

Miranda Graham

Graduate Painting: Artist's Statement

A Case of Living

Beauty and honesty reside in the everyday pains of existence that most insist on hiding. Through the act of exposing these pains, I hope to explore the dignity of what's real. In these portraits, I am chronicling life, expressing the duality of every moment, the beauty of imperfection. In the most alien, the most often concealed and overlooked, is where I'm searching to find the most honest discussion about beauty, reality, and where these two meet in ordinary people.

Loveliness is vested in imperfection, and dignity is inherent in flaw. I grew up surrounded by disastrous occurrences, feats of flesh, and close encounters. Some of these disasters were mine, but many others were my father's and grandfather's; from missing appendages to paralyzed limbs, I shared their moments of trauma as if my own. My family is living a life shaped by miracles and mapped in scars; each mark or dent is particular to a proud story worth telling over and over. This work is quite influenced by a genealogy, of family deficits, deformations, and biological damage, and the notion of creating memories or timelines through shared scars. I am consumed by the body's ability to heal, to transcend ruin, and keep living—demonstrating powers of regeneration. I function in a heightened state of presence, constantly aware of the complexities of emotions and challenges one faces when confronted by corporeal distress (owned suffering or sharing the hurt of others). And still, I refuse to abide by formal notions of beauty, contesting the historic core of aesthetics as being more than just a fleshly survey of Siebers's core three, "harmony, integrity and beauty" (3). This work is about living in the residue of marks and pain, the mapping of a life well lived by appreciating the human experience in its inbuilt dualism.

In many ways, these portraits are intended as an examination of contemporary aestheticization of form, readily contrasting beauty with the sublime. In examining physical imperfections with a passionate and personal encounter, I ascribe care, and balance to an

inherently base subject matter. Each body painted becomes a topographical site for investigation, creating a familiarity or comfort with bodies from which we purposely alienate ourselves (Weiss 88-89). Umberto Eco's, *On Ugliness*, best captures the intent of my work with a reference to Nietzsche's ideals/aesthetics of the sublime by stating, "the Sublime 'subjugates terror by means of art'" (276). When I paint, I am inspired quite literally, by the harshness of reality and the flimsiness of living. It is in the vulnerability of flesh, that I recognize my humanity and am able to acknowledge life as being less than ideal. When stripped bare, our bodies are able to communicate that reality is violent, scary, and filled with unspeakable atrocities, evident in the marks we all acquire over time. In these marks and residual tribulations, I find calm. Scars, scabs, and bruises don't evoke fear of mortality but instead, invoke the poetic and exquisite suggestion of re-growth, healing, and the unconscious ability to persevere in the most hostile of environments. Contemporary society seems infinite in so many ways. We live longer, look younger, and subscribe to unrealistic ideals of beauty; defined by Kristeva as a "totalizing process that transforms momentary and diverse bodily sensations into a [necessary but an altogether inaccurate] unified body image" (Weiss 89). In order to fit into a world of perfection, we've learned to hide our deficiencies; becoming reliant on clothes, makeup, and products to streamline marks of individuality to new levels of the supposedly pristine, forcing a false acceptance, a psychological adoption of the seamless, sealed-up body as natural. But imperfection makes a body unique, owned and intimate: proof of life, if you will. Stories hide in lopsided breasts, curved and bent toes, scars, and parts gone missing. They are not only worthy of our consideration as a culture of viewers but also worthy of a proper unveiling. Grosz gives structure to my sentiments in stating:

"...art also contains the possibility of re-figuring, transforming, and functioning at the very limit of the body's capacities... present[ing] us with the possibilities of bodies that are barely conceivable, that challenge

and problematize the very stability and givenness of bodies, that force us to rethink our presumptions and our understandings of what bodies are” (Smith/Morra, 193).

These paintings are about being brave enough to be vulnerable and offer up the most personal and fragile for a much larger discussion of beauty than the superficiality from which a constructed appearance allows.

These paintings function as an entry point, a doorway to a discourse of candid life. Painted in a traditional manner, I use oils on canvas and the intent of portraiture to reexamine traditional and preconceived notions of beauty and form. In these paintings, I intend to search the skin, in ways discomfoting and atypical to the acceptable socio-cultural norm of nervous concealment, and to expose the loveliness inherent in the act of revealing. The figures must be handled explicitly in their rendering, leaving no question as to the sincerity of the focus. Even though the figures are grand in scale, they are not to be viewed as exaggerated or fetishized but more so heroic and commandingly present; for that reason, I’ve chosen oils & inks as my primary media. There’s a familiarity in oil paint as a medium that suits flesh, and a natural fluidity and staining that comes from ink that parodies our most basic bodily makeup, both the body and media being ever-changing. Painting is somewhat akin to cyclical destruction and rebirth, constantly in flux with every movement of the brush, and so are our bodies in flux with the world surrounding us. As the translucent layers of paint build to define forms and figures represented, such layering becomes emblematic of restorative dermis. In these paintings I find myself at home in the material the way I feel at home in my skin. And for that reason, this harsh examination of surface becomes that much more palatable.

The scale of these works is larger than life size (increased four times their original size and sometimes larger) to showcase intensive inspection of tangible human form. Emily Braun best describes this technique as “demanding a body to body appraisal that intensifies...

phenomenological impact” (Braun). By enlarging specific parts of the figure to such a grand size, I hope to impress upon the viewer the immensity of personality hidden in the minuscule marks we all bear and often hide. The palette is heightened but sensitive to value and temperature, as each tonal shift is indicative of a particular individual and their life experience. These color palettes are deliberately intensified to evoke a pride in defining marks, vivifying an experience by increasing value.

My hope in this critique of the ideal form is that the viewer experience a note of confrontation, a hook between disgust and empathy, allowing one to better understand the personalities created by marks of healing and how those translate to the individual and the delicate stories beneath. I’ve found the only way to successfully convey care/sensitivity in the treatment of every subject to the viewer is for me to make a real and genuine connection to the models. All the models represented in these portraits are actual people, with real stories, that I have had the pleasure of knowing on an individual level before painting them. Being that there is a considerable amount of time invested in the processing of each piece, it becomes absolutely necessary for me, as an artist, to connect with every painting on a personal as well as formal level. I believe this is the most crucial facet of my process, as it generates a genuine conveyance of honesty and enables a more immediate and intimate entry point for the viewer. The paintings zero in on certain qualities about a person that are, by society’s standards, flawed. In the directness of the compositions, I facilitate the discussions I’m most interested in having. The directness of the gaze pushes confrontation between viewer and figure that is often deliberately avoided and ironically immediately noted. In this focused discomfort, one confronts stigma and fear, allowing an entry point for acceptance. Many of the figures are depicted environment-less, adrift in a field of color or cropped without indication of location or context, intentionally staged to mimic a clinical encounter. The sterility and lack of complication implied in a non-objective

image field deliberately hones the focus of the painting while also drawing attention to our subconscious tendency to limit our initial views of an individual based solely on flaw.

As a culture immersed in images and advertising, there is extraordinary emphasis placed upon appearance for both men and women. But in considering my own female perspective, it is women who place the highest amount of value and demand on their looks (Neade 16). As a woman, part of me subscribes to these ideals, and to an extent must abide by them for acceptance in relation to socially constructed norms. However, another part of me genuinely believes in the seduction of flaw and the advertisement of a realistic self. That being said, the perspective of my work is unique in that it is fundamentally sourced from the ideals of feminism but is not limited to the female gender alone. The idealism behind self-acceptance pertains to all sexes (Weiss 89); hinged on a universal point of access, our aging bodies I use the grand scale of the paintings as a similar advertising space, where the concept is as subversive to the intent of a billboard as the content. I am advertising initial discomfort as a trade for potential self-acceptance versus selling a prospective correction or solution for a body that may not need fixing. Granted, there are a lot of female painters working in a similar contemporary vein addressing the abject form with feminist motive, like Jenny Saville, Cecily Brown, and Lisa Yuskavage and to a degree Julie Heffernan. As a female artist I look to these women honestly for inspiration, but also as a template for all the things I know I don't want to paint. There's an indulgent carnality or shock/awe factor in Saville and Brown's work that verges on obscenity that I can't apply to my own (Saville; Brown). While I can't deny there is a certain element of body objectification in my own work, considering the narrowed framing or scope of the subject, however; it's not with the intention of limiting the personhood of the model by en-freaking or fetishizing the abject that I make paintings. I am drawing the gaze to seemingly base subject matter not to expose how raw and animalistic it is, rather to highlight a point for consideration and attempt to elicit empathy

and reverence rather than disgust. In regards to feminist art, I may be female but I believe labeling my work with a feminist motive seems limiting in the ever-widening scope of contemporary body issues (Weiss). Thirty to forty years ago, male body insecurity wasn't nearly as prevalent a topic as it is today. From year to year the notion of imperfection becomes more and more taboo for women as well as men (Cortese 61-75). Regardless of sex, the body as a site of insecurity and confusion is an idea that is manifesting as image normalcy. It is my hope that in limiting the gaze of the viewer to a narrowed focus on the body that I am in fact making this an all-inclusive commentary or genderless topic. Without gender complicating the way a viewer experiences the image, the painted body becomes everybody, a point of access to the human condition. For this reason, I intentionally avoid elements of satire and vanity that Yuskavage and Heffernan use in addressing their work (Saltz; Heffernan). While my paintings are about approaching bodily image and the superficiality of glossy societal standards, I find no humor in such a reality. It is my most sincere objective to use my feminine perspective to bring sensitivity to an inclement subject matter. The paintings are not only intended to focus on the dignity of our imperfections but emphasize the admirable qualities they should elicit and perhaps amplify consciousness of the topic (Smith and Morra, 193).

Much of my reference material as of late has been a combination of turn-of-the-century medical/documentational photography but also images and biographies of human oddities and circus sideshows I have resorted to these source materials simply out of the lack of availability of like contemporary imagery. As a society, we have streamlined our perception of self so much as to exclude such imagery from immediate public access. What used to be so accessible and common to the general public has been nearly erased from our western contemporary mindset (Mannix 8-9). The reasoning for this phenomenon is potentially two-fold (Siebers 42-44). Some say the "freak culture" is disappearing and a less prevalent topic of discussion in contemporary

society because Western culture has changed, grown to accommodate, and in many cases provide equal opportunity for the differently abled. In many respects I find this to be true, knowing full well a disability is nothing more than a perceived or socially constructed identity. However, the other half of me genuinely believes that the media is responsible for such abusive image streamlining that there is quite simply no room for difference outside of specific entertainment venues (Cortese 75). With each medical advancement, our own physical anomalies become less and less permissible in the public sphere and normalcy becomes so out of reach and unattainable one begs to question the purpose or benefit, if any, of such rigid standards. The demands of social idealization are extreme in the sense that so long as there exist opportunities to further plasticize and accessorize our forms, there is simply no reason to maintain our increasingly abject humanity. I would like to think much has changed historically in how we, as a culture, view abnormalities/disabilities, somehow becoming more equal or accepting. In reality, not much has changed. In the past, imperfection and disfigurement was a topic to marvel over, a spectacle. In some cultures human curiosities and miracle survival stories were rumored as portents or heralds of the divine, “not seen as disgusting, but as intellectually exciting” (Eco 243-260). While in others, abnormalities or maladies were, as Hunter states, “attributed to the wrath of God” (7). Since the event human rationalization, and later still of the first human autopsy, the point of real understanding of the human body commenced and whatever sense of wonder and curiosity we once purported morphed to distress and apprehension of ephemeral corporeality (Nochlin). One idea then becomes married to the other, fear of mortality and censorship of the less-than-ideal figure seems to increase and evolve with each passing year. What I appreciate most about the biographical sideshow material is that the people showcased were capable people living life under certain constraints, aware and confident in the aptitude of their own bodies (Hunter; Mannix). They lived in communities accepting and outspoken about

flaw, allowing them to lead extraordinary lives despite bearing marked differences in form. I recognize this same tenacity in each individual that I have the pleasure of painting and Millet-Gallant accurately captures a similar admiration in her assessment of Frida Kahlo's life's work, "serv[ing] as public performances of identity whose significance and legacy exceed the frames of... [a] disabled body, as well as the frames of...historical context" (3). As a culture, we are being taught to avoid, fear, and unnecessarily internalize the stresses surrounding the very nature and fabric of our makeup. The ephemerality and limitations of our bodies is just one exquisite facet of our form. Emily Braun best described this phenomenon by suggesting, "One finds compelling beauty in a picture of death... vivified by the visible process of its making" (Braun).

These paintings are a contemplation of simple existence, and the vulnerability of flesh. Recognizing our insecurities and confronting the reality of forms that defy description allow us to access parts of ourselves we relinquish in our quest for contemporary immortality. It is imperfection that makes a body unique, owned and intimate: proof of living. As a people we are never simply exposed, but this work is solely devoted to the idealism of being simply exposed and imperfect, a chronicling and celebration of life.

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