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## Transcendence

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Transcendence

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
Fine Arts

by

Holis Hannan

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2007

May, 2011

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a description and critical analysis of the processes, concepts and imagery of my artwork. I am interested in creating visual narratives, often figurative, in the form of sculpture, collage, and installation. In my work I attempt to call attention to the human condition, specifically addressing sexuality, mortality, psychological issues and power struggles. I incorporate both cultural and personal references and use traditional and non traditional materials and processes that are intended to conceptually inform the viewer further. My intention is to create distinct embodiments that provoke contemplative emotion and in which the object and the aesthetic experience allow us to consider and re-consider who we are and how we progress as a culture.

**Key Words:** Contemporary art, Sculpture, Installation art, Performance art, Collage, Identity, Human condition, Surrealism, Feminism, Transcendence.

## INTRODUCTION

My work focuses on creating visual narratives in the form of figurative sculpture, painting and collage. Like many artists and thinkers, I attempt to call attention to the human condition. Much of the work deals with death, chaos, disquiet, and tragedy, but not entirely absent in these works is hope, beauty, or levity. It is my intention to create distinct embodiments that provoke contemplative emotion with a strong purport regarding life. Furthermore, I am intrigued by tension in art and aspire to insert this element on some level into each piece I create. My work combines natural and synthetic materials in an attempt to create tension using opacity and translucency, realism and fantasy, clarity and ambiguity.

I wish to continue exploring the ways in which I can present situations and activities from our shared culture. I believe the art object and the aesthetic experience allows us to consider and re-consider who we are and how we progress as a shared culture. Although this point of view is broad and my artwork is specific, I require this open framework to genuinely consider all that I can.

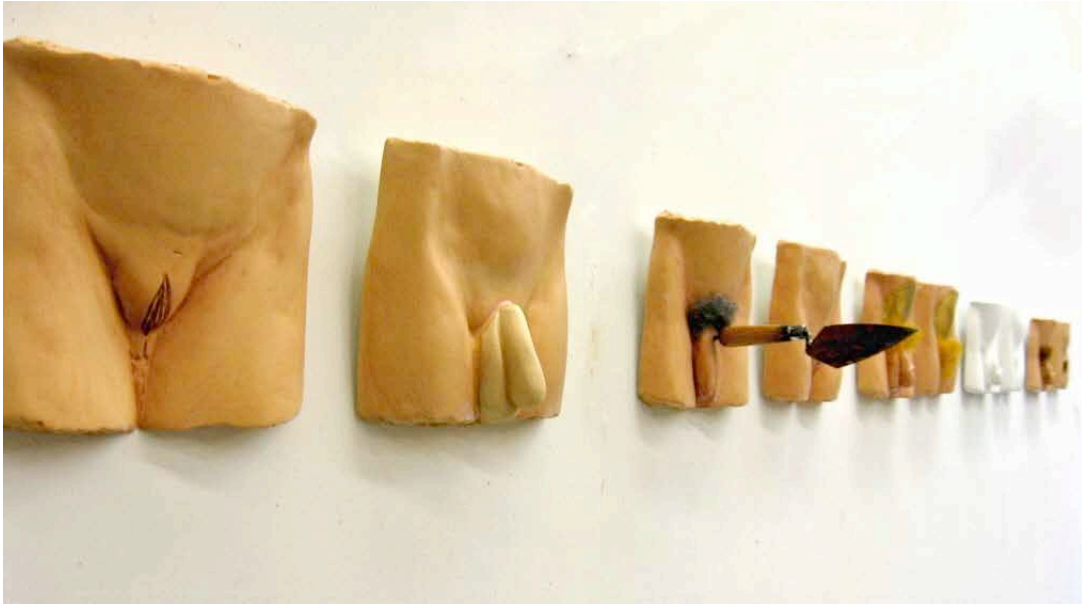
In this thesis, I hope to explore the evolution of my sculptures, installations, and collages and explain my impetus in creating them. Specifically, I will begin with my early sculptures, which focus on identity through sexual orientation, and explain how this body of work leads to the incarnation of my present work which I characterize as transparent corporeal embodiments. Then I will discuss my collage work and how I have come to incorporate it into my current sculptures. I will conclude with thoughts on my future endeavors.



## Genital casting

Early in my graduate studies, my interest lay narrowly in the curiousness of identity based on sexuality. Focusing specifically on adult female and male genitalia I created two relief sculptures of the frontal portion of the pelvic region based on the scale of my body; one represented the female sex organ and the other the male (fig. 1). I utilized my own body to represent the female and created the other using images of the male genitals from various sculptures, photos, and models. I then cast and reproduced several pairs of each intending the use of repetition to create works that communicate the greater complexity of sexuality.

The exposed genitalia are confrontational, and through the use of repetition and their position at eye level, which forces the viewer to confront them face on, the effect is more compelling and uncomfortable. In addition, I assigned new identities to some of the forms by modifying, reversing, or inventing genitals through appropriating culturally accepted signs associated with gender. Furthermore, the reliefs are hung in thematic pairings which are meant to add yet another layer to the overall psychological impact.



**Figure 1. *Genital Portraits*, 2007, plaster and mixed media, 10x13x3-4"ea**

Presented as such, the pairings are at once disconcerting and uncanny, in particular the pairs of invented genitalia. A “stand-in” for the genitals was made with found objects such as hand tools (trowel, hammer, or screwdriver) or household/kitchen items (feather duster, whisk, or corkscrew) and could be detached or attached to either the male or female form. There is a correlation here with the “Mr. Potato Head” toy but presented here with a sinister tone. The reliefs were painted realistically and void of genitals (similar to *Barbie* dolls), and steel wool was used to supplement pubic hair, all of which added to the eeriness of the composition.

## Hybrid Utterance

During the experimental stages of working on this series of work it became apparent that in this manifestation, these forms seemed to moralize and classify sexuality, hence enforcing the binaries of sexual difference. My interest veered toward obliterating this absolute categorization of such binary opposition. In an effort to clearly communicate my intent – to confront the viewer with questions of identity through psychological disturbance - I created “hybrid” forms by combining multiple genitals. Using a set of the previous cast crotches I molded the loins connecting the two together forming a complete three-dimensional slice of a figure with male genitalia on one side and female genitalia on the other.

The resulting form dismantles total classification of an either/or sexual identity and ultimately challenges conventional thought which links our genitals to our social position (as women or men). Much like the image depicted in Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled #263* (fig.2), these forms depict a body that is both male and female, and that, as Rosalind Krauss states, “contests social/sexual identity divides, creating the kind of slippage that

is meant, precisely, to blur their meaning, rather than to reify it, or better, to create meaning itself as blurred.”<sup>1</sup>



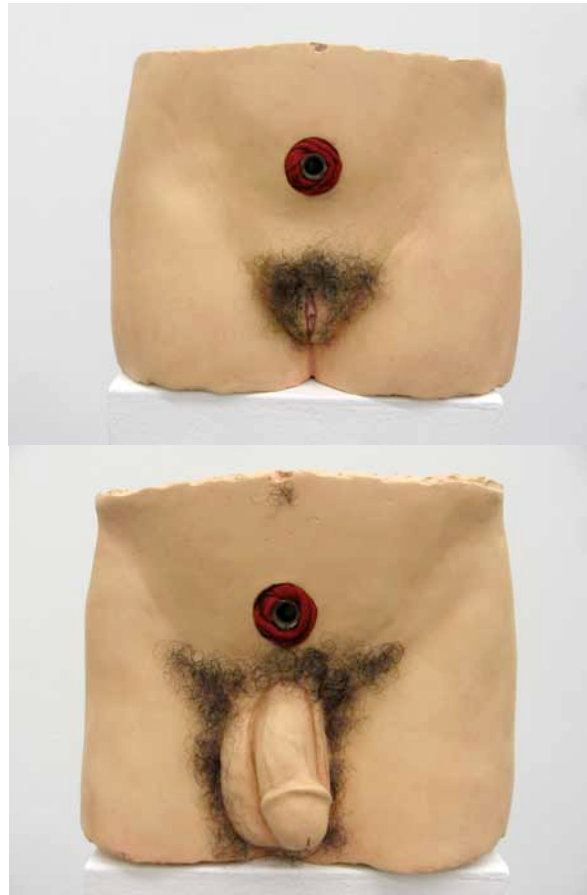
Figure 2. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #263*, 1993.

*Glory Hole*, 2007 (fig.3), is a postmodern reaction to the sharply classified previous pairs. The work pays a kind of homage to the Surrealist figuration practiced by René Magritte, whose work *Delusions of Grandeur II* bears some resemblance to this piece. Here, however, there is only the lower section of Magritte’s oneiric female form and the illusion is found when walking around to the other side which has male genitalia. The artifice is tilted toward the uncanny in that it is rendered hyper-realistic,

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Cindy Sherman 1975-1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 208.

complete with human hair in the pubic area adding to the already apparent sinister tone. Furthermore, a keyhole surrounded by red velvet is implanted slightly above the genitals, on either side, completing this uncanny surreal milieu.



**Figure 3. *Glory Hole* (front and back), 2008, plaster, hair, velvet, keyhole, acrylic, 10x13x8"**

Once again the viewer is intentionally confronted and disturbed by the uneasiness of the strange exposure. However now the psychological effect is pushed in two new and provocative ways: the

surprise in discovering the additional and contradictory genitalia; and the tension created through presenting the viewer with the challenge of whether or not to investigate the keyhole more closely, forcing him or her to come in even closer proximity to the exposed genitals.

With *Glory Hole*, I address ambiguous identity, which I feel is part of the human condition. Technological and scientific developments in genetic modification and cosmetic surgery – taken to the extreme in sex reassignment surgery – have become part of our times, and part of the human search for identity. We have access to these previously private parts of human life through the media, and especially the internet, where we are able to fabricate identity with our fingertips alone. The most private aspects of ourselves have proven mutable and easily made public, which is something I wanted to explore further in my work.

### **Transparent Corporeal Embodiments**

The ease with which we can show ourselves led me to an interest in exploring the interior space of the corporeal form. My initial idea to express the body as a vessel for identity was to create transparent forms the interiors of which could then be activated with color, light, and layers

of materials in order to communicate a greater complexity of identity. At first, I contemplated casting the forms in clear resin or glass; however, this would have required two things I was lacking: the skill to work in such material and the financial backing to provide them. I also had no desire to delegate a third party to create them, forgoing my participation, which I feel is crucial to my practice. Through extensive investigations of material I encountered an alternative material and casting method that satisfied my provisions and “gave birth” to an entire new body of work which I continue to explore.

My tape sculptures are created by arduously wrapping the original form-my body, a taxidermy animal, or mannequin- in a non-traditional art medium, that is clear plastic packing tape. The original form becomes trapped and is visibly suffocated beneath the clear tape surface. Subsequently, I release the form by carefully cutting it out with a blade and then remove it. Ultimately I re-assemble the form, meticulously mending the seams with packing tape and obscuring the incisions.

The resulting form is a clear, hollow casting, void of the original pattern. Much like the exoskeleton shed by local ecdysozoans – the

crustaceans, arachnids, and cicadas that are part of our tenacious ecosystem – the forms emphasize the presence of the original through its absence. I feel that the exoskeleton can also be related to “shedding skin,” or renewing identity. We, as humans, are unable to do this literally, but metaphorically this could parallel our ability to shift and change how we are perceived.

My first tape sculpture was cast from my body, an idea generated by my interest in creating a dialog with the work of Antony Gormley. Gormley’s early figures (fig. 4) are made from plaster casts of the artist’s body which are then overlaid with sheets of lead. “He has spoken of becoming passive while being wrapped in clingfilm and plastered over, and the need to have the right pressure in his lungs as the plaster dries, to give the body interior space. The aim is not personal expressiveness but the right relationship of space within and the outside the body (‘my work is to make bodies into vessels that both contain and occupy space’).”<sup>2</sup> Intrigued by Gormley’s notion of making bodies into vessels that contain and occupy space and his physical relation to the work I set off to embrace

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Causey, *Sculpture Since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 253.





Figure 4. Antony Gormley, *Untitled (for Francis)*, 1985

this notion. My approach, however, was to add a more ephemeral and what I would argue a feminine counter to his dark, heavy lead forms.

The production turned out to be arduous and quite torturous, not to mention it often required the help of an assistant who would have to cut me free-often resulting in actual cutting my flesh. Although the ideas surrounding all of these implications were profoundly suggestive and provocative, of which I favor, ultimately I succumbed to an interest

directed toward an overall narrative and opted to use mannequin forms to make my casts.



**Figure 5. *Conduit*, 2008, packing tape, straw, extension cord, light, wood plaque, dimensions variable**

*Conduit*, 2008 (fig. 5-6) is an installation consisting of four tape cast forms- three human forms on a floor covered with straw and a mounted deer head hanging on a wall. The central figure (a cast made directly from my body) is positioned on hands and knees as if crawling, her form is transparent, allowing us to view the red extension cord that enters through

her vagina, winds through her pregnant belly and exits through her mouth. She faces the floor below her where there is an infant attached to the end of the cord projecting from her mouth. Blue wire and glossy clear tape wrap the cord as it exits her mouth, suggesting wetness. It coils toward and penetrates the navel of the infant form. Given the small, obscured light source illuminating the baby's interior the cord becomes the apparent conductor of life. Now an umbilical link, the cord parallels the gesture of the infant, who reaches toward her face with one hand frozen in the sign of a holy blessing. This gesture evokes images of the Virgin with the infant Christ. It is difficult to discern a definitive reading of this sign, which, in this context, the distinction is blurred as to whether it is intending toward either a religious or impious connotation.

This elusiveness continues throughout the installation. The hunched central figure is poised to elude the view of the other figures behind her, either ashamedly hiding the projected baby or vigilantly protecting it. The cord, fifteen feet in length, extends from behind her and winds like a snake toward an electric outlet on a white wall. A small standing figure molded from a child-sized mannequin holds the cord (fig. 6). The figure stands in a



**Figure 6. *Conduit* (detail), 2008, packing tape, straw, extension cord, light, wood plaque, dimensions variable**

contrapposto-like pose suggestion the classicism of Renaissance sculpture. One arm carries a coil of the cord and the other extends toward the outlet grasping the plug. It is unclear whether the figure is plugging in or pulling out the cord, yet its dominant position of control can be discerned. In contrast to the other two human forms, this figure is more reminiscent of a fantasy character because it has pointed ears, hooves and there is wool

stuffed in the legs and up to the mid torso, on its head, and coming out of its mouth creating a goatee. The unimposing size and fantasy characteristics contradict its dominant position over the central figure.

A deer head, cast from a taxidermy mount from a trophy hunt hangs on the wall; its base is the original wooden one, but the animal's head has been replaced by a replica, made in transparent tape and thus diaphanous. A golden glow comes from within this shell (created by the reflection from the mylar that is mounted on the wood beneath the surface of the deer) which adds to the ethereal feeling of the work. Furthermore, the head of the enchanted stag is slightly skewed and appears to look down toward the central crawling figure. The meaning of this trophy is enigmatic; is it a stand in for a supernatural being- the divine- that is witnessing or controlling the event that lies before it? Is it meant as a signifier of man's power; if so, is it a semiotic nod toward man's power over nature or women?

The whole installation is intentionally ambiguous. The absence of color and abstracted features mask specific identity; the scene floats between the surreal and worldly, private and public; the narrative conjures

religious and impious allegory, and invokes moral dilemmas. Once again I am pleased with the ambiguity, I feel it addresses the many uncertainties related to the human condition that I did not achieve with the genital castings; addressing the fears of childbirth, questioning the origins of procreation, and confronts various forms of oppression. The installation allows for mystery regarding the human condition. There is a level of anxiety attained in confronting the unknown, which in combination with the juxtaposition of natural and synthetic materials, and the provocative nature of the central form creates an overall tension, further complicating any extrapolation of conclusive reading of the work.

Tension takes a different form in *Sustain*, 2008 (fig.7-8). A small illuminated room is concealed by a set of mini-blinds which emit a glow of light. Clear plastic sheeting and bubble wrap cover the walls and ceiling of the room. These materials seep out around the blinds into the exterior of the room. The ceiling is illuminated by a coil of lights beneath the plastic membrane. Several transparent tubes filled with glowing lights and draped in plastic rise up from the floor. In the center of the room a life-sized, human-like form is suspended from the walls and ceiling by web-

like tendrils attached to multiple places on its body. The figure hovers weightlessly, in a semi-supine position with its back toward the viewer. It is frozen in a moment with its head and one arm stretching backwards yet not quite completely engaging the viewer's gaze.

It is ambiguous whether this is a moment of torture, the figure being pulled in all directions by its projecting tendrils, or a moment of conception, the space mirroring that of a womb which the figure is attached to by its life-supporting umbilical cords. Here the tension is created in a power play of unsolvable and inconsolable intensity: should the cords be cut to release the captive, or must they remain connected to sustain it?

The installation had an additional, unintended visceral effect as result of the suffocating feeling one experienced in viewing it. The plastic covering of the walls, ceiling, and floor enveloped the figure; this was an intentional representation of a womb or cocoon. In effect, however, the plastic conjures a familiar image of consumer safety labels seen frequently on plastic bags that warn of the dangers of child suffocation. Although this reading was not my initial intention, I feel it fits well within my overall



Figure 7. *Sustain*, 2008, packing tape, clear plastic, bubble wrap, dimensions variable



Figure 8. *Sustain* (detail), 2008, packing tape, clear plastic, bubble wrap



objective to create an embodiment that both attracts and repulses the viewer; attracting with its intriguing illuminated etherealness, and repulsing, with its torturous tendrils and this feeling of impending suffocation.

Furthermore, it was my intention to evoke an unsettling psychological effect which dealt with the nature of voyeurism. By far the most infamous work of art dealing with voyeurism being Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, which I prefer not to rival, however, cannot escape comparison. Much like Duchamp's enigmatic work I have created an installation that deals with the interaction of intimate privacy and voyeuristic gaze, and the intertwining of eroticism and violence. I feel I added a futuristic (in the sci-fi sense) spin that is grounded in my use of materials. Additionally, the figure I have created does not read strictly as violated woman, rather it is a more alien form, intending an ambiguous reading toward the fragility of all creatures. In concluding, I feel the strongest similarity of the works was impart to a voyeuristic feeling that is conjured as the viewer must peer through an obstruction, in my case the mini-blinds, in order to engage in the spectacle that they conceal.

## Transcendence

In *Transcendence*, 2008 (fig. 9-10), the spectacle is also veiled. The installation is enclosed within four walls of white sheer fabric. The central figure lies on a bed of chips of tree bark that covers the entire inner area of the square enclosure. The life-sized body is human in form but has a deer's head, also of natural size. The figure lies on its side in a fetal position and is formed of the same material it lies on. The head of the figure appears to have been severed from the body with the opening of the neck lined in red velvet. There is a shift in material also as it is made of plaster that is left unfinished. Several strings of white lights flow out of the neck and up into the ceiling. Laying beside the form is a pair of gilded horns which are joined in a circle that resembles a crown of thorns.

This artwork is a result of an unresolved childhood trauma of which has appeared and reworked itself in repetitive dreams and nightmares and has since coalesced with a recent unresolved adult trauma. My intention was to re-create this vision in a fantasy-like setting; one which speaks to the level of intensity of the existing trauma. Furthermore, I intended to



Figure 9. *Transcendence, 2008*, plaster, bark, gold-leafed antlers, lights, velvet

exorcise the painful and unsettling vision and in turn embrace the mourning and loss. There are several levels on which I feel have successfully achieved my intended goals.

To begin, the enclosure was intended to evoke an image of a canopy bed; one of a child, a king or perhaps a hospitalized patient and within

which children may dream under or the elderly may die. I feel this was effectively achieved through the use of enclosing the space with the sheer drapery. The bed of bark within the perimeter of the walls signifies a freshly torn forest bed. Deer renew their antlers by shredding bark on trees, rubbing off fresh velvet to reveal dead bone. An intentionally mystifying and bewildering fantasy creature formed of bark lies on the bed in the installation (fig. 10). Its human-like shape emphasizes the decapitated head of the creature.

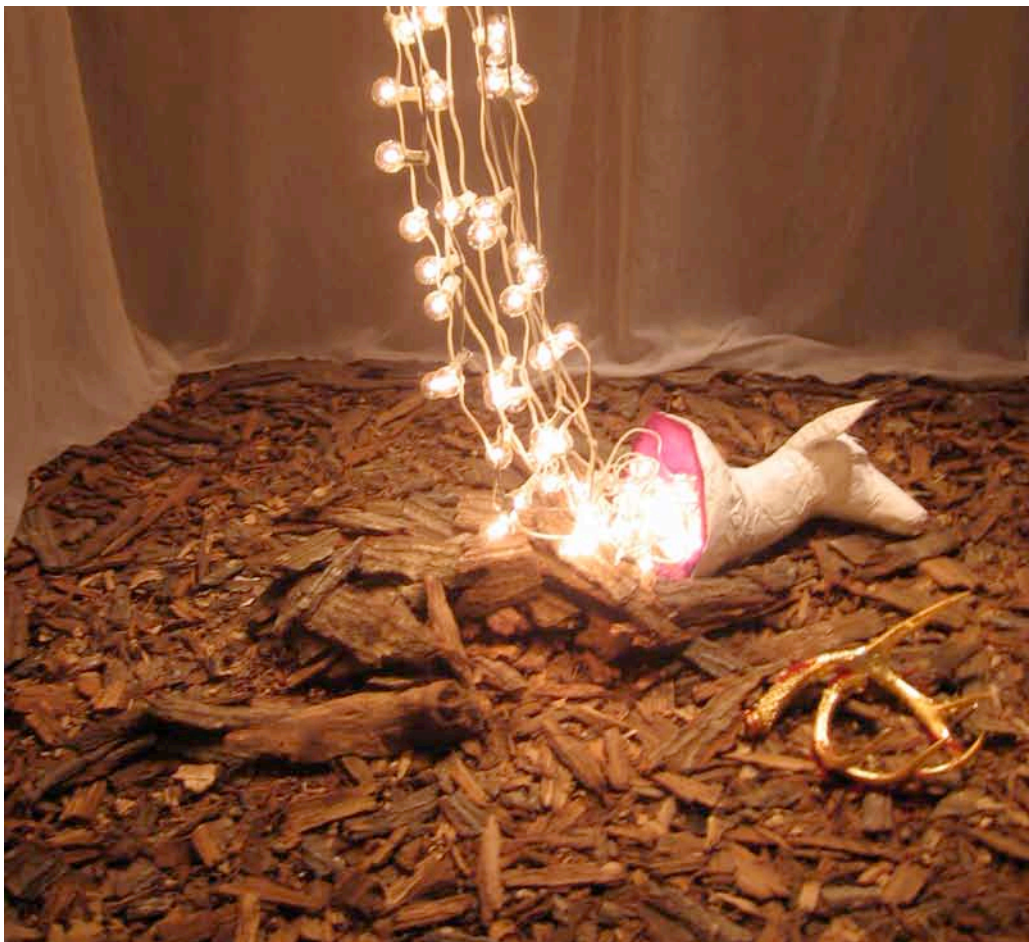


Figure 10. *Transcendence* (detail), 2008, plaster, bark, gold-leafed antlers, lights, velvet

I cast the head of a deer, which belonged to my fathers trophy collection, one which I grew up with, one which I saw gutted and flayed in my backyard (specifically on my childhood swing set). I had used the same form to create the transparent tape sculpture for *Conduit*. Here, however, I have chosen to transform the previously oneiric form. In a process which involved destroying the ritualistically swathed ethereal form, I poured plaster inside of the shell, casting the insides of the fragile form. I left the interior hollow, resulting in something now closer to a vessel than a cicada shell. The form remains frozen, like a death mask, and its exterior remains in its natural state; pure, white plaster with all the imperfections and scars the tape cast exposed. There is an overall feeling of empathy evoked that is intensified when confronted with adjoining crown of golden horns that lie besides the fallen stag.

The fantasy is soon raised up to a moment of enlightenment made apparent by the multitude of lights that escape the creature and appear to float into the air above it, culminating at the ceiling. This gesture is intended as a nod of respect toward the late conceptualist artist Felix Gonzales-Torres, who often used strands of light, or clear plastic wrapped

candy, to signify the profound sense of loss felt for those who have died prematurely, including loved ones. In addition, my intention was to appropriate Gonzales-Torres use of lights in respect in order to signal to the lost spirit. In concluding, the work “transcends” my emotions of loss, using materials in Gonzales-Torres visual language to express feelings of mourning and absence. The intention to transcend a visceral emotion carried over into my next work.

*Dialectic Within*, 2009 (fig. 11) is a life-sized figure consisting of two heads and torsos which are entwined in its multiplicity of limbs. The figure is formed entirely of transparent tape and cellophane and its interior is hollow. As New Orleans critic, D. Eric Bookhart, pointed out in his reading of the work, “the multiplicity of limbs belies the fact that there are only two torsos rapturously engaged in what might be a Hindu deity rendition of a Merce Cunningham moment — or maybe an inner dance of approach-avoidance.”<sup>3</sup>

The head of one torso, which is tilted upward and back, emits a stream-like projectile that attaches to the ceiling. The other head is buried

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<sup>3</sup> D. Eric Bookhart, “Thank You Sir May I Have Another,” *Gambit Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 33, August 2009, 55.

in the bosom of the torso which it embraces. Two arms embrace one torso as the others are caught in a moment-fighting, stretching out for help or as sign of rebellion. The multiplicity of legs are similarly frozen in an act-wrapping around, kicking backwards, spread open, and standing off balanced. It is unclear whether this is a moment of sexual ecstasy, frustration, joyful exhilaration, spiritual bliss, excruciating agony, or revolt.



**Figure 11. *Dialectic Within*, 2009, packing tape and Saran wrap, dimensions variable**

This work shows the discord between feeling and behavior, another aspect of the human condition. I wanted to transcend an emotional conflict; one of both love and violence that begins in the body and then becomes realized through action, which in turn becomes cathartic. I concluded that when these opposing emotions merge an abject code of communication is born, where disfigurement is struggling to be beautiful. I feel the resultant form successfully expresses this collision of emotional states and the body's erratic manifestation of what is felt.

### **Cutting straight to the point**

I have always considered how the media – television, internet, the printed word and image - effects the human condition and the search for identity. I initially adopted collage, using various magazines as source material, to sidestep a period of artist's block. Though this practice was initially "the artist at play," I realized I was using a medium that was about the media, and began to construct a visual vocabulary with it that incorporated both cultural and personal references. With collage, I was able both to investigate the fantastic nature of the carnivalesque and the queering of identity, specifically as it is presented through the media.



Much like the carnivalesque, the resulting work lived in an uncanny and whimsical universe all its own, separate but linked to the work I had previously created.

In addition, I have also worked to understand the history of collage, which is imbedded in the movements of Surrealism and Dada. This, in turn, has heightened my desire to create a dialog that pays homage to its predecessors and the traditions while simultaneously probing the position of collage in contemporary art. In keeping with the traditional notions of collage, I embrace incoherence, fragmentation, and disjunction.

Concurrently, I combine the traditional methods of collage with unique non-traditional methods, such as using pins and letting the cut outs float vicariously, instead of pasting them down. In addition, in more recent work, the final piece is a photograph of the collage which flattens out the work and melds it into one media. In my most recent work, I incorporate collage in an installation in which the spectator becomes implicated in its creation. Furthermore, it is my hope that these works not only coincide with the shared intentions of many female predecessors of Surrealism, which sought to construct an image of woman as a figure of agency and

transformation, but also to challenge societal ideologies, expose our shared cultural constructs both accepted and hidden, and ultimately bring to question formation of identity.

I feel that I address these aspirations through the construction of my collages which are made in layers, each one cutting away part of the subject matter. The remainder is then combined with other images. Skin, for example, is cut away, so that only the outlines of human shapes remain. I feel my approach makes for perplexing shifts of identity and meaning within the different layers of the collages; these shifts, ultimately create a new reality.



Figure 12. *Untitled*, 2007, collage, pins, Styrofoam, 12x12"

In *Untitled*, 2007 (fig. 12) reality is abstracted. I have cut away the facial and some body features and replaced them with an abstract, painterly image, in order to obscure the identity of the figures, allowing them to represent the “other.” In addition, I have re-ordered the architecture and incorporated the abstract pattern used in the figures into it, giving an over-all otherworldly feel to the setting.

A similar eerie feel is carried over into the narrative. A female figure stands, off-centered, in the foreground of the composition. She holds her head as if in distress as two ominous figures loom high at the center of the frame, appearing to be leaving the scene. Additionally, the paper is pinned onto Styrofoam, allowing edges to fold, slightly peel, and, as seen in the female figure, float vicariously, enhancing the awkwardness of the piece. Furthermore, the piece is left untitled, leaving out clues which could aid the viewer decipher the event which has unfolded. There is a sense of anxiety and tension brought on both by the restructuring and the ambiguous narrative.

In *La La Land*, 2010 (fig. 13), this anxiety is intensified. The imagery is particularly vibrant, sexual, and disturbing. There is a

schizophrenic sense brought on by the surreal feeling evoked and the ambiguity of the narrative. This discomfort is fostered likewise in the manipulation of the materials. The images are further distorted by folding and warping the cutouts and pinning them in place on to the styrofoam. Hair, for example, wraps around objects and the legs float and the feet are unhinged from the piece.



Figure 13. *La La Land*, 2010, digital print, 12x12"

In the end, the image is photographed and its final manifestation is a high gloss digital print in the original proportions of the collage. My process parallels the process used to make the original source material. Much like the manipulation of the models in the images (i.e. hair, make-up, and lighting effects), but also the way the photographs themselves are manipulated to make ideologically beautiful imagery. Yet, here I have taken this imagery and distorted it and made visible manipulations the incisions, pins are left in and grotesqueness of the process exposed.

The title, *La La Land*, is derived from a slang term which refers to a precarious semiconscious state of mind, but it also means, as I found when I had a temporary residency at Otis College of Art, to the city of Los Angeles, in a sarcastic manner. At the time I made this piece, I was living in my studio, unable to afford the high cost of rent in LA, and in a complete state of flux, both physically and mentally. It was during this transitional period that I began an intense investigation of the fragility and temporality of my work and ultimately the psychological effect that manifests.

I recalled my work (fig. 14-15) that I had created during the early experimental stages with the transparent packing tape figures. The figures had balloons and collage incorporated in and on them. I utilized the seductive and glossy language of commercial photography found in magazines intending to produce works that probe the false promises of perfection. Magazine images of ideal eyes, lips and skin tone were taped to the transparent, plastic-looking tape figures- sort of my twist on modern-day plastic surgery (fig.14). The resulting image subverts the pervasive language of the slick photography as it is used in advertising and publicity, creating edgy images that intrigue and disturb.



Figure 14. *Medusa's Gaze* (detail), 2008



Figure 15. *Fix Me* (detail), 2008

The use of balloons was also intended to push the idea of cosmetic alteration. Balloons were the breasts and stomach in *Fix Me* (fig. 15). The balloons were inflated during the initial presentation with the intention that as they lost air they would alter the shape of the figure and ultimately the reading of the work. Limbs were missing, an amputated breast was replaced with bulbous red balloons, and facial features that were visible through the use collage were sharply cut and overemphasized. All this added to the anxiety of the piece. In choosing to incorporate the collage sparingly, I emphasized the unfinished quality and furthered the feeling of anxiety. Mirrors implicated the viewer in the work, suggesting his or her own discomfort with identity and complicity in the consumption of the source material.

These pieces had an unfinished and chaotic quality. I eventually felt that although the overall effect was extremely disturbing, aspects of this work were too heavy handed and literal. I abandoned it due to an unfavorable critique and my lack of critical art historical understanding, needed to ascertain and articulate its purpose. After a year of intense studies in critical art theory at Otis I began to understand the relevance of



these pieces. Furthermore, I began to surmise their importance in directing the trajectory of my work.

I realized that the collages I was making as mental diversions were linked to my original thoughts about identity and manipulation of the body. Installation, however was too removed. Though installation asks for interaction with the space, I had created spaces that were more like Baroque theater. They were dramatic and appealed to the emotions, but they were separate, much like the surface of a painting or the “fourth wall” in theater that blocks true interaction with the audience. By using my own body in performance, I feel I can better address and explore the ongoing ways we build identity, and incorporate the viewer to complete the work. I am now focusing away from the traditional object and towards temporal and ephemeral performance based installation art, which I feel fulfills my artistic goals outlined in this thesis.

Other artists like Marina Abramovic, Andrea Fraser, and Sophie Calle, have used performance to personally connect with the viewer. These artists have not hesitated to express deep feelings about the world, themselves, and the artist’s role. Drawing inspiration from events and their



own lives, and setting up situations that blur the division between art and life, these artists explore arts potential for transformation and catharsis.

In her latest performance, *The Artists is Present* (fig. 16), Marina Abramovic sits silently in a chair throughout the day with museum visitors taking turns sitting across from her. The performance took place over the three months of the exhibition and was estimated to have lasted for a total of 716 hours and 30 minutes. Many who interacted were brought to tears, others simply sat contemplatively.

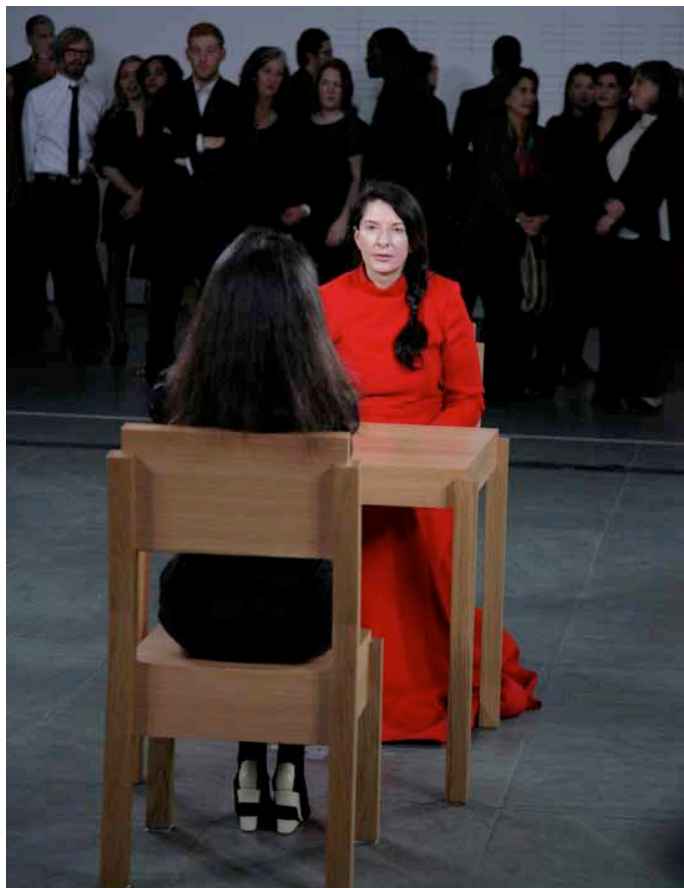


Figure 16. Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present*, 2010

My forthcoming performance for my thesis presentation shares certain themes/does similar things as performances by Marina Abramovic. For this piece, I will live in the gallery space for the duration of the show. The space will be divided in two: on one side will be a traditional gallery space where art will be shown, and on the other will be a living space/studio that resembles my living/studio quarters in LA. My audience will be able to enter my space, interacting with me within it, as I work on pieces that will fill the traditional gallery space. I intend to communicate that not only is human identity never finished – the changes are perpetual, as we seek and enact them - the identity of art is never finished. In both cases, context changes meaning. Aspects of this performance will be undetermined until it is enacted; this too parallels the unpredictable nature of the human search both for self and meaning.

In retrospect, while my work has evolved over time, I see I have maintained a clear trajectory. Despite variations among my individual projects, I feel the perspective and formal language is evident throughout. Simultaneously, while the assortment of images and symbols I select may hint at an intentional subtext, my commitment remains to focus on

undefined narratives, as seen in many examples herein. Thus, my choices are intentional but the associated meanings are not, I leave this up to the viewer. I prefer to create work with little or no intention of communicating a specific idea, much to the chagrin of many critics searching for meaning behind the art. For me, it is more important to create something that is uncontrolled and unresolved, reflective of contemporary human condition, which I feel that my latest installation embodies.

### **Conclusion**

My artwork typically addresses the subjects of death and dying, disquiet, chaos and tragedy, balanced with levity and by expressions of hope and beauty within the confines of a narrative. My work engages the audience through its focus on the human condition, whether referring to the presumed relationship between my earlier, and more formally traditional sculptural works' facile reference to figurative statuary, or the more recent body of work that employs imagery from the advertizing/fashion industry in the form of paper collage. My art has always stressed the psyche, rather than the physical sculptural object. I would also incur that my earlier sculpture deliberately looked backward

toward the art history of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque period and in deference to pre-Freudian thought. My most current artistic endeavors incorporate current collage and installation art that quotes, reinterprets and re-contextualizes Surrealism and Dada; a more recent direction in the modernist and contemporary culture. I continue to embrace the exploration of the manners in which the artist can present interactions and gestures existing within the artist can present interactions and gestures existing within our shared culture. It is my personal stance that the aesthetic experience can allow us to contemplate and reconsider who we are as individuals and how we progress as a shared culture. I require access to the most broad and flexible framework in order to genuinely take as much into consideration as is feasible. My work combines natural and synthetic materials in order to create tension based upon dichotomy and the juxtaposition of opposites.

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## Vita

Holis Hannan was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1988 she enrolled at the University of New Orleans and began her quest for higher learning which lasted on and off for over twenty years. In that time she prospered in several arts related careers from jewelry designer to mural decoration. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in art from the University of New Orleans in 2007, graduating on the Dean's List with honors and receiving the Excellence in Studio Arts Award. After graduating she attended an artist creativity workshop given by the extremely inspirational author of *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron, which inspired her to continue her quest and pursue a Master's Degree in Fine Art. Hannan has exhibited her work in New Orleans and Los Angeles, where she spent a year of graduate studies at the Otis College of Art and Design. She was awarded the Peter Goulds Scholarship to attend Otis and while there she was highly influenced by artists that taught and lectured, including among them John Knight and Andrea Fraser. She has also studied abroad in Italy while during her graduate studies, attending the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale which she deems the highlight of her educational studies. She currently resides in New Orleans with her dog, LuLu, and is looking forward to returning to Venice to attend the 54<sup>th</sup> biennially.