# *Changing Water*
# *a reflection on self-identity and religious upbringing*

*by*

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Purify through fire and fury.
you want so badly to be pure again

you call yourself a lamb, a doll, an innocent thing

Searing.

Until now, with raw baby flesh left

Pink, bubbling burns.

But pink doesn't wash away sin

and shiny rosaries don't make

you any less scared of God.

-Poem adapted from
*"I don't believe" - by Apple3*
*And "Bathe in Brimstone" by*
*Kitt.*

I grew up as a Jehovah's Witness, a Christian denomination known for its strict beliefs and practices. Founded in the late 19th century, the organization emphasizes the imminent return of Jesus. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to God's commandments. Door-to-door preaching is part of their efforts to spread their beliefs. They do not celebrate traditional Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter, viewing them as having pagan origins. As a child, I struggled heavily with the ideas that have indoctrinated me since I was born. This religion felt highly restrictive. Participating in "worldly" activities, such as being politically aware or interacting with non-witnesses, was presented as something that could ruin you. And if you strayed from the faith, you risked being disfellowshipped, which means being shunned by the community. Throughout childhood**,** I was

terrified of losing everything, but I also longed to feel connected to other children. This created extreme feelings of guilt within me. I felt like an outcast at home and in the outside world. Many photographs in this project represent my struggle with religion. “Prayer” is an 11x13 inch black and white print. Pictured in it is a young girl kneeling in a prayer position alone in the woods. The girl is dressed in all white. The white acts as a symbol of her purity. As she pleads to God for forgiveness and protection her dress rubs against the ground becoming more soiled. The photo gives off a feeling of desperation as she sits alone praying to be saved from her feelings.

One night my mom and dad got into an argument. They fought under the cover of darkness in hushed tones in an attempt not to wake my little brother and me. Their fights occurred often and always escalated. I would be jolted awake by screaming, a door slammed shut, or the creation of a new hole in my wall. On this particular night, I remember sitting on the floor crying as I watched my dad walk down the stairs, and as he told my mom to take care of me because I was her daughter, not his. I can't remember what happened after that. I eventually fell asleep while holding my mom and taking his place in my parent’s bed. I felt guilty that he had no one to hold him the way my mother was holding me. Is this why he hated me? Is this why it was so simple to shed me off? Maybe it would be better if I wasn’t his, then he wouldn’t have to pretend to love me. I could be the nothing he needed me to be. “Banister” is an 11x13 inch black and white print. It depicts a man's hand on a banister. This photo represents the memory of this moment.

I am my father’s child. I see him in my eyes, my hair, my sensitivities. He will always be a part of me. However strange, foreign, and ugly I am to him, he is mine and I am his. And when my partner and I argue in harsh whispers at night I remember we are mirrors.

I have struggled for a long time to find a home within myself as my body shifts through the waters of time. While looking for a home I searched for comfort. I searched for God, I searched for a father, and I searched for a lover. Their hands have all marked me, each time reshaping me into unstable water.

My work has always focused on exploring what this all means to be me. How has my religious upbringing shaped me? How has my tumultuous relationship with my father affected how I view myself or my relationships? In a society where dark skin is often seen as inherently aggressive, softness is an act of rebellion. The construct of femininity has been traditionally viewed through a Eurocentric lens. It is a lens that cannot be fully applied to African American women. White society has always excluded black women from their connotations of femininity. This often leads to the over-sexualization of black women and young black girls both outside and within the black communities. The hyper-sexualization of black girls' bodies not only robs them of their childhood innocence but also burdens them with immense social pressure. Growing up, it became very clear to me that there was a strict set of rules that I had to follow to become a proper young lady. It also became clear that I was expected to fulfill society's unrealistic fantasy regarding what my body should look like; an expectation that I could not reach. It seems my body has always been a source of emotional conflict. I was too fat when I was younger, and as I grew out of it, I was then not "thick" enough in the right places. I have used my senior project exhibition and thesis to counteract these feelings and to be able to show and accept my body for all that it is and is not.

During this project, Andres Serrano's 1987 photograph, Immersion (*Piss Christ),* was always in the back of my mind. It depicts a small plastic crucifix submerged in a small glass tank of the artist's urine. *Piss Christ* was one of a series of photographs that Serrano had made

that involved classical statuettes submerged in various fluids such as milk, blood, and urine. It followed two years after Serrano's 1985 work, Blood Cross. The piece was a winner of the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art's "Awards in the Visual Arts" competition, which was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, a government agency that offers support and funding for artistic projects. The work generated much controversy based on claims that it was blasphemous. In response, Serrano chose not to define the photos meaning embracing its ambiguity, but he has also stated that while this work is not intended to denounce religion, he hoped to allude to the trend of commercializing or cheapening Christian icons in contemporary culture. Serrano has rejected the claims of blasphemy and considers piss Christ a serious work of Christian art, once saying "What it symbolizes is the way Christ died: the blood came out of him but so did the piss and the shit. Maybe if Piss Christ upsets you, it's because it gives some sense of what the crucifixion was like" What inspires me about this work is the artist's intentions. Serrano was raised catholic and has stated that he is Christian and because of that I find it interesting that he was able to look past his faith and add his critique to a world where people can become so blinded by their faith.

Elle Perez is another photographer whose practice has influenced this project. Elle Pérez was born in 1989 in the Bronx, New York, and lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. After receiving their MFA from Yale School of Art, Pérez has worked primarily in photography, depicting intimate moments, and emotional exchanges in visceral detail. At the beginning of their career, Pérez photographed entertainment wrestlers interested in their performativity. Pérez continues to experiment with notions of authenticity by using a collaborative approach to portrait photography that blurs the lines between still life, and documentary. Perez successfully depicts the queer experience and mirrors the ever-changing nature of identity. While working closely

with their peers from the queer community as their subjects, they explore the complexities of gender identity.

In my life, I have often felt wrong. I have felt as though my body did not belong to me, and that I was cursed and could only look at the people around me from a distance. I have searched for myself repeatedly, always ending back where I started. With this project, I wanted to change that. I wanted to finally find a place to belong. In my searching, I have realized that I must reckon with my past and accept everything that has made me who I am today.

Works Cited

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Copes, C. (2022, January 7). Soft Black girls and the reclamation of Black femininity. *Medium*. https://zora.medium.com/soft-black-girls-and-the-reclamation-of-black-femininity-203db3c57f35

*Elle Pérez — Art21*. (n.d.). Art21. https://art21.org/artist/elle-perez/

Wikipedia contributors. (2024, April 14). *Andres Serrano*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andres_Serrano

*Prayer* 13x19 black and white print

*Finding light* 11x17 black and white print

*Oh God* 8x10 black and white print

*Untitled* 8x10 black and white print

*Breath In* 8x10 black and white print

*Untitled* 13x19 black and white print

*Touch Me* 13x19 black and white print.

*Good times* 11x17 black and white print

*Watch me destroy you* 11x17 black-and-white print

*Untitled* 11x17 black and white print