

**BOY/CRAZY**

by  
Sasha Williams

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Sponsor: Matthew Bollinger  
Second Reader: Sharon Horvath

I made a doll last summer out of a scrap of fabric I'd found in my basement. I created it as a persona to reference in my narratives. Using this inanimate object as my figure, I explored my concepts and influences in art history without the baggage of correct anatomy. I then chose to create narratives where the doll was the protagonist of my stories and memories.

One story is a catalyst to my current body of work; I was molested in middle school. It took years for me to understand the depths of the abuse that only lasted a few months. Being introduced to sex during puberty completely skewed my view of men and relationships. I began to associate all intimacy with sexual desire and became physically closed off to those closest to me. The pain I felt has stayed with me for eight years now, and became my burden to bare alone. I created this doll as an icon for my experience with men, a visual representation of my battle with gender dysphoria and mental illness, and my stubborn attachment to femininity. The puppet has had a single mastectomy. Half of its yarn hair is short and blonde while the rest is long and brown. It has a large toothy smile plastered on its face, as well as two red brushstrokes, imitating cut marks, running down the inside of its wrist. Acrylic paint and embroidery thread define the face, while hot glue articulates fingernails, teeth, and drippy tears. It is a caricature of gender, as well as a physical reflection of self-consciousness.

I found that working from the doll had affected my mode of drawing. I twisted, bent, and stretched the distorted limbs to study from. I also used the doll as a reference because I liked the material; how it folds, gets dirty, or rips along the seams. Occasionally I'll move out of this mode of painting into a more observational approach. I meant to adopt Paula Rego's method of painting from dolls, like in my painting titled *Blue Room*, which is based on the *Red Paintings* of Alfred Leslie (Bradley, 22, 123). In my painting the figure is a lounging, boneless

creature with weepy eyes and a contorted smile. I painted the crotch and abdomen an ultramarine blue, jutting out to the foreground. I made this as an experiment and character study, exuding the same personality as the figure does in Alfred Leslie's painting *Carolyn Arnold*. I occasionally still use it as a reference, like in my painting *A New Type Of Feminism*, where my doll is being ripped limb from limb by surrounding femme individuals. These assailants have stretched the doll, spread eagle on top of the icon for the female sex. The scene evokes sexual horror that borders on ludicrous. I began to change the anatomy of my characters to shape the figures to my canvas, manipulating their form as readily as I change colors.

I love studying the compositions of old master works. I have taken classes in Dutch and Italian art because I've always been drawn to formulas for compositions. I boil these equations down to basic shapes I lay out in the initial composition. In *The Calling of Saint Matthew* by Hendrick Ter Brugghen, the cluster of characters creates a separation between the foreground and background, while the six hands make up the Fibonacci spiral, guiding the eye to the coins on the table. These formulas originally guided the viewer to important details while creating a didactic narrative often used for religious works. When I paint loosely, I prioritize light and structure over detail and accuracy. Cartoons are interesting to me because of their disregard for the anatomical tightness, seen in the older paintings I love, in interest of the line of action (McCloud, 72). I've started using this cartooning technique in conjunction with these old construction techniques to mold a painting crafted by high and low art.

When starting a painting, I experiment with different light sources and temperatures and intensities of light through analog and digital sketches. I'm fascinated by color theory as it relates to light positions and cast shadows, as well as temperature. I often use light kits to paint

and photograph from. I've studied Caravaggio's work and often attempt to emphasize a theatrical light source inspired by his works like *The Entombment* and *The Death of the Virgin*, two paintings that have influenced me more than any others (Spike, 133, 151). I keep warm and cool at the forefront of my paintings, and often will push them further by taking pure colors for light sources, be it phthalocyanine blue for an enveloping darkness, or cadmium red for colored LED lights. *Hot Spot* is a self-portrait in polka dot pajamas where the shadow places the figure in a deep blue that surrounds her on all sides. She crowds herself in front of her phone, the only light source in the room, engulfed by the darkness.

The size of a painting says something to the viewer. I enjoy large works because I have the ability to paint my doll the size that I am. Whenever I paint, my intention is usually to create a life-sized figure. The physical movement of my hands when painting feels genuine in a large frame. With room to create sweeping gestures or small details, I can contrast my intricate marks and serpentine line with my thicker paint or translucent glazes. In my painting *6pm Outside of the New Paltz Youth Program, March 2011*, a large silhouetted shadow sweeps the lower half of the canvas, curving in at both bottom corners to lock all figures inside of the claustrophobic darkness. The diagonals of the figures' arms enclose them between the window's transparent yellow light and the deep indigo outside. These overstretched limbs guide the viewer around the painting to the climactic moment: the spotlighted man encroaching on the girl with the AERO shirt.

In my smaller works, I focus on the subject's positioning in the frame. Many of these paintings are claustrophobic, with characters falling over one another, or pushing against the walls of the fictitious room as well as the canvas itself. The figures are often bending over backwards (which I always found kind of funny) to stay in the frame. At the same time, these

characters battle for space with other figures. In my painting *Sims 4 and Tinder*, the girl on top, collapses off the bed onto her friend below, squashing her into her laptop. Phones and computer screens are something that I rely on in stressful situations; I escape into a digital world. In this painting, the escape is instead a lethargic act of bonding between two people. Many have read it as insidious because the figures have expressions of discomfort and seem to awkwardly disregard one another's personal space. I'm interested in this crammed sort of intimacy. I want to bring light to moments where the emotions are more complicated than happiness and sadness. In my painting *Dead Skin Removal*, a naked figure carves layers of flesh from her arm. I decided to have the figure carving and scratching instead of cutting and bleeding. With my disinterest in trauma porn and outward gore, I delay the shock value that more overt violence would create. Instead, I focus on the anxiety and anonymity of the character. I didn't include much of the face, basing the expression of the subject solely on her physical actions. Instead I focus the composition on the arm, which looks like a wooden stick with the flesh being peeled away like bark. I keep in mind the way the body forms directions in the painting; the figure's arched back and vertical forearm frames their self harm.

Throughout my senior project, I created a visual language of uncomfortable femmes involved in bodily harm, social anxiety, and physical discomfort. I expanded the anatomy of my figures through use of my doll, and continued to cartoon my figures to further the caricaturistic quality of my work. Using theatrical lighting from observation, I could construct scenes with purer colors to emphasize my mood in both large and small works. I have integrated my fascination with baroque art, cartooning, and dolls in these works as a way to create something cartoonish and ludicrous out of the trauma and the mundane.

When I was thirteen, an injustice was done to me. The effects the events had on my personality festered for years without recognition from my parents, my friends, or myself. It seeps into my view of myself and my view of others. I've worked hard to convey this red hot rage I feel in something other than self harm, deprecation, and internalized misogyny. My paintings point a critical eye on the way I think and experiences I've had. Is my work self portraiture or autobiographical? I've stopped thinking of the characters in my stories as they once were in real life since I found myself getting too close to my memories of individual people. I sacrificed detail in my paintings out of fear of criticism or public shame. Now I round out my figures with their own stories and intentions. This project has been a way for me to confront myself about my problems with intimacy and relationships, as well as confront others with these tormented femme protagonists and their resilience. This series didn't close this chapter in my work, which is fine, because I still have a lot to say.

Images



Sasha Williams, *Blue Room*, 2018, Acrylic and Oil on canvas, 3 by 4 feet.



Alfred Leslie, *Carolyn Arnold*, 1975, Oil on canvas, 72 by 108 inches.

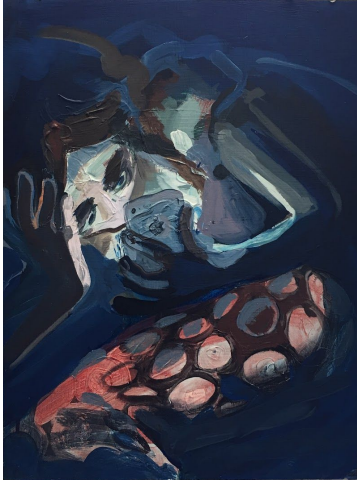


Sasha Williams, *A New Type Of Feminism*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 5 by 4 feet.



Hendrick Ter Brugghen, *Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1620, Oil on canvas, 5½ by 4½ feet.





Sasha Williams, *Hot Spot*, 2019, Acrylic on panel, 18 by 24 inches.



Sasha Williams, *6pm Outside of the New Paltz Youth Program, March 2011*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 6½ by 6 feet.



Sasha Williams, *Sims 4 and Tinder*, 2019, Acrylic on panel, 18 by 24 inches.



Sasha Williams, *Dead Skin Removal*, 2019, Acrylic on panel, 18 by 24 inches.



Sasha Williams, *Sk8er Boi Falls off his Sk8er Board*, 2019, Acrylic on panel, 4 by 6 inches.



Sasha Williams, *Ring-Light*, 2019, Acrylic on panel, 18 by 24 inches.



Sasha Williams, *Untitled*, 2019, Acrylic on panel, 4 by 6 inches.



Sasha Williams, *Study for Sims 4 and Tinder*, 2019, Gouache and Ink on paper, 8½ by 11 inches.

Works Cited

Bradley, Fiona, and Paula Rego. *Paula Rego*. Tate Pub., 2002. Pgs. 44, 45, 123.

McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics*. HarperCollins, 2006. Pg. 72.

Spike, John T., and Michèle K. Spike. *Caravaggio*. Abbeville, 2001. Pgs. 133, 151.