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Artist Statement

Plato claimed the prisoners were held captive by shadows, Foucault referred to them (the prisoners) as actually being “captive shadows,” but the Roman Emperor Nero simply perceived them as his audience (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200). When Nero mounted the stage the theatre immediately transformed into a prison-like structure where the exits were obstructed by guards to prevent any escapes (Bartsch 6). In front of his carcerated audience, the imperial actor-warden would perform the roles of various mythical characters (i.e. Hercules, Orestes, Oedipus, Thyestes and Canace) that were guilty of many crimes that he had also committed (Bartsch 39). While acting out his male roles he would often wear a mask fashioned after his own likeness, but if he was playing a female character he would then adorn himself with a mask replicating the features of his deceased wife or current lover (Bartsch 46-47). In this body of work, I use Nero's theatrical masks and a selection of his tragic roles to serve as a means of representing and exploring the connection between power and visibility, as well as the fluidity and reversibility of power relationships.

When Nero left his seat in the audience and took to the stage to “recite poetry, sing to the lyre, and interpret tragic roles” he engineered a “schematic reversal” of the theatre (Bartsch 2-3). Within this transformative process, the tyrant breached the “dividing line of the seats and the stage, and the boundary that separates the real from the representational” (Bartsch 1, 3). The difficulty in deciphering this distinction between representation and reality was further increased when he would wear a mask fashioned after his own likeness. This eccentric and unexplained act undermines the quintessential function of a theatrical mask, which was to divert attention from “its present wearer to the absent character whose persona and role it represented iconically” (Bartsch 47). By not offering a “consistent frame of viewing,” it understandably heightened the

audience's confusion (Bartsch 49). Between Nero wearing a mask that is a replica of his own face, and playing stage roles that bear a striking similarity to his life, the question arises as to whether he is even acting (Bartsch 41). This supposed transparency, which is strongly reminiscent of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, counter's James C. Scott's claim that "the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask" (3). (Within the painting *The Emperor's New Mask*, this idea is specifically addressed by offering a satirical revision to Anderson's story.)

Even though Nero may be the spectacle that is presented on stage, he still maintains his position as the spectator as well. The substantial inversion of the theatre's paradigm designated the seats as the new stage, thus casting the former audience as the unwilling actors (Bartsch 3). Once the "spectators were the performers, their every gesture came under scrutiny as Nero gauged their reactions" (Bartsch 5). In order to avoid any unnecessary and harsh consequences, they resorted to simulating appreciation and bestowed their greatest praises for his performances (Bartsch 6).

In order to ensure that they were giving a stellar performance as a courteous and receptive audience, Nero would place them under surveillance (Bartsch 5). He arranged it so "many men were positioned in the open and even more in secret to observe the identities and expressions of those present, along with their enthusiasm and resentment" (Bartsch 7). Also, these men would influence the crowd's behavior by means of intimidation (Bartsch 8). Due to the all-seeing eye that has been implemented and shamelessly exploited in Nero's reconfiguration of the theatre, a comparison can easily be made to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Within the book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes its architectural structure:

At the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole

width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cell of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible...Visibility is a trap (*Discipline and Punish* 200).

At this point, Nero's theatre functions as a semi-Panopticon, where the stage serves as the central tower. In the seating area where the audience members were once freely dispersed, is now used to quarantine the unwilling actors. Nero has now transformed a place of spectacle into one of surveillance. Inside the Panopticon, the actors are to be constantly visible, but the inhabitant of the tower is to remain invisible and unverifiable at all times, therefore bringing about a visual dyad (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200). Within the peripheric ring, “one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 202). Here, the “dialectic of disguise and surveillance” characterizes the power relations between the dominant and the subordinate (Scott 4). This appears to initially follow in accordance with Bentham's design, but there could be discrepancies. Nero's mask and his spies in the audience may not have served as an adequate substitution for the venetian blinds that were to be placed on the windows of the central observation tower (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 201).

The audience has implemented their acting to serve as their disguise, allowing them to figuratively hide. But it will become unclear as to whether their masks place them in a state of oppression or a position of control. Since Nero had situated himself to be both the supervisor and supervised, a mutual gaze between him and the audience therefore developed (Bartsch 3). In regards to this two-way inspection, Shadi Bartsch references Scott's idea concerning the interweaving of power and theatricality. She comments that while “one is watching for the

subordinate's correct performance, the subordinate is watching to make sure his performance is giving rise to the desired effect” (Bartsch 11). This interaction between two parties of different rank provides a clear indication that both have a vested interest in maintaining their truths (Bartsch 11).

As Scott states, “it is in the interest of the subordinate to produce a more or less credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him” (4). However, “if the weak have obvious and compelling reasons to seek refuge behind a mask when in the presence of power, the powerful have their own compelling reasons for adopting a mask in the presence of subordinates” (Scott 10). Throughout this reciprocation of the public transcript, “the masks may get thicker or thinner, they may be crude or subtle, depending on the nature of the audience and the interests involved, but they are nevertheless performances, as are all social actions” (Scott 28).

According to Bartsch, “the absence of acting when Nero is the audience, the failure to pretend innocence after seeing through the illusion, the inability to realize that a fiction is being imposed upon you...are fatal oversights” (20). These rules certainly applied outside of the theatre as well. Nero would frequently bring his theatrical antics into the realm of reality. He would dress up in disguise and move about the city creating havoc by committing such acts as theft, assault and murder. In one particular incident a man of senatorial rank, Julius Montanus, nearly beat the disguised emperor to death for molesting his wife. Nero recognized Monanus, but was reluctant to mete out any punishment since he presumed the senator was unaware of the assailant's identity. However, Monanus later sent Nero a letter requesting, if not begging, his pardon for the attack. Due to the acknowledgement of a truth that would have been wise to remain hidden, Nero ordered him to commit suicide (Bartsch 17).

Nero's first attempt to murder his mother, Agrippina, could serve as another example of a subordinate attempting to benefit by means of deceit. Nero tried to drown her by the means of a collapsing boat that he and Seneca devised after witnessing one in the theatre. After the attempt failed, Agrippina pretended that she was unaware that it was Nero's doing (Wiseman 258). By not publicly acknowledging that her son was the culprit, she vainly hoped her life might be spared (Bartsch 21).

These incidents can serve as demonstrative examples of “hidden transcripts” that are produced through the practice of domination (Scott 27). According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero's reign was composed of two main elements: “the public script that all are forced to endorse, and the private truth that goes unspoken, occasionally flaring up into public view in rare acts of rebellion” (Bartsch 23). Such acts include the times people would throw leather bags over the heads of Nero's statues. This gesture implied that he should be enclosed in the bag and thrown into the sea, which was a typical punishment for matricides (Bartsch 26). These acts of rebellion and resistance echo Scott's claims that “offstage, where subordinates may gather outside the intimidating gaze of power, a sharply dissonant political culture is possible” (18).

The power relations between the subordinate and the superior in these instances are indeed considerably asymmetrical, but the rare acts of rebellion and frequent acts of deception indicate an existence of freedom, despite it being marginal. Returning to Foucault, he states that “power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free,” and in order for them to “come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides” (*Essential Foucault* 34). Furthermore, “this means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all”

(Foucault, *Essential Foucault* 34). Thus power relations are “mobile, reversible, and unstable” (Foucault, *Essential Foucault* 34).

Toward the end of Nero's reign, the tables were certainly beginning to turn. An increasing number of people were becoming less willing to accept the tyrant's authority (Grant 39). To add to the problem, Agrippina remained a source of perpetual distress for Nero, even after her death. He was plagued with fear of the Furies, who in Greek mythology were spirits that sought vengeance for the crime of matricide (Mendelsohn 386). His fear was so great that after hearing the stories of them, he decided not to visit Athens during the tour of Greece (Bartsch 42). Furthermore, when Nero's decline became evident, according to Suetonius, “the most recent drama Nero had sung in public was *Oedipus the Exile*, and he ended the verse: ‘wife, mother, and father bid me die’” (qtd. in Bartsch 45). This performance served as a kind of a rehearsal for his real life downfall. When Nero was ousted from power and was on the run, the historian Dia alleges he was closely comparing that verse to his own situation by repetitively reciting a similar line, “wife and father bid me die pitifully” (Bartsch 44).

Aside from the tragic roles Nero would perform, his use of masks also foreshadowed his own demise (Slater). In Roman culture, it was common to have realistic masks made of office-holding family members that would be worn by actors at their funerals (Flower 2). Actors of similar body types of the deceased would be trained to imitate them, so that the “entire family line was, as it were, would be brought back to life on stage” (Wiles 130). The employment of actors in the funeral procession inevitably aligned it with the theatre, which required that the theatrical mask be of “a quite different identity in order to avoid any risk that it might be mistaken” for one of a noble family's ancestor (Wiles 130). If these distinctions in the masks were to be blurred on stage, it would have caused great offense to these families (Wiles 130). Theatrical masks generally had exaggerated expressions, but since Nero's are assumed to have

bore a very close likeness to his own or Poppaea Sabina's (his deceased wife) facial features (here, he symbolically becomes one of his own captives), it must have generated a disturbing sense of ambiguity between theatrical and funerary practices (Flower 38).

In regards to the use of masks in the context of death, David Wiles asserts that, "Roman culture was far more concerned than Greek culture with the afterlife." Moreover, "while the Greek who put on a mask created a new form of life, the Roman resurrected a dead being" (129). Aside from the mask of Nero's wife, there is also an eerie and disquieting truth to this statement in regards to his wedding a freeman. After kicking Sabina to death while she was pregnant, he attempted to replace her by castrating and marrying a young male named Sporus. Edward Champlin explains Nero's newly found matrimonial bliss:

Nero called Sporus "Sabina" not merely because, owing to his resemblance to her, he had been made a eunuch, but because the boy, like her, had been married to him, in Greece, by contract, Tigellinus giving the bride away, as the law ordained. All the Greeks held a celebration in honor of their marriage, uttering all the customary good wishes, even to the extent of praying that the legitimate children might be born to them...In addition, [Sporus] was termed 'lady,' 'empress,' and 'mistress' (146).

The legacy of "Sabina" continued even after Nero's suicide in AD 68 (Grant 39). After succeeding Galba to the throne, Otho, the former husband to Nero's Poppaea, took Sporus as his bride. (The two men initially shared her, but Nero eventually removed Otho to Lusitania in order to procure a monopoly over his beloved [Champlin 46-47].) He too, would refer to the eunuch as "Sabina" (Champlin 147). (This story is played out in the triptych, *The Sabina/Sporus Love Triangle*, where the multiple sized canvases are arranged like an echelon.)

It is this idea of recreating or representing a form of life that influenced me to appropriate the highly stylized bodies from Greek pottery and juxtapose them with the hyper-realistic masks of a Roman emperor. The amalgamation of styles that is introduced by this juxtaposition provides multiple frames of viewing, and generates contradictory modes of perception. Since the

black figures from archaic pottery are characterized by dark, flat, reductive and elongated forms, they begin to bear a resemblance to silhouettes and shadows casted by real bodies. Given this view, a variety of ideas can be brought about concerning the real and the representational. Here, a reference can be made to the legend of the Corinthian Maid. Nicholas Mirzoeff cites the narration of the story from the Roman historian Pliny:

[Dibutade] was in love with a youth, and when he was leaving the country, she traced the outline of the shadow which his face cast on the wall by lamplight. Her father filled in the outline with clay and made a model; this dried and baked with the rest of his pottery (qtd in Mirzoeff 33).

This theme of placing one's focus on false representations plays on the notion of Nero being duped by the performance acted out by his audience, the representations he forced them to create. This coincides with Scott's assertion that the public script is “the self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen” (18).

It is also here that Nero shares a resemblance with the prisoners in the Plato's cave who mistook the shadows for reality. Just as he was physically bound with chains when performing as the insane and blinded Hercules that murdered his wife and children, he metaphorically had his “legs and neck in bonds” as well (Plato 193). While his audience was confined to cages, he dwelled in the cave. However, as previously seen, Nero was both the spectator and the spectacle, which would also cast him as the captor and the captive (this concept of an ambiguous identity produced by the mirroring of hierarchal opposites is explored in the piece, *How to Captivate your Captor*). He too, joins Bentham's captives as he is “transformed into a silhouette, an object of observation” (Shapiro 297). As Gary Shapiro explains, “those trapped in the cave are part of an audience; the inhabitants of the Panopticon are, each one of them, solitary actors of their own theatres” (297). Plato's allegory and Bentham's design may seem to be diametrically opposed

(especially since one depends on naivety and the other, awareness), but Nero embodies the attributes of both as they “figure a relation of truth and vision” (Shapiro 294).

In this body of work, I use Nero's theatrical masks and a selection of his tragic roles to serve as a means of representing and exploring the connection between power and visibility, as well as the fluidity and reversibility of power relationships. For the man who allegedly loved everything Greek, he tended to neglect its philosophers (Mendelsohn 385). In regards to limiting and controlling power, Foucault had stated:

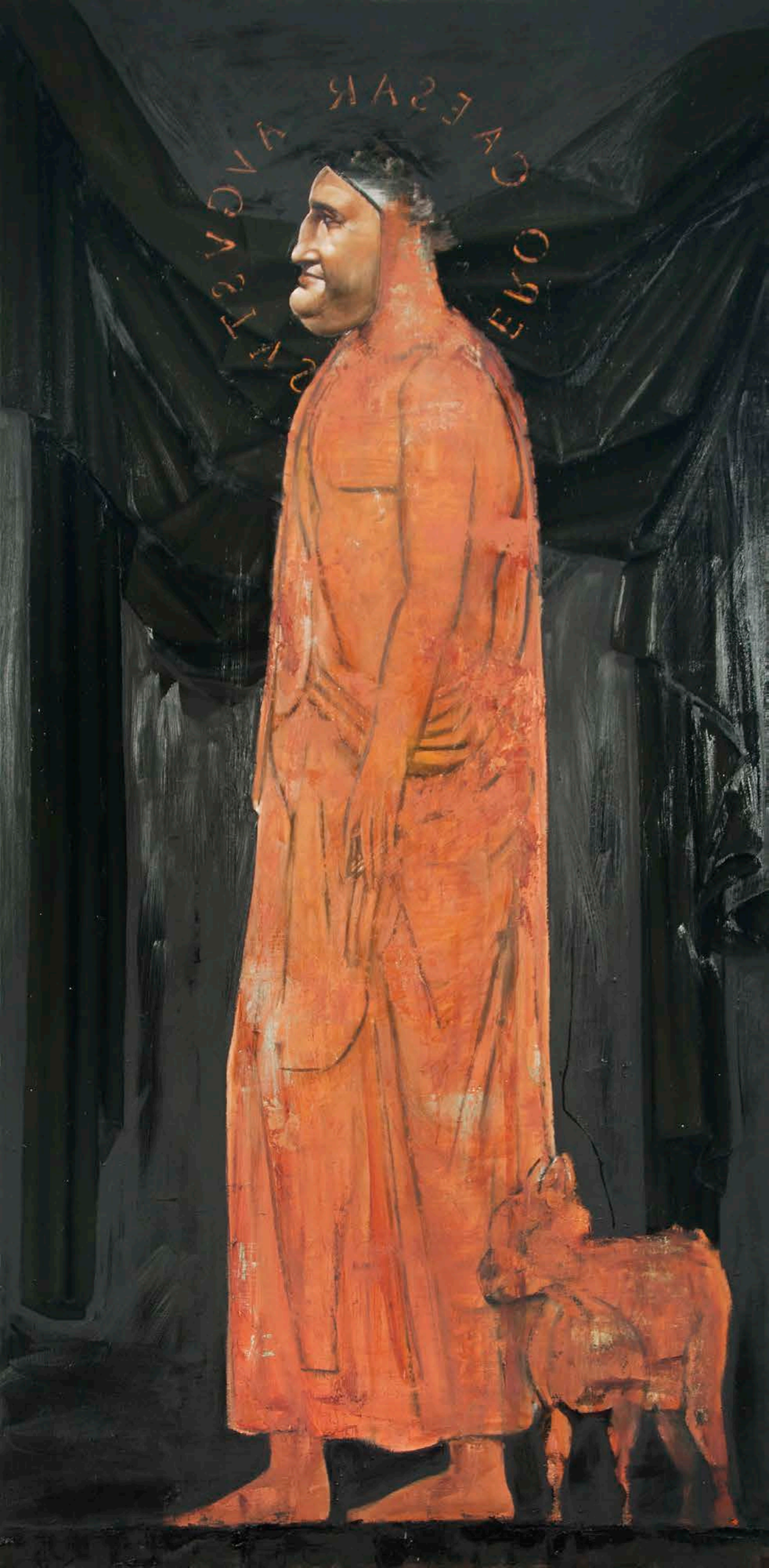
For if it is true that slavery is the great risk that Greek freedom resists, there is also another danger that initially appears to be the opposite of slavery: the abuse of power. In the abuse of power, one exceeds the legitimate exercise of one's power and imposes one's fantasies, appetites, and desires on others. Here we have the image of the tyrant, or simply of the rich and powerful man who uses his wealth and power to abuse others, to impose an unwarranted power on them. But one can see in any case, this is what the Greek philosophers say—that such a man is the slave of his appetites...The risk of dominating others and exercising a tyrannical power over them arises precisely only when one has not taken care of the self and has become the slave of one's desires (*Essential Foucault* 31).

Foucault continues to elaborate on this line of thought by citing Plato's assertion, that “being defeated by oneself is the most shameful and at the same time the worst of all defeats” (qtd in *The Use of Pleasure* 69). In this sense, Nero has unintentionally offered resistance on behalf of the dominated populace against his own excessive exercising of power. Following in proper accordance with the character of a self-referential tyrant, he was his own *captive shadow*.

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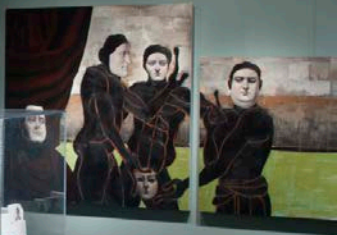
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D. AUGUSTINUS EPISCOPUS CONFESSOR





Philip Ruel
MFA Thesis Exhibition
Visibility is a Trap

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