

EGO TRIP

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University of Missouri - Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by

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EGO TRIP

presented by Nabil El Jaouhari

a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

and hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance

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Introduction

My exhibition, entitled *Ego Trip*, was an attempt to explore the concepts of biological destiny, productivity, and gender roles through the lens of feminist and queer theory. This lens was focused on the myth of Narcissus, revealing commonly held cultural assumptions with masculinity and flowers.



Jaouhari, Nabil El. *Ego Trip*, 2013.

The Myth of Narcissus

The myth of Narcissus, from which the term *narcissism* is derived, is the tale of a handsome hunter. He was the son of a river God named Cephissus and a nymph called Lyriope and was renowned for his beauty. One day, when Narcissus was in the woods the mountain nymph Echo saw him, fell deeply in love, and followed him. Echo eventually revealed herself to him and attempted to embrace him, but he stepped away and told her

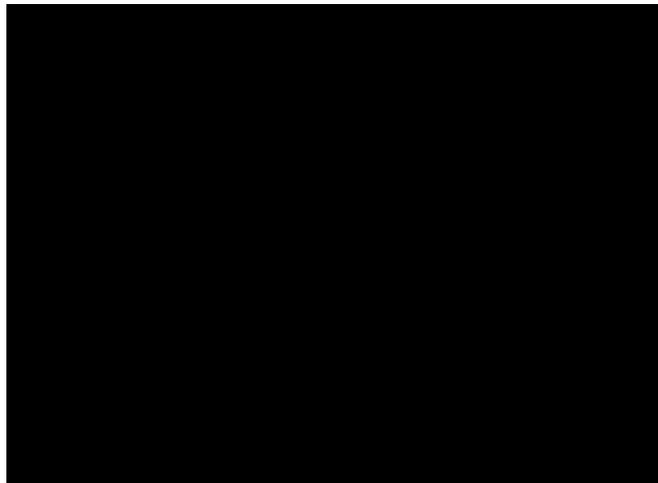
to leave him alone. Rejected and heartbroken, she spent the rest of her life pining for his love until she wasted away and all that remained was her voice, which could only repeat what others spoke. Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, learned of this story and decided to punish Narcissus, and so she led him to a reflecting pool. When he saw his own beautiful image, he fell in love with it; unable to consummate his love, he stayed entranced by his own image until he too wasted away, and morphed into a flower. The myth tells a moral lesson of punishment for being *narcissistic*, or for being in love with oneself. In psychoanalysis, narcissism is an egotistical preoccupation with oneself, up to and including erotic gratification derived from admiration of one's own physical qualities. In my work I revisit the myth of Narcissus in order to explore two of its major ideas: (a) reflection and (b) man becoming a flower.



Source: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Narcissus*. c. 1597, oil on canvas, 44"x38". Galleria nazionale d'arte antica nel Palazzo Corsini, Florence. Available from: Artstor <http://www.artres.com/c/htm/Home.aspx> (Accessed April 14, 2015).

When Narcissus saw his reflection, and loved it, he broke two major rules: he redefined his biological destiny to procreate by denying his body and love to the Other. According to one of the classic version by Ovid found in book 3 of his *Metamorphoses* (completed 8 AD):

“This is the story of Narcissus and Echo. There was a day when Narcissus was walking in the woods. Echo, an Oread (mountain nymph) saw him, fell deeply in love, and followed him. Narcissus sensed he was being followed and shouted, "Who's there?" Echo repeated, "Who's there?" She eventually revealed her identity and attempted to embrace him. He stepped away and told her to leave him alone. She was heartbroken and spent the rest of her life in lonely glens until nothing but an echo sound remained of her. Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, learned of this story and decided to punish Narcissus. She lured him to a pool where he saw his own reflection. He didn't realize it was only an image and fell in love with it. He eventually realized that his love could not be addressed and died”



Source: Nicolas Poussin, *Echo and Narcissus*. before 1630, oil on canvas,29"x39". Muse du Louvre, Paris.

Available from: Artstor <http://www.artres.com/c/htm/Home.aspx> (Accessed April 14, 2015).

Before I elaborate in my explanation and connect them to my work, I would like to reveal some of the important allegories in the myth: Narcissus was a hunter. That is, someone that is on the lookout, who is ready to overtake his prey; and where hunting is read as a metaphor for courting sexual partners, is designed to spread his seeds. This is way that males are portrayed by society: vigorous, dynamic, and forceful; he is an agent who acts on and affects his surroundings. His transformation into a flower seems to be a metaphor for a double emasculation: Not only is he turned into a symbol of femininity, but it is a flower that does not become a fruit; there is no reproduction or offspring. The narcissus flower is purely decorative.

Echo as a female character seems to be incapable of having her own voice; she can only have the repeated voice of the other. She is repeating a pattern of women's prescribed role, which is to follow the man. And when she has no one to follow or repeat she fades away and dies. Theorist Laura Mulvey elaborates in her influential essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, "Man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."¹

Through this we learn that Narcissus had the chance to be with someone else, but instead he wanted to be with his reflection. He wanted consume no one else but himself, and by doing that he became a lost sex, a symbol of masturbation, or autofellatio, an act that will never involve the Other and that can certainly not reproduce, which makes him a threatening character. And through denying Echo (the Other) his body and seeds, he denied her biological destiny as well. She went on being stuck in guilt over her inability

¹ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, (1975): 1.

to sway him. By understanding this part of the moral outcome of the myth, we understand the threatening aspects of Narcissus on society, and later I will link it to the work of Simon de Beauvoir.

For the purpose of this discussion, “biological destiny” is understood to mean reproductive potential and the biological imperative to reproduce. The cultural expectation that adults have children is ancient, universal, and still very strong even in contemporary society. This applies not only to homosexuals, but also heterosexuals who choose not to have children.

This tragedy raises a red flag by warning “males” that they are not supposed to look at themselves, and have any intentions or appreciation aimed toward themselves. It is a cultural expectation that the gaze is directed from the Self to the Other, and from the Male to the Female. As John Berger wrote in *Ways of Seeing*, “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”² In this context, the Other is always implicitly female. In the Myth of Narcissus, the gaze is doubly shifted, and the Self becomes objectified due to the act of reflection. The gaze is bounced back toward the Self, and toward the Male.

Would this myth have the same effect on us, if Narcissus had been a female? Vanity, and the action of looking at oneself in the mirror, is considered a stereotypically feminine weakness or fault. For a male to exhibit this kind of behavior would therefore cause his masculinity to be called into question.

Through visual histories, the male controlled the gaze as a feature of a gender-based power asymmetry, thus “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in

² Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 1972, 47.

looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.”³

Thus, the gaze has typically been understood as being directed towards the female and her body as a process of objectification associated with visual pleasure and sexuality. It is worth noting that this “ideal” spectator is not only assumed to be male but specifically a heterosexual male. It is a cultural assumption that the male body is not supposed to be looked at with any lust or pleasure, as that would indicate a viewer that is either heterosexually female or homosexually male; both of which are categorically “Other” and neither of which are allowed the agency of the gaze. Thus through this understanding we realize that not only did Narcissus change his biological destiny by falling in love with himself, but he also created an imbalance, since he became the simultaneous bearer and receiver of that gaze; therefore his status as a male comes into question. For all of these reasons it is only natural that Narcissus has become a subcultural gay idol, as one of the earliest characters that combines vanity and pride with rebellion and threatening sexual qualities on a cultural level, a character that redefines every traditional misconception surrounding masculinity.

For example, *Pink Narcissus* is a 1971 film by James Bidgood. This iconic film is a fetishized homoerotic fantasy that envisages the fantasy life of a male prostitute. There is no “plot,” as such, but a series of fantasy scenes in which the protagonist imagines himself. It portrays him as wanting his beauty to be admired. The film contains no dialogue, making it a purely visual experience.

³ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 4.



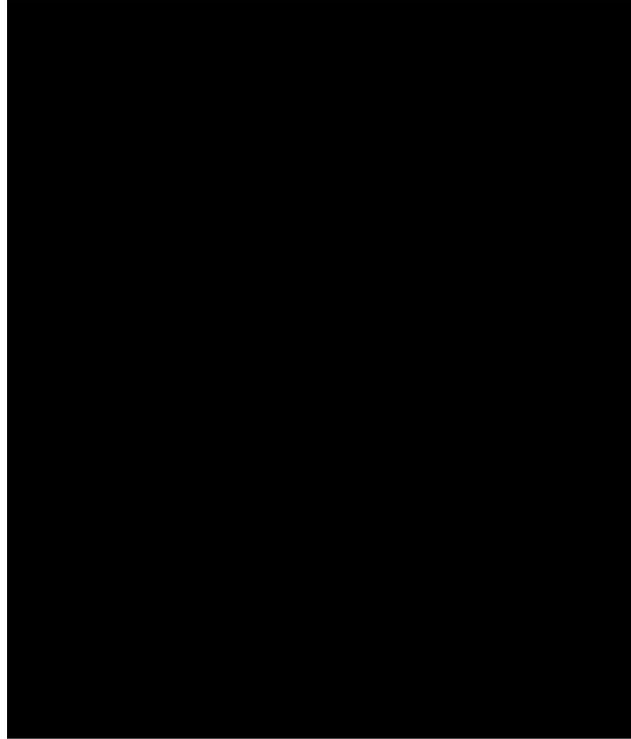
Source: Willard Maas, Pink Narcissus. 1971, film.

In contrast, Willard Maas's 1971 film *Narcissus*, which was included in the 2011 exhibition *Narcissus Reflected*, re-imagined the myth with the title character as a marginalized ragpicker in modern New York City who suffers a tragic death by drowning. This film can be easily read as an allusion to the unenviable social condition of homosexuals in mid-century America.

The above mentioned show included a broad collection of artwork centered around the theme of Narcissus. For instance,

From Jess's work, with its two nude homoerotic male figures, we are led to a series of rooms in which a variety of surrealist artworks address gay culture and gender politics more explicitly. These include work from Pierre Molinier's 'Narcissus Pantomime', a series in which the artist poses in drag with or without a mirror. In the grainy 8mm film *Mes Jambes*, 1967, the artist's legs are seen from the waist in stockings and high heels, twisting and turning as if admiring their reflection.⁴

⁴ Lesso, Rosie. "Narcissus Reflected." *Art Monthly*, No. 347 (2011), 1



Source: Jess, Narcissus Pantomime, Collage. Available from:

<http://gilessutherland.blogspot.com/2011/06/narcissus-reflected.html> (Accessed April 14, 2015).

Transgressing Biology and Gender Roles

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1945) talked about detaching the female's body from its destiny by denying what society establishes for her as a fixed, inevitable role. In this view, society holds that women are biologically designed to carry babies, stay home, and conform to what men want for them. This physiologically-based capacity to bear children is considered her biological destiny and thus becomes the basis for her subordinate position, the essential feature from which her other feminine characteristics are assumed to arise, and inescapable. De Beauvoir talked about two factors that explain the evolution of women's condition: Her participation in production, and freedom from reproductive slavery:

Woman's awareness of herself is not defined exclusively by her sexuality: it reflects a situation that depends upon the economic organisation of society, which in turn indicates what stage of technical evolution mankind has attained. As we have seen, the two essential traits that characterise woman, biologically speaking, are the following: her grasp upon the world is less extended than man's, and she is more closely enslaved to the species. But these facts take on quite different values according to the economic and social context... Thus the control of many modern machines requires only a part of the masculine resources, and if the minimum demanded is not above the female's capacity, she becomes, as far as this work is concerned, man's equal. Today, of course, vast displays of energy can be controlled by pressing a button. As for the burdens of maternity, they assume widely varying importance according to the customs of the country: they are crushing if the woman is obliged to undergo frequent pregnancies and if she is compelled to nurse and raise the children without assistance; but if she procreates voluntarily and if society comes to her aid during pregnancy and is concerned with child welfare, the burdens of maternity are light and can be easily offset by suitable adjustments in working conditions.⁵



Source: Elliott Erwitt, FRANCE. Paris. 1949. The French writer Simone de BEAUVOIR, author of "The Second Sex", at home.1949. Available from: Artstor <http://www.magnumphotos.com/> (Accessed April 14, 2015).

⁵ Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Knopf, 1949, 47.

Thus when a woman breaks free from her preordained function and refuses the given calling of being a mother and a housewife, she is not only the “second sex” that is being dominated by the male, but she becomes a lost sex.

The idea and meaning of the lost sex is what I am interested in with this body of work. “Sex” in the vernacular is defined as (1) biological sex or gender, and (2) sexual coitus, or the sex act. *The Second Sex* was attacked directly and placed on the Catholic Church’s list of prohibited books: the Index Librorum Prohibitorum. The book was censured because it is an invitation to oppose two major conceptions: (1) Set gender roles, and therefore the “norms” as considered by societies and religion: A male and female, characterized with a set of fixed physiognomies. (2) That sex is for the sake of reproduction. “Sex is not an end in itself, rather, a gift like all such gifts, and it must be stewarded.”⁶

When a woman can engage in sex not to get pregnant, but for the pleasure of the act itself, she is reestablishing or redefining her gender role, not to mention doing what men have done for centuries. Therefore this is what the lost sex is: It is a sex act that does not conform to an aggressive set of ideas about gender roles, and sexual behaviors, as defined by men or by God. The reproductive potential of the act has been wasted, or *lost*.

But the concept of the lost sex doesn’t only apply to liberal women, but to anyone who does not deliver on the biological expectations. There is a social stigma on childlessness, particularly in women; from being a spinster— in the English proverb: “they that die maids must lead apes in hell”—to a “barren bride” who will be looked down on for her barrenness. Many times female infertility is a source of consternation

⁶ Yancy, Philip, *Finding God in Unexpected Places*. New York: Doubleday, 2005, 19.

within marriage, as traditional norms question why any man would marry a woman who can't bear children. But above all the idea of the lost sex transcends gender, and it highlights any acts of pleasure that do not conform to a system in which we are designed to procreate, and produce. As such, acts like masturbation, which according to the Catholic Church "constitutes a grave moral disorder" are condemned.⁷ Similarly in Islam: The Qur'an says, "The believers are... those who protect their sexual organs except from their spouses... Therefore, whosoever seeks more beyond that, then they are the transgressors."⁸

Autofellatio is a masturbatory act in which a man orally stimulates his own penis. In my work, I employ imagery of autofellatio to represent the ultimate manifestation of self-love. It is a self-love that precludes the need for physical intimacy with another person in order to achieve erotic gratification, and demonstrates an intense level of self-involvement. It is also a form of isolation, or a declaration that no one is good enough to consume his body, other than him. This idea relates back to Narcissus, who spurned his admirers and was unable to love anyone but himself.

What about men? Don't men have a set biological destiny that restricts them and frames them as well? As a matter of fact, the myth of man's sexual destiny is still pervasive in popular culture. Men are expected to be productive and to "spread their seed" as far and wide as possible. According to Carole Vance, western culture has what is called the Cultural influence model.⁹ This formulation is that cultures have a set model of

⁷ Hamer, Jerome. "Persona Humana Declaration On certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics 29 December 1975." *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*. (1975), 4.

⁸ *Qur'an*, 23:5-6.

⁹ Vance, Carole. "Anthropology Rediscovered Sexuality: a Theoretical Comment." *Soc. Sic. Med.* vol. 33, no. 8 (1991), 878.

both men and women so that “sexuality is seen as the basic material—a kind of universal Play-Doh—on which culture works, a naturalized category which remains closed to investigation and analysis.”¹⁰ If this is the case, then the long neglected understanding and exploration of the male body makes that body appear clearly as “factory-loaded with a predictable Play-Doh hard drive.”¹¹ Any man that wants to break free from his role is automatically stripped of his masculinity, and shunned. Are gay men “real men”? Gay men redefine stereotypical ideas of masculinity through either exaggeration—the Adonis Affect (another term for muscled dysmorphia)—or by masking it through cross-dressing, and so on. They are above all looked at as an abomination, because their lives are seen as utterly sexual, but not procreative.

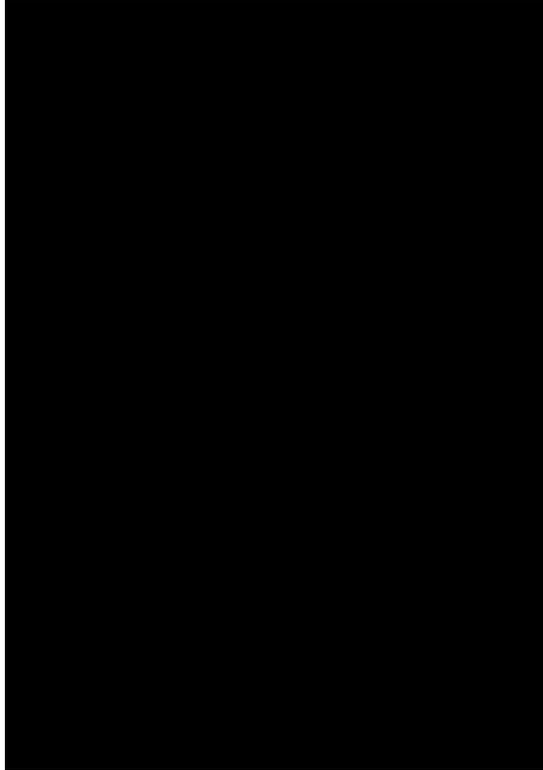
As of 2014, there are 77 countries where homosexuality is illegal, and in five of those—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Mauritania, Sudan, plus parts of Nigeria and Somalia—is punishable by death. In Lebanon, where I grew up, homosexuality has only recently been decriminalized. There are also a number of countries, such as Russia, wherein homosexuality is not explicitly illegal but laws exist to severely restrict it. In spite of legislative advances in the U.S., ten years after the Supreme Court ruling in *Lawrence vs. Texas* that decriminalized homosexuality, there are still thirteen states that have anti-sodomy laws on the books; and Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas’ laws explicitly outlaw consensual homosexual sex between adults. Between 2011 and 2013 in Louisiana, at least a dozen men were arrested and brought to jail on a count of “attempted crimes against nature,” and same-sex couples in Texas and North Carolina have been arrested

¹⁰ Ibid

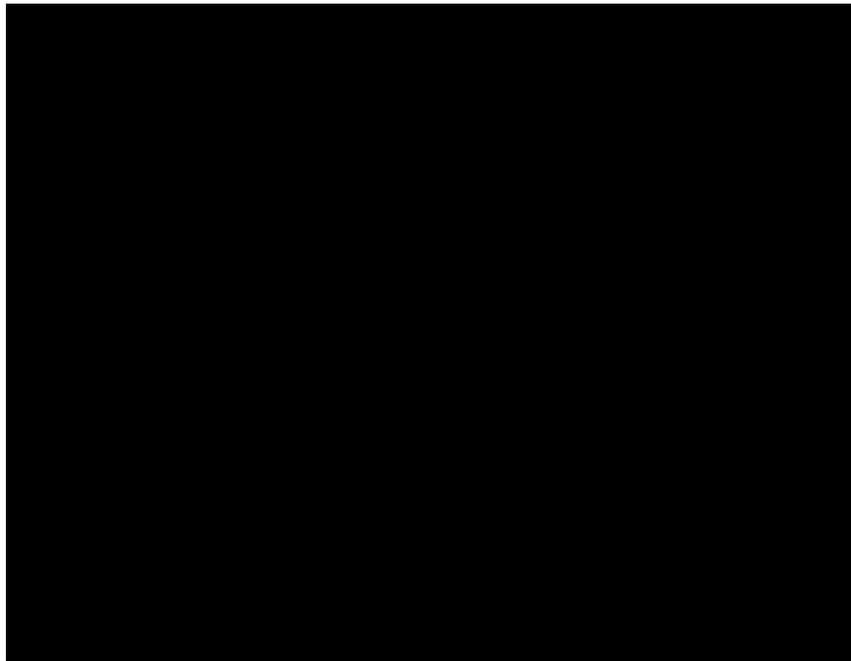
¹¹ Inhorn, Marcia C. *Reconceiving the Second Sex: Men, Masculinity, and Reproduction*. Oxford, NY: Berghahn Books, 2009, 23.

and harassed under laws against “homosexual conduct.” The fact that these laws, although unconstitutional and technically unenforceable, remain in the code reflects a powerful and persistent cultural sensibility.

From a female point of view, we can examine the work of Tracy Emin and Sarah Lucas to see how contemporary artists address issues of sex and gender.



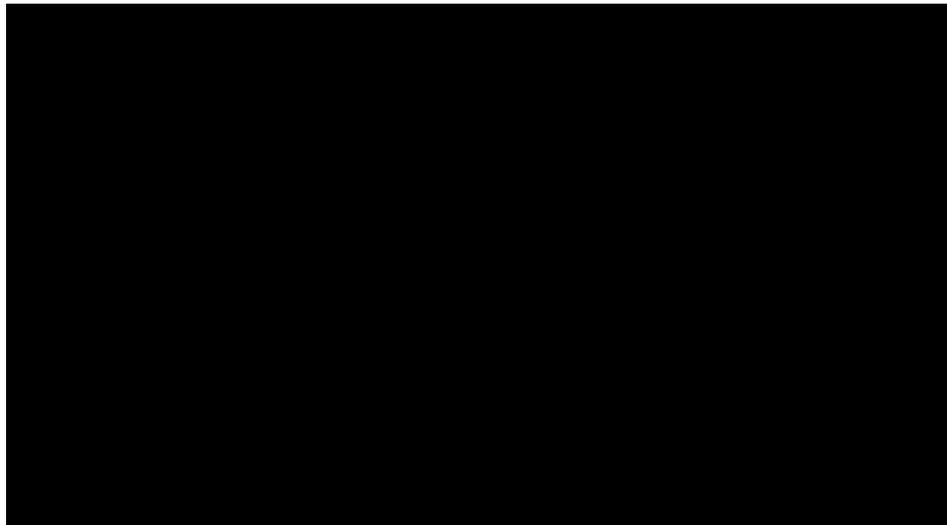
Source: Tracey Emin, *The Last of the Gold*, 2002, applique blanket, 117"x82". Available from: Artstor.org
(Accessed April 14, 2015).



Source: Sarah Lucas, *Fighting Fire with Fire 6 Pack*. 1997, 6 black and white photographs painted with ink
and acrylic, 47"x53". Available from: Artstor.org

(Accessed April 14, 2015).

Emin uses embroidery, a traditionally genteel and feminine decorative technique, to embellish her frank and visually aggressive drawings. By famously exhibiting her bed, Emin stretched the line between public and private to its breaking point. Sarah Lucas constructs visual puns around issues of gender and sexuality. In her assemblage sculptures and self-portraits, she employs sexual metaphors and symbols with a bawdy sense of humor, substituting furniture and food for body parts in provocative images.



Source: Kehinde Wiley, *Morpheus*. 2008, oil on canvas, 43”x71”. Available from: Artstor.org (Accessed April 14, 2015).

Another contemporary artist dealing with issues of gender identity is Kehinde Wiley, whose large-scale paintings blend masculine figures with feminine decorative patterns. Their monumental scale and over-ornamented surfaces juxtapose stereotyped images of hyper-masculinized African-American men with lush, decorative floral backgrounds that give an impression of contemporary pre-Raphaelite opulence. The majestic figures appear to emerge from or disappear into these backgrounds that are

ornamented like carpets or wallpaper. He consistently references the European painting tradition in his compositions and poses, as well as with his academic technique.

What all of these artists have in common is their persistent use of self-portrait, a continuous practice of looking at and examining the Self. The relationship to Narcissus should be clear.

Flowers: Man Becomes Flower.

As a clear outcome to such a foreboding male character, Narcissus dies and becomes a flower; and not just any flower but one that reveals a designed punishment toward a masculinity that neglected its social expectations of biological destiny and its given male gender role. Flowers here seem to be a metaphor for emasculation: they are beautiful, delicate, and fragile; and these qualities have typically gone hand in hand with femininity in Western culture, including visual and scripted cultures.

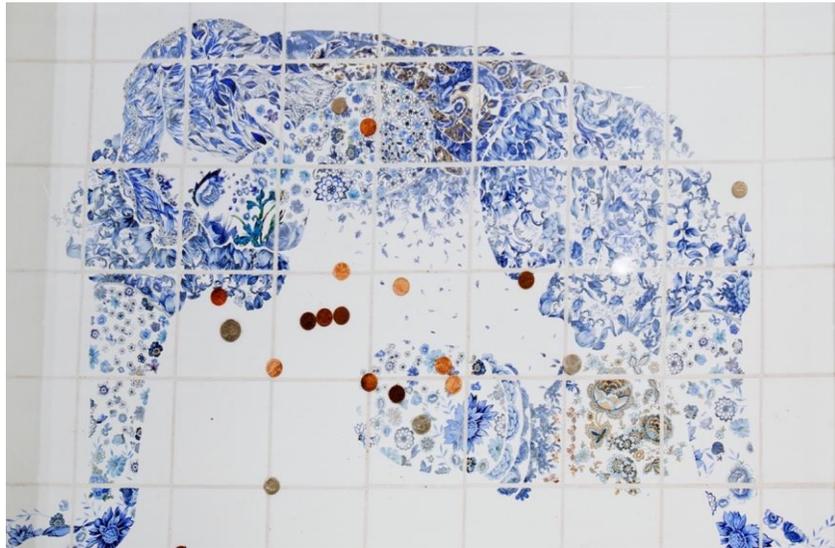
Ever since the thirteenth century for example, when the scholars interpreted the lyric from the Song of Solomon “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys” as a reference to the ^[L]_[SEP] Virgin Mary, representations of Mary ^[L]_[SEP] have commonly included a white lily as a symbol of spiritual and sexual purity.¹² From the Renaissance through the eighteenth century, portraits of women often included a single bloom or a bouquet of flowers to convey more general connotations of fertility and beauty.¹³

¹² Stott, Annette. “Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition.” *American Art*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1992): 61.

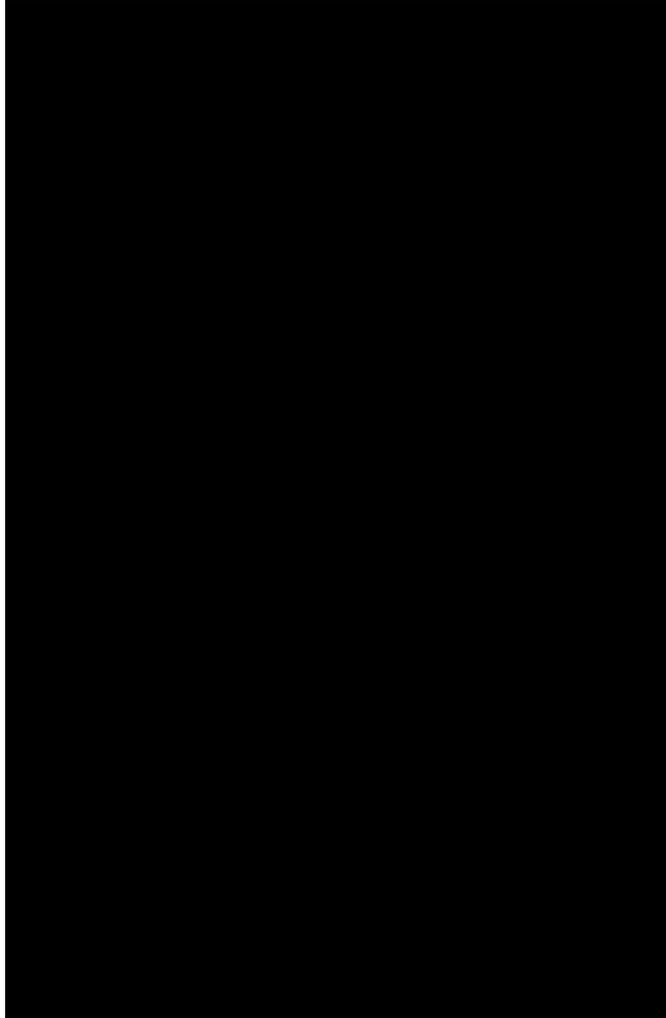
¹³ *Ibid.*



Source: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Narcissus*. c. 1597, oil on canvas, 44"x38". Galleria nazionale d'arte antica nel Palazzo Corsini, Florence. Available from: Artstor <http://www.artres.com/c/htm/Home.aspx> (Accessed April 14, 2015).



Jaouhari, Nabil El. *Ego Trip*, 2013.

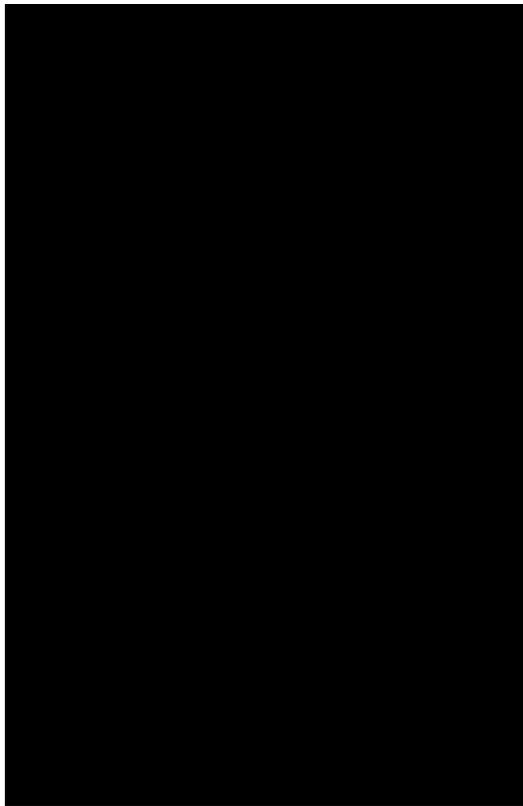


Source: Juan Correa de Vivar, *Annunciation* 1546-1559, oil on pannel, 89"x57". Museo del Prado, Madrid .

Available from: Artstor <http://www.artres.com/c/htm/Home.aspx> (Accessed April 14, 2015).

A great example of the cultural association of flowers with femininity is Georgia O'Keefe's flower paintings. In these paintings the close-up compositions eliminates the identifying outlines, causing the petals to look like vulvas. Take for example *Black Iris III* (1926), which evokes a veiled representation of female genitalia while also accurately depicting the center of an iris. Petals are colorful, delicate, and when they open they reveal the core part of the flower; and they superficially resemble labia. O'Keefe insisted that she was only painting flowers without any sexual subtext. Ignoring the fact that

flowers are themselves sexual organs (of plants), it is difficult to imagine that O'Keefe was ignorant of the symbolic relationship in Western culture between flowers and women's sexuality. After all, the euphemism "deflowering" to indicate loss of female virginity has been in use since the late fourteenth century. In spite of O'Keefe's objections, this preexisting connection has prompted audiences to read these images as representations of women's sexual organs. That is to say, people see vulvas in her flowers because they expect to see them there.



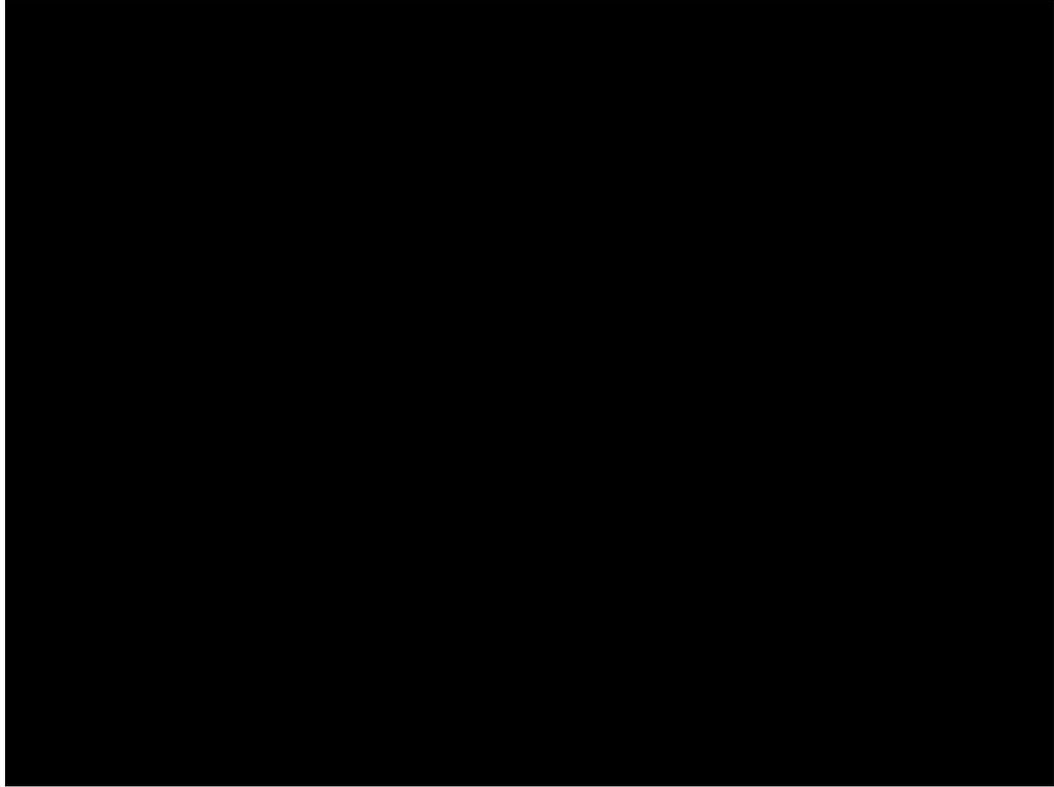
Source: Georgia O'Keefe, *Large Dark Red Leaves on White*. 1925, oil on canvas, 32"x21". The Phillips Collection. Available from: Artstor.org (Accessed April 14, 2015).

Even though O'Keefe denied that she was representing female genitalia, and refused to accept the title of being the originator of female iconography, that did not stop feminist artists from iconizing her. Judy Chicago not only reserved a seat for O'Keefe in

her masterpiece, *The Dinner Party*, but draws almost the entirety of the visuals from her. This time around Chicago revisited the symbology and compositions that O'Keefe used, but eliminated any doubt that the flowers are vulvas and combined them with decorative crafts such as needlework, weaving, and other domestic arts that are associated with women. This is an important shift, which brings together the comparison between the flower as a symbol and a history of femininity, gender role, and biological destiny and links it to craft and the domestic arts.

A bigger shift in the associated connection and representation takes place in Pipilotti Rist's video piece: *Ever Is Overall*, 1997. In this video we see a young female in a blue housedress, carrying a long flower as she walks down the street. She walks up to a parked car, and smashes its window with the flower. Unlike Chicago, Rist does not look the past in the eyes, trying to reexamine women's history through a passive symbolic representation of female sexuality, in order to pinpoint an existence. "The limitations of these symbols are essentializing to the feminine as a whole, reducing the feminine to one symbol instead of many"¹⁴

¹⁴ Mangini, Elizabeth. "Pipilotti's Pickle: Making Meaning from the Feminine Position." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 68, vol. 23 no. 2 (2001): 2.



Source Pipilotti Rist:, *Ever Is Over All; detail*.1997, Film, Audio, Video and Digital Art
Photographs. Available from: Artstor .org (Accessed April 14, 2015).

Instead Rist's video takes cliché feminine symbologies and redirects them: the housedress, the red shoes, but most importantly the flower that was a female's vulva, become active and masculinized. The delicate seeming flower is revealed to be in fact rigid and capable of being used as a tool or implement of destruction. The flower now is an active phallus, and by this engagement Rist has shifted the symbol itself, not only its associations:

“Rist dodges the inevitable trap of the binary relationship in *Ever Is Overall* by deconstructing both her sign and the *other*. In fusing or *confusing* the feminine symbol with the masculine, she not only deconstructs the symbolic structure of “woman,” as defined in patriarchal language, but also of “man,” as defined by phallic function.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Mangini. “Pipilotti's Pickle: Making Meaning form the Feminine Position,” 4.

Biologically, flowers are the reproductive organs of a flowering plant and can carry both male and female sex organs. In fact, they have the ability to change sex according to their needs. In other words they are hermaphroditic. This is an important fact on the biological level that redefines the misconceptions we have about flowers and their nature. Flowers do have Stamen (Penis), but they also have Ovary (Vagina). Flowers effect reproduction by providing a mechanism for sperm and eggs to meet through pollination. Sometimes cross-pollination happens between different blooms or different plants, but it is also possible for sperm to combine with eggs from the same blossom.

In return to Narcissus, in the myth he never obtains certain orientation, or characteristics of one gender over the other, he just becomes “inbred” with himself. He is a flower that doesn’t want to spread its pollen, nor become a fruit. He refuses the company of Echo (the female), but he never loves or follows another male either, except for himself. Thus he is the male and the female at the same time. Here we realize the connection between the myth and the outcome, even though it is still an outcome with a heavy cultural weight, forcing it to sway towards a feminine pole. Not only feminine at its cultural level—pretty, delicate, and purely decorative as well—but just the way I earlier compared Narcissus and his state to the lost sex act of masturbation and autofellatio, he becomes a flower that will never become fruit and that reinforces the decorative aspects of its existence. Consequently it is a flower that decorates a place in nature for a bit, and never becomes anything else, before it fades away and dies. Just like a thin, delicate, decorative veneer.

As established, flowers as symbols are culturally associated not only with femininity but with women themselves. There is a long and wide-ranging visual history of flowers as a decorative motif in architecture and interior design, and Décor in particular. Interior architectural spaces and their decoration are considered part of the domestic sphere, which is also strongly concomitant with femininity. Feminine arts and crafts, embellishment, and domestic creation are all bound by the assigned gender role that says: Women are meant to stay at home, decorate it, and clean it.

Papering a wall will transform it from something strictly utilitarian and elevate it into the decorative. Wallpaper takes an open, public space and gives it connotations of private or living space. In this body of work I have created rooms, and these associations and ideas are manifested in the usage of decorative materials including wallpaper, decals, and stickers that are very strongly correlated with femininity. These rooms become stages on which these ideas can be acted out.



Jaouhari, Nabil El. *Ego Trip*, 2013.

General Description and Layout

The show consists of two parts, presented in two room-like structures. The structures are positioned facing one another. Occupying the central space of the gallery, away from the walls that are being darkened completely, therefore the viewer is automatically invited to walk around and into the structures that are being highlighted. Both structures are ceiling-less, and have squared platforms that the viewer steps upon to enter the space. The first structure that sits closer to the gallery entrance is U-shaped with three walls, the opening sits facing the back of the gallery where the second V/ or corner shaped structure with two walls sits, the end corner of its platform is facing pointing at the midpoint of the U shaped structure.

Both structures are 8'x8', with another 8' in-between them where a kaleidoscope shaped video is being projected on to the floor, over a piece of wallpaper that is similarly shaped. The structures are the art pieces that carry other art pieces; hence each behaves like a small opened gallery inside out, a gallery that has a public outer, and a domestic interior. Therefore the role of the actual gallery here becomes an encapsulating space by providing a physical, and a conceptually contextual ceiling.

The entire floor of the U shaped room is covered with white 4''x4'' white tiles, that contains a reflective pool filled with water, the 2.5'x4'x 5'' recessed pool or tub, masters most of the center left part of the floor. Its frame raises a few inches over the floor level. The entire structure appears to look like a showroom in IKEA or similar retail space. An overly ornamented round shaped golden mirror sits in the middle of the right wall, facing a 4.5'x5' painting on a pegboard, that sits on the left wall, above the tub.

The tiles continues quarter way on the side walls, and crawls gradually three quarters up the back wall to form a stepped pyramid shape that conquers most of the back wall, and carry a porcelain phallus sculpture pointing downwards that is covered with blue floral decals. Right above it in the middle of the stepped tiles pyramid an outline of the same blue flowers decal; appear to create a silhouette of the porcelain phallus that is pointing upwards creating a reflection of the actual sculpture.



Jaouhari, Nabil El. *Ego Trip*, 2013.

The tiles meet a floral golden molding that separates it from heavily ornamented metallic vintage wallpaper. The wallpaper resembles a landscape with trees, mountains, and sky. The metallic part of the wallpaper is reflective silver and mirror-like. The back, or outer walls, are covered with a different wallpaper, but one that still has metallic/reflective parts. This wall paper stretches all over the side walls, until half way

on the back walls. The center part of the back wall, we see the wallpaper used on the inside reappearing. A 4'x 4.5' painting panel is placed in the center, as for the sidewalls, each has a 2' x 2.5' print, on reflective golden paper.

The corner shaped structure, consists of four paintings on panels that are 8'x4', creating two walls 8'x8' each, the platform is also of the same dimensions. The back of the walls is entirely covered with floral wallpaper, and each has a painting hanging in the middle of it. The two paintings are 4'x4.5' each, and the platform of the room is also 8'x 8' x 6".

Conceptual Analysis

The first room-like structure resembles a bathhouse as a fetishized space that is associated with homosexuality. The bathhouse represents a contemporary subculture, and relates to a history that combines masculinity with narcissistic self-love and the physical obsession with oneself image.

Bathhouses throughout history are fetishized places, which brought the private act of bathing to a public space. Historically, bathhouses were places where men and women went to bathe, but the contemporary association of the bathhouse is as a place where gay men congregate to socialize and engage in sexual activity. It is a place where a man could go to experience the contemporary myth of Narcissus: Men can go there to show off their bodies and indulge in vanity and the pleasure of being looked at, as well as see himself reflected in the water.



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This structure combines the resemblance of a bathhouse (the tiles) with the interior of a living room (the wallpaper). The wallpaper brings the feel of the private, as in the decorative interior space of a home, into the public, while making the public feel of a bathhouse become more private. Therefore the interior of the room is a space where the domestic meets the foreign. The continuation of the wallpaper on the exterior of the walls is another suggestion of the private becoming public, since wallpaper is something that belongs on the inner part of a wall. The structure functions as a stage on which the tile grid and the wallpaper represent the juxtaposition of masculine and feminine spaces. That is, the public sphere is traditionally associated with masculine activity while the domestic sphere (i.e. interiors) are the domain of the feminine.

Another important combination that takes place here is the gender associations between the bathhouse that is masculine, geometric, systematic, and the feminine, decorative, organic qualities of the wallpaper.

The entire space, and all of the displayed pieces, materials, and ideas, revolves around reflection. I have included numerous reflective surfaces in my work so that the gaze of the viewer is reflected back at them. Associations with visual reflections connect to the myth of Narcissus, oneself image, and ego. For example when I remade the image of Caravaggio's Narcissus using only decals, it sat in a tub filled with water so that the viewer's image would be reflected back at them when they looked at the piece, "seeing themselves" in Narcissus.

Ceramic decals go through a literal physical metamorphosis during the firing process. They are decorative and sit on the surface, but then they melt into the surface, fuse, and become permanent. Because of this transformation, they have a relationship to Narcissus and his metamorphosis into a flower. They are blue, which is a color that has a gendered association of masculine (blue for boys) but they have a decorative floral pattern, which has a feminine association. This is another representation of the decorative and of flowers representing Narcissus, but also symbolizes the feminine imposing itself on the masculine.

The U-shaped room conceptually represents Narcissus, and the V-shaped space "echoes" this space. Thus, the second room stands in for Echo. These two structures represent the two main characters of the myth. Because these two characters fail to live up to their biological expectations, I wanted to free the work from the horizontal expectation of the gallery wall, and let the artwork itself becomes its own gallery,

rebellious against the established system. They are engulfed by the gallery and exist confined within it, but they are creating their own space inside of that space: The paintings become walls that carry other paintings. So the artwork, by behaving in a way that is contrary to the usual expectation, is imitating the behavior of the mythological characters. In the process of creating this other space-within-space, the gallery and the artwork begins to fold in on itself.

As previously defined, autofellatio is the act of oral stimulation of one's own penis as a form of masturbation. I am using autofellatio imagery as a visual representation of the ultimate manifestation of physical self-love, when men become fixated on self-image. It is an actual representation, but it is about the idea of wanting to consume oneself, or a declaration that no one is good enough to consume his body, other than him. It is also a form of isolation. This idea links back to Narcissus, and the way he will not give himself to anyone else but his own reflection.

While flowers may be able to pollinate themselves and become productive, a person is not. So Autofellatio is a lost sex act in which procreative potential is turned inward toward the self. Even the position into which a man must contort himself in order to perform Autofellatio suggests a folding up of the body, that he is turning himself inside out, and consuming himself.

The autofellatio images are on a golden reflective surface, therefore the viewer becomes involved in the image, through seeing his or her own reflection. The image is composed of multiple stamped images of contemporary masculine motifs and objects such as footballs, mustaches, and roosters. These motifs are stamped in ink and then removed with alcohol, which also removes the golden reflective surface and reveals a

non-reflective gray substrate. Stamps themselves are coded feminine, as they are frequently used in the production of highly feminized craft projects such as scrapbooking, but their function has been subverted to create a hyperbolic hyper-masculine image. The final figure appears to be floating in this decorative golden field.



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Heritage

In an attempt to explain and elaborate on ideas of the lost sex and biological destiny that I am talking about in my first chapter I will be presenting a formal analysis of a painting that reveals and explains some of the artistic decisions and material choices I took to highlight them. The painting is a combination between flat color blocking areas and organic vegetation. A male figure stands towards the right edge of the painting

almost giving a feel that it is about to step out of the space. He is looking away from his hands that are holding on to a thread leading to a big grouping of vegetation that is floating in a bundle like balloons. His head and extremities seem to be moving away from the threads and the vegetation from the painted canvas to cutouts that reveal floral wallpaper.



The figure is wearing a striped T-shirt, on right side it's blue, and on the left it's pink, the green stripes opacity changes with the way that the pink and blue shifts and blends. So as we move towards the left side of his T-shirt where it is fully blue, the strips become solid green, and same thing on the pink side, while in the middle where the pink and the blue meets, the green stripes become less and less opaque. This is important symbolically in understanding projected ideas of gender role, and biological destiny. In western societies pink is associated with girls and blue with boys, and green often stands for nature or the natural. The green stripes on the figures shirt are not representing nature in the way that it is represented in the vegetation. On the contrary, this is a controlled nature that separates, defines, and it limits each of the color/gender labels. As the green stripes lose opacity the "nature" of a gender is called into question. These connotations between colors and gender role indicate the state the figure is living in; while looking away from the blue/boy he is ignoring the label/gender role assigned by society.

The vegetation presents three different stages of the fruit, and link that to three different applications of paint. First we have the buds and flowers, which are painted with a combination of very thin paint, and thick paint (impasto). In her book *WET: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (1997) Mira Schor, links fluids/thin paint with females, "Red floods. " It is that biologically woman are associated with fluids, they get "wet", menstruate, and lactate.



Jaouhari, Nabil El. *Ego Trip*, 2013.

Thick application of paint takes on an aggressive appearance, which can be associated with masculinity. The point here is to create a visual connection between different applications of paint, and the gender association label that belongs not only to that form of application, but also to the history of masculine/feminine symbology. Therefore this resembles a “sex” act between thin, delicate/feminine paint, and thick, impasto, aggressive/masculine paint. In the middle part of the bouquet, we see a bunch of outlined, and implied quality of representations, this part speaks allegorically to the way we are “trained” to become fruits, it’s the phase of being rendered, molded into a role that leading to the fruitful outcome.

This is important since we get to see above that the flowers morphing into big fruits at the top left part, hovering over the figure's head. As I said before, the figure is not only looking away from the blue side of his shirt, but also from the flowers/productive sex act, that defines his set biological destiny. He is about to let go of this "Natural" cycle of reproduction that is presented in the "Bouquet" of life. Another type of morphing takes place on the physical/material level. The figure's exposed skin shifts from canvas, which resembles the norms of painting itself and its history, on right side where the figure is still holding on to the vegetation by a single thread, to a floral patterned wallpaper, presenting the "Lost sex" that "Echo's" itself into a pattern. It represents flowers that will never become fruits—their destiny is not that of the flowers of the vegetation—and the way that they appear under the canvas, inside and outside the figure, highlights the passive decorative quality of the pattern and abolishes the active developing reproductive quality that we see in the bouquet. Therefore the figure loses its identity, by losing his features, and just become a pattern.

Visually, some of the pieces have a similarity to Wylie's paintings in terms of the decorative, floral aspect of the backgrounds; but the figures are conceptually tied to the female character Echo and, like Echo, are losing their identities and disappearing into a symbolic representation of nature. Also, my figures, although clearly male, are not hypermasculinized. The silhouette becomes a representation of a different kind of stereotype that is blending into the background. Unlike Wylie, whose figure is the star of the painting, in my work the figure fades into the background and the background itself becomes the focus. There is a self-portraitive quality to my work, but this self-referential

quality is obscured in that it is based in symbolic motifs from my childhood (e.g. figs) that have a more narrative quality.

The large porcelain phallus in the bathhouse room could relate to objects that Lucas could use in her work in that there is a direct gendered, sexual reference contained within an installation. Both Emin and Lucas utilize different media and found objects in their display, but both of these artists' work is more visually aggressive, "in your face" than my own. There is a narrative to my work, but it takes a different approach to telling a story grounded in a different mythology than just the mythologizing of one's self.

Conclusion

The work was important to make because I was trying to question my sexuality through questioning the way that I am perceived through a cultural lens. It wasn't celebratory; it was perhaps a stepping-stone toward understanding my own position in society. The work was also important to make as a commentary on the associations of materials and representations and motifs to gender. One should care about it because everyone has to live with and within the social construct of a gender binary. I wanted to explore my own gender or my own orientation through this binary, and I was trying to find the natural in art. The familiarity of these representations allures the viewer, but also prompts the viewer to question those familiar associations. The work has a beautiful, seductive quality to it but at the same time blurs the boundary between masculine and feminine and illuminates how fragile these constructs really are.

I learned a lot of technical aspects when it comes to constructing a room or an installation. I learned how to take an idea or a concept and try to push yourself as hard as

possible to actually create a link between the myth and a contemporary representation. I leaned on the history of art (e.g. Caravaggio, 16th century floral painting) and contemporary installation art and married them together to create this installation that not only has all of these different stops on this timeline but also has all of these materials, which I also learned to marry to each other.

I learned about the placement in the gallery and how a person should navigate around this space. I would love to find this way into art borrowing these aesthetics from art history and molding them into something contemporary. I learned how to marry material and concept, and how to use the preexisting associations of the material itself to start to say something more. How do you force a placement or an assembly in order to force it to say something more or less about the idea? Material starts to talk to concept; there is a lot of material that is associated directly with what I'm trying to say (e.g. wallpaper). There is also the idea of construction and maybe random associations of different representations of work. Different representations on the level of manifestation and on the level of material itself, the same idea morphs into more than one representation.

In the myth of Narcissus and Echo I found a threshold to mirror what I was trying to say. Because of the flower and the floral aspect there was a link between Narcissus and the decorative, and the story supplied the visual language that inspired the idea of these display rooms. That visual language came from the subject matter and took different forms, morphing into more than one kind of display because of the different materials I used, which mirrored different aspects of the concept.

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