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MFA Thesis Statement

In contemporary society, the mass media, pop culture, and the beauty industries drive the framework of images that encourages Western culture's fascination and obsession with the female form. The framing of contemporary woman through images creates a fractured impression of the identity of woman. This framework of images exposes the awkward tension between the audience and the process of signification that occurs between the body and images. The language of psychoanalysis presented by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan stands as an example of the dominant mode of thought of Western society and its attitude towards the female form. Feminist writers including Laura Mulvey, Judith Williamson, and Judith Butler discussed various aspects of the relationship between object and subject in female representation. In both senses of the word "image", our image-conscious culture constructs identity through what we see in images. Women are particularly associated with being recipients of the gaze, while the image of woman is continuously manipulated into a specific, idealized kind of beauty image. The American beauty pageant system is one facet of Western culture that drives the function of woman as the recipient of the gaze while reinforcing the standards associated with a search for a woman or child winning at beauty. The imagery of beauty pageants inspired my current paintings, where I appropriate images of beauty queens from the Internet and juxtapose them with symbols that refer to Grimm's fairy tales. My intentions with the work are to create a narrative that exposes the vehicle of the beauty pageant as a mechanism for control, societal influence, and pressure while demonstrating the depths reached by the myth of perfect beauty.

Fairy tales functioned as warnings to children about various dangers in the world while triggering an awareness of self through archetypal symbols. Fairy tales are recognized as fable and fiction by the unreal events that take place within themselves; talking rabbits not only do not exist but cannot exist. Fairy tales typically use archetypal symbols in an attempt to appeal to various ages, cultures, and races. Examples of the symbols that I use include the theme of wild animals versus contained or restrained pets, which are present both in painting and in children's literature, or symbols that contained a contradictory message or tone depending on the initial source of the reference. One example of a contradictory symbol is the white rabbit within *Alice and Wonderland*, where the rabbit being chased by Alice represents a shifty, elusive character while also being a small fluffy caged animal. Within art history, the rabbit was traditionally viewed as a symbol of innocence as a vulnerable animal of prey, while also being recognized, because of the rabbit's ability to breed continuously, as a symbol of sexuality and lust. In terms of the space in which my figures are situated, the beauty queens in my paintings are contained in an ambiguous interior space that is not concretely defined by any further shapes or location. The space around the figures function as psychological space that is intended to imply a threat while displacing them from any context. The use of internal spaces is a reference to figurative work by Edward Hopper of women in interior spaces as a representation of isolation and self-reflection.

Feminist theorists, artists, and writers have long interrogated historical theories of psychoanalysis with the intention of dismantling a mode of thought that discriminates against women because of difference. Freud's theories define the psychological and sexual development of the individual through experiences of presence and absence, particularly focused on woman and her lack of penis or the relationship with his mother, which was

one based on desire. This perspective assigns these processes within the dominant binary-system of thought where the female and her body are placed in a subservient position to the male. Within a Freudian perspective, female children develop with disappointment in their figure, and are considered possessed by the anxiety of “penis envy”, which can otherwise be identified as a self-recognition of incompleteness, inferiority, and lack. The quality of inferiority and its assignation to the body can be connected with the hierarchy of competitions; the winners are ranked in order of perfection, where the queen is considered the most perfect, physically and otherwise. Concerning the analysis of representation, a post-Freudian psychoanalysis offers opportunities to recognize where the development of particular visual fascinations or scopic pleasures begin in childhood. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan identified the “mirror stage”, in which the child begins to ascertain an integrated self-image through a glimmer of recognition of itself when viewing itself in a mirror. Here, the child has its first experience with the pleasure of looking when the image perceived is recognized as signifying itself (Eagleton 164-6). Laura Mulvey identifies this moment as “the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image” (Mulvey 807). This fusion between self-image and eternal image coincides with Lacan’s identification of the child’s move into the “symbolic order”, another stage initiated by the gaze and through which various social roles are implicated (Eagleton 167). The inclusion of the mirror as symbol references Lacan’s “mirror stage” and the development of self-awareness while also indicating various mirrors within mythology, such as the enchanted mirror within the tale of *Little Snow-White*.

Within the context of beauty pageants, the gaze of the audience, including the judging panel, the crowd, and viewers watching through television, plays an important role that is referred to in various layers within my paintings. The gaze has often been associated

with ocular power, in which the viewer exercises visual control and power over the person being seen, such as in the case of the traditional figure painting within art history. One of the largest and most prolific media within contemporary culture that epitomizes this kind of relationship is the cinema; other examples might also include the advertising and fashion industries. Laura Mulvey, in her classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, discusses the relationship between images of women and the implied male gaze in mainstream film through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. She presents a compelling argument for how popular culture encourages and reinforces voyeurism and exhibitionism, as well as the eroticization of the female body as object and the male as voyeur. Film accomplishes this construction through the exploitation of scopophilia, in which sexual or other types of pleasure is derived from looking at others. Freud discusses scopophilia in his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, in which he associates the scopophilic condition with the various stages of development in childhood. Freud identifies the ways in which children receive behavioral information and self-awareness by intently observing the public and private activities of those around them (Mulvey 806). Pleasure in the observation of others is continually reinforced in contemporary culture through various technological platforms, including movies, the Internet, and “reality” shows. Similar to their role within beauty pageants where they promote themselves as national characters, woman’s presence on the cinematic screen functions within an exhibitionist, sexual capacity, “with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (809), existing within the spectrum of feminine stereotypes that includes the girl-next-door and the pin-up, except the beauty queen exists as a stereotype in itself. The appearance of women in the mass media, including pageantry, conveys their existence as sexual objects and the holder of the look, whereas the man is the bearer of the look and thus the holder of power.

Similar to Freud's theories, in which the woman's purpose is short-lived and shallow, the female character exists solely for the function of her signification, and she has no value outside of this role. Through this Freudian analysis presented by Mulvey, the female figure represents sexual difference and ultimately the penis anxiety defined by Freud. The female's appearance thus represents both male desire and the anxiety he experiences in the castration complex. According to Mulvey, the male unconscious deals with this anxiety through two avenues:

Preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery) counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object; or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (Mulvey 811).

The first option listed is identified as voyeurism, in which the male must investigate, in a sense, the female character, while the second is otherwise identified as fetishistic scopophilia. In this second avenue, the physical beauty of the female character becomes over-valued, in a sense an object in itself, disjointed from the actual physicality of the female. The translation of this over-valuation from the adult female to children in beauty pageants is particularly disturbing because of the adultification of the features of the child.

The connection of the female body as a signifier and instigator for male desire can also be strongly linked with the quest for physical perfection as displayed within mainstream advertising culture. Naomi Wolf explores the often unobtainable requirements of female physicality and beauty in her book *The Beauty Myth*. She identifies a comprehensive trend within the components of culture to displace the power of women

from success and activism into a form of anxiety about appearance and physical perfection. While there are small variations depending on delivery and intended audience within various advertisement sectors, generally in North American and European contemporary media, women and girls are portrayed physically thin, youthful, and relentlessly perfect in physical appearance. Women function within a sexualized capacity and are posed with the intention of evoking eroticism. Advertisements and media exacerbate the emphasis of a particular appearance to the point of obsession of beauty and thinness by these industries. Wolf parallels Mulvey's discussion of the fetishization of the appearance of woman in her analysis of beauty images, in which "men are more aroused by symbols of sexuality than by the sexuality of women themselves" (Wolf 175). Thus the actual person is devalued while the image of woman is overemphasized and highly valued above all else. Wolf's arguments propose that the female body is directly associated with self-discipline within these images, where the physically, cosmetically perfect, and groomed woman represents a high level of self-control over her physical body and depicted image. These images operate successfully as advertisements by provoking in the viewer a sense of shame and anxiety about her own appearance that can only be resolved by the product or endorsement carried in the ad. In addition to the media images, even the language of beauty advertisements equally promote the idea of striving for perfection.

The art historian Lynda Nead, in her article "Framing the Female Body," discusses historical representation and the codification of the female nude while also looking at Freud's theories. She defines how "one of the principal goals of the female nude has been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body" (Robinson 565). Nead connects Freud's ideas of an imperfect feminine corporeality with an interest in and obsession with the female nude in art of the past, the frame of an image functions as a container of a body

that was historically thought of as filthy and polluted due to its physical processes. The nude, and particularly the female nude, as a tradition was repeatedly revisited in art history in a continuous attempt to redefine the margins of the frame surrounding the body. One example of the language of containment discussed by Nead concerned the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, an openly gay photographer who documented underground sexual practices and the first female world bodybuilding champion, Lisa Lyon. Initially, Lyon presented a kind of female body image different from the social ideal that imprecated a new type of muscularity and strength previously unseen in female representation. Despite these opportunities for new types of expression, this variation of the highly contained female form remained fixed within the frame, merely revising the previously established vocabulary of what was acceptable for the female nude. Similarly, the child beauty queen represents a high containment of the body, but there is the additional layer that this is cast upon the most undisciplined and untidy age group, which indicates the fact that these children are being prepared by someone who is more technically able to achieve the high degree of grooming they present. It is a containment of the body by proxy, with the child reflecting the success of the parent.

In her analysis of gender in *Bodies that Matter*, theorist Judith Butler discusses a “reformulation of the body” with the intention of rethinking its materiality, specifically within the context of gender and power. Binary opposition places gender within the pairing of male/female, in which humanity is divided between the two as well as within the correlative binary of mind/matter (or intelligibility/materiality), in which men are associated with logic and the mastery of reason. Butler explains that woman has typically been associated with the body within classical thought as can be seen by the root word *mater* (Butler 31). The association of woman with the body, or nature, is an idea that has

been frequently explored by feminist artists, including Carolee Schneeman, Judy Chicago, and Janine Antoni. Despite this connotation, Butler points out the impossibility of this association because of the foundation of patriarchal thought. This can be demonstrated by Freud's psychoanalytic theories, in which he applies the gender binary of male/female and presence/absence in order to create a dichotomy that subverts the female body of any presence, and effectively separates it from significance. Because of the indissolubility of schema from matter, the form of something never appears without its matter and the connotation of both reason and matter with the masculine is inevitable. Butler points out that the masculine thus takes up both placements within the binary, where the feminine is "figured within the binary as the *specular* feminine and the feminine which is erased and excluded from that binary as the excessive feminine" (Butler 39). The connotation of the female body with excess is also reflected in Freudian thought since the female body loses its significance after a certain point in the cycle of reproductive development. The child then reorients its focus on the body, law, and language of the father as more significant. Applying the binary of male/female and the recognition of presence/absence as that which is active/passive connects these meanings with the body. The end result is that the male body is associated with being active and the female with passive, a connotation supported by Freud in his elevation of the penis as well as the representations of both bodies throughout art history.

Butler's arguments concerning the *specular* feminine reinforce the idea that the female body is intended to reflect and signify the male body. Wolf's recognition of the contradiction in society towards women presents the idea that various industries through the vehicles of mass media manipulate the image of woman in order to make profit. These manipulations are successful because of the association of the female body as a symbol of



containment, success, and desire while also depending on the deliberate encouragement in Western culture of male voyeurism and spectatorship. The female body has essentially been stripped of presence and significance within philosophical thought, while simultaneously being the focus in the tradition of the nude figure in art. Meanwhile, the male body within traditional artistic expression is associated with aggression, authority, and power, occupying a position of importance by creating meaning. Male figures, particularly those in royal portraits, were posed with a great sense of movement and activity, frequently facing the viewer with a direct look back that indicated visual aggression. One example can be found in the portrait of Henry the VIII by Hans Holbein the Younger. Female figures, nude or clothed, occupied postures of passivity, such as sitting, reclining, or with the back to the viewer and not commonly returning the gaze, such as in the portraiture of the society painter John Singer Sargent.

The irony concerning the presence of women in historical painting and the devaluation of the female body *in person* reinforce the idea that the *images* of women are elevated and thus fetishized. Fetishization confirms a type of excessive control of the image, since within the frame of the painting the figure is controlled, contained, and aesthetically pleasing. In history, the shift from painting to photography, while maintaining and exacerbating the tradition of the figure, heightened the inherent sexuality of the figure while further separating it from its actual physicality through the recognition that the figure actually existed before the camera. Current advertisements, while minutely altered through photo-editing, take advantage of our assumption of truth before the camera, even though much of the audience recognizes that prevalence of manipulated photography in the mass media. My figurative paintings investigate the combination of mythology with the relentless pursuit of perfection in the representation of the female. The little girls in my

paintings exist in an environment where adult grooming and make-up techniques are utilized on small children. The relentless fetishization of the image of women impacts even the way that the youngest of our culture are groomed with the consideration of physical perfection. Beauty pageants, which are derivative of the same extremely body-conscious era that produced the body building contests, represent a similar type of control—the domination of the self over form and receiving a reward for this mastery over the self. Paradoxically, these children achieve recognition only through the assistance (control) of their parents who are under the influence (as a form of control) of societal standards. In child development, particularly in the theories of Sigmund Freud, the theme of control and self-awareness are intertwined unavoidably through the stages of psychosexual development. The symbols integrated from fairy tale mythology, art history, and psychoanalysis imply an invisible threat that indicates the vulnerability of the existence of images of these objectified children on the internet as well as onstage.

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