

F EYE VE IBS

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Master Thesis

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Photography

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Fitness = “Fit for Purpose”¹

With the emancipation of women in the 20th century, there has been a shift in the ideal of feminine beauty. This is also represented in imagery, ads, and other types of new media...² – Eric Chaline

Each time period creates its own definition of the ideal body. These representations of the ideal body exist in media, photographs, drawings, paintings, and popular culture. The context in which I am using “ideal body” relates to the representation displayed in mass media which is placed in the eyes of the consumer. The ideal body is used to sell products, ideas, and lifestyles. This body within Western culture in the twenty-first century is thin, toned and somewhat muscular, but not overtly muscular.

My work is about the unattainable body image represented in mass media. The ideal body is manipulated not only physically but digitally to create a glorified body that is repetitively placed in front of a consumer as a product or an idea that should be sold. Presented in these mediums is a body that pushes the standards of women to even more unattainable ideals. Women are bombarded with perfected imagery daily. Due to this selling technique by advertising companies, women begin to look down on their own bodies and believe that they should be the “perfected” versions of themselves. This causes them to take action on their own bodies. Even when viewers of mass media are aware that the images they are reading are highly edited or the readers are cognitive that the models they are viewing have an occupation that is centered around their body presentation, it still has a massive effect on the perceptions of themselves versus others.

¹ Eric Chaline, *The Temple of Perfection: A History of the Gym* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2015), 79.

² Chaline, *The Temple of Perfection: A History of the Gym*, 79.

HISTORY OF THE IDEAL

One of the first instances in history, in which the body was represented as the ideal, was the classic Greek culture. Greek culture heavily executed fitness and exercise as a health and spiritual regimen. To fight diseases, doctors would recommend dietary regulation and exercise, which inevitably created a link between the gym and health.³ To have a healthy body was the ideal, but also regulating exercise produced an aesthetic, which is another form of an ideal body.

The Greek ideal was defined and balanced. Art history sees this fit ideal for mostly males, and not females. Chaline states, “what we can be sure of from both artistic representations and documentary references, is that the ideal male body was not the same as it is today,” and did not represent the entire Greek population as a whole.⁴ Similarly to the ideal body presented in Greek sculptures, contemporary culture has its own way of displaying the ideal body in popular culture: Photoshop (invented in 1987). This manipulation happens much faster than sculpting a sculpture and can be mass produced quickly. The images altered and perpetuated throughout mass media will be viewed as historical documents and references of society by future generations.

Today, images are produced to sell an idea or a product. If these images can be edited and presented rapidly to the public, then mass media will show a hefty amount of Photoshopped imagery, presenting what the body *should* look like. Capitalists societies include sell for profit and have their own motives for corporations as Roland Barthes states in *Camera Lucida*.⁵ Donnalyn Pompper, *Rhetoric of Femininity*, says that “the beauty, fashion, mass media, and advertising industries run on images that do not always adequately represent girls and women,

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1988).

but significantly impact them.”⁶ Advertising is constantly bombarding consumers with images that are in fact a *mask*,⁷ or a false representation of what actually exists in the world. Eric Chaline in *Temple of Perfection: History of the Gym*, found in his research that “body image dissatisfaction leading to psychological disorders is more associated in women due to bombardment of imagery of thin perfect models or big breasted women in popular media.”⁸ These bodies are created within a digital frame and then are presented as real bodies that are untouched by alteration. As women and men stare at faux bodies represented as real, they will aim to achieve these bodies that never have or never will exist in the real world.

PAST WORK AND WORK PROGRESS

In the past, I have created video art to discuss the untrue images shown to popular culture by mass media. *PhotoshopME*, 2016, was a video that showed myself moving in still images that were stitched together to create a video. With every frame, there are three or four edits that manipulate my body. This is to show the lack of truth in post processing, and the movements actually done within the computer to show this process. Some forms of the body in certain still frames are edited into monstrous forms that are just as attainable as the ideal body represented in mass media.

The truth within photography is a subject I have heavily relied on in my research, and have focused on the ideas of Walter Benjamin, Martha Rosler, and Guy Debord. Debord states that, “modern industrial capitalist societies have created a world in which the majority of people are increasingly passive and depoliticized ... [these societies have] absorb[ed] us in a world of

⁶ Donnalyn Pomper, *Rhetoric of Femininity: Female Body Image, Media, and Gender Roles* (Lexington Books, 2016), 101.

⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*.

⁸ Chaline, *The Temple of Perfection: A History of the Gym*, 163.

illusions and false consciousness.”⁹ We view images in mass media without further question.

Even if we are aware they are fake, we still choose to compare ourselves to them and will believe specific elements of them.

Advertising messages are predominantly focused on a world full of glamour and entertainment. Issues of conflict are usually packaged around an array of feel-good factor articles in which leaves consumers powerless to an overwhelming spectacle.¹⁰ Although viewers are in control of what they are viewing, the loss of control of our own bodies take over when viewing a glamorous perception of life repetitively. The loss of control can result in many serious actions being taken on the body to present a similar body to the ones presented in mass media. The idea of the unsustainability of the ideal body being influenced by popular culture, led me to the works of Vanessa Beecroft and Heather Cassils, who have been the two biggest influences on my work. Both of these artists discuss capitalism and the ideal body that can be attained but cannot be sustained. Beecroft and Cassils are both stuck within the notion of the ideal body, yet also acknowledge its entrapment and are working to combat it.

My thesis and previous work has references to Andy Warhol, who picked up the perception of the commercialized America. Andy Warhol has influenced my visual aesthetic in my current work *FiveLBS*. His work is filled with sarcasm and pushes the ideas of mass media as influence. His series, *Marilyn Monroe*, is a piece that I have found myself enthralled with. His use of color, cropping and replication is not only intriguing to the eye but also makes us question the original image and the intent of that original image. The time period that we live in now (2017 - 2018) is full of replicas, duplicates, and unoriginal imagery that claims to be original or

⁹ Liz Wells Quoting Guy Debord, *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 195.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

the truth, when in reality all of the images are representations, and the true image only exists in the original object or person. This drowning in visual imagery is something that Debord focused on since the life of glamour is presented as the life we live daily.¹¹ However, we know that the idealized and perfected life does not exist.

Using this Warhol aesthetic, in 2017, I created a 4' x 4' grid of video screens that played GIFS portraying particular body parts being edited over and over titled *insta-LOSS*. This specific piece is a continuation of *PhotoshopME* but is different in the way it is displayed and broken apart. Instead of a full video, each segment is its own clip and separated into GIFs. A GIF is a short video that consists of 3-10 photographic images that create a small “video” under a 5 second time frame. Each GIF shows a different body part that has been edited. Some GIFS include facial features and expressions that change from content to discouraged, while others focus specifically on a body part that could be “improved,” slimmed down, or made stronger. I added elements of unrealistic editing, such as: altered skin colors, tattoo removals, thinner body parts, shading to create muscle, and hair growth. In some of the GIFS, I reverse images at the end, or completely shift the hue of the image. Aspects of these edits refer to Warhol’s *Madonna* series, as he shifts her skin tones, hair colors, and other pigments to press the sarcasm of what is being held up as ideal or iconic in popular culture.

After creating this piece, I began to revisit the work of Eleanor Antin and her piece *Carving Traditional Sculpture*. Antin documented herself on a diet to show how her body could be changed and manipulated through her own consumption. Antin allows her viewer to dive into her work by the use of repetition which includes photographing herself over and over in the same positions. Although her body is changing, her positioning is not. This portrays the obsession and

¹¹ Wells. *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 195.

repetition in an everyday routine that could produce a drastic change within the body. Susan Bordo states that “the ideal of slenderness, and the diet and exercise regimens that have become inseparable from it, offer the illusion of temporary ideology of femininity.”¹² The temporary ideology of femininity being the current trend in the ideal body that is fixated upon by mass media and thus popular culture. As Antin documents her repetition to her thinnest self, she points out the obsession with diet, exercise and the aesthetic of being skinny even if it is only sustainable for a small amount of time, or if it is extremely unhealthy despite its trending appeal in society.

I found myself drawn to Antin’s work also by the use of her body to show power and control, and how my current work provokes the same conversation. Displaying images in a scientific matter causes the audience to analyze the images more and question the changes, or the need for the changes. The idea of sculpting, and the link of control and power versus nature and genetic predispositions is the center idea around my thesis work, *FiveLBS*. The real question is who is controlling the person in control. Bordo attributes control to how “the body is not only a text of culture, it is also, as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault have argued, a practical direct locus of social control.”¹³ Culture is a large reasoning for many to find perfection in their own body or is a factor of why people want to sculpt their body in the first place.

¹² Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2013).

¹³ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, 165.

THESIS: FIVELBS

My thesis, *FiveLBS*, showcases six materials that are displayed on the wall in photographs that represent pop-art commercialized imagery. The materials in the photographs are: pomegranates, apples, pears, artificial bones, a stack of cut wood, and sticks. The photographs display these materials, but all weigh different amounts than one another. The numbers that the materials weigh are also used to title each photograph individually. The relationship between the presented image and the title is comparable to an image and caption that would be displayed either in mass media or in social media. Therefore, all of these items weight differently to represent different body types or imagery aimed to sell different ideas. In front of these photographs, placed directly below on the ground are the original materials from the photographs that have been broken down to only weigh five pounds. The remainder materials have each been deconstructed differently by either my own hand, or by nature. The materials are placed on mini-pedestals that are a little over a foot in height. *FiveLBS* is about society's fixation on weight and the destruction it can have to always be focusing on weight.

The numbers that society focuses on represent either a bodybuilding, weight loss, or anorexic mentality. Susan Bordo's, *Unbearable Weight*,¹⁴ discusses these ideal goals that are rather unsustainable for an entire lifespan. Alan Klein, *Big Little Men*,¹⁵ believes there is a connection between bodybuilding and weight loss mentalities, as he stated that "both slenderness and muscularity have at their core two traits, resistance and control."¹⁶ However, he states that

¹⁴ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. 165.

¹⁵ Alan M Klein, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993)

¹⁶ Klein, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction*, 183.

there is a vast difference between starving oneself, and eating constantly to produce muscle mass.¹⁷ The connection between the thin body and the muscular body, is one that I am particularly interested in, as they are both ideal bodies in contemporary culture, but are two extreme goals to attain.

BEFORE OBJECTS

I use specific materials to represent different body types in my images. Displayed in photographs I show the original, “before,” image that would be seen in comparison to weight loss commercials or on social media. These objects are as listed (titles of each piece are italicized):

Pears (19.6 LB): Pears were chosen due to the representation of the “pear-shaped” body. This body is very common within women due to the fact they are child-bearers. Hips are created to hold babies and multitask with other objects and humans. This multitasking can include taking care of a child while trying to achieve other tasks throughout the day. As a woman, it may be easier to hold a child by resting them on their hips while trying to clean up around the house, or even complete simple tasks like walking to a destination. This body, however, is not the ideal body within the Western culture. Although it is a functional body, the Western ideal does not display large hips, or bigger thighs within its reproduction in mass media.

Pomegranates (9.4 LB): Pomegranates have a variety of sexual attributions within art history. I chose Pomegranates due to their linkage with the female reproductive system. The idea of anorexia and dieting can be very harmful to this part of the female body, specifically within a bodybuilding competition setting, and as well with a starvation method to reach a thinner “ideal body.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Artificial Bones (*2.1 LB*): Artificial Bones were chosen because of the representation of science and our actual bodies. However artificial bones are much lighter in weight than real human bones. These are to represent those that are already overtly thin, to a point they look weightless, yet still feel the need to make some alteration to their body. The artificial bones I chose only weight 2.1 pounds. Many people who struggle with either a natural thin body, or an eating disorder attempt to cover up their body with fashion. Others may try to alter their body with cosmetic surgery. I acknowledge that there are many sides to the extremely thin body, which can exist due to genetics, or can be an effect of an eating disorder.

Pile of Wood (*20.1 LB*): I chose a pile of wood to represent bodies with lack of curves or feminine representation. This also plays on the metaphor of “flat as a board” or “boy-bodied”, that many thin women identify with. On both ends of the spectrum, overweight or underweight, body shaming exists. Due to this shaming, individuals have begun to call women with no curves, “not true women.”

Sticks (*24.6 LB*): Sticks also represent the notion of being stick thin. Some of these bodies do have some curve or movement but are still remotely thin or flat. Some of these individuals choose to be thin, and others cannot help that their bodies display this aesthetic. The idea of the stick-thin figure can be very disruptive and dangerous in society. At the end of the day, the goal of being this body composition can burn people out, physically and emotionally. However, we are all human, and all mortal, and no matter our life journey we will end up in the same manner.

Apples (*18.2 LB*): Apples were added to this installation due to their commentary on another body type that is often referenced in Western culture. The ‘apple’ body is one that holds

more weight around its stomach. This produces a rounder body type that is promoted as unbalanced and unhealthy since its fat content is one that is closer to the heart.

The titles of each photograph are to be questioned by my viewers. These labels are used in three ways. The first, is giving a documentation of a weight. The second use is to represent similar labeling to captions and statuses on social media. In fitness imagery on social media platforms like Instagram, there are a lot of fitness “gurus” who post images with a caption of how much they weigh. Perhaps the weight is accurate and represented in the image, but maybe it is not accurate, or maybe it took multiple photographs to get that particular angle to look like it matches the number. Thirdly, the number could be taken as emotional weight. Some of the before objects chosen are similar in representation, but the importance of each piece relies on how it is broken down in the display in front of the photographs.

AFTER OBJECTS

The objects presented on the pedestals in front of the photographs are “after objects.” These objects have gone through a series of processes to break them down, or build them up, to match the weight of five pounds. These materials are presented on short pedestals that are approximately a foot in height. The reason why the pedestals are near to the ground, instead of eye-height, is to have the viewer look down on the goal-oriented number, or the ideal body that our society holds up.

Five pounds is a way for people to verbally converse about their progress. If there is an attempt to lose weight, people round up or round down to explain how much they have lost or gained. Most likely, those attempting to pursue weight loss (or weight gain), will tell others they have lost five pounds, ten pounds, thirty pounds, eighty-five pounds, but would never actually say they lost sixty-three pounds in total. Our bodies fluctuate in weight daily and even hourly.

The actual amount of weight an individual lost or gained is impossible to verbalize truthfully at all times unless someone was physically standing on a scale as they were talking.

Another reason the final objects are displayed in five pounds is in reference to gym equipment. Typically dumbbells, barbells, and assisted weight machines are all incrementally set at five pounds. Since I am referencing pop culture and mass media influences on the ideal body, I am referring to these more mainstream gyms that offer incentive to lose weight, but the goal of weight loss or muscle gain is fully dependent on the members dedication, desire, and own mentality to achieve their goals.

Through the breaking down process I ask a simple question: How much does it take to get rid of five pounds? The result of this question shows obsession, dedication, and sometimes the result takes on more weight emotionally than what we had to begin with. Not only are some of the breakdown processes faster and more controlled, compared to the slower and more natural representation of the breakdown process, but all of it speaks to the level of fixation on a number. This goal-oriented number will drive a person to either commit to an act that is more intense or will lose motivation in entirety due to the disappointment in their own body.

The breakdown of materials is also a process due to the fact I obsessively have to breakdown and weigh these materials to make sure they weigh five pounds. As stated earlier, within a day, weight can flux in the human body ranging from three to five pounds. These fluctuations can cause an immense amount of stress on those attempting to reach a specific number.

The objects after the breakdown process all equal five pounds. The breakdown process varies from natural processes to my own control over the process. As human beings, we have a certain amount of control over our bodies. There are specific things that we can control, such as:

how much we eat, drink, run, work out, and what we choose to spend our time with, however, the results of these elements of control are in flux. Sometimes we have genetic restrictions that will not allow us to gain or lose weight no matter the amount of food we place into our body. Other times we are infected with diseases or illnesses that do not allow us to be well, adapt to new lifestyles, or place restrictions on our expected results or plans for our lives. The way each object is broken down speaks to this amount of time, effort, dedication and control that particular people are willing to place into reaching their own definition of the ideal.

I chose to dry out pears and pomegranates to represent the idea of natural decay, yet I present them in different ways. The pears are cut up in slices and are dried out naturally. They are not processed, but are left out to dry naturally, to show the lack of effort but the pure course of nature to allow the dehydration process on the pears. However, the pears are sliced which allows the drying process to occur much faster than whole fruits attempting to be dried out. This means that although the drying out process is natural, there is an element of control that is speeding it up. This could be equivocated to not exercising or not changing particular food groups consumed, but by setting up this process to be more successful in the beginning, such as: Gastric Bypass surgery or consuming dietary pills that make the stomach feel fuller during the day. Therefore, situating oneself in an environment that does not allow for normal eating habits to occur.

The other fruit group used is pomegranates, which is presented dried out and hardened, but is displayed in both full fruit form as well as broken pieces and seeds that are exposed. To show the pomegranates in full figure, yet dried out, leaves the viewer to question what is inside. The process for whole food dehydration takes weeks or months. A small hole punctures the fruit and leaks fluid as air seeps into the fruit, drying it out slowly. The drying out process is different

in representation from the pears in the way that represents the destruction that happens overtime on a human body. The parts that show the seeds exposed and the skin of the fruit broken apart reveals the insides of the fruit. As this represents the female organ, this poses the question of what destruction is caused by being fixated on a number or outside aesthetic with no regard for what is occurring on the inside of the body. As the female body restricts food, water and weight, eggs (in this case: seeds), can be dried up and can lose all of their content that is usable.¹⁸ Within the bodybuilding culture, there is a limit on the body to endure fasting routines for competition and stage presentation, before the body is dried up, and can no longer be used for reproduction.

To represent a different body type, and a different way of achieving a goal based on weight, I used artificial bones that weighed less than five pounds and added silicone with mixed t-shirt, and rags as a way to build on weight. The mixture that is added onto the bones is a man-made product. The silicone has reference to silicone that is placed in human bodies to create an aesthetic. This aesthetic is one that is very common within the twenty-first century and has become quite affordable. The t-shirt and rags represent fashion and culture. Human beings find their identity in what they place onto their body, but also use fashion to hide and cover their body. The element of fashion is one that is heavily involved in human past, which prior to the twentieth century could be used to make the ideal body. However, after the 1900s, clothes began to cover the body less, and the body itself was meant represent the ideal instead of clothes to create the façade of the ideal.

The pile of wood that is represented portrays a body that is flat and not curved. This body lacks curves and those who possess this body often are heard saying they desire more curve in

¹⁸ Juha J. Hulmi, et al., "The Effects of Intensive Weight Reduction on Body Composition and Serum Hormones in Female Fitness Competitors." *Frontiers in Physiology* 7 (2016), 689.

their body. Therefore, to breakdown the body, I physically cut each 2x2 piece of wood to create a number of pieces of wood that are presented as one. The ends are cut off to produce a smaller sculpted-like piece, and they are stacked to show how broken they have become. Some pieces are almost entirely gone and other pieces remain shorter in length but are fully intact. Through the process of achieving curves, weight is lost, but so are most of the individual pieces. These individual pieces could represent different parts of the body, but more importantly, different elements of what make a person an individual which includes personality, emotional control, hormonal imbalance, psychological state, and overall happiness. The sculpted like stack of wood attempts to be curvy and attempts to have refined sanded edges but cannot complete the task in entirety. There is also wood-stain poured over the stack of wood, to show the attempt to be something else, which is refined, perfected, and “presentational,” but the attempt is unsuccessful and simply stained unevenly.

Another thin element I chose as a representation of a smaller body was a pile of sticks. The idea of being stick-thin is one that is attributed to Western culture and the represented ideal body in mass media. Instead of added weight or adding curves, I focus on the stick-thin figure in which hosts this “ideal” body that still does not feel thin enough. Dysmorphia is a common problem in the United States, being over 50 percent, specifically within women.¹⁹ Thin bodies are the ideal, yet those who possess them hardly see themselves as the ideal. This causes further problems like bulimia or anorexia. Therefore, the breakdown of this object is portrayed in ashes. The ash has many different symbolisms. First symbolic reference that many will think of is death. The idea of pushing the body to the extreme to reach a specific weight is dangerous and deadly. The second, is burning oneself out. To constantly be in attempt to reach a specific

¹⁹ LM. Koran, E. Abujaoude, MC. Large, and RT. Serpe, “The Prevalence of Body Dysmorphic Disorder in the United States Adult Population.” *CNS Spectr.* 13. 4. (2009), 316-22.

weight, be on a new diet, and follow strict guidelines without allowing the enjoyment of life burns out people in the sense that they feel overworked, tired, and depressed. The weight ratio of sticks to ash is not mathematically sound or equal. The amount of ash to be obtained to create five pounds would have to come from an enormous amount of sticks or branches. This unequal amount is to speak for the daunting goal or destruction that lies ahead which is not represented in reality. This means that if a body weighs 100 pounds and it is attempting to weigh 80 pounds, this can harm the body but also is unattainable to lose that amount of weight and still function. The unequal amounts between the two, sticks and ashes, also reflects the dysmorphia problem of not seeing the truth, or not seeing how problematic the issue really is.

Finally, the use of apples has reference to the “top-heavy” body. This body typically has smaller legs, smaller hips, but a larger stomach and breast area. Medically, this body is proven to be unhealthy to the heart, since the larger areas of fat are closer to the heart. Commonly, this body is produced due to consumption, however, in some cases, this is a body that occurs because of genes or thyroid issues. The apples are broken down by being squeezed into juice. The idea of squeezing a fruit so hard to produce nothing but juice, is one that leaves me feeling Claustrophobic and anxiety ridden. For health concerns, this body has pressure on it, by medical standards, to change in order to alleviate stress on arteries to create a less overworked heart. This body, however, also feels pressure from society to rid the aesthetic of a bigger stomach because it is nowhere near a flat or sculpted stomach that is presented in the media.

CONCLUSION

My work is driven from a variety of inspirations, but I find peace in researching artists that are aware of their issue and fixation on a problem, however they still feel completely stuck within the problem. Through theoretical research, I understand the definition of “woman” that is

defined through visual imagery in mass media that bombards our contemporary society.²⁰ The definition of woman is formed based on repetitive mass media that after multiple times of viewing we accept as the norm and as the truth. This very definition is in constant flux, alters our perception of the ideal, pressures how we believe we should look, and ultimately makes us shift our daily routines to achieve that definition.

The changes we make to our daily habits, and the fixation on numbers as the measurement of our success, in the end may not seem as beautiful as we believe it is going to be. We hold up ideals that mean nothing at the end of our life, such as the goal to rid five pounds. We fixate on our presence in social media and what people may perceive as who we are, and how we look, but our captions to these images may be falsified or glorifying something that does not actually exist. We place our bodies through hard work and effort and can be seen as dedicated individuals who focus on health, while actually neglecting health in entirety by focusing on the aesthetic rather than the functionality of our organs. Our society has a fixation on numbers and takes drastic measures to achieve these numbers. However, by doing just this, our society neglects to see the truth in attainability rather than the façade of the represented.

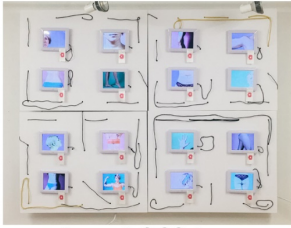
²⁰ Pomper, *Rhetoric of Femininity: Female Body Image, Media, and Gender Roles*.

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Ashley Paige Young Images



InstaLOSS.jpg



InstaLOSS2.jpg



ThreadedLBS.jpg



FIVELBS_1.jpg



FIVELBS_2.jpg



FIVELBS_3.jpg



FIVELBS_4.jpg



FIVELBS_5.jpg



FIVELBS_6.jpg



FIVELBS_7.jpg



FIVELBS_8.jpg



FIVELBS_10.jpg



FIVELBS_9.jpg



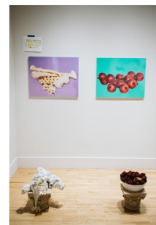
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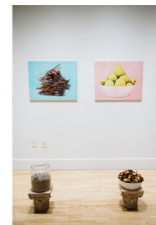
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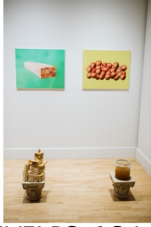
FIVELBS_13.jpg



FIVELBS_14.jpg



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