant.
The idea of beauty and what is beautiful has long been a competitive edge. While the admired body type, facial features and attitude may change with time, culture and interpretation, the importance of beauty cannot be denied. I find Rona Goffen’s description of female beauty in the artistic competitiveness of Italian painter, Titian interesting:

“In the Renaissance, as in ancient times, female beauty was the lodestone of aesthetics --despite the fact that the male was taken to be the norm, the female an aberration. Given that the beautiful woman is the archetypal subject of beautiful art, Titian's women may be understood as illustrations not only of his artistic gifts
but also of his superiority to his rivals, past and present. In competing with his
greatest contemporary rival, Michelangelo, Titian enlisted his women to assert at
once his genius and the primacy of painting over sculpture, of colorito over
disegno and finally, of the feminine over the masculine.” (Titian’s Women p.10)

While, unlike Titian, I do not choose beautiful women as my subjects (or for that matter,
try to create beautiful images in general) to show superiority, the idea that beauty can be used to
assign power to an individual who does not necessarily possess it is an interesting concept that
may apply to commercial exploitations. Advertising campaigns harness this notion of beauty for
their own needs. What better way to give the impression that a product is superior, and the one
product you cannot live without, than to place it with a confident, thin and beautiful woman (fig
12) (Kilbourne, Can’t Buy my Love, All).

The modern female idols that have been chosen by contemporary multi-media; i.e.,
magazines, television, and advertisers stress ideologies not only about the products they are
selling, but also about how a woman is expected to look and behave (Kilbourne, Killing us Softly
4). The over saturation of this female idol in our society forces an emphasis on beauty, body
type, and youth. This emphasis results in damaging affects to the average woman’s feelings of
self-worth beyond just physical appearance, but also how she feels about herself as a whole.
“The ads sell more than products. They sell values, images, concepts of success and worth, love
and sexuality, popularity and normalcy. They tell us who we are and who we should be”
(Kilbourne. Media and Values Issue #49).
MY SEARCH BEGINS FOR THE INDIVIDUAL BEHIND THE IMAGE

“Magazines, TV, everything you look and see, you have to be beautiful” (Toddlers and Tiaras). Through constant repetition of images in the media, we see a projection of the archetypal, dominant female of our society. Though in actuality we do not know anything about who she really is, and most of what she sells is a contradiction. Jean Kilbourne puts it best:

“…What does advertising tell us about women? It tells us, as it always has, that what’s most important is how we look. So the first thing the advertisers do is surround us with the image of ideal female beauty. Women learn from a very early age that we must spend enormous amounts of time, energy, and above all money striving to achieve this look and feeling ashamed and guilty when we fail and failure is inevitable because the ideal is based on absolute flawlessness. She never has any lines or wrinkles; she certainly has no scars or blemishes; indeed she has no pores. And the most important aspect of this flawlessness is that it cannot be achieved, no one looks like this, including her.” (Kilbourne, Killing us Softly 4).

The realization that the women I was using to create a role model and mother figure were fabrications I could not live up to directed me to ask who these women were as people. Rarely are models shown as people, they are more often shown as props, and I wanted to know who they are beyond the charade. The parasocial relationship I had built with these women was too strong to abandon them now. “Parasocial relationships have become increasingly common
during the latter half of the 20th century and the concomitant rise in television and motion picture popularity” (Giles).

Figure 13: Untitled by Barbara Kruger for W Magazine feat Kim Kardashian, 2010

The false relationships we establish with celebrities occupies much of the American public’s time, but as much as we almost unconsciously begin to recognize celebrities as friends or participants in our lives, in actuality, we begin to feel more lonely, because we are surrounded by fewer actual human beings in our personal lives (Butler and Pickett) (Teenage Paparazzo).
Combined with other feelings, loneliness is an impression I attempt to convey in my photographs, the potential loneliness of the model-individual and our own loneliness when we gaze back at her. A recent piece by artist Barbara Kruger of popular media phenomenon Kim Kardashian demonstrates this concept successfully (fig 13) (Hirschberg and Kruger, W Magazine).

My recognition and familiarity with women in the media inspired me to begin photographing the series Madonnas. In most of my work, I do not have a clear conceptual base at the beginning. My initial goal with the Madonnas was to simply capture portraits of women expressing their feelings in an intimate manner. Through the process of shooting constantly and almost obsessively, I began to understand that this was a personal search for a female idol, a figure that has been inconsistent in my life. An additional realization came to me with a new set of images I was concentrating on. In the body of photographs within the “Venus” series I call, Mourning, I was further stressing a notion of intimacy because the models were allowing me to photograph them unkempt at sunrise in the nightgowns they had slept in the night before. Not only are the nightgowns important to seeing the models in a personal light, but that also signifies something of personal importance to me. One of the few memories I have of my mother is in her nightgown. The beautiful disheveled hair and sleep in the eyes is something I search for in these women. They are already beautiful, but so often in the photographic and digital process they are changed to meet a separate and unattainable ideal.

Simplicity is divulged in the identity associated with many, but not all female “idols” that are represented in media sources. Popular women such as Katherine Hepburn, Princess Diana, Michelle Obama, Tyra Banks, Sarah Palin, Oprah and Madonna, among others, have
successfully built or are building a reputation that includes specific character and identity traits. These are women who, more or less, have controlled how the media portrays them. They understand that beauty is necessary, but they are careful to build their public identities beyond that ideal. These women are an exceptional view to idol figures we are regularly presented in the media. Showing qualities of a woman’s real substance is rarely a concern to those in control of the image being projected.

Examples of women who have not strictly controlled their image (or perhaps chosen a superficial one) include most notably, the animated Disney Princesses, and those prefabricated human princesses glowing with a healthy portion of sex appeal - Marilyn Monroe, Pamela Anderson, Kim Kardashian, the Spice Girls, Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, the Pussy Cat Dolls, among others. With many of these women, the character traits assigned are unilateral.

When I cast for models, I choose to photograph women, who, in many ways aspire to achieve the same notoriety as the dreamlike images of women I have mentioned here. However, I am hoping that the model will open up to me and allow me to see the individuality of her actual self. I find that the real women I meet and get to know during the photographic process are multifaceted, intelligent, strong and willing to share their personal feelings in the image, not only to connect with the viewer and myself, but also to experience their own thoughts and experiences. Recently, I collaborated with two models separately for the series *Madonnas* who found the photo shoot itself to be “therapeutic.”
IDYLLIC MORPHING

A separate, but related issue, within the identity crisis of women in the media is that of morphing the identity of historic idols/icons to fit a more feminine or mainstream ideal. This is explained in the article “Iconography: WTF, Glamour?” by Kelsey Wallace for Bitch Magazine. She comments on a photo spread recently published in Glamour magazine with the aim of representing women of the past 70 years who have been inspirational. Wallace describes:

“[the photo spread’s] purported goal is to inspire us that we can "do anything" by recalling great achievements made by women of the past, yet instead of publishing photographs of the actual women, Glamour chose to enlist actors with upcoming projects to promote to portray the icons. Not to mention the fact that nearly every woman chosen to model in the spread is much younger, thinner, and more conventionally attractive than her historical counterpart.” (Wallace)

By morphing the legitimate female idols of recent history to fit a prescribed notion of beauty in our time further stresses the importance of a woman’s looks above all other accomplishments.

In the documentary, “Picture Me”, an autobiographical approach reveals Sara Ziff, a successful fashion model, as she rises to fame. Ziff speaks to the camera during an interview toward the end of the film:

"When girls grow up reading these magazines they are presented with images of basically just actresses and models, and it sort of perpetuates this idea that this [being a model, being beautiful] is how women can be successful, and maybe in a sense I bought into that - this idea that this is a place I fit in - that this is something I can do..." (Picture Me)
Later in the film, an interview with another model supports Ziff’s statement further "People in the industry we work in don't see us as human beings" (Picture Me).

The glorified model-like female idol praised in our culture can be damaging to the psyche of women, but I admit that I do not live outside the media’s influence. I even embrace it at times. There is a need inside of me to observe beauty based in reality from the women I photograph. I find myself repetitively attempting to create a woman who fits the idol typecast but who allows an intimacy to be achieved with me, and the viewer. I want to know who these women are before they are morphed by Photoshop and advertising campaigns. I look for a moment when the model lets down her pose and is behaving naturally and even awkwardly, as shown in the image Venus Clenched (fig 14).

![Figure 14: Venus Clenched, Mourning Series, Photo by Author, 2011](image-url)
Dutch photographer, Rineke Dijkstra has been a major influence on my work. Dijkstra explains some aspects of her process in the book "Image Makers, Image Takers" By Anne-Celine Jaeger; “I try and look for an uninhibited moment, where people forget about trying to control the image of themselves.” (Dijkstra, Jaeger) She continues:
“A photograph works best when the formal aspects such as light, color and composition, as well as the informal aspects like someone's gaze or gesture come together. In my pictures I also look for a sense of stillness and serenity. I like it when everything is reduced to its essence. You try to get things to reach a climax. A moment of truth.” This sentiment can be observed Dijkstra’s beach portraits (fig 15) (Dijkstra, Jaeger 136-145).

Dijkstra’s portraits have always spoken to me in an honest way, and while honesty in photography is a debate within itself, it’s something I’m constantly searching for. Dijkstra explains that she waits at least two weeks before assessing the exposed and processed film from any project she may be working on, explaining, “you need distance to see properly.”(Dijkstra, Jaeger) I agree with Dijkstra about giving distance to the work. Photographs need time to breathe and develop a personality that may not have been recognizable if edited the same day it was taken. I feel I have an approach similar to Rineke Dijkstra, though we differ in many ways, especially when I consider the method in which we choose our subjects. While I seek out women with a specific look using social networks, Dijkstra often chooses her subjects on a whim, while already on location (Blank 76-89).

Lauren Greenfield documents youth culture and the effects of intertwining self worth with body image and/or monetary value. Greenfield, as with many of the artists who inspire me, works in video and still-photography. She focuses on the effects of the culture around us, often displaying a high contrast between what is perceived and what is real. Greenfield exposes methods of thought in our society, particularly in young people, that may unsettle many viewers of her projects, but when assessed culturally, Greenfield’s projects illustrate reasonable
outcomes. Greenfield is able to create images that double as both documentary and art by establishing a notion of comfort with her subjects. This established comfort allows the subjects to act as they would typically, creating an implicated sensation for the viewer. As with Greenfield, contemporary culture is a major influence in my work.

An image wherein the viewer feels emotionally connected to the atmosphere shown can be the product of "breaking the fourth wall." Classically, a term used in reference to theatre, the fourth wall is an imaginary wall used to separate audience from actor (Wallis and Shepherd, 214). To break the wall the subject speaks directly to the viewer through the camera. The subject must be at ease with the presence of the camera in order to achieve this phenomenon.

While highly controversial, Sally Mann’s series Immediate Family (not shown), successfully involves the viewer in this way. For this work, Mann photographed her children and family. Many of the photographs focus on her children, who often played in the nude (Barrett and Kundu 172-175) The portrayal of a young, fragile world of pretend laced with mother-child intimacy results in images that are poetically involved and that for an outsider of the family, may be uncomfortable. Sally Mann is influential to me because her images are elegant and beautiful. The fact that many of Mann’s images feature her daughters mimicking poses seen in popular media (not shown) has also been of interest to me.

Many people believe Sally Mann should have kept private images private. The children were nude being “with family”, but then the images were made public. Because of this, many feel Sally Mann exploited her children for fame (Barrett and Kundu 172-175). This brings up the question, when is photographing others exploitation? In my photographs discussed in this thesis, I work with consenting models over the age of 18. Mann was criticized primarily for the reason
that her children were children, and hence may not have been able to fully understand the totality of their consent.

Figure 16: Brooke Shields at 14 in Calvin Klein jeans, Print Advertisement, 1980

If age is a primary signifier of exploitation, than why is more criticism not paid to the use of young women in commercial endeavors? Supermodel Adriana Lima won the ‘Ford Supermodel of Brazil’ contest at 15 (TMZ). Runway models are aged 14 to 19, with some as young as 12 (Picture Me). On the fashion runway, the models are regularly dressed in revealing clothing and are often photographed while changing or topless (Picture Me). Many of these girls, not yet women, are utilized in advertising campaigns where sex sells. One famous example of a commercial like this aired in 1980 and stars a 14-year-old Brooke Shields implying to the viewer that she does not wear underwear with her Calvin Klein jeans (fig 16)(Marino). Is this also considered exploitation, and if so, why did it sell so many jeans?
When studying feminist artists such as Hannah Wilke, Pipilotti Rist, Marilyn Minter, and Mary Beth Edelson, I admire the combination of performance with photography and/or video. Hannah Wilke is a good example of this combination in her first photographic body art piece *S.O.S — Starification Object Series* as well as her last work, *Intra-Venus,* (neither shown here) in which she photographically documents her own physical transformation and deterioration resulting from chemotherapy (Reckitt and Phelan 107). The piece *Art must be beautiful, Artist must be beautiful* by Marina Abramovic (not shown) is worth mentioning as an influence; wherein the artist continually speaks the title of the performance as she brushes her hair and her face in a violent manner, topless.

Cindy Sherman pushed performance in photography a different way by physically changing her appearance and attitude in her work. In her series *Untitled Film Stills* (not shown), Sherman presents the viewer with multiples of constructed female identities as mimicked from the media (Reckitt and Phelan 114-115). Finally, Barbara Kruger combines text and imagery to involve the viewer in questioning themes of politics, sexism, identity, and consumerism (fig 13) (Reckitt and Phelan 123).

Realism and simplicity are qualities that particularly influenced me while creating images for the *Madonnas.* During my research, I was attracted to the large, magnified portraits by Martin Schoeller and Chuck Close. Images like these become landscapes in the detail retained by each dimple, line, and pore. I have always been interested in portraits that, in addition to thorough concepts, indulge other forms of photography. Artist and photographer Rebecca Curry, a colleague of mine, has also been a great influence. Curry’s portraits placed against black seamless backgrounds motivated me to also experiment with such a background. Simple, but
unique portraiture by Alec Soth, Helen Van Meene, Suzanne Opton, and Richard Avedon have also been influential to me.

In-your-face close portrait realism contrasts these next artists who intertwine fantasy and hyper reality. The works of artists David LaChapelle and Jill Greenberg were a passion of mine for a time in my undergraduate career. While I still appreciate the ingenuity required for their works, over time, the “wow” factor was lost to me. I feel many of their images are a wonderful show, but I have a hard time creating an extensive connection with the subjects due to the digital manipulation and artificial lighting. This is probably why I choose to use very simple, natural lighting. LaChapelle creates beautiful images of female ideology, but the reality of it is lost, and the fantasy is intentional
THE PROCESS: MADOONNA SERIES

Figure 17: Untitled 8, Madonna Series, Photo by Author, 2009

The technical processes I choose vary depending on project. The process of the Madonna series (fig 17) reflects the importance of transience in the image. Inspired partially by Cartier-Bresson’s belief in the “decisive moment”, this particular series depends heavily on the notion of a solitary recordable moment between subject, photographer, and viewer. To
accomplish this, I have chosen to work in film with a traditional medium format camera. I use a shallow depth of field, focusing primarily on the eyes of the subject and allowing other features such as nose and hair to be absorbed with a slight blur. Each roll of film records only twelve images, and I try to take only those twelve images. The camera itself is complicated to maneuver and any mistakes made on the film cannot be discovered until after chemical processing and even then, are virtually irreversible. These factors lead to a precious, singular image. Once printed, a noticeable film grain can be observed. The dialogue created between grain, pore, line and pupil is a congregation of photography and humanity. The grain reiterates transience, showing clearly the chemical on the plastic and mimicking the fact that this ephemeral moment has been recorded carefully.

Figure 18: Studio Set for the Madonna Series, Photo by Author, 2008
The Madonnas are photographed in a studio (fig 18), wherein I set up and control all the elements. I am very close and slightly above the subjects when I photograph them. However, while viewing the subject through my large, clunky camera, I feel as though I am farther away than I actually am, almost as if I am watching through a filter. Chance plays a role as I wait to see if the subject and I have created a sufficient relationship, as I wait to see if the subject will be comfortable enough to let down her guard. Sometimes the subject does not open up as much as I would like, and that may be due to personality traits or because she doesn’t know who I am and does not trust me enough. I think the images of women at this phase, when they are not completely open to the experience, are also valid to the series for the sole reason that it shows them as people with complicated notions of trust. As I mentioned earlier in this thesis, the images of a series work together, hence each one will not be exactly like another. Not every image will have the same emotion, nor should it. Each image is a member of a family that cooperates in telling an inconspicuous narrative.

The models in this series wear their standard everyday makeup and do their hair in the same way. They are asked to wear a neutral tank top or tube top in order to keep the distraction of clothing to a minimum. The choice to photograph the women against a black seamless backdrop is also made to keep the concentration primarily on the subject. Each participating woman is selected carefully and is asked to think of a range of personal, but nonspecific moments from her life. The women are asked not to share their thoughts. They are asked to eventually see past the camera and studio to share an intimate moment with the artist and the viewer. The facial expressions associated with their thoughts suggest universal roles allowing viewers to feel akin to the women in some way.
THE PROCESS: MOURNING SERIES

The technical process involved within Mourning is quite different from that of the Madonnas (fig 19). To begin with, I shoot with the Canon 5d mark ii digital single lens reflex. My distance from the subject varies from generally three meters or farther. I am on my knees, below the subjects when I photograph them (fig 19). I relinquish control of the lighting - the changing tonalities of the sunrise - and allow a natural environment near the model’s home to play a major role in the image. Chance occurrences that take place in the background will indicate in the future, when this image was photographed. For example, electrical lines or political signage may interrupt the landscape she is surrounded by. Even though it is easy to shoot in bulk with digital, I still shoot very few images, perhaps fifteen at most per portrait-landscape. I shoot predominantly with a 50mm lens, which is a lens usually recommended for
close portraiture. The aperture is set to a shallow depth of field to create a large portion of bokeh, or aesthetic blur, in the image. Such an effect used in a landscape can sometimes create an otherworldly atmosphere.

![Figure 20: Venus with Birds, Mourning Series, Photo by Author, 2011](image)

The landscape and the atmosphere are almost as important to the image as the model herself. A good example of this is the image *Venus with Birds* (fig 20). In some images the landscape seems to outshine the woman who has agreed to meet me in her nightwear at a very inconvenient time of day. Generally, we are accustomed to seeing only those closest to us in this sort of ensemble. Furthermore an enormous amount of self-assurance and trust in the photographer must be involved when allowing a photo like this to be created of oneself. Most of
the women have never met me before and have agreed to collaborate strictly based on our discussions via the Internet and my photographic portfolio. The women are asked not to prepare themselves at all, just to wake up a moment before meeting. They are also asked to actually sleep in the sleepwear/nightgowns they choose to be photographed wearing in order to maintain the legitimacy of the image.

Figure 21: Birth in the Parking Lot, Singular Image, Photo by Author, 2009

The concept of rebirth is relative in the *Mourning* series. This entire series was inspired initially by an image I photographed of a model in a parking lot (fig 21) in which the model looks eerily similar to the image in the painting *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli (fig 2). Historical references affect art making in ways artists sometimes are not aware of and I did not recognize the similarity until a few weeks after the shoot had taken place. I knew this image (fig
21) was special, but it wasn’t personal enough yet. To me, the concept of rebirth has a clear association with the sunrise. And that association led to the early images of this series. I wanted to document the female’s interaction with the sunlight. In some images, the sunrise actually obscures the identity of the women, in other images; it works in perfect harmony with their presence and the landscape.

Figure 22: Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, Painting, 1485, Uffizi Gallery, Italy.
COLLABORATION, GESTALT, AND REGIONALISM

In both bodies of work, the models become collaborative entities, because so much of their persona is required to be revealed when creating the image. Both ask the model for a certain aspect of vulnerability, whether sharing a serious moment through her eyes or allowing herself to be photographed unkempt, possibly half asleep.

Gestalt principles of closure, similarity, proximity, symmetry, continuity, and common fate are rarely something I consider in the brainstorming process of creating a body of work, but these principles have affected my photographs (Gestalt Principles). This is particularly apparent in the figures relationship to the ground, the abstraction of the figure, and the photographers’ relationship to the figure (below or above). I feel content is more important than the development of formal artistic elements, although there is a balancing act between the two. Closure is achieved in symmetry, as are slight changes in facial features and pose between the Madonna portraits. The Mourning series finds closure in symmetry as well as repetition and rhythm in the landscape.

Regionalism is an unavoidable factor. Currently, I live and work in Florida, so while I do make photographs while traveling, the majority of subjects and landscapes incorporated in these works may leave a southern impression.
RESPONSE

Immediately after the photographic session I feel either very good or indifferent. This depends on the connection I experienced with the model. I wait a week after the session to assess the photographs and choose my favorites. Sometimes, I will know the specific image I will use immediately. Other times I’ll use nothing from a shoot at all and months later return to those same images and find something new that changes my opinion. At this time, I’ll also discuss the images with my mentors and colleagues. Knowing what actually happened the day of the shoot often leaves me attached to one image over another that sometimes other viewers do not understand.

The longer I look at the images, the stronger my attachment to a specific one becomes. When the image is successfully printed, I sometimes find myself in awe. I’ll hang them in the studio and stare at them for long lengths of time. Alone with my prints, the idol quality encompasses me. I feel a need to be the woman in the photograph. In fact, when the prints are exhibited, I sometimes feel self-conscious, as though the images are actually of me.

There is a major difference between the relationship I create with the woman I meet in person and the relationship I create with the image. This could grow from the consciousness that no matter how much effort is put into creating an honest portrayal of the woman, only a miniscule glimpse of the true person will ever be captured. I always attempt to create interactivity with the individual viewing the work and I hope that viewing the images is multifaceted but also self-reflective, as it is for me.

END.
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