

“AND YOU CALL THE PAINTING ‘VANITY’”

BY
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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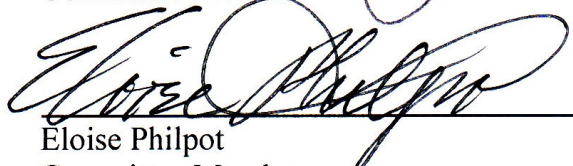
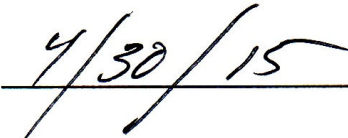
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Abstract

Historically, women have been seen as objects of pleasure for the male gaze. This has been the role of women in art for thousands of years and only recently have contemporary female artists started to challenge these notions of what women are in life and in art. This thesis challenges the position of women in art by rejecting the male gaze. By taking the most feminized subject in art, the ballerina, and combining her with the silhouette, I have made her the subject for challenging the role of women in art. I use the silhouette as a metaphor for contemporary female art and the rejection of westernized fine art that is still overflowing with the idea of women as objects. By integrating the dancer with the silhouette and carefully selecting specific body positions, I have made each image a symbol of women's strength. The women in these paintings are no longer a sight, but an idea. The idea being that she is no longer an object, or a typical demure ballerina. She is not a child, nor is she an overly sexualized woman. This thesis shows how I successfully blurred the lines between classical aesthetic and contemporary female art by challenging the male gaze and the role of women in art.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Table of Figures	v
Introduction.....	1
Inspiration: Kara Walker.....	5
Use of Body Language.....	7
Process	9
Conclusion	12
Bibliography	16

Table of Figures

Figure 1. Jordan Blevins, <i>In My Hands</i> , 2015	1
Figure 2. Jordan Blevins, <i>Becoming</i> , 2015	3
Figure 3. Kara Walker, <i>Hunting Scene</i> , 2001	5
Figure 4. Jordan Blevins, Detail#1. <i>Lost and Found</i> , 2015	9
Figure 5. Jordan Blevins, Detail #2. <i>In My Hands</i> , 2015.....	10
Figure 6. Jordan Blevins, <i>Lost and Found</i> , 2015	13
Figure 7. Jordan Blevins, “ <i>And You Call the Painting ‘Vanity’</i> ”, 2015	14
Figure 8. Jordan Blevins, “ <i>Blurring the Lines</i> ”, 2015	14
Figure 9. Jordan Blevins, <i>On My Own</i> , 2015.....	15



Figure 1. Jordan Blevins, *In My Hands*, 2015

Introduction

“You paint a naked woman because you enjoy looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and call the painting ‘vanity’, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.”

“The real function of a mirror was to make the women connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.”

“Women are to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own.”¹

¹ John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Michael Dibb, Chris Fox, Richard Hollis, “Ways of Seeing”. The Viking Press, New York. 1972. page 51-55

Historically, women have been seen as objects of pleasure for the male gaze. This has been the role of women in art for thousands of years and only recently have contemporary female artists started to challenge these notions of what women are in life and in art. Men have dominated the art world for centuries and thus, women in art are often seen as the subject, not the artist. I wondered what that made me, as a modern day female artist. My work consists of representational portraits and figures, so I made my goal for my graduate series to challenge the male gaze and the role of women in art, while still being feminine and beautiful. To do this, I chose the ballerina as my subject.

In art, the genre of ballerina paintings is, not surprisingly, dominated by men and thus plays to the male gaze and objectification of women. Often, ballerinas are painted as overly childlike or overly sexual. For example, when googling “ballerina,” the images displayed are children in tutus and sexualized women. The question was posed to me, “Are my paintings of typical demure ballerinas or are they something more?” So I asked myself, “In my hands, are they something more?” To help me find the answer, I looked to contemporary female artists and found inspiration from African American artist Kara Walker.



Figure 2. Jordan Blevins, *Becoming*, 2015

Walker cuts and glues black paper to gallery walls to make enormous works of art completely in silhouette. I was in awe of her silhouettes, which are so simple, but so loaded. They challenge issues regarding race, sex, history, social class, and fine art itself. Knowing the significance Kara Walker places in her silhouettes, I chose it as my representation for challenging the role of women in art and created a story of my own journey in art in the process.

For me, the silhouette is a representation of contemporary female art and the rejection of westernized fine art that is still overflowing with the idea of women as objects. I'm using the silhouette as the answer to the question, "are they something more?" I have taken the most feminized subject in art, the ballerina, and combined her with the silhouette. I have made her the

subject for challenging the role of women in art. I have used the mirror, an item commonly used in art to turn women into objects, and by replacing the mirror image with the silhouette, I symbolize a woman's strength. The reflection in the mirror is no longer a sight, but an idea, the idea being that she is no longer an object, or a typical demure ballerina. She is not a child, nor is she an overly sexualized woman. She is strong, feminine, and beautiful, not for men, but for herself.

Inspiration: Kara Walker



Figure 3. Kara Walker, *Hunting Scene*, 2001.

Kara Walker started out as an oil painter, but after graduate school she began to research, write, draw, and watercolor in hopes of working out challenges she was facing with her oil painting. She thought as a student that “real art” was done in large oil paintings and eventually turned from oil painting to watercolor and drawing media. She realized that drawing and watercolor were seen as second class in the art world, but continued to work with these because of the intimacy and results she experienced.²

She uses the idea of second class often in her works. For example, second class medium (watercolor and drawing), silhouettes as second class art experience, second class women’s art form, and black people as second class citizens. After her graduate studies, she started to address her internal struggle of her life as a black woman. The inspiration for her works began when she was a child and moved with her family to Georgia. There she realized that racism still existed and was confronted with this reality daily.³ This is when she found the silhouette and the images that propelled her into the successful artist she has become.

²“Kara Walker: Rise Up Ye Mighty Race!,” YouTube Video, 6:40, posted by “Chicago Humanities Festival”, Mar 4, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meSWqY_vMo0

³Heartney, Posner, Princenthal, Scott, *The Reckoning: Women Artists of the New Millennium*, page 224.

I chose the silhouette after researching Kara Walker's work. I felt I could relate to Kara Walker because of our similarities in our views on art, our mutual rejection of oil painting, and a shift to watercolor and drawing. But mostly, I felt her ideas of rejecting male dominated westernized fine art⁴ directly correlated to my challenging of the role of women in art. This is why I decided to use the silhouette as a symbol in my work to challenge the male gaze.

⁴Kara Walker: "Rise Up Ye Mighty Race!" YouTube Video, 10:00, Posted by, "Chicago Humanities Festival," March 4, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meSWqY_vMo0

Use of Body Language

*"A primary goal of painting is to express states of mind. A person's nobility of the mind is thought to be mirrored and expressed by the nobility of his or her body. Movements of the body are movements of the soul. The body repeats some of the harmonies that governed the universe. Hence proportions and bodily movement are thought to be both expressive and divine."*⁵

Expression of emotion through body language plays an important role in my figurative pastel and watercolor work. During my graduate studies, a series emerged that focused on the human body and a search for correlating emotions to body language. I was first inspired to look at body language from oil painter, Shane Wolf. The way Shane Wolf achieves emotion is what I most take away from his works. The emotions he creates through contemporary body positions combined with exciting brush strokes are what first inspired me to create my figurative series.

I realized, through my figurative study, that emotion is more than facial expressions; emotion is also seen through body language. For example, holding arms close to the body or touching the neck conveys feelings of powerlessness or vulnerability. Holding your arms out from the body or up in the air conveys power and excitement.⁶ My next task was looking for which emotions I wanted to evoke and how. As I stated before, I no longer wanted my figures to be seen as objects, or demure ballerinas. My figures are not children, nor are they overly sexualized women. I was able to achieve this in part through silhouette, but also through body language. I looked for exciting compositions in the quiet moments, times when the model was at rest, putting up her hair, or taking off her shoes. In those moments I found body language that

⁵ James Elkin, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught: Discussing Florentine Renaissance Art Academies* (University of Illinois, 2001), 12-13

⁶ Amy Cuddy, "Our Body Language Shapes Who You Are" TEDGlobal 2012 video, Filmed June 2012, http://www.ted.com/talksamy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are#t-203021

was simple and true. This is how I was able to paint the ballerina without sexualizing or objectifying.

Process

I used watercolor and soft pastels to create naturalistic figurative paintings. I want my paintings to be technically accurate in terms of proportion and structure, but I also pushed my work to be artistic and creative. I find artistic qualities through the natural mark made by the medium, textures, and the color palette. Using mixed media, I'm able to achieve unique marks, color vibrancy, and a strong play of light. I find the process and results of combining soft pastel together with watercolor to be exciting and creative. Through my process I am able to enhance the emotional experience for each painting. I achieve emotion in my paintings, in part, through body language and, in another part, through color, contrast, and mark.



Figure 4. Jordan Blevins, Detail#1. *Lost and Found*, 2015

The colors in my works are extremely saturated. I am constantly working off of warm and cool color combinations. Each time I add a warm color I accompany it by a cool color and vice versa. By doing this, all of my colors play off one another and intermingle to create exciting color combinations. I was inspired to incorporate this watercolor technique from the works of watercolor artist, Don Andrews. The contrast I create in my works also adds to the emotion

portrayed in each painting. Throughout my compositions I am always playing light against dark. I wanted the light areas in my paintings to almost glow. The color and contrast of my paintings play important roles within each painting, but another element to emotion is mark.

My use of marks is important in my paintings. Because I combine watercolor and soft pastel, I achieve a variety of marks and textures. In watercolor, for example, I achieve different marks through techniques like granulation, which is when pigments settle into tiny indents on the surface to create a speckled effect. Another example is the shape the watercolor makes as it moves and pools while wet. I also use a spray bottle to add spots and drips. In contrast to watercolor marks are the marks I create with soft pastel. I love the array of marks I can make using soft pastel. I use the side of my pastel stick to get wide angular strokes, combined with



Figure 5. Jordan Blevins, Detail #2. *In My Hands*, 2015

Finding a compatible surface for a dry medium and wet medium wasn't a simple task. I began researching surfaces for pastel when I came across a recipe for soft pastel primer that is applied to masonite board. I tried it, but wasn't completely happy with the results. I began to alter it by adding a few of my own ingredients to change the texture of the initial primer. I incorporated marble powder (to create a light texture) combined with water and gesso. Since

pastel is a drawing medium my next idea for the primer was to add color to my base. I created primed surfaces in yellow, blue, black, and gray. At this point, I had created my own unique formula for a primer that I applied to masonite board. I was specifically making my primer to act as a surface solely for soft pastel, but my recipe would later change again to incorporate watercolor medium.

While working on my first large scale figurative work, I was nearing the completion of the painting when I decided to try something a little different. I laid the board flat on the floor and began to add watercolor to the surface. I wasn't completely happy with the way the pigment soaked into the surface so I added latex to the primer. The latex worked like a sealer. The watercolor wouldn't soak into the primer; it sat on top and dried into heavy and saturated pools of pigment. I found the surface acted like synthetic watercolor paper called Yupo. Watercolor on Yupo paper is very delicate; touching the surface would ruin the watercolor effect. I found with my primer I got similar effects as Yupo, without the delicacy. The creation of this primer was the start of my mixed media series.

After the surface is primed I'm able to start the figure drawing. The figure drawing is done from life and is completed in two stages. My model sits for me until I get a finished outline of the body and features. I wait till after the watercoloring process is finished before I begin modeling in pastel. I want the watercolor to be spontaneous and colorful like the work of Don Andrews, as well as expressive like the strokes from Shane Wolf. My backspace technique is to enhance the artistic quality and emotion in each work. The movement and drama help push the painting past just being body language and facial expressions.

Conclusion

The title of my first piece, *In My Hands*, is actually a reflection on me. I wondered, am I creating a classical representation of a demure ballerina or had she become something more *In My Hands*? I wanted this series to show my progression as an artist, not just the progression of my abilities, but the progression of my thought processes. Studying contemporary women in art inspired me, and I began questioning what my work should say as a female artist, and what I found was these groups of works. In this series I blurred the lines between classical aesthetic and contemporary female art by challenging the male gaze and the role of women in art.

The poem below represents the narrative that I created within my works. The narrative begins when the figure looks into the mirror and asks “am I a demure ballerina or am I something more?” In the later paintings the silhouette is introduced, which is when it begins to change and gain a life of its own. Eventually, the ballerina and silhouette merge and I begin to blur the lines between the two.

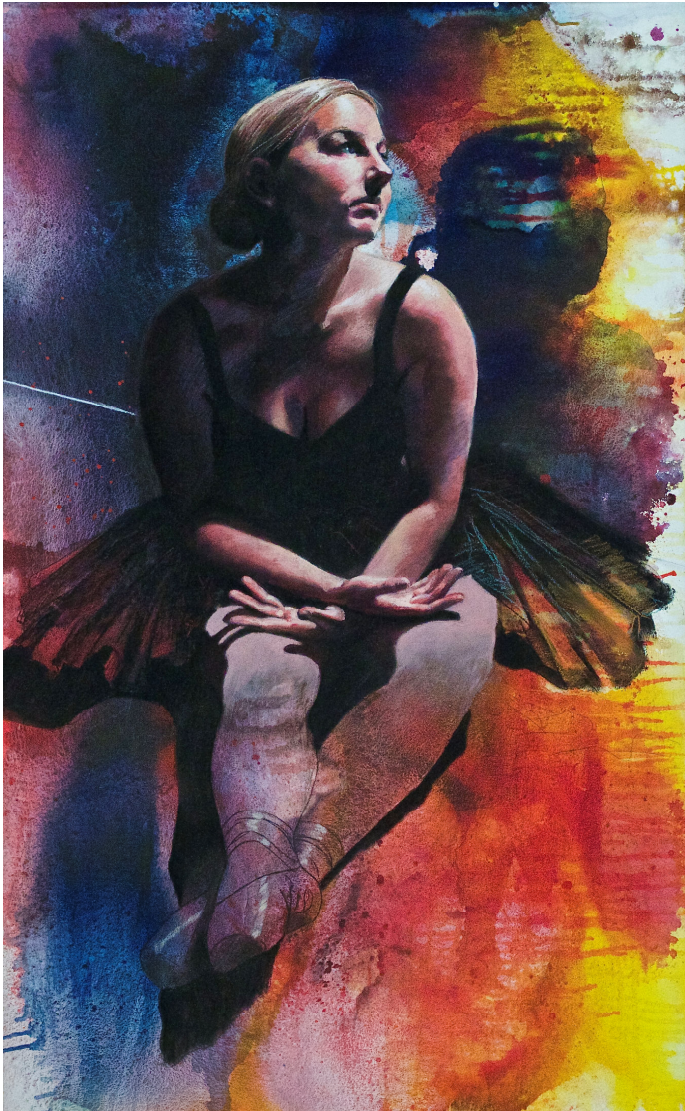


Figure 6. Jordan Blevins, *Lost and Found*, 2015

Hello Stranger

*In reflected glass I find myself
And wonder what I am.
Day in and day out I stare and stare,
But no answer comes my way.*

*In reflected glass I looked today
And found a changing sight.
Shrouded in dark it peered at me
And I thought it wasn't right.*

*In reflected glass a shadow sits,
What ever could it be?
It creeps about and turns its head,
There it waits to frighten me.*

*In reflected glass the darkness lurks,
And always to be found.
With time that passes I feel at ease
And pleased when it's around.*

*In reflected glass I see a friend
Beyond its glassy cage.
Day and night it stays with me
And embrace it at this stage.*

*In reflected glass I find myself
And wonder what I am.
Day in and day out I stare and stare,
But the answer's "In My Hands."⁷*

⁷ Jordan Blevins, *Hello Stranger*, 2015.

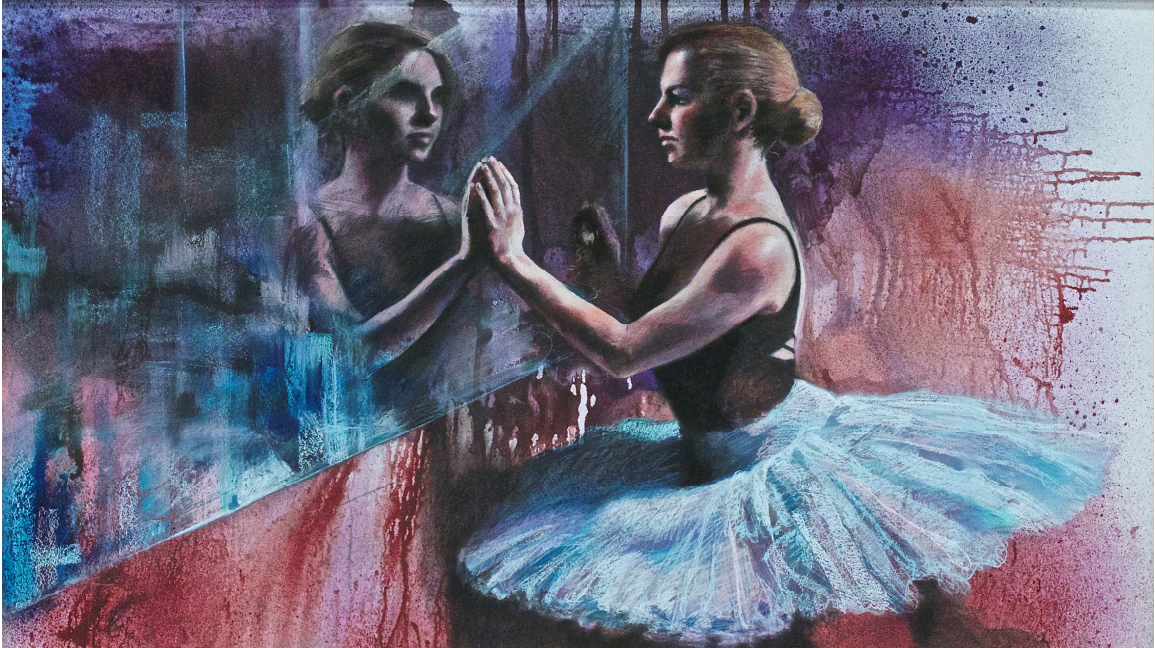


Figure 7. Jordan Blevins, *“And You Call the Painting ‘Vanity’”*, 2015



Figure 8. Jordan Blevins, *“Blurring the Lines”*, 2015



Figure 9. Jordan Blevins, *On My Own*, 2015

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