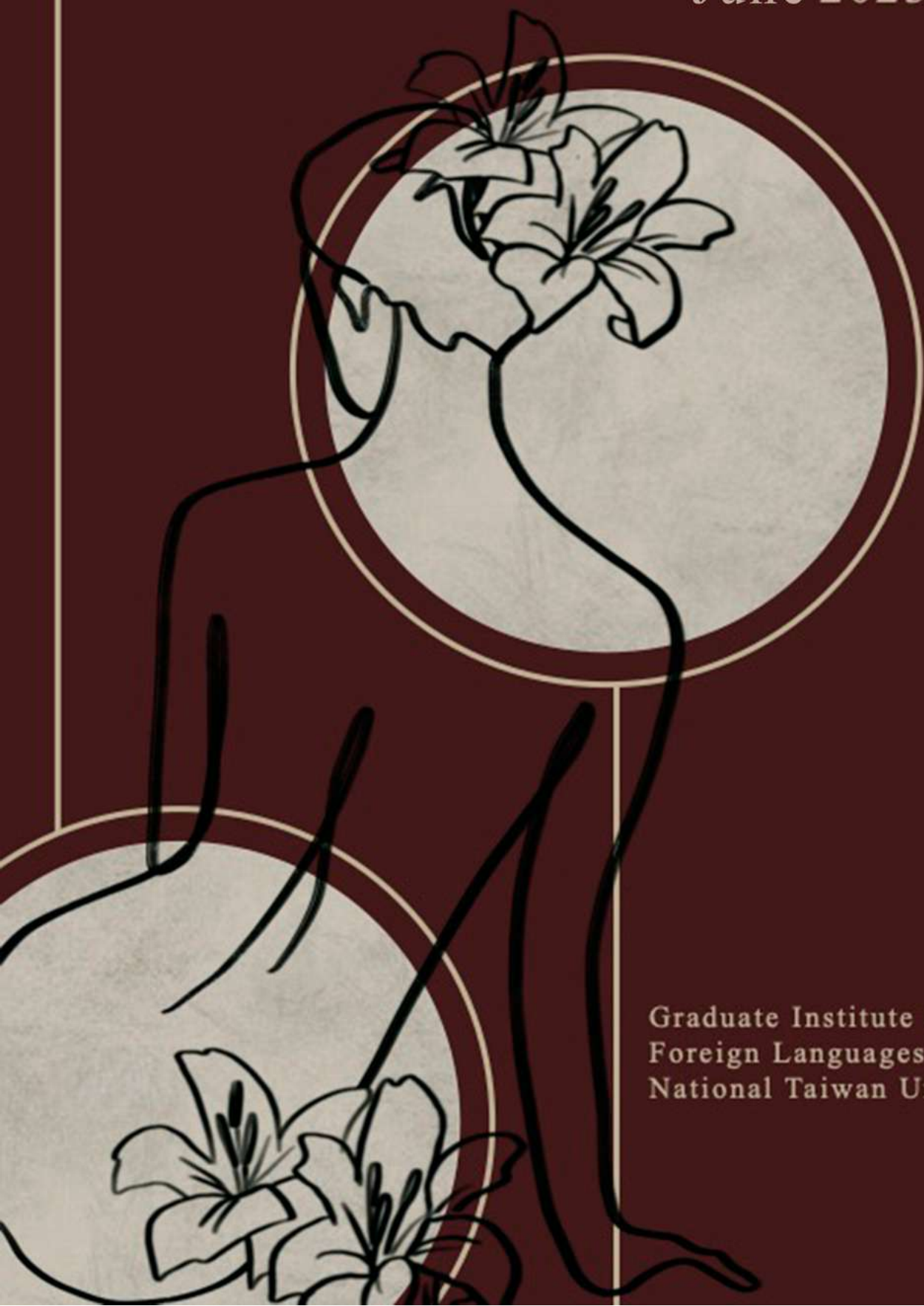


PROJECT+

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Sexiness/Sexism

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My design philosophy is primarily to express the sexiness of female body through minimalist lines. The white lilies are her only decorations, which create a sense of contradiction between purity and sensuality. The circle is like a peeking hole, which I utilized the texture of paper to emphasize its vulnerability and susceptibility to being broken.



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EDITORS' NOTES

L i l l i a n & S h a n i a

ISSUE 20 ● SEXINESS/SEXISM ● JUNE 2023

For the 20th issue of Project+, we choose “sexiness/sexism” as our topic. In our modern digital age, the media has produced certain “ideal” images. “Sexy” is certainly one of them. Whereas before, sexiness often referred to the objectification of women--that is, with female bodies regarded as desirable objects to satisfy the male appetite and gaze--increasingly, the concept of sexiness is diversifying to include the male body or be a means for females to acquire autonomy.

What is your first thought when you hear “sexy”? What images spring to your mind? Do you think of “sexiness” as a kind of “sexism”? Or can we deconstruct this association and find more possibilities to open our senses?

In this issue, we have collected several brilliant pieces that delve into the relationship between sexiness and sexism.

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR YUNG-CHAO LIAO

We begin this issue with an interview with Professor Yung-Chao Liao, who generously shared with us his academic trajectory and advice for graduate students, along with his thoughts on how the concepts of “Sexist/Sexiness” reflects temporal changes.

FILM REVIEWS

Resonating with this issue's theme, we present two film reviews. In “The creative power of the Female Gaze,” Kokoro Tomika follows the gazes and queer desires in Celine Sciamma’s 2010 film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, while in “Sex and The Slasher,” Karen Dellinger reveals the rejection of sexual character stereotypes and the pornography industry in Ti West's 2022 slasher film *X*.

ARTWORK

To extend the discourse on sexism and sexiness, we reached out to Ally Zlatar, an activist and artist dedicated to exposing to society the diversity of bodies. Her artwork portrays the traumatized body suffering from body dysmorphia, providing an alternative survival mechanism for those who feel vulnerable.

As this latest issue goes to press, we are unexpectedly experiencing a #MeToo moment in Taiwan. Numerous women and men have courageously come forward to share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault, first in the political sphere, then in academia and other domains. These cases foreground the imbalanced dynamics between power and sex. We hope that through the exploration of gender and sexiness in this issue—particularly in relation to discussions of violence—we are bringing thought-provoking voices into this ongoing conversation.

J u n e 2 0 2 3

24 FEBRUARY 2023 | INTERVIEW BY LILLIAN PEI-YU WU

Interview with Dr. Yung-Chao Liao

Peiyu: Could you please provide a brief introduction of your research fields and your experiences teaching students at NTU/DFLL?

Yungchao: When I was at graduate school in NTU, I was studying mostly James Joyce. That was topic of my thesis and my dissertation. Actually, the whole graduate school was crazy about psychoanalysis at that time, so I read some psychoanalysis, gender politics as well.

But after graduating from NTU, I got a job, and I decided to say goodbye to Joyce for a while. I started to do research on the topics that I actually like, which were not that accepted at that time. It was like a falling within the range of cultural studies such as globalization and Madonna, "Techno" San Tai Zi, and so on. It's an interesting experience. I tried to engage theory with a cultural text--engage with that and try to come up with something interesting.

About ten years ago, I started to do something about monster. Monster studies has been hot in recent years, which was reflected on my graduate school class. So many people came. But just like yesterday I told my students that, "you don't come because it's trendy. You come for something that's related to you." That's the most important thing.

Peiyu: So, you mentioned this semester you teach monster studies in DFLL. Can you talk about what purpose you'd like to achieve? Do you have any advice for graduate students who aspire to become young scholars in your field?

Yungchao: Purpose. I don't have a purpose. It's more like an advice for students. Now every course has objective, right? You could read the syllabus or the introduction page of every course—to polish your English ability, and so on. But I think the most important thing is that you actually relate to the course.

Though I don't know about the whole picture, I heard today that in graduate school sometimes you do not have a lot of assignments every week. I also heard that some students would prefer to take easy courses. But I think it is contrary to the purpose of graduate school. You come here to be challenged, not to be pampered. I want to say this frankly. I don't want to pretend and tell you guys that you are so brilliant when in reality there is still a lot of room to improve. After graduation, you will face the reality.

So, if I have any suggestions to our graduate students, first thing is that... of course everybody likes to take the course that they think they are interested in, but if you haven't taken all of the courses, how can you judge which one you like or you don't like?



For myself, I would like to take courses I don't know what they are. I like challenges. Difficulty, failure... don't understand what others' talking... I think it's a good experience. It makes you know where you are. For example, like climbing a mountain, if you do not face a real high mountain, you do not know where you are. You think you are already high enough, but actually it's not. So, this is one thing I would like to share with our graduate students. Do not avoid difficulty. Probably you guys should appreciate those professors who teach difficult stuff because they have to spend more time preparing for it.

Yesterday I also talked to my students how to find a good topic for research paper. It's not just like you use a theory and execute it on the text like a machine. It's meaningless. For your thesis or a dissertation, we want something that is deeper and more creative. So, at that moment, you really do have to find the proper or interesting methodology that you like. There are people who just go to some speeches and take a very superficial idea of the theory to apply to their articles. I think it's not that appropriate. You have to go back and read the whole thing. Don't try to take easy steps.

And do not take too many theories at one time. I know a lot of students who are interested in theory, because theory has its charm. But texts are also very important. Text is a very complicated world. Theory is more or less abstract, right? Text is more like a real world where we are living. When those two things come together, if you do detailed textual analysis with the theory, you'll find that they do not usually fit into one another. That's a good starting point. This is where your text can provide something in return to fix or modify the theoretical concept. And in that way, you can create something new.

Peiyu: As the theme for this issue is "sexiness/sexism," could you explain to us why and how the idea of sexiness was invented in the field of mass media? Did it originate from any "sexy goddess" such as Marilyn Monroe or Madonna?

"Over the years in the feminist camp, I think there are different voices and ideas about women being sexy. Some people may think that it's a kind of degrading women, like you make yourself the object of desire to cater to men or patriarchal values. But there are also more flexible and interesting ones—expressing sexiness as a way of empowering women."

Yungchao: I think different era has different idea of sexiness. It's not the modern invention. But in different era, sexiness is defined differently and produced differently. So, you cannot say there is no idea of sexiness in Ancient Greece, right? They probably do not use the word sexiness. I think that being sexy or trying to represent yourself as being sexy is traditionally what an orthodox feminist theory will frown upon when feminism was trying to counter male dominance, such as body, mind, reproduction, and so on. For example, there is a very famous article, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Even though for today it's a bit outdated, the idea is still very important.

At that time, a lot feminists were trying to encourage women to let go off the experience of being objectified by men. This kind of objectification is also a process of sexualization but to the benefit of male onlookers. Of course there are a lot of problems within that idea. I don't want to go into details, but over the years in the feminist camp, I think there are different voices and ideas about women being sexy. Some people may think that it's a kind of degrading women, like you make yourself the object of desire to cater to men or patriarchal values. But there are also more flexible and interesting ones--expressing sexiness as a way of empowering women.

So, let's get back to the idea of being sexy. In Laura Mulvey's article, she actually mentioned about the classical Hollywood movies and stars, such as Marilyn Monroe. At that time, there was a rule that female characters on the screen cannot look directly into the audience.

That's kind of interesting, right? I think your generation has been accustomed to not only female performers but also male performers being sexy. They look into the audiences to provoke or solicit the onlooker's desire. If you'd like to check any music video today, K-pop or others, they always look directly into you to invite you... expressing their sexiness to invite you to sexualize them. They make them your object of desire. It's so common.

But back at the time when Laura Mulvey was writing, female performers were not allowed to do that. It's a rule. So, for my part, I think that the appearance of Madonna is very important in the history of not just pop music but also in the history of the relationship between female entertainer and audiences. If you go back to her music video, you will see that she looks directly into the audiences and seduces the audiences to sexualize her. It was in 1983, very early.

Of course I am not saying that before Madonna there were no female performers who tried to do that, but not that successful. And it also has something to do with the rise of the channel called MTV, so that Madonna's video can be circulated 24 hours a day. It was a new medium at that time. So together with Madonna's success, more and more female performers knew that they can follow suit. So today, there are few mainstream entertainers, whether male or female, who do not look into the audiences and seduce the audiences to take them as objects of desire.

Peiyu: So, we have seen the concept of sexiness has evolved over time, for example, from Madonna's red lips to K-pop idols' white long legs. How do you evaluate this phenomenon of the changing sexy images?

Yungchao: Let's go back to reassess the whole thing. I think evaluating sexiness as a kind of valid subcultural subversion has to depend on the context. When Madonna appeared on MTV--her look, her body language, and all the stuff--it had a kind of challenging effect to the male audiences who have always been active--and female performers being passive.-- So, it had the effect of empowering females. That's why at that time she had a lot of female supporters.

Peiyu: It's important for us nowadays to consider more about the relationship between production and consumption in the field of mass media. And, as you also mentioned the relationship between the stars and the audiences, I'd like to ask more about "the sexy" and the audience. I mean, in what ways can we relate sexiness to the idea of physical autonomy? Is sexiness a form of sexism, or can we deconstruct this association and find more possibilities?

"I think the most important thing today to deal with sexiness is to understand how it was produced in the first place. "

But today, I think we are in a different context. For most of the mainstream entertainers, before they were pushed to the market, they were already trained how to act in a sexy way. It's already very formulaic. Sexiness today has a formula or many formulae. So, if you ask me today of being sexy and its relationship to male and female empowerment, I think we have to be more cautious about this because the sexiness today is overtly commodified. If you want to find some subversions in those things, you have to be very contextualized and be more cautious.

I think the most important thing today to deal with sexiness is to understand how it was produced in the first place. Then we can say whether it is subversive or not, not vice versa. We need to understand how an idol was produced, from body language, mindset, and even the face, and physicality. They are born to be a commodity, and this commodity is related to capitalism. I think the most difficult thing to fight is actually about capitalism.

Yungchao: It's a complicated issue. In the past, these two can be separated. A lot of people thought that acting sexy is a form of sexism. Why would females always have to be acting feminine and sexy while males do not have to do that? But today, the line between sexiness and sexism has been blurred. Today for everyone, regardless of your gender, if you like, you can be sexy. And the act itself does not necessarily contain some form of sexism.

It really depends on the context. Suppose someone, for example, some groups or some people such as the elderly people are not encouraged to be sexy, and you find they, whether male or female, acting very sexy. I would say this is very empowering because they are challenging ageism, or the sexism underneath ageism. They are challenging the idea that old people cannot be sexy. So, if some elderly people express themselves in sexy ways, I think in one way or another, it could be very subversive.

Or, the disabled people. If they act sexy, maybe some people would think it's weird or inappropriate. If they are acting sexy, they can also contain some kind of potential for subversion of sexism. But it is still very much depending on the context.

And, if you ask me about young people who have abled bodied and good appearances, does this act empower them? I think yes and no. On the one hand, yes, maybe you dress in a sexy way as a young person, you feel you are very confident. On the personal note, you are empowering yourself, right? But what you do not probably know is that you may already fall into the stereotyped sexiness that capitalism encourages you to do.

I bear no grudge against being sexy for young people. I just feel like... why do they have to dress up in the same way? It seems like there is a formula there. Similar kind of make-up. Similar kind of bodybuilding. For example, a lot of men like to go to a gym to work out. Bodybuilding or working out can be quite empowering, but I have reservations about putting oneself into a stereotyped, commodified image of sexiness, which actually contains some form of sexism or valorization of a particular image of masculinity of manliness. I think sexiness has a lot of potential to defy capitalist logic. But unfortunately, its practices are relatively minor. Or if people do that in alternative ways, maybe they will be labeled as "weirdo." This can also be regarded as a kind of sexism, right? So, today sexism is a very complicated issue.

Peiyu: Do you think the concept of a sexy man is different from that of a sexy woman?

Yungchao: If we want to talk about men being sexy and women being sexy, basically, they all fall under the same ideal of sexiness, right? But, of course, men and women are biologically and culturally different. So, the kinds of sexiness are different. Today we have standardized ideals to judge whether a woman or a man is sexy. In terms of the popularity of being sexy, I think the sexy man is no different from the sexy woman.

But there is also a gender issue going on there. For male entertainers, for example, they are more or less immune to ageism. For the male models, they can still be judged as being sexy even in their forties. Some people may even say that when the male models get older, they look more and more sexy, or mature in one way or another. But for female models, I think it's a different story. As women are growing older and older, some of them may try to retain their sexiness by going through some plastic surgeries. For this, they are often met with the comments saying that "why do they have to do this? They look unnatural!" In one way or another, they think that older women should not express sexiness. They should express elegance.

There is sexism here. We are privileging men instead of women. If you want to ask me about the differences between the sexy men and sexy women, do they have differences? I think at the younger stage, perhaps only the way expressing sexiness is different. But as they grow older, sexism is made more prominent along the gender line. You will see the difference. Huge difference.

Peiyu: It also seems like that when we are talking about sexy women, people would immediately have an image about maybe women wearing few clothes and being sexualized. But when referring to sexy men, the idea gets vague.

Yungchao: Some people have a hard time accepting that men can be sexy, even though today we have more straight men who could appreciate that. The idea is that usually, very traditionally, when we talk about male sexiness, we don't use the word sexy. They will use "man," "manly," or "masculine." Because for some people, the idea of being sexy is actually being sexy in a feminine way. That's because they cannot appreciate how a man can be sexy. But if you ask women, I don't know, you can find that some of them may find some men very sexy.

But today's world is a very multi-cultural world. We have different genders and different sexualities. They all have their ways of looking at the object of desire as being sexy. At least to me, today's men on the media, which is a platform for the dominant culture, they tend to more or less present men as being sexy. There are also votings every year, like ten sexiest men of the world, etc. It's been held for a long time. So, I think in today's world, men being sexy has already been instilled in our cultural imagination.

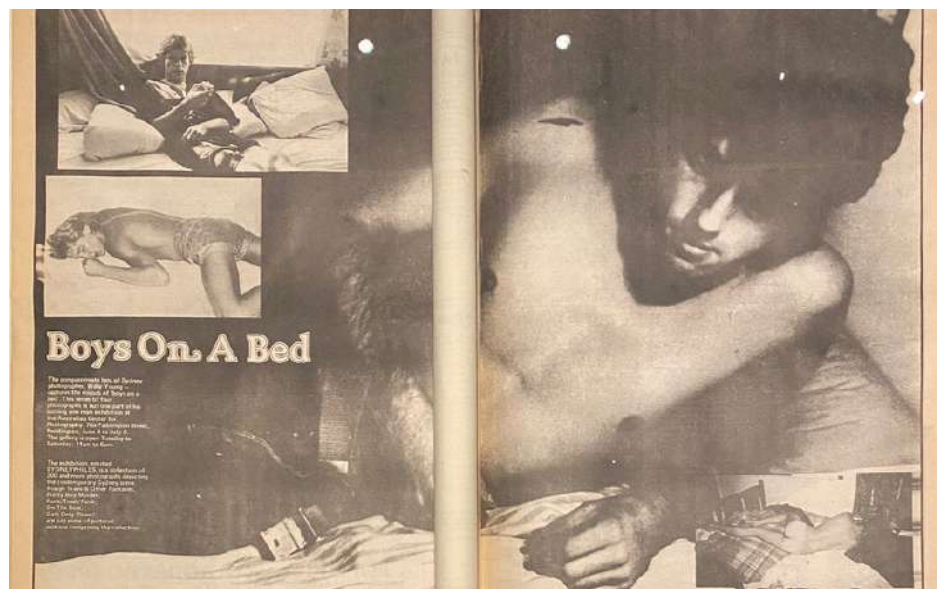
Peiyu: And I think of Timothée Chalamet. He featured on the cover of Vogue and was described as one who led a growing trend of breaking down the traditional boundaries between masculinity and femininity.

Yungchao: Yeah. Actually it's not something very new. We may called this "gender bending" in the past. For certain idols, they would like to or they can actually express both the traits of masculinity and femininity, for example, Harry Styles. You look at how he dressed. He is deliberately trying to modify himself as a gender bending figure. Of course gender bending is very ideal for the market, right? Because you can appeal to both sides. Not just both sides. For a lot of different markets, right? Like LGBT, etc. There are a lot of marketing strategies going on there.

Peiyu: Finally, we'd love to have your recommendations on some books, films, or anything related to our interview today, so that our readers can explore this topic further.

Yungchao: For my part, I do not actually know some very interesting academic books about this topic in recent years. Probably because this topic had been discussed intensively in the 1980's and 1990's. But it doesn't mean it is not important. It's already seeped into the everyday life.

But coincidentally, last night I was reviewing one of my favorite Japanese anime. I find it so intriguing, and the idea there is very relevant today. It's called 少女革命 *Utena*. It's very interesting, and a lot people find it's difficult to understand, even though its aesthetics was modeled after "girl manga." But the idea there is about "combat" and revolutionize the world produced and run by male standards. It's about the idealism of a prince and a princess, and how the bubble of this idealism eventually bursts. I think it recasts the value of true love there. The protagonists are two female characters, and the story basically depicts how they eventually find ways to break or revolutionize the male world, though with very traumatic processes. I think it is a masterpiece and relates to what we have discussed today, more or less. You cannot find such a good anime in Japan nowadays. It's very philosophical and yet entertaining!



FILM REVIEW



The Creative Power of the Female Gaze which “Makes You Seen” in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

Kokoro Tomita
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The Creative Power of the Female Gaze which “Makes You Seen” in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

Kokoro Tomita
MA student in Foreign Languages and Literatures,
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This review contains spoilers.

“Well, if you’re looking at me, who am I looking at?” Directed by Celine Sciamma, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) is a love story between two women about looking and being looked at. The film foregrounds the issue of gendered gaze through the representation of women in art and history and also carefully depicts queer imagination, pleasure, and resistance arising when women reclaim their own gaze. Set in 18th-century France, the film begins with a young French painter, Marianne, traveling to a small island off the coast of Brittany, where the Countess hires her to secretly paint a portrait of her daughter, Héloïse, who, craving equality and freedom, refused to have her portrait painted by several male painters, in order to resist her arranged marriage. Marianne, who works on the portrait while secretly observing her in the guise of Héloïse’s walking companion, confesses she is actually the painter before she completes the painting, and when Héloïse sees the completed portrait, she coldly rejects Marianne’s gaze as a painter, saying that the painting does not truly capture her. Yet, after seeing the painting, she voluntarily agrees to be the model. In the five days granted by the Countess to complete the

portrait, the two young women discover intimacy and themselves as subjects of desire as they try to see each other beyond the power dynamics of subject/object of looking.

As a woman who loves women and rarely feels a sexual or romantic attraction to others, I could, for the first time, see and feel myself in this work that visualizes queer desire arising from a specific context, language, and emotional intimacy they share as women. Sciamma, as a queer feminist director, acknowledges that “[t]he film is a love story, but it’s also about creating” and considering the “female gaze.” She takes filmmaking as a “strong opportunity to make new stuff, new images, new narratives,” but also “to be playful” (qtd. in Sciretta). The film has received positive acclaim for using female gaze to tell a lesbian narrative, often compared to the 2013 film *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, which Julie Maroh, author of the original book, described a graphic seven-minute sex scene as “a brutal and surgical display of so-called lesbian sex, which turned into porn” (qtd in. Child). While we can see much discussion of Sciamma’s usage of the female gaze as resistance to what such a dominant male gaze have done, how she adds the playful and creative elements that stir a subversive imagination to the repressed

herstory has not been adequately discussed yet. Focusing on the joy and innovation of her ambitious attempts at tackling the issue of gendered gaze, this essay seeks to look at what the female gaze in the film do, which I believe is one of the most significant part of what the film offers, and sketch the ways the female gaze operates as a powerful tool which "makes you seen."

The possibility of an alternative gaze and its creative power

Academic discussion of the gendered gaze rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourse originates from Laura Mulvey's 1975 theorization of the "male gaze." Mulvey points out how male-dominated mainstream cinema relies on gender asymmetric structures of "active/male and passive/female" that objectify the female body as a sexual object for the masculine point of view to enjoy, and reinforces dominant ideologies through codes and conventions (Mulvey 19). Mulvey suggests an alternative perspective, the "female gaze," to oppose such dominant models and represent women as subjects with agency (11).

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Sciamma skillfully incorporates such feminist theorization of the male gaze into her narrative and scenography, and further explores the possibility of an alternative gaze transcending power structures between a gazing subject and gazed object, regardless of sex/gender. Such a possibility is best represented in the scene in which Marianne finds that Héloïse also gazing at her. Héloïse had refused to expose her body to the gaze of male painters, but she eventually agrees to model for Marianne. Seeing the exile of men to the offscreen narrative presence and the female painter becoming the subject of looking, some might rush to expect the story of what Mulvey calls the "female gaze" is already well presented in the film. However, what makes Sciamma's attempt at tackling the issue of gendered gaze outstanding and more compelling is the film's intervention into the point that Mulvey's concept

of the "male gaze" is not to be simply identified with that of male sex/gender. Although both painter and model are female, unequal power dynamics between subject and object remain in the beginning. When Héloïse observes Marianne's one-sidedly voyeuristic gaze, she challenges Marianne, asking, "Well, if you're looking at me, who am I looking at?" That is, not only does Héloïse accept Marianne's gaze, but she also gazes at her painter. Marianne then gets a puzzled look on her face. The audience recognizes how being gazed upon makes a person vulnerable, and that looking at someone carries the possibility of being gazed at by the other. Moreover, as Marianne relinquishes her voyeuristic gaze, the portrait shifts to a collaboration between the two. We witness two women becoming the subjects of desire only after coming to look at each other equally. By depicting the two women's intimacy deepens through the shifting gazes, Sciamma implies the possibility of a gaze free from gendered power relations, transcending boundaries of looking and being looked at in a subject-object relationship.

Furthermore, the film effectively visualizes the creative power of such an alternative gaze through the shifts in the portrait quality. The intersection of the protagonists' gazes gradually deepens, starting when Héloïse reacts to her first portrait, which depicts her as a disciplined woman governed by "rules and conventions," in a somewhat sad and angry tone: "It's not close to me," suggesting that she's not visible to the painter. The two women start to collaborate on the portrait, embedding themselves in each other's points of view and trying to look deeper into each other's humanity. When Héloïse sees her portrait completed through this process, she smiles serenely and feels truly seen. In other words, the portrait the two created by collaborating together succeeds in presenting the truth of Héloïse, which could be erased. By juxtaposing the shifting gazes of the two women from Marianne's one-sided gaze to the two's mutual gaze and the quality change of the

portraits' truthfulness for the portrait's model, the film shows the creative power of the gaze—its potential to be a liberating, compassionate, and powerful tool allowing the subject to feel truly seen, or telling the truth of the erased.

The re-telling of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the power of the mutual gaze

Another playful element Sciamma inserts into the film regarding the issue of gendered gaze is the re-telling of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which further emphasizes the creative power of the mutual gaze Héloïse and Marianne's herstory opens up. As their separation draws near after intimate hours shared on a distant island in Brittany, Héloïse tells Marianne that she has a new feeling, "regret." Marianne responds, "Don't regret. *Remember*" (my emphasis). Héloïse stops Marianne as she leaves the house, urging her to "*turn around*" and look at her (my emphasis). They look at each other, and then the door closes. In the myth of Orpheus, Orpheus' act of looking back to Eurydice eternally separates Orpheus and Eurydice. Therefore, when Héloïse reads the story to Marianne and her maid Sophie in a utopian space they can enjoy for only five days, a context emerges in which the act of "turn[ing] around" leads to eternal separation. However, Sciamma did not leave the door closed on Héloïse and Marianne's story.

Years later in Paris, Marianne's first reunion with Héloïse occurs at an exhibition where she exhibits her work, depicting the separation between Orpheus and Eurydice, under her father's name. On a wall at the exhibition, hangs a portrait of a mother and child, Héloïse and her child. The lady in the portrait holds a book in her right hand, her index finger pointing to page 28. Seeing this cue, Marianne takes on an expression of joy and relief. The number pointed to the page on which Héloïse, prior to their inevitable parting, had Marianne sketch her nude portrait to be something Héloïse should look at to remember her by. Marianne correctly detects the hidden message conveyed through the portrait by Héloïse, that she is a page in

Héloïse's life and that Héloïse still thinks of her. This first reunion shows that Marianne and Héloïse recall each other visually: Héloïse gazes at Marianne through books; Marianne gazes at Héloïse through portraits. Even if they do not directly exchange glances at the exhibition, the reciprocity of their gazes is maintained through the books and portraits. We witness the gazes of the two who continue "turn[ing] around"/ "remember[ing]" each other intersecting once again.

According to Sciamma, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is "basically about how the male gaze can kill you," and attempting to see the point of Eurydice, the one who is looked at, is "a way to play with this myth" (qtd. in Sciretta). In other words, she tries to illustrate the potential violence of the male gaze and the tension it creates by having Héloïse tell the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Thus, the reunion of the two through their gazes after the door closes, further metaphorically highlights the power of the mutual gaze: the creation and the continuation of their own story, when Sciamma juxtaposes the relationship between Marianne and Héloïse with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice throughout the story.

Re-signifying of male gaze

The expression of the female gaze also re-signifies the male gaze by using it to continue a herstory. Some would see the scene where Héloïse points to page 28 in the portrait as just passive and weak resistance of Héloïse to the inevitable fate of marriage and children. It is true that Héloïse still subordinates and perpetuates patriarchy. However, I read this reunion scene as going beyond something coincidental where we can see subtle resistance of Héloïse. The power of the reunion lies not in revealing page 28 in the painting, but rather in Héloïse daring to allow a male gaze as a portrait model. The portrait of her at the exhibition was a quite feminine and subordinate image of Héloïse painted through the gaze of a male painter—the sort of gaze that Héloïse would have most wanted to refuse.

Considering the fact that she had refused the male gaze of several male painters and Marianne at the beginning of the story, which erases her truthfulness, it is less likely to be inevitable for her to allow such a male gaze. Suppose her anticipation of the possibility that Marianne, a painter, might view the painting at an exhibition, then it becomes clearer that Héloïse allowed herself to be subject to the male painter's gaze for Marianne and herself. In other words, she deliberately uses the male gaze, a symbol of oppression, to continue the story of two women. Then, Marianne receives and reciprocates Héloïse's gaze showing a soft smile on her face with heartfelt fulfillment and joy. In this sense, the women's reunion through portraiture does not seem coincidental. It is rather a reunion brimming with implications, born of a collaboration between active resistance from Marianne, who continues as a female painter despite the constraints, and the active resistance of Héloïse, who dared to be painted.

According to Jacques Derrida, all symbols hold the possibility of being cited, grafted, and reiterated in ways that differ from the original intent and context of the speaker or writer (101–103). Unexpected rearrangement in what Derrida calls "citational graft" is part of the theoretical rationale for Judith Butler's concept of performativity. Butler sees the potential for a subversion in gender performativity when gender performativity is grafted and cited in different contexts (21). In the film, Héloïse cites and applies the male gaze to a different context, which allows her to gaze at Marianne in the portrait and subjectively continue the herstory of two women. The audience witnesses the moment when the male gaze, which has objectified women's bodies, deprived women of their voices, and left their truths outside the screen, becomes the voice of Héloïse crying out on the screen, "Look at me"—the failure of the conventional quality of the male gaze. In this sense, this herstory goes beyond the realm of a woman's mere passive resistance and allows us

to witness the possibility of, if not complete, subversion that challenges and re-signifies the male gaze.

As discussed so far, through the female gaze transcending power structures between a gazing subject and gazed object, this film well depicts the joy and potential power of the queer imagination, which allows the women to make themselves truly seen to each other, narrate their own story, and tell the truth of the erased while also maintaining the tone which describes the pain of the two who are forced to separate, Héloïse being betrothed to a man for her family and Marianne continuing art yet still being marginalized as a female artist. Sciamma advocates that "[the female gaze] is a decision not to objectify people" (qtd in. Gilchrist). Looking back on the moment when Marianne decided not to objectify Héloïse as a model and the after, I would suggest that one of the significant parts of the film's creativity lies in the way Sciamma implies to us what such a decision can do and where it potentially leads us to go.

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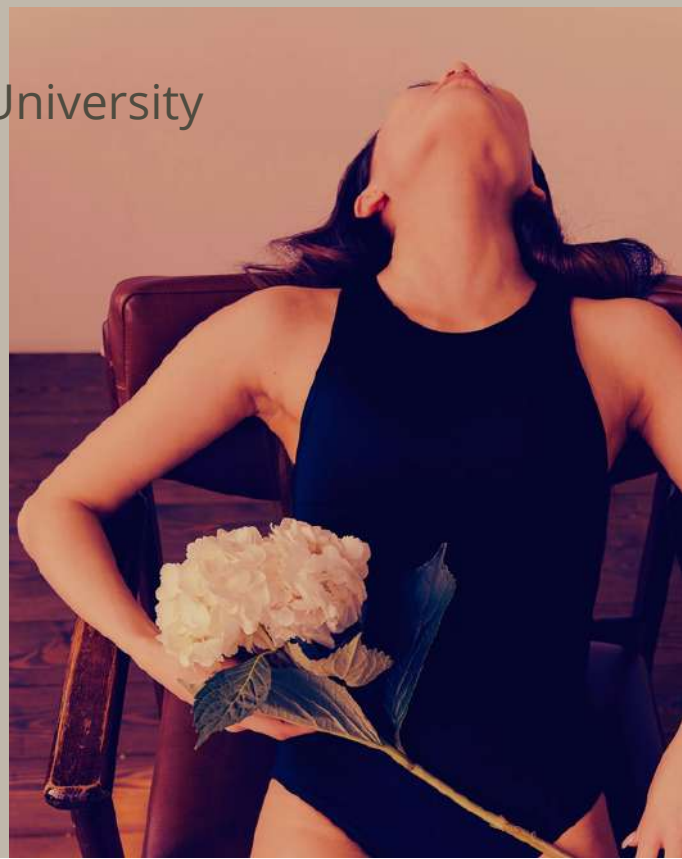
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FILM REVIEW



Sex and the Slasher: Genre Homage and Subversion in Ti West's *X*

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Self-reflexivity has long been an integral element of horror cinema, from its familiar reliance on the familiar but repressed imagery to the postmodern rejuvenation and deconstruction of genre tropes widely popularized by Wes Craven's *Scream* franchise (Telotte 139-40, Wee 45). This quality has subsequently spawned a multitude of approaches to genre convention, with filmmakers alternately celebrating, subverting, or spoofing established formulas. Contemporary slasher cinema has seen either rebooted returns to genre- and era-defining franchises such as *Halloween* (1978-) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974-), which amount to earnest (albeit regurgitative) efforts to recapture the visceral impact of the originals, or *Scream*-esque films such as *Happy Death Day* (2017) and *Freaky* (2020) that highlight their stabbings and chase sequences with snarky, self-aware comedy and explicit references to the genre and medium they inhabit. Under this context comes director Ti West's *X* (2022), an indie slasher film that serves as a tribute to the grimy gorefest of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as well as the sex-crazed clichés of grindhouse pictures from the 1970s: A pack of young people who pile into a van and end up fleeing killers at an isolated

farmhouse are "a collection of porn performers and one painfully pretentious cinematographer" (Rothkopf). They aspire to make an adult film that is artistically sophisticated as well as sexually explicit. While this might appear to inherit the slasher's tradition of gratuitous female nudity and promiscuous characters, *X* offers a far more nuanced treatment of sexuality than most of the (s)exploitation films it ostensibly pays tribute to. Beyond engaging with the aesthetic and tropes of graphic grindhouse horror (O'Brien) to the point of indulgent sensationalism, Ti West's horror homage actively subverts the genre's traditional treatment of sexuality, morphing into a sobering yet sympathetic contemplation on the nature of sexuality's relation to desirability, youth, and mortality.

While *X* wastes no time in foregrounding the racy nature of its protagonists' business on a Texas farm, these characters are not represented as shallow stereotypes. Both the cast and crew of the X-rated dirty movie are shown to have a humanizing degree of depth and personality, and the group's interactions reveal a delicate dynamic of emotions and motivations. Would-be auteur pornographer RJ both encapsulates the passion-driven love for

filmmaking, and serves as a sly parody of “filmmakers with convoluted aspirations to ‘elevated horror’” (O’Brian). His girlfriend and assistant Lorraine, initially dismissing RJ’s cinematic endeavor as smut and getting accused of prudishness, has a change of heart and eventually participates in the unsimulated onscreen sex too - a decision that distresses RJ considerably and exposes his hypocrisy regarding sexual liberation and the artistic transcendence of his work. Stripper-turned-amateur porn actress Maxine is defined by her unrelenting desire for the excellence and exposure she believes herself worthy of, repeatedly punctuating her drug- and pride-fueled pursuit of stardom with the mantra “I will not accept a life I do not deserve.” Her appearance in what RJ insists will be “a good dirty movie” is presented as a rung in the ladder toward success in Hollywood, a means to an end rather than an indulgence in youthful frivolity (as is often the case with sexually active young women in slasher movies). In a manner that complements Maxine’s fierce determination, her more laid-back co-stars Bobby-Lynne and Jackson are established as agreeable, free-spirited people whose willingness to work as porn stars indicates their open-minded attitudes toward sexuality as well as their eagerness to capitalize on their youth and physical beauty while it lasts. By the time *X*’s own Texas massacre kicks off, the audience sees the victims neither as superficial sex objects nor as expendable “meatbags waiting to be killed” (Janisse 18:12); rather, the characters are “lovable” and “develop[ed]” beyond the skin-deep sketches that usually populate sex- and violence-filled exploitation films (Mia Goth qtd. in Janisse 18:27). Contrary to the tradition of slasher films in which reckless young people are often “punished” for their promiscuity (a convention that reflects a paradoxically puritanical mentality toward sex despite an eagerness to portray it on screen), the butchering of *X*’s characters warrants a genuine pang of sadness from the viewer.

Besides being a refreshing deviation from the slasher’s stereotypical lack of character depth, *X* refutes the exploitative demonization of sexuality so prevalent in the seedy genre.

Even more noteworthy is *X*’s success in balancing its victims with an equally compelling antagonist, the sex-starved, voyeuristic old woman Pearl. Bobby-Lynne’s progressive assertion that when it comes to sex, “[q]ueer, straight, black, white - it’s all disco” because “one day, we’re going to be too old to f—,” paints her as a mouthpiece of the blithely sex-positive milieu she inhabits, but more importantly this foreshadows the murderous motivations of elderly farmhouse owners Howard and Pearl, whose aging bodies have become an impediment to their physical intimacy. Much to the despair of Pearl, who reminisces about her glamorous past and burns with envy at the sight of Maxine’s nubile beauty, the coterie of porn creators seems to be flaunting the glory of youth and desirability in her “grotesquely withered” (Hasted) face. A pivotal incident in Pearl’s spiral into violence happens when she secretly watches the shooting of a sex scene in a barn, with Maxine’s sexual vitality triggering a torrent of resentment—though it also arouses her considerably. This moment links *X*’s somewhat playful metacommentary on the process of filmmaking with the darker undertones of gaze, voyeurism, and desire; that both Maxine and Pearl are played by actress Mia Goth reinforces the film’s themes of “aging and lost youth” (Janisse 10:57) and “sex as a means to dreams, and age as its bitter end” (Hasted). After picturing herself in Maxine’s place as the porno’s titular “farmer’s daughter,” Pearl is inspired to adorn herself with makeup and attempts to seduce her husband, who rejects her due to concerns about heart failure. The old woman is further enraged when her subsequent sexual advance at RJ ends in a gentle but resolute rejection. Feeling shut out from enjoying the pleasure and validation of desirability that sex would have granted her, Pearl unleashes a lethal bloodbath on the unfortunate young people

(starting with the gory stabbing-turned-decapitation of RJ) that eventually leaves Maxine as the sole survivor, i.e., the genre-obligatory "Final Girl" (Clover 51). Throughout her rampage, she enlists husband Howard in the hunting down of their guests, and the couple's conjugal passion is seemingly rejuvenated by the violence - as evidenced by their eventual labored but heated lovemaking session that occurs with a terrified Maxine hiding under their bed. Despite all the slashing, shooting, and alligator snacking that *X* brings to the audience, not to mention Pearl's ultimate violent demise under the wheels of a truck that Maxine makes her escape in, it is this borderline-Gothic display of geriatric sex that stands out as the film's most disturbing scene, especially as it contrasts with the earlier sex scenes from RJ's porn film featuring young people - obviously intended as titillating rather than horrific.

This treatment of aging and sexuality has garnered *X* some criticism for its ostensible ageism and sexism, with the elderly couple's carnality presented as a grotesque horror show and Pearl's sexual desire portrayed as monstrous because she is no longer young and desirable according to societal standards for women. The repulsion on Maxine's face whenever Pearl attempts physical contact with her and when she listens to the old couple having sex has been accused of evoking "hagsploitation" clichés in horror media, demonizing and dehumanizing the aged woman for shock value (Walker). However, these criticisms overlook much of the nuance with which Ti West merges the topics of sexuality and mortality with his spin on the slasher formula. Goth imbues her performance of the forlorn, then violent Pearl with a striking degree of humanity, and her plight of feeling trapped within a decaying body while the pleasures of sex continue being enjoyed without her incites genuine sympathy from the audience before her brutal tendencies are revealed. While the concept of the violently "monstrous-feminine" (Creed 3) is by no means a new horror trope, *X*

fuses a female antagonist with the slasher genre's conventionally male killer who preys on female victims with a phallic weapon (Corrigan); moreover, a closer look at Pearl's attitude and actions reveals that she is not villainized simply for being an old woman who wants to have sex, but for her desire to punish young women for having liberal access to what she has been denied. Her final words to Maxine, calling her "a deviant little whore" (01:35:56) and threatening, "It'll all be taken from you just like it was taken from me!" (01:38:09) reveals a puritanical moralism and deeply misogynistic bitterness that echoes patriarchal views that desirable women inevitably expire. As Pearl's youthful counterpart, Maxine's successful escape from the slasher's attacks further subverts the gendered genre trope of the Final Girl as a conservatively dressed (Grahame-Smith 63), virginal (Corrigan) girl who abstains from substances and stands apart from her promiscuous, drunken friends. Maxine's addiction to cocaine, fame, and sexuality in fact bleeds into her determination to survive Pearl, and as she drives away from the old woman's freshly-flattened corpse on the pavement in an "optimistic inverse" homage to Sally's escape in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Janisse 25:06), she also leaves behind the slasher genre's sexist, slut-shaming trope of killing off people for enjoying sex - a trope aptly embodied by the now-dead Pearl.

As Bee Delores suggests, "[m]ost splatter flicks simply bury life's fluorescent impermanence with schlocky characters, gratuitous violence and gore, and sex, sex, sex. ... Thankfully, filmmaker Ti West fearlessly confronts aging, death, resentment, and regret with his horror feature comeback, *X*." Rather than settling as a simplistic slasher or sexploitation flick that bombards the viewer with graphic sensationalism, *X* blends good but not-so-clean fun with the aesthetic of such lowbrow films. *X* reworks these elements to present a bold and yet nuanced commentary on the twisted proximity of desire, violence, and mortality.

Sex is an essential theme throughout the film: it is less as a source of sleazy gratification or female objectification and more as a multifaceted source of motivation for the handful of characters, whose varying attitudes toward it are crucial aspects of their unconventional personalities, which further reflects different approaches to coping with the inescapable fact of mortality. Above and beyond honoring the genre conventions he clearly knows and loves, West delivers a subversive slasher that is as smart in execution as it is sexy.

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ARTWORK



This Body of Mine

Ally Zlatar

Biography



Ally Zatar is an artist and activist who established The Starving Artist initiative and The Starving Artist Scholarship Fund. Her humanitarian efforts have been acknowledged through various awards, including The Princess Diana Legacy Award 2021 and the King Hamad Award for Youth Empowerment 2022. Zatar's artwork explores the complexities of the human condition, delving into themes of illness, vulnerability, and the authenticity of one's lived experience. She holds a BFA in Visual Art & Art History and an MLitt in Curatorial Practice and Contemporary Art. Zatar's Doctorate of Creative Arts is with the University of Southern Queensland, and she teaches at the University of Glasgow and has previously taught at KICL London and the University of Essex.

Artist Statement

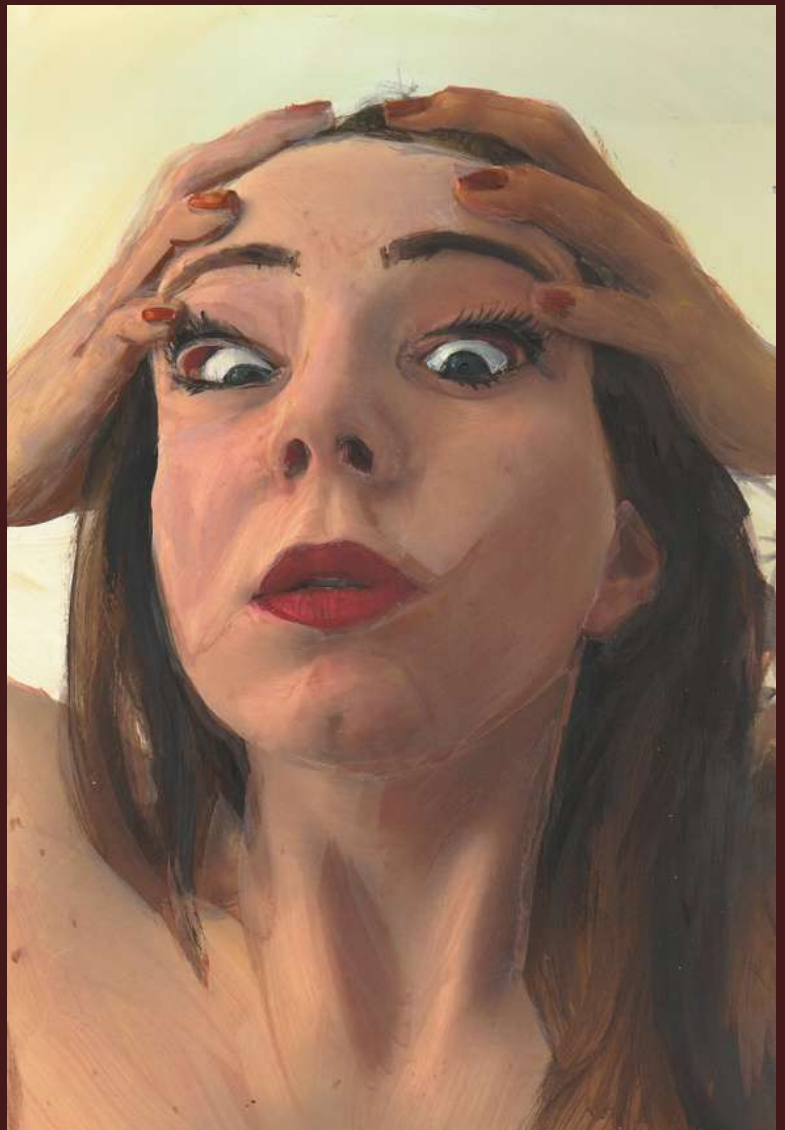
As an artist and activist, my work is deeply rooted in the exploration of the human condition, specifically the experience of the body and how it is perceived and understood in society. Throughout my personal journey, I have grappled with body dysmorphia, and it is through my art that I have found a way to redefine my relationship with my own body and inspire others to do the same. Through my latest series of paintings, "The World, The Flesh and The Breath," I delve into the complexity of body dysmorphia and explore the ways in which we stretch and distort our bodies to fit into societal expectations of beauty. Using bold colors and fluid brushstrokes, I depict the emotional and physical struggle of living with body dysmorphia, inviting the viewer to consider their own relationship with their body and the world around them. Additionally, my work also explores themes of gender and sexuality, challenging traditional notions of desire and identity. By redefining bodies, sex, and gender through my art, I hope to inspire others to embrace their own unique experiences and identities, ultimately creating a more inclusive and accepting society.

The World, The Flesh, and The Breath



Artworks Introduction

In "The World, The Flesh and The Breath," I explore the theme of body dysmorphia and the sexualization of the body. The works are an examination of the distorted relationship we have with our bodies as a result of societal pressure to conform to a narrow definition of beauty and "sexy." Drawing on the theory of abjection, I depict the ways in which we disassociate from and reject our own bodies to meet societal expectations.



Using bold colors and fluid brushstrokes, each painting captures the emotional and physical struggle of living with body dysmorphia. The series invites viewers to consider their own relationship with their body and the world around them.



At the core of "The World, The Flesh and The Breath" is a commitment to vulnerability and authenticity. Through my personal experiences, I aim to create a dialogue about the sexualization of the body and the disattachment from it. I hope to inspire viewers to embrace their own imperfections and find beauty in the diversity of human experience.

Between Self and Other





As an activist, I am committed to using my art as a form of advocacy and systemic reform, creating a space for marginalized voices to be heard and celebrated.



My initiatives, such as The Starving Artist and The Starving Artist Scholarship Fund, demonstrate my dedication to using creative voices as a means of creating change and promoting inclusivity and accessibility. Both my personal journey and artistic endeavors are inextricably linked, both informed by and informing each other. Through my art, I seek to inspire others to confront the discomfort and shame associated with body dysmorphia and to redefine their own relationships with their bodies, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and just society.

The Strings that Bind Us



My Sword is a Blade, and My Body is Cut

Artworks Statement

The "Refuge for the Oppressed Body" delves into the idea of ungendering as a form of protection or internal refuge for those with eating disorders who seek to control their bodies in a world where they feel violated and unsafe. The work explores the concept of building walls around oneself as a way to cope with trauma and seek refuge from the external world. While this form of protection may be flawed, it is a survival mechanism that provides comfort and agency for those who feel powerless. My aim is to examine the idea of asylum through the body, highlighting the complex relationship between the individual and their physical form as a site of both vulnerability and strength.

For more information regarding to the artist, please find: <https://allyz.cargo.site/>

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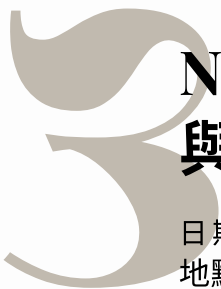
[HTTPS://CLAROC100.WORDPRESS.COM/ANNUALCONFERENCE45/](https://claroc100.wordpress.com/annualconference45/)



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日期：05/06 (五) - 07/16 (日)

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