

Bellamy 1

Jaclyn Bellamy

Roth

Senior Thesis Paper

16 April, 2019

### Loving Women

Over my 3-year career in the Painting and BSVA programs at Suny Purchase, I have worked and struggled to find a voice for myself and my work as well as settle on what I would like to say through my paintings. Even coming to settle on painting as a medium was a difficult decision that was not without influence from numerous trials, failures, and experiences I underwent over the past 34 months. Alongside school work, I also took much time to reflect on my personal identity and many times questioned myself about what was important to me and what I wanted to achieve. The questions I asked myself ranged from how I identified in my sexuality, how I thought of myself as an artist, what I want to see in the world- in general and the art scene- and what I wanted people to know about me and what I found satisfaction in. Most all of my works from the first two years I spent at Purchase I found were void of any of my personal visions and lacked, for a lack of better words, soul. Simply seeking to please and thinking to myself that I should try and conform to what others would want to see from me restricted my artistic expression and made me produce pieces that I would never dare say I was proud of. However, this could only go on for so long before the shame I felt morphed into something akin to anger and frustration and then later into resolve to reclaim my art and voice for myself against

## Bellamy 2

any fear or protests I may have had. Following my personal reflections, I came to the conclusion that my sexuality and identity as a gay woman has always been important and had been becoming increasingly so over the past years. Though I found that much of the attitude surrounding the theme of gay women in art was that it must always be apparent that being LGBT was a cycle of suffering and hardships. I did not subscribe to that sentiment and thus thought that it was needed that there be an expression of the ability to be comfortable and in love with your identity. Upon further reading and experiences, I also began to discuss with peers and in class about women in the eyes of men, specifically the notion of the male gaze and the fact that on the flip side there can be not a female equivalent. There are many people who believe that gay women and men look at women in the same lens and I wished to challenge that notion. Without much deliberation, the focus for my thesis naturally became about women, being part of the LGBT community, and women in relation to the male gaze and the role femininity plays within all of these.

Prior to starting at SUNY Purchase, I had attended SUNY Sullivan and attained my associates degree in graphic design and up until that point I had worked very little with paint, spending most of my time illustrating traditionally with pencil and pen or digitally on a drawing tablet. Being thrown into painting classes upon entry was a shock and challenge for me, because painting as a process felt so foreign and different from vector shapes and dry lines on paper. It would not be an exaggeration to say that I almost had to learn how to paint and catch up to my peers who I felt had an extensive amount of knowledge and experience in and about the painting world compared to me. The catch-up process of course included looking at and finding art and artists that resonated with me and what kind of art I liked to look at and create. Even before I

came here, I had been looking at Edward Hopper's paintings. I was taken by the spaciousness in them, which while not simple painting in the least, did not fill the eye with clutter of objects and unnecessary decoration. The clearly defined forms and figures resonated with me and my graphic teachings of clarity and legibility. The spaciousness that comes from high-contrast lighting and simplifying cityscapes and interiors to the essential forms further contribute to how Hopper defines the spaces in his paintings.

When first beginning my final body of work I did not have my ideas completely solidified and tried to experiment with the idea of inserting feminine-presenting figures into common archetypes of tropes seen throughout art history, and or re-envision famous works through a female lense as an attempt to try and connect to the Art History minor I had picked up. From the start I found it hard to create a tangible narrative with the idea, but nevertheless I attempted to create work with this idea in mind. I produced two paintings, my first being "Goddess", an acrylic painting on a 72" x 12" wooden panel inspired by medieval church portal statues. This first painting served as a springboard to test my material preferences since the meaning and content of the painting was still eluding me. I decided that I wanted to continue working on wooden panels. I admired the textural surface and weight of the boards, as well as the way smoothed wooden board allowed for Acrylic paint to glide. Immediately following, I produced a painting heavily inspired by Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*.<sup>1</sup> In this I was trying to focus on shape and forms, trying to create figures composed of simple and sharp shapes. Yet again, I found myself materialy exploring and testing out ways I wanted to present my figures, but the

---

<sup>1</sup> Klimt, Gustav. *The Kiss*. 1907, Austrian Gallery Belvedere.

content still felt shallow, and thus after failing with numerous other sketches I decided to shift focus.

I had the opportunity to take the Introduction to Media Studies class offered at Purchase, and as a result I was able to read and watch John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*<sup>2</sup>. Specifically what caught my attention and followed me through the rest of my work were Berger's words on women and how regarding the gaze, men look at women, and women look at themselves being looked at. I took this idea into my work and thought what if I were to remove men from the equation? Further aiding my thoughts were Laura Mulvey's writings on women in film,<sup>3</sup> and the idea that women exist for the viewing pleasure of men and are made into literal objects of viewing pleasure void of agency. Now I asked, can I, a woman who sees other women in a romantic and attractive way still take viewing pleasure from the way women are portrayed? If I were to attempt to recreate the sexualization and objectification that men often put onto women in media-both film, art, and other- would it still have the same connotations? Can men get viewing pleasure from art of women created from a woman's lens? I took these ideas and created a series of smaller, personal and sensual images, all with lgbt themes that revolved around conventionally attractive women engrossed only with each other. The lens from which a painting is painted can drastically change the connotations of said painting and suggest towards the personal experiences and attitude of the artist- even if two people were to paint the same subject, since they are looking at it within the context of their own life and identity, the paintings will say completely different things.

---

<sup>2</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*:Penguin, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Mulvey, Laura.*Film Theory and Criticism*. Screen, 1975.



This way of thinking became even more apparent after reading in Mary D Garrard's *Feminism and Art History Questioning the Litany*<sup>4</sup> how Artemisia Gentileschi's rendition of Susanna and the Elders greatly differs from many of her male counterparts renditions because of her view on the subject not only as a woman but as a woman who had experience of sexual assault.

Gentileschi's experiences in her life and relationships with men can be said to greatly influence the way she painted her subjects, and those knowing her history are almost forced to take it into

---

<sup>4</sup> Garrard, Mary D, and Norma Broude. "Feminism and Art History Questioning the Litany." *Feminism and Art History*, 1982.

## Bellamy 6

account when viewing and trying to understand her work because it becomes almost impossible to dismiss them.

Mulvey discusses the objectification of women in film and specifically mentions cropping and disembodiment of women's body parts, such as parts of legs that further strip a woman of any personal identity. With that in mind, I created my triptych of leg paintings, yet again acrylic on wooden panels, that experiment with the idea of expression through an expressionless body part.



Through loose lines to try and give the illusion of movement, I wanted to offset the idea that these cropped images of legs were the same as movie stills that chopped women up into body parts without an identity. Through movement I wanted to show that they were, in fact, people who move, and do not stand still to be simply gazed at, for a woman's identity is linked to her entire body and being, not just her facial expressions. Still sticking with me was the idea that I did not want my work to come across as a melodramatic fetishizing of female and LGBT suffering,

so I consciously chose bright vibrant colors, working with almost exclusively primaries and mixing them. I actively tried to add a playful teasing element to the pieces in this grouping in an attempt to show that my experience loving women and being a woman has not been one that has brought me anguish, but rather one that has joy. These, as most of my works, were all primarily in acrylic, with only two being done in oil. Again, I pushed solid shapes and forms, and forwent local color for a vibrant effect. Perhaps because of my background in Graphic design and having my associates in the field, I also started to press heavily on a more graphic look. These pieces however, when looked at and reviewed, garnered thoughts from people about artificiality and the glamorous appearances of the women I chose to portray. Heavily made-up with long lashes and sensual features, I had constructed characters that fit perfectly into the role of an object men would traditionally love to look at. That was an new realization that turned my attention to the past and more retro inspiration.

A housemate of mine who is a film studies and screenwriting major is frequently watching and analyzing films in our apartment common area and encourages anyone around to sit and watch with her. I had the pleasure of watching the 1972 french film *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*<sup>5</sup> with her. I was taken by the film's vibrant set design, the colors all striking, bright and indicative of the tone of the scene. The women within the film were all incredibly dolled-up and glittering at all times, even crying pretty and gesturing with all the elegance in the world. The melodrama was almost comedic but it was enchanting and captivating, a feast for the eye and junk food for the romantic soul. Since I was younger, one of my favorite movies has always been the 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives*<sup>6</sup> based on Ira Levin's 1972 satirical novel<sup>7</sup>. The

---

<sup>5</sup> Demy, Jacques, director. *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. 20th Century Fox, 1964.

<sup>6</sup> Oz, Frank, director. *The Stepford Wives*. Paramount Pictures, 2004.

remake takes a very different tone from the first film made in 1975, turning it into a comedy, retaining a loose women's empowerment theme, but taken completely away from the context of the women's lib movement of the time and turning its chilling dystopian message into a joke of sorts. What the 2004 movie does do is completely exaggerate the artificiality and picture perfect glamor of the women living in Stepford- who are later revealed to be cyborg-type women who were modified by the husbands to fit into the role of the perfect housewife- and turn them into genuine objects of viewing pleasure, complete with sundresses, perfect hair and makeup, and plastered on smiles. The idea that something so picture-perfect could have a complex and dark underbelly always stuck with me, though I chose to twist and look at it in a more optimistic manner more befitting of what I find important- looks have no bearing on whether or not a woman is complex- while glamour and exaggerated looks can be seen to represent fake happiness and covers for a hollow inside, being made-up does not negate a woman's agency.

Taking off the rose-colored glasses, looking back at media portrayals of women from as early as the 40's to as late as the 70's, it did not escape me how gender roles were so heavily weighted and enforced. This is especially prevalent when I chose to create a collage consisting of 50's-era kitchen adverts. The message in these beautifully colorized photos and illustrations was offensively blatant- the kitchen was the woman's domain, the home was her place, and a woman should only find fulfillment in making her home as similar to those in the ads and television shows as possible. Besides the obvious sexism interlaced within this message I began to think about how it would be possible for any woman put into that role to not get horribly angry with their entire destiny being decided for them. I do not wish to be regressive and say that a woman

---

<sup>7</sup> Levin, Ira. *The Stepford Wives*. Penguin , 1972.



cannot find fulfillment within being a homemaker, but the problem that I encountered was the forceful stripping of agency by insisting that the role of homemaker is the only one women should have. Thus I painted two larger paintings on the subject in which while not outright rejecting being a homemaker, the women depicted are rebelling against the propriety of it all. These two piece in particular were intensely influenced by the works of Ella Kruglyanskaya.<sup>8</sup> I was taken by the fluidity in her lines and the energetic gestural quality in her paintings. I tried to work closely looking at her technique of the lines and colors being off-register and the overall resemblance to drawing. I found that drawing directly onto the canvas, applying paint, and then going back into draw over the painting to define the gesture lines worked well to free and loosen up the figures. I found that this felt like a grand return to drawing which I consider to be my most comfortable medium.

---

<sup>8</sup> “GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE.” *Gavin Brown's Enterprise - Artists - Ella Kruglyanskaya*, [www.gavinbrown.biz/artists/ella\\_kruglyanskaya/works](http://www.gavinbrown.biz/artists/ella_kruglyanskaya/works).



I find that there is a certain kind of apprehension I have when it comes to painting that has taken a while to try and quell- as a loose medium, I've always struggled to find the proper amount of control for paint, which is why I feel most proficient with a fast-drying medium like acrylic- which I like to mix with matte medium to further try and press the paint under my thumb. With dry and fast-drying materials, I can work at a rapid pace more loosely without much worry for unwanted mistakes, for I found it easy to integrate any unintentional marks into the gestural lines and continue onwards. With the combination of smoothed flat surface from layers of applied gesso, mixed with ultra lite complement of Guerra paints, sanded out and and

smoothed, and acrylic paint mixed to be matte and fast-drying, creating a texture akin to drawing paper that allowed for the easy integration of graphite and marker over top, I managed to reach a point of semi-satisfaction in my material that better matches my solidified subject content.

Developing my thesis, while it took many different twists and turns, those were necessary in developing my work and concept further. The initial thought of women within a historical context did not outright disappear but instead broadened to include a more contemporary time frame but still allude to the history of the way women are viewed even from centuries bygone. Using my personal identity as a springboard and the lense from which I viewed the content I was interested in, I was able to create a narrative that I feel mostly encompassed the thoughts and ideas I had revolving around being a gay woman and existing as someone female-identifying. When people look at my body of work I would like for my joy in how I express myself to be apparent but I also would not like the feelings of defiance and frustration to be swept under the rug. I would not dare to say that this collection is finished nor that I have said all that I want on the matter because my identity and the problems surrounding those who are female-identifying are not something that can be expressed in such a small body of work, or even in a body twice or triple the size. There is still much that I would like to say and as long as I and others continue to share similar experiences and thoughts , I do not think I will finished any time in the near future.

## Bibliography

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*: Penguin, 2008.

“GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE.” *Gavin Brown's Enterprise - Artists - Ella Kruglyanskaya*, [www.gavinbrown.biz/artists/ella\\_kruglyanskaya/works](http://www.gavinbrown.biz/artists/ella_kruglyanskaya/works).

Gerrard, Mary D, and Norma Broude. “Feminism and Art History Questioning the Litany.” *Feminism and Art History*, 1982.

Klimt, Gustav. *The Kiss*. 1907, Austrian Gallery Belvedere.

Levin, Ira. *The Stepford Wives*. Penguin , 1972.

Mulvey, Laura. *Film Theory and Criticism*. Screen, 1975.

Oz, Frank, director. *The Stepford Wives*. Paramount Pictures, 2004.

Demy, Jacques, director. *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. 20th Century Fox, 1964.

