

POROSITY – THE SPACE BETWEEN IDENTITIES

by

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ABSTRACT

“Porosity” investigates the abstraction of bodies as a way to free people from the visual constraints and societal markers of “difference” or “otherness”, as tied to class, gender, sexuality and race, that are used to marginalize individuals in our society. I in no way want to remove people’s individual experiences, however, these narrow and rigid categories of socially constructed identities support hierarchies that are based in capitalism and systemic oppression, which I think should ultimately be dismantled.

Within my monoprints, I use this abstraction of human form to allow for endless possibilities of shifting identity and individual freedom of expression that is not defined by the labels constructed by others. This abstraction of human form also, allows the body to become a sight of resistance and defiance to controls or “disciplines” placed upon one’s existence through bio-political or state structures.

I argue that these works of art will allow contemplation on the structures, expectations and invisible manipulations that are tied to how we form and embody our identities in society, while still imparting feeling and emotion as tethered to a shared human existence. I also, hope that they will represent the future possibilities of our fluid identities and a utopian universal that is a shared human experience.

INTRODUCTION

Defined by my experiences and relationships formed during my formative years in rural northern California, I am a product of hippy /environmental activism within a tightknit community focused on the arts, activism, and grass roots organizational tactics. I maintain interests in politics, justice, equality, and an innate desire to monkey wrench capitalism from the inside. My nontraditional upbringing has led me to question ways my art can be used as vehicle for societal change or protest. It has also fueled my desire for theory and education into praxis and artistic expression to improve our world, even in some small way.

Two key events that changed the direction of my life and helped to focus what is fundamentally vital in my personal fight was the end of my marriage, followed by my former partner Annie's transition. These two major life changes showed me the importance of making choices in my own life that would protect the rights, bodies, and humanity of those closest to me. I knew I needed to use my privilege or positionality, as a white, cis, bi, lower middle class, able-bodied, and educated woman, to help make the world a just place to exist for anyone who is marginalized by society and the intersection of power structures focused on gender, sexuality, class or race. I chose to better the world for those I cared about while simultaneously acknowledging, I also need to do the same for myself if I wanted to engage the world in a meaningful way with my artistic practice. These experiences led to me choosing to get my graduate degree and pursue my own dreams of artistic growth, mentorship, and education. Ultimately, I wanted the freedom to make art for me, without regard to my father, to benefit society or work with issues of capitalism. However, this, as I have come to realize, is a naive and, frankly, selfish take on existence because I cannot ever really be free when others suffer

systemic oppression and marginalization daily. It is all our collective responsibility to dismantle the systems of oppression propped up through capitalism in order to make changes for the betterment of humanity. I want my artwork to improve the lives of others who have been marginalized and invalidated by mainstream society, even if it is in a small unassuming way.

This is represented in the body of print work presented in my thesis show, “Porosity-The Space Between Identities.” This show questions how bodies can be visually represented without markers of gender, race, class, or other socially constructed identities. It is informed by my former partner’s transition, and the loss of who I knew them as, coupled with my own attempt to process my grief resulting from the loss of three family members in the last three years. These experiences force me to interrogate how we form identities, both inward and outward facing. I also question how we deal with a literal loss of the corporal body. I am looking at these questions and considering my perspective through the intersectional lens of abolitionist feminism, queer theory, grief and bodily loss, bio-political and capitalist manipulations, while considering identities and the control exerted over the human body by others. Through an abstract representation of the body I hope to defy the systemic structures of oppression which form these identities and render them visible to those whom they marginalize. I am wanting to shed light on what is seen or unseen, in regard to societal controls and enforced subtle manipulations on our individual existence, which ultimately informs my time in the studio.

My struggle is to create a visual representation of the body that defies categorization or markers of sexuality, gender, race, class or disability and still impart the emotions of our shared humanity, such as feelings of loss, grief, anger, joy and/or happiness. Through these one of a kind, individual and unique monoprints presented in my MFA show, I allow space for discussion

and contemplation around the social rules that regulate the formation of our identities. The work opens space to consider the fluidity of gender, sexuality, and the subjective experience. While I in no way want to remove people's individual experiences, I do think that these narrow and rigid categories presented through socially constructed identities support hierarchies that are based in capitalism and systemic oppression, which I ultimately think should be disassembled. I believe we need to dismantle these systems of power that enforce binary assumptions around bodies and identities, allowing people's aqueous humanity, and not the markers of "otherness," to be how we see and acknowledge our shared existence.

GRIEF, LOSS AND DEATH

One of the biggest personal influences on my art and what ultimately led me to experiment with monoprinting was the unexpected deaths of my cousin, friend, and great-aunt all in 2019, which now has snowballed into a global pandemic consisting of perpetual hidden sorrow and endless catastrophic global trauma. This grief, heartache, and seemingly endless loss makes me recall a line from C. S. Lewis's book, *A Grief Observed*. He asserts, "no one told me grief felt so like fear... I'm beginning to understand that grief is not just loss. Grief is about becoming untethered. It's about losing an identity. Losing a map and a compass all at once – a way to orient our life." This really spoke to me and my own experiences with grief, feelings of vulnerability, and loss of identity while simultaneously allowing empathy for others also experiencing grief/loss on such a large scale stemming from war, famine, or a politicized global pandemic. Judith Butler assert this idea of grief being a transformative resource in, *Undoing Gender*,

"To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to a simple passivity or powerlessness. It is, rather, to allow oneself to extrapolate from this experience of vulnerability to the vulnerability that others suffer through military incursions, occupations, suddenly declared wars, and police brutality."

(23 Butler)

This idea of transforming loss into a resource and reframing feelings of powerlessness when we have no control echoed my own attempt to recontextualize all the losses I had experienced in the recent past.

I struggled with questioning, for myself, how can one suddenly unbecome a person that you have identified as your entire life and wondering where that now orients you in the world?

Can I even live up to that person I was but can never be again? Afraid that I wouldn't be to find "myself" again. Tying back to the Lewis quote this highlights how the disorientation of grief and its subsequent untethering can feel like fear, fear of the unknown, fear of a future without a person who mattered so much, fear of our own shortcomings when processing grief, and fear of our own vulnerability.

Surrealist Techniques

I needed to find something, a way to keep making, that could get me out of, through, or past the anguish, distress, grief, and horror I was struggling to process while still having to find my compass and navigate finishing graduate school. Similar to the Surrealists, I started experimenting with automatism, abstract expressionism, and chance-based artwork as ways of tapping into the subconscious mind, attempting to link my grief to my creativity and move beyond the fear. I tapped into several different surrealist techniques including the process of frottage, paint pouring, and free association. Frottage has been an investigative method I have done for quite some time but have only recently reincorporated these found textures and visual rhythms taken from my childhood tradition of taking grave rubbings, with my father, at every major city we traveled to. These cemeteries, especially now through the eyes of a teacher and no longer those of a child, formally reflect many of the elements and principles of design. They have rhythm and texture. Conceptually they further connect our loss to the loss of others, but not on a personal level as much as on a human level. For me, they play up the rituals and memorializing aspect of grief and loss, making a tradition of our own losses and make monuments out of our grief.

Another surrealist technique I embraced was paint (or ink in this case) pouring, I played with pouring pigments on to my printing matrix to allow for fluid mixing and chance to be incorporated before mono printing a unique and hopefully specific work to the person I was focused on, almost a form of free association through trying to tap the subconscious and create a fluid abstraction of identity. Artist and author Jacques Schnier compares, the influence of free association in regard to psychoanalysis and art in a speech he gave to the American Society for Aesthetics,

“The principle of free association as conceived and applied by psychoanalysis for uncovering repressed unconscious processes of the mind is practically identical with that described by Schiller, Börne, or Wilkenson for creating works of art. An individual employing this method in analysis is first required to put himself in a condition of calm, self-observation without trying to think of anything. Then he begins to say everything which he becomes inwardly aware of — feelings, thoughts, remembrances, and so forth — in the order in which they arise in his mind.” (Schnier)

Basically, he is comparing the importance of free association in psychoanalysis to how important we should consider this technique to making surrealist art. It opens the conscious mind to the unconscious idea and allows for utilizing this technique of free association, or to use Andre Breton’s term for referring to surrealist visual art made this way, “graphic automatism.” Seeking a way to move beyond, while processing through, Breton also contends, “it (graphic automatism) brings to light deep individual tensions and to some extent releases them - is the one and only mode of expression entirely satisfying to both eye and ear” (Schnier 64). Schnier, likewise describes this method of making as one that overcomes resistance. This idea, as a tool to overcome my own resistances resonated with me in the face of my grief.

“In art, free association serves somewhat the same purpose by providing access to the artist's inner mind. We know that during this phase, resistance is overcome and the result is a flow of associated thoughts and images characterized by symbolism, condensation and displacement, the distinguishing features of the primary process.” (Schnier 65)

I feel that in my presented MFA show (numbers 11, 15, and 19) for me, were able to successfully capture this method of working within graphic automatism and overcome the mental blocks I was experiencing from my grief and loss.

In some of the artworks from Porosity (numbers 13 and 21), I also embraced the surrealist method where one allows paint to run down a vertical surface. Because I utilize a thick oil-based printing ink it allows for a much slower drying time and slower, almost glacial, movement down my paper which changes the forms and texture created in the work while still supporting a subtle mixing of color and creation of dimensionality. This technique allows for the incorporation of both chance and free association in making these print collages. Schnier contends this method allows a moment, feeling or inclination to be the work's focus, freeing things sometimes deemed trivial or meaningless by the conscious mind when making work in the studio. He states,

“the artist turns from all tendencies to report the experiences of sense perceptions, i.e. to report on the world of objects about him, and gives precedence instead, to the feelings, thoughts, remembrances, and impulses as they arise in his mind. Any color, shape, line, or balancing arrangement as it comes to the surface of consciousness is acted upon and incorporated in the work (later, these elements may or may not be retained). No motive, irrespective of how bizarre or abstract, is considered unimportant.” (Schnier 65)

This method of embracing impulse, memory and the nonsensical was a key motivator in my own studio practice and allowed my newest work to take shape without conscious or logical

restrictions to what I was exploring. Andre Breton claims that due to modernism we now turn away from anything deemed irrational or superstitious in art. He argues that, “Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices.” (Breton 8) Basically, this is asserting that in order to make art that challenges conventions or the status quo one must reject the dominant discourse around how we tap into our creativity and express our views artistically.

Grief and Vulnerability

I was hoping, and ultimately succeeding, through these new methods and abstracted styles (people/bodies/entities) to find my inspiration after heavy losses, re-tapping my creativity, perseverance, and drive to move forward. My culminative works, as shown in Porosity, embraced my own vulnerability to allow for creative growth and artistic innovation in the face of struggle. According to researcher-storyteller and author Brene Brown, fear of shame inhibits creativity and keeps us hiding so others, but really ourselves, will not see us as unworthy or imperfect. She asserts in her now famous TED talk, “vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change.” Brown goes on to argue that, “vulnerability is still just essential. We can’t know things like love and belonging and creativity and joy without vulnerability, but in this culture of reflexive cynicism you better also really understand shame if you’re going to put yourself out there.” How she speaks about shame being so closely tied to fear and only being counteracted through our own authenticity and vulnerability, was really important for me to realize and allowed me to embrace my own fears and insecurities around the future while I processed grief through my studio practice.

Through my pandemic disruptions and struggles, my work slid from visually representational and personally narrative to an abstracted form focused on more ambiguous or fluid representation of bodies and existences as a way to connect with those who have been lost. In the studio, I was creating new possibilities of form and visual representation. Monoprinting as a technique, helped me visually explore and represent the emotional experiences I struggled to express through words or representational imagery. I felt that switching from a form of printmaking that could be editioned, like relief or intaglio, to a method of printing intended for a unique one off work spoke more to the loss of individual people and held space for the openness of non-dualistic identities. Through automatic monoprinting, combined with collage, stitching and responsive inkwork, I am able to represent, very specific and nonspecific people, who I've lost throughout my life and whom others have lost in theirs. Allowing my own experiences and loss to be transmuted into a shared experience of humanity and its subsequent vulnerability. These concepts are best show for me in works (number 1 and 2) from my MFA show, "Porosity." These pieces embraced many of the newfound processes and way of thinking about the body. Additionally, both works also embraced the use of stitching and cutting to hold things together (people and identities) while mimicking marks or voids. I always am reminded of Louise Bourgeois and a very specific quote from her when I incorporate stitch work in my pieces. She said, "I always had the fear of being separated and abandoned. The sewing is my attempt to keep things together and make things whole." For my work it feels the same, keeping people's existences whole and inseparable to outside trauma or loss.

Grief as a Catalyst for Change

One thing I have come to believe, through my own experiences with loss, is that grief is the biggest catalyst for change. It forces us to reassess who we are and what we believe in. It alters how one sees the world, how one exists, speaks, or processes existence. It can make us question our faith and our ideals. For me grief made me reassess what and how I was making work. According to Judith Butler grief also places us in a position of compassion with others navigating life and loss. Accessing empathy through grief helps us to understand what it means to exist in a human body, one that cannot exist in isolation from others. She asserts,

“If we might then return to the problem of grief, to the moments in which one undergoes something outside of one’s control and finds that one is besides oneself, not at one with oneself, we can say grief contains within it the possibility of apprehending the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are from the start, and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own.” (22 Butler)

This echoes with me and reinforces the importance of community during times of grief and the critical importance for empathy with others when they experience loss. It also is a fundamental piece connecting how grief is tied to my own interest in the human form, which has served as inspiration/focus for this current body of work.

As someone who has experienced extensive death and loss of loved ones in my life every few years, I have come to understand grief and loss to be part of everyday existence. I recognize the impermanence of our existence and simultaneously, the ephemeral beauty that can be in a smile or moment of laughter. One can’t have the light without the dark, so to one can’t live without experiencing death. Life ultimately is for the living and we must choose to live despite, or maybe with, our grief and loss. The world doesn’t stop when your mourning and

unfortunately, most people do not want to or cannot understand what a life altering experience profound loss can be (three in a row is absolutely devastating). It is not just loss of a loved one, physically and emotionally, but also loss of the self-identity with how they saw you in the world and how the person who is grieving understood their place in the world. Where once you were a niece or cousin or friend, suddenly through death, one is undone and can no longer be that version of a person that one knew themselves to be. This concept struck home for me after reading about Lacan's theory of the Other/other and considering how that applied to my grieving the loss of loved ones. Lacan asserts in his mirror theory that when we are seen through the eyes of another person, they simultaneously create who you are through how they see you and validated how you are seen outside of yourself. To me this means, that in the wake of loss we are unable to validate how we identify and since the person who desired, even platonically, us is gone we will not ever be the same.

Grief as a Tool of Control

In addition to grief changing how one identifies individually, grief also serves to be a tool of control by the state through medicalization and sanitation of death and loss. Through the use of grief counseling, state sanctioned limits to time off work and exorbitant costs associated with death rights (coffins, cremation, funerals, grave plots, notarized paperwork the expires), a person's experience and ability to process death is managed and directed by state entities. Robyn Ord argues, in her article about the dominant discourses around grief, that grief has become regulated and controlled through how, when, where, and who is allowed to grieve. Grief has become "manageable" by institutions as a method of "control" over a person. She states that,

“The object of [these technologies] is not to impose upon "the griever" externally but to colonize from within, so that those who are objects of this discourse see themselves as proper objects. The goal is to shape the subjectivities of the bereaved, and this shaping of subjectivity is what Foucault means by ‘discipline.’” (Ord)

These tools of “discipline” used to colonize and regulate our subjectivity form how we see ourselves into a “normalized” or healed non-grieving person who can now go back to work, pay bills, and be a functioning member of society. This managed function of grief into self-discipline forces people to “just get over it” to be productive members of society. It has also become sanitized through categorization of a “normal” grief that is short term, fixable, and regulated, “clean” as it were. As opposed to “abnormal” grief that is messy, overwhelming, and fundamentally human, you know the “dirty” side of loss. Ord asserts,

“The medicalization of grief has also led to new levels of social control. Discourses of grief seek to discipline and control grief by creating boundaries between normality and abnormality. Death is a "scandal" and a threat to modernism and thus must be subjugated. To discipline grief is to police the border between life and death, and medicalization has become a tool for such surveillance. Grief work, then, becomes an instrument of surveillance, a site of power, and an agent of social control.” (Ord)

These state mandated methods of sanitization and regulation have led to these institutional “norms” and “measurements” of grief. Doctors and psychologists now decide a treatment to cure your grief with pills and certain measurable outcomes. Someone else gets to decide how long one can grieve, where its acceptable to show grief in a public or professional setting, and what requirements you need to meet to be “cured” of your grief. Ord contends that when grief and loss is seen as just another method of controlling, medically, what is “appropriate” for human

behaviors. We take away the right for people to grieve and process death as they see fit and not on predetermined medical timeline that allows grief to be “delt” with. She proclaims,

“While all traditional theoretical models of grief have the potential to become overly prescriptive, linear, and medicalized, the use of theories that discuss “abnormal” and “com- plicated” grief imply a predetermined definition of appropriate grief. More specifically, these theories place an emphasis on the individual to recover from loss in a predetermined manner. This is dangerous because it opens up the possibility for failure, as not everyone can or will “recover” from loss, nor will do so in a specific way.” (Ord 200)

For me this quote drives home how the medical service industry is attempting to universalize and control an experience that is so personal, unsettling, and often indescribable or incomprehensible to others. Greif is not linear or restrained or measurable by medical professional and shouldn’t be something we try to “cure”. Instead we should consider grief and loss a chance to be vulnerable, messy, and human. Greif and loss of a loved one, ultimately forces a moment of clarity around what really matters in life and encourages grow within and outside ourselves. The vulnerability and introspection that comes with loss allow for creativity and innovation to flourish in the wake of one of the hardest life experiences.

QUEER AND TRANSGENDER THEORY AROUND IDENTITIES

A second major influence for my artwork and MFA show, was my experiences with formation or expression of gender identities. It can seem odd to some that as a cis-gender woman I can be so adamant about queer, non-binary, and trans identity positions. However, my former partner of fifteen years started transitioning six years ago. Annie is my chosen family and someone who I lived with and watched be courageous enough to transition. I supported and encouraged her through second puberty and hormone injections, numerous surgeries and lengthy recoveries, and the endless bouts of gender dysphoria brought on by the terrible thing strangers said to her about her body and identity presentation. Her journey to being seen authentically by others has served as a daily inspiration to me and a catalyst to my own artwork. As she gave up her privileges and position of power, I strove to understand my own positionality and decenter my whiteness and privilege to better understand how society oppresses those deemed as “other,” “different,” or non-conforming. A Judith Butler quote from, *Undoing Gender*, that resonated with me was about the value of being a porous boundary and de centering our own experiences. She contends,

“I suggested as well that the way in which the body figures in gender and sexuality studies, and in the struggles for a less oppressive social world for the otherwise gendered and for sexual minorities of all kinds, is precisely to underscore the value of being besides oneself, of being a porous boundary, given over to others, finding oneself in a trajectory of desire in which one is taken out of oneself, and resituated irreversibly in a field of others in which one is not the presumptive center.” (25 Butler)

Ultimately, Butler expresses the importance of understanding where and how the body plays into the struggle faced by people who do not identify as heterosexual or cis gendered. She also argues

the momentousness of understanding that we need to care for others and not make our narrow viewpoints the only reference point if we want the world to be a better, non-oppressive, existence for all. For me this reiterates that gender is a spectrum not a binary, one without labels or ridged constraints of identities that should be best represented visually or artistically through abstract forms and interpretations. I think it is also important to note that these binary identities of gender and sexuality, rather than being actual descriptions or even symbolic reflections of reality, are at best power-laced abstractions created through technology, discourse, and heteronormative ideals.

Fluidity of Identity

In the pieces presented in “Porosity” I highlighted fluidity of color mixing, shifts of space and forms that are striving for endless possibilities of identity and provide an openness of experience. Through these new monoprints I found a way to represent people’s fluid and shifting humanity, free from visible markers of being “other,” “different,” or “gendered,” free from the judgments the “norms” society places upon our specified existences and free of socially constructed identities. For some people these identities are a valued and celebrated, but for many people visual identity markers only serve to categorize, contain, and stereotype our individual selves forcing them to fit within those societal norms and expectations. As Michael Foucault asserted and a phrase that has long stuck with me, visibility is a trap. He argued that when claiming a marginalized position or identity, it can both offer community and inclusion while simultaneously allowing for discrimination, violence, and systemic marginalization. This to me shows the double-edged sword that comes with a rigid classification of socially constructed identities juxtaposed to a personal desire to live life authentically. I argue that these identities all our bodies inhabit are not rigid fixed binaries but instead should be considered contextual,

unfixed and negotiable. Some identities seem more fixed due to the length of time one has inhabited them, but all identities are mutable and personally defined, they can be contingent on the relationship, moment, or context. Philosopher and author Silvia Federici also believes in this idea of the malleability of social identities but asserts that we must understand the social, economic, and class-based structures that affect identity formation. She argues in her book, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*, that as feminists we need to not tell other women what forms of exploitation are acceptable, but we need to expand our view of possibilities. To understand our capacity, as women, and to determine what and how we want our lives to be without relying on systemic oppression telling us what we should be. Federici also states,

“This also applies to the question of gender identity. We cannot change our social identity without a struggle to change the economic/ social conditions of our existence. Social identities are neither essences, fixed, frozen, determined once for all, nor groundless, infinite shifting realities.” (31 Federici)

She asserts, that social and economic factors cannot be separated from one’s identity formation and most importantly once we understand and change those societal factors around gender, sexuality, and class, our identities and relationship with the world shifts. These “social identities, including gender identities, are shaped by class, gender relations, and the struggles of the communities we come from.” (31 Federici) For me this reiterates the importance of intersectionality as an analytical framework to understand, question and critique the world and acts as a way to understand the structures that come together and shape our specific socially constructed identities. Where these many different existences intersect can both privilege and oppress us simultaneously but are so fundamental to recognize if we are ever to figure out how we fit in the world. For many of us it is important to acknowledge our positionality so we can effectively and fully participate in the conversation around intersectionality. As a white, cis, bi,

lower middle class, able bodied, educated woman with mental health issues (anxiety, depression, and trauma) I face different discrimination than a woman of color, or a gay man or even someone who identifies exactly the same as I do. This is what makes understanding intersectionality so important. I fully think that if we do not decenter white heteropatriarchy, we will never be able to understand the position of people who are the most marginalized by our civilization. If equality is ever to truly exist, we must start from the bottom up not the top down and break away from a rigid dualistic view of the world.

Binary Gender Identity

Federici questions in her most recent work, how we will ever go beyond the idea of binary identities without society looking at the bigger picture and powers at play. She asserts,

“How, for instance, can we envisage ‘going beyond the binary’ without an understanding of its economic, political, and social utility within particular systems of exploitation, and, on the other hand an understanding of the struggles by which gender identities are continually transformed.” (Federici 10)

This idea of “going beyond the binary” makes me question if that is enough or if society needs to remove the concept of gender all together and remove gendered visual characteristics, to move forward how people are able to identify in a fluid non-constrained manner. I would argue for a gender-based abolition that is Queer/trans centered freeing us from white heteronormative patriarchal ideals to allow for any interpretation or performance of gender that people want to embody. I want to stress that for my own work this is NOT a T.E.R.F (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism) based abolition of gender to focused only on the biological based ideology of “men” vs “women.” Instead I contend society should embrace and learn from transgender

experiences and fluidity of gender expression in order to “move beyond the binary” and consider all kinds of gender expression to be valid. I do not think that our identities should pre-determined by our biology that may or may not match up to how one feels inside. This can be tied to Cartesian thought and the idea of mind body duality. Cartesian thought argues that the mind and the physical body are separate and non-identical parts to a whole human. However, these two parts don’t all ways line up. When that is the case one can struggle with the rigid categorization of socially determined identity. Meredith Lee argues in her master thesis paper, *The Paradox of Identity*,

“that centering gender in the body constructs gender as ahistorical and thereby erases the political, economic, and cultural significance of trans oppression and struggle. This paper concludes that the systematic pathologization of nonnormative sex/gender identification has historically constituted the notion that gender trouble is indeed a personal problem that should be cured through medical science.” (Lee)

Essentially, she is asserting that when one considers gender based in biology and not formed through societal systems it erases and devalues the transgender experience. It subsequently places the trans experience outside of the “normal” and socially accepted idea of gender. Society needs to change how gender is performed and acknowledged if we ever are to accept and validate trans, queer, or non-binary identities. We should turn away from rigid classification of only men and women to allow people in the future to be as fluid and malleable in their identities as they want.

THE BODY AS RESISTANCE TO CAPITALISM

Growing up in a counterculture, I have long existed with what most people consider to be pretty radical antiestablishmentarianism beliefs. I despise consumer capitalism and corporate culture, and dream of a time, when those money-focused ideals will be replaced with valuing all people over profits. In her book, *Feminism Interrupted*, Lola Olufemi asserts, “The State organizes our lives. It defines the parameters of the way we live, from what is legal and illegal, to the medical, social and political services we can access.” (22 Olufemi) This is fundamental to understand within my studio practice and serves as an impetus for the work I make. As Olufemi argues the state organizes our entire lives and I argue it does so to control, sanitize and regulate existence. I am sure some would say it is for the betterment of society, however, as a person who has felt manipulated and controlled through my identities I disagree.

I was first interested in fully understanding the societal controls and manipulations of myself as seen through the systemic methods upheld by capitalist structures. When I was attempting to regain control of my body and find my own autonomy after I was sexually assaulted at the age of 22. I had naively thought before then that I was the only one in control of my body or personhood I suppose. However, once my ability to choose was taken from me I realized, to what extent I was being manipulated through “norms” and expectations placed on me by my gender, class, and sexuality. I have been seeking my own independence and agency from this trap through knowledge, understanding of my own existence and place in the world. According to Butler the body can provide agency and simultaneously make us vulnerable to others,

“The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where “doing” and “being done to” becomes equivocal. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever our own.” (21 Butler)

For me this serves as reminder that even though we consider ourselves to be independent, autonomous and in control of the body we inhabit, ultimately, men in positions of power make choices that impact our lives every day. The body can then be considered a site of endless struggle for control but simultaneously, can be a site of resistance to domination and the systemic controls of power. Capitalism and societal “norms” keep us in check through use of “disciplines” and heteronormative reinforcement of what we should be doing. For me defiance against capitalist systems of manipulation is fundamental to my artistic practice and is one reason why I have chosen to represent an abstracted body, person or fluid identity in the pieces shown in my MFA show “Porosity.” Federici states why it is so critical for us to understand the impacts of capitalism on our bodies,

“The main reason we must speak of the body is that rethinking how capitalisms has transformed our bodies into labor power helps us place in context the crisis our bodies are currently undergoing and, at the same time, read behind our collective and individual pathologies the search for new anthropological paradigms.” (76 Federici)

This just reinforces, that if we ever truly expect to be in control of our bodies and change our positionality in the world, we need to first understand the socio-economic, political, judicial and moral structures that form the world we exist in. To fully know the world, we must wake up to what oppresses not only ourselves but others in the communities we live in. This defiance

through understanding is the only way to tear down capitalism and the systemic methods of oppression it maintains.

FEMINISM AND EQUALITY

Something that I struggle with in my own studio practice, is how I can meld political activism, social justice, and the feminist viewpoint into my work without making it to overtly obvious and visually referential through overused tropes associated with feminism. I feel that making the work too easy to understand can water down the political meaning but at the same time I want my art to be impactful and make the viewer think about systemic structures of marginalization. Printmaker and author Josh MacPhee questions the roll of art as a tool for social change and the validity of binary expression. He wonders, as do I,

“What if our images could do more? What if they had the potential to be radical, to go to the root, to try and represent the relationship that is hidden behind the binary idioms of our traditions? What if we were able to know what determines, and to clearly express, that which is truly wrong with capitalist society? (24 MacPhee)

I want my work to accomplish just that, more, and to show the hidden systems at play when contemplating identity. I want the detriments of the gender binary and its reinforced stereotypes to change so everyone can be accepted for who they are not just who they are told to be. This acknowledgement of systemic oppression hopefully causing a rupture in the way we consider works of art and challenging the viewer to see the context in which they are created.

Feminist Art Practice

I am striving to embody feminist ideals in my art and methods of crafting community in my artistic practice. I seek to up inspire those who identify as “different, “abnormal” or “strange” and draw light to the oppressions all women are currently facing to some degree. Anyone who identifies as a woman or “other” are still facing discrimination, sexism, violence, and inequality

in pay on a daily basis. Unfortunately, this means that fighting for feminism is still necessary if we want to have justice and equality for all people. It is still fundamental to framing how one talks about intersectionality and understand the contextual factors of oppression that effect everyone. We all deserve to have equal opportunities and fundamental respect in society.

Feminism is still key contextually if we are ever to shift the way we theorize and discuss art made by women on the same level as art made by men. Author and feminist Mary Jo Agerstoun puts the importance of feminist-based art works into perspective. She asserts that,

“feminist activist art is characterized as simultaneously critical, positive and progressive. By critical we mean work that seeks to expose underlying ideology’s or existing structures that have a negative effect on women’s lives; by positive we mean work that takes a stand, expressing its makers faith in achieving results or positioning alternatives; by progressive we mean a belief in the feminist tenets of equality and inclusiveness, a better world free of sexism, racism, homophobia, economic inequality and violence.” (Mary Jo Agerstoun)

As a feminist activist artist, I want my work to be seen as all of those same things, critical, positive and progressive. I hope my print-based artwork can question the status quo and is not tied to how well I perform femininity or embody my gender identity. I don’t think my work is any less valuable than a man’s but because of my gender it often is criticized in a punitive manner, due in part to how women are devalued and objectified in our patriarchal society. I question how my own art practice can be moved beyond the markers of my gender, sexuality, and class. I want to be equal in value and not dismissed or patronized, to even a mediocre man in the art world. For me equality, justice, and freedom of choice are crucial rights that should be allotted to all not just straight rich white men.

Feminist Art Theory

These feminist ideals of equality brought about a completely new theory about art (feminist art theory) and places itself in direct opposition to a traditional formalist art theory. So instead of judging art solely on its formal and purely visual characteristic (line, color, form, scale), feminist art theory seeks to place the artwork in an intersectional context and in relation to the factors that oppress women and exclude their artistic talents. To admit that gender does count in art (along with race, class, and many other contextual factors) is to make what has been covert and negative in formalist aesthetics the starting point for another theory altogether. Far from being a set of discreet, autonomous art objects, art is deeply contextual (Lauter 98) This “new” feminist theory, through its attention to the difference that gender makes and has always made in the creation, reception, and evaluation of art, not only permits us to understand many perplexities of art and the art world as interpreted by different theories, giving artist-status to women in the bargain, but it also re-enfranchises art by revisioning its complex relationship to culture(s) (Lauter 92). Another key factor for me in feminist art theory, one that I hope to embody in my work, is that it proposes a way to reengage people who have long been marginalized by disenfranchisement. If disenfranchisement is the consequence of formalism, then feminist theory returns art to its social contexts and reinvigorates it so that it becomes a source of power to a wide variety of people (Lauter 104) Art formalism and other non-inclusive methods of theory and analysis should be replaced by feminist theory to remove gender biases around “fine art” and to reassess the value given to works of art made by women. Frankly, our society need to revalue the positionality of queers, women, and anyone else on the fringes in order to make the world equitable and just.

Feminism as Motivation for Social Change

Feminism is at the same time both naturalized into popular culture and invisible (Jones 18).

Basically, because white cis heteronormative middle-class feminist ideals have been absorbed into mainstream culture people don't feel that they need to educate themselves on the past struggles and the current oppressive systems still in place. We need intersectional feminism to see where all areas of reform need to occur. Silvia Federici asserts that feminism revalues women as more than baby carrying sexual objects. She contends,

“Feminism was a revolt against our being defined as ‘bodies,’ only valued for our imagined readiness for self-sacrifice and servicing of other people. It was a revolt against the assumption that the best that we can expect from life is to be the domestic and sexual servants of men and the producers of workers and soldiers for the state.” (25 Federici)

One must view feminism as a tool to make change in society, specifically for me through artistic practice, and not consider feminists only bunch of man hating radicals because until women are truly equal to men none of us can be free.

THE END OR REALLY THE BEGINNING OF THE NEXT

“Porosity” has been a visual representation of my journey through grief and loss that has highlighted a reinvigorated creativity and authentic voice in my monoprints. In the end, I hope I have been able to highlight some of my motivations, inspiration, and creative directions that my work has taken in the last three years. I feel that I am asking questions around the formation of gender, sexuality, and class-based identities, that have no easy solutions. These The dismantling of systemic oppression in relation to the rigid binary of social identity formation is not something I will ever be able to fully address through my artwork alone but I hope that my prints will open the space for conversations about “normative” and rigid binary assumptions currently based in white heteropatriarchy. While I do not think I have fully realized all these questions, I feel like now I know better what I want to move towards in future studio work, conceptually and visually. I hope to keep exploring new conceptualizations around a defiant, abstracted, and fluid existence that can inspire others to adopt a defiance to, or at least a spark of comprehension for, socially constructed identities used to manipulate us all.

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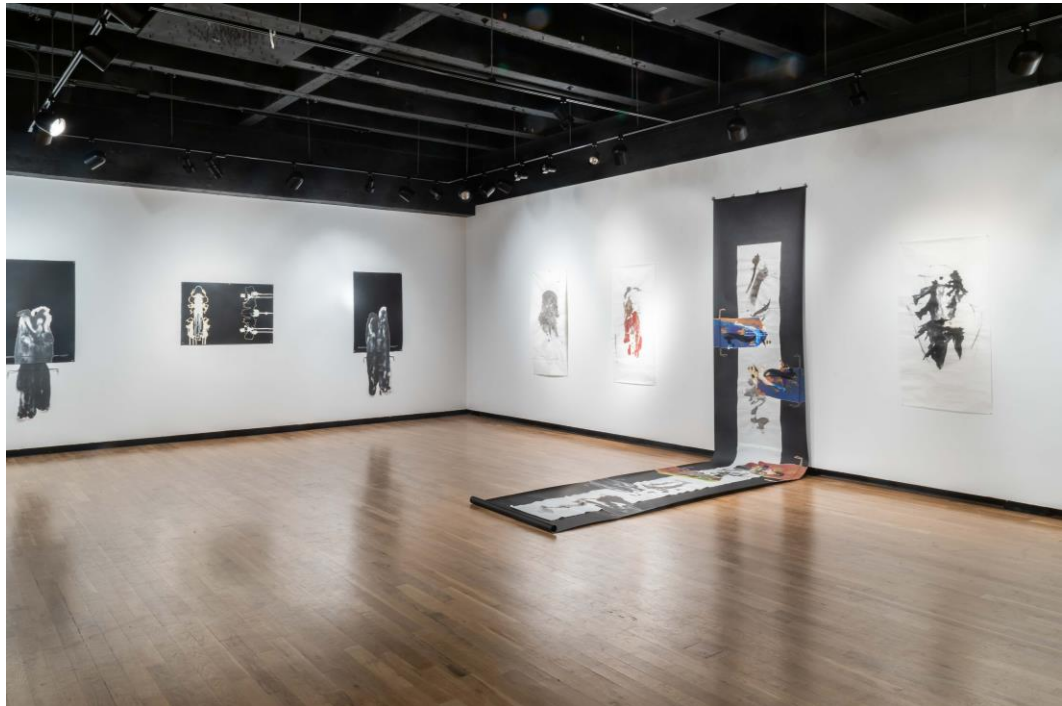
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

IMAGES FROM MFA SHOW, “POROSITY – THE SPACE BETWEEN IDENTITIES”



1. Install of gallery space
2. Install of gallery space – Left room



3. Install of gallery space – Left room



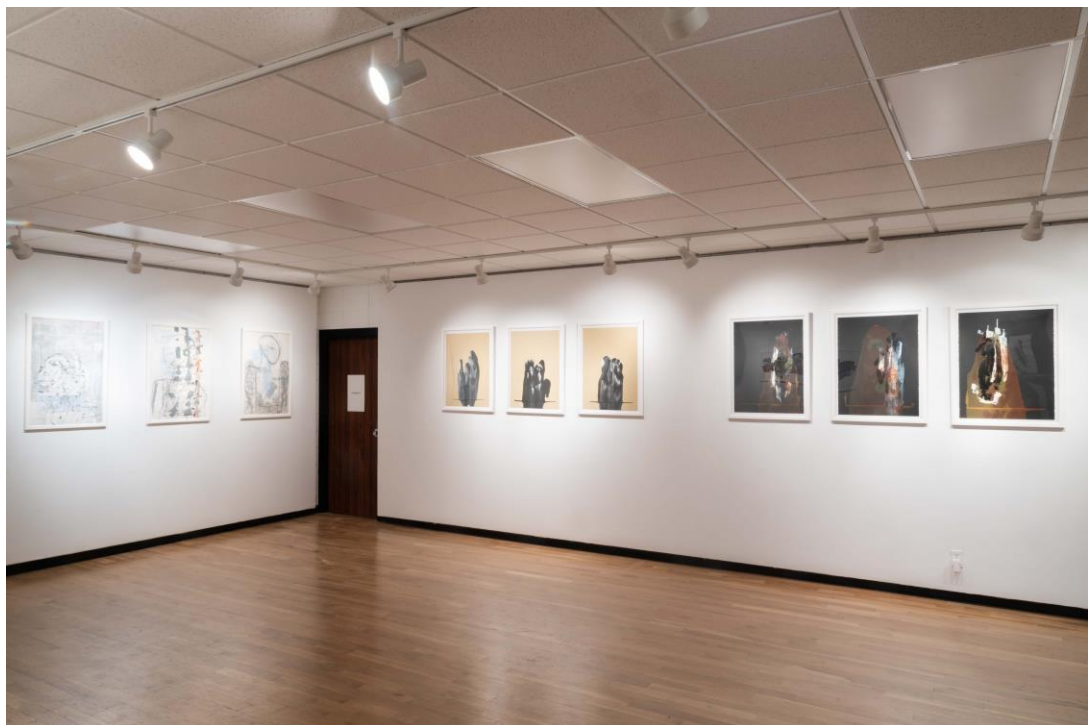
4. Install of gallery space – Left room



5. Install of gallery space – Right room



6. Install of gallery space – Right room



7. Work Number 1



8. Works Number 2, 3, and 4 (Left to Right)



9. Works Number 5, 6, and 7 (Left to Right)



10. Works Number 8, 9, and 10 (Left to Right)





11. Work Number 11

12. Works Number 12, 13, and 14 (Left to Right)



13. Works Number 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 (Left to Right)



14. Work Number 20



15. Work Number 21



16. Work Number 22



17. Work Number 23

