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I WISH I WAS A COWBOY

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ABSTRACT:

Within my body of work, *I Wish I Was A Cowboy*, I consider the sociocultural norms that develop and repress sexual identities, focusing on the period of adolescence. Questionable narratives from my past and personal memories coalesce around questions of female purity, self-respect and the idea of “natural” behaviors. Video and digital image interact with sculptural structures, and together the works reference subjects of taboo, kink, and repression. Various barriers, basins, and alters reference control of bodies, the view of the public, toxic ideals of “purity” and the stigmatization that surrounds sexual power possessed by femme individuals.

The title *I Wish I Was a Cowboy* draws attention to the devaluation that is placed on femme and femininity. Within my material choices, imagery and videos I aim to create my own femme version of being a “cowboy” situated among heavy, bleak, sterile structures.

I choose to present imagery of empowerment of femme identities in sexual situations and celebration of feminine sexuality, taking visuals from images and games created by and for a masculine audience- reclaiming them in this new femme world.

A considerable amount of my visual imagery encompasses a potential for choice of where the power is being held or enforced. It presents a grey area/ back and forth of disgust and desire, degradation and empowerment. Power, however, like identity, is not (or should not be) simply binary, but a fluid range. This work addresses the intricacies of sexual relationships, power relationships, and relationship with self.

Using visual cues from equestrian sport, video games, and intimate acts in public spaces, I create environments that mix pleasure, frustration, vulnerability, and power.

I WISH I WAS A COWBOY:

by
Perry Burlingame

B.A., University at Albany, 2012

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University
August 2019

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I. YOU CAN'T BE THAT BOY, YOU CAN'T BE THAT GIRL

My Current practice uses sculpture, video, and digital imagery to address society's discomfort with sexuality and the effects this has on the development of our sexual identities. Heavily integrated within this is the search for power, thinking of power as the freedom and ability to dictate one's own existence. The work incorporates imagery and sensory elements evocative of my own adolescence, a time when we are simultaneously learning how to suppress our desires as much as we are developing them. Giant, transparent stickers of fantastical horses among digital rainbows and clouds adhered to plastic create the smell, touch, and aesthetic specific to this time period of being a young female in the late 90's-early 2000's. (Figure 1, 2) These pieces, reminiscent of posters from my bedroom wall, are paired among sterile, tiled structures referencing public places where typically intimate actions occur (i.e. public pools, shower rooms, bathrooms, locker rooms as well as religious altars) and samplings of gameplay from video games, living out fantasies in the digital realm. This body of work uses nostalgia as both an escape to an unreal, optimistic time as well as a place to look back on in attempt to recall the future we hoped for during this time of development. The contrasting elements create spaces that are both playful and violent, alluring and uncomfortable.

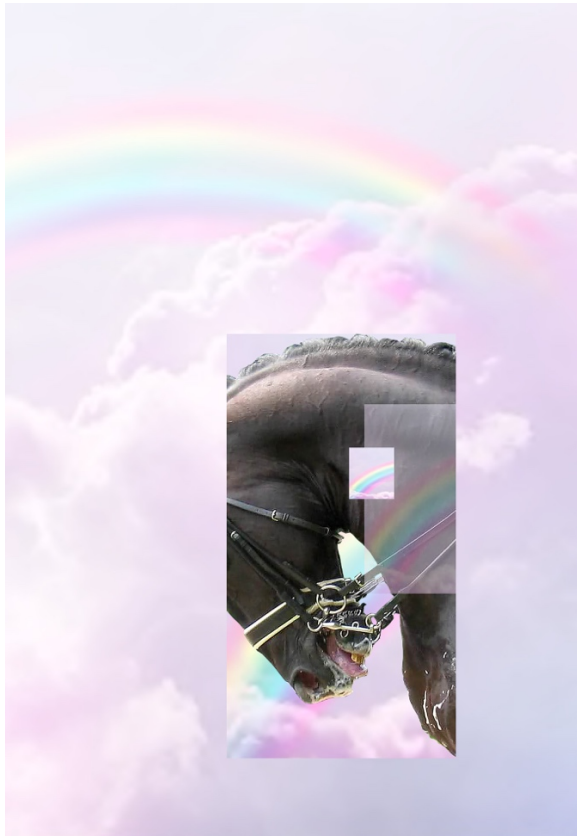


Figure 1. *Candy Necklace*. 2018

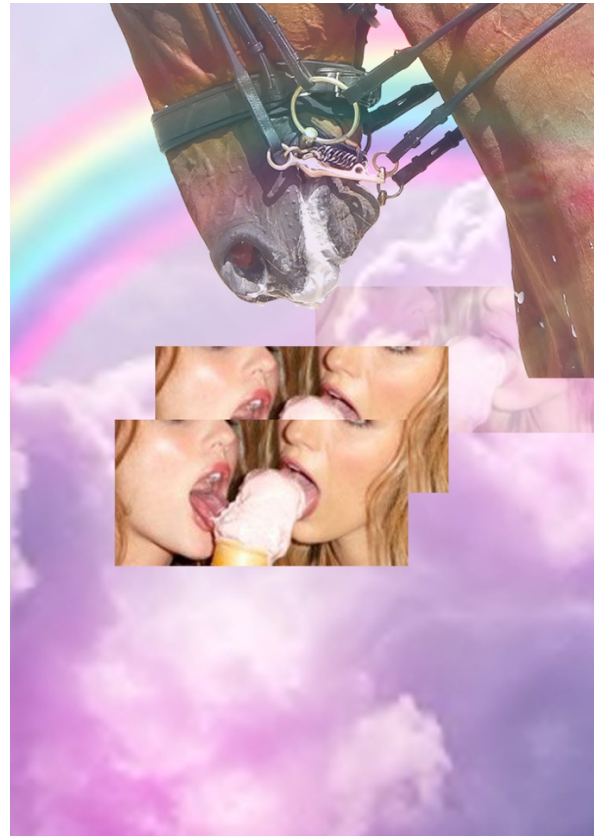


Figure 2. *Mouth Feel*. 2018

II. HORSE GIRL: reclaiming over-sexualized tropes

The horse girl trope is one of outsiders looking in. It is the male gaze sexualizing the movement of equestrian riding, the cliché myth that girls “lose their virginity” on horseback due to broken hymens, and a general judgement that a girl’s interest in horses makes them socially different.

There are many sides to the equestrian world as a young female. It is one of independence and freedom as well as one of being watched, judged, and compared. It

is an opportunity to access a kind of power of movement that isn't available in other aspects of adolescent life, it is a balanced world of freedom and restraints.

The "horse girl" stereotype takes this interest and lifestyle and strips it of validity, deeming the participating female as socially inferior.

I return to memories of my own adolescence spent riding and showing horses, recalling a time of simultaneous growth and repression. I think of the enormous animals I surrounded myself with and the equipment of care and control that was a part of my everyday life. I recall the fantastical horse posters I had plastered to my bedroom walls. Divine beasts emerging from clouds, rainbows, and rushing waterfalls as visions of pure strength- free and all-powerful beings. I recreate these posters now, reflecting on that fantasy of absolute freedom that seemed so possible in my youth. My reinterpretations contain aspects of that idealistic view, depicting strong beasts among beautiful backdrops. Now however, they are harnessed. They are not free absolutely but fighting for it. Fragmented images of horses emerge from dreamy rainbows and fluffy clouds, bits in mouth, reins tight, sweating, drooling.

Behind the Bit (I) and *Behind the Bit (II)* (Figure 3) manifest as largescale posters, mounted to manipulated plexiglass. Stainless steel hardware and a set of reins hold them upright and rigid. Rather than being adhered to the wall they stand away from it, existing among the viewer, taking up space.



Figure 3. *Behind the Bit (I) and (II)*. 2019.

Further nostalgic imagery appears in the form of photos once printed in magazines targeting “men’s interests”, of actresses from early 2000’s (typically female targeted) teen dramas (such as *Gossip Girl* and *The O.C.*) These depictions of male-gaze idealized female sexuality mingle with the frothing power of the horses, both asserting their presence and addressing the struggle to reclaim feminine wildness. Both on a quest to reclaim their existence as one of power.

Through this work I grapple with societies repressed desires and the spectrum of control, or lack thereof, we have in our sexual identities- the cultural conditioning that occurs via exposure, opinions, judgements, and force of others that begins prior to our sexualities developing and carries with us well beyond. I am reclaiming the title of Horse Girl as one of independence and pleasure, the depiction of the relationship of female and animal as one of feminine power. I am also acknowledging how flawed societies acceptance of feminine power still is, and that there is still a very present struggle.



Figure 4. *I Wish I Was a Cowboy (1)*. Video Still. 2018.

III. VIDEO WORLD

I think of nostalgia as both a form of escapism, but also as a way to analyze past ideals and work towards a better future. Video games provide entry to an inaccessible realm, especially to adolescents who have less control over their lives, but to adults as well. Reflecting on my access to, and engagement with the digital world during many crucial years of development, I turn to video games again to not only participate in fantasy, but to also evaluate the nature of various designs and the effects they have.

I Wish I Was a Cowboy (1) (Figure 4.) is created from gameplay from *My Horse and Me*. This game allows the player to digitally engage in a dream world of caring for, riding, and showing their own horse. The video is a slow-motion loop of the player (in this case a blonde girl) riding her horse through an idyllic pasture, disregarding and passing by the set course (outlined by floating yellow stars) and jumping over fences.

An accompanying video, *I Wish I Was a Cowboy (2)* (Figure 5.), is created using gameplay from *Grand Theft Auto (GTA) V*, a game that positions women and sex workers as inferior and dispensable. This specific video features the player engaging in first-person-view intercourse. Throughout the video, a smaller screen appears displaying the same video, but opened on the familiar scene of the early 2000's default Windows' desktop background, a recognizable image that is burned into the brains of Microsoft-using millennials. The action is slowed down and looped, with distorted audio from the game- deep, slow, digitized breathing. As the video is projected, it passes

through a clear vinyl sheet that is hung by equestrian reins with text taken from the play *Equus*, a narrative that deals with conflict between personal pleasure, values and desires vs. societal expectations. A contrast to the more light-hearted nature of its counterpart, the two videos offer context of play, idealized innocence, violence and fantasy to each other and the viewer.



Figure 5. *I Wish I Was a Cowboy (2)*. 2018.

Further videos are made from Second Life game play. I have created my own avatar, altered to look as much like me as possible. She engages with spaces such as shower rooms and pools, churches, strip clubs and public sex parties. In the video *Girth* (Figure 6.) she lounges on a carousel unicorn, the horn between her legs, a nod to Freud's theory of the horse becoming a phallic, empowering extension of a girl as well as a symbol of the frustration in longing for power. In other videos she uses sex toys while a rocking horse looms in the background. She furiously scrubs her hands clean and is watched in a public shower.

I spend time navigating through these alternate worlds, (all of which have been designed by men- which is apparent even in the games intended to target young girls such as "My Horse and Me") and edit my game play down into clips that depict a specific narrative or mood.

The videos capture moments that flirt with both misogyny and empowerment, a line that is difficult to navigate in our society. This is used with the intention that both are acknowledged, both are felt, and that the demand for empowerment is deemed necessary.



Figure 6. *Girth*. Video Still. 2019

IV. ACKNOWLEDGING FEMMEPHOBIA: Resisting toxic devaluation of femininity

As misogyny continues its presence, it is important to be mindful of the varying forms it takes. It is so deeply seeded in our society and I continue to be (perhaps naïvely) surprised to find it within even the safest-feeling and highly progressive spaces.

I was raised female and thoughtfully and consciously still identify as such. I typically present in a moderate to highly feminine way, a choice I have struggled with time and time again. There is a vulnerability in doing so that I have had trouble understanding and have often resorted to taking on a more masculine aesthetic in an attempt to assert

myself or demand respect. This is a frustrating circumstance which I have learned is a product of femmephobia.

Femmephobia is one of many less recognized regulatory powers that polices genders, bodies, and sexualities, impacting individuals across various identities, perpetuated through the ideology that femininity is inferior. It is the fear or hatred of all people and things which are perceived as femme, feminine, and/or effeminate regardless of gender, and results in oppression of individuals whose gender presentation is classified in any way as being on the feminine end of the gender binary, due to clothing, behavior, or mannerisms (Tannehill, B.)

Femmephobia simultaneously reinforces and is reinforced by misogyny and exists within the realm of other toxic ideals such as heteronormativity, cis-normativity, homophobia, transphobia and the normalization of sexual harassment in public spaces.

Part of why this form of misogyny exists and is tolerated in so many spaces and communities is that it is justified because it is not privileging men. It is however privileging masculinity and is functioning in the same way. Rather than placing the preference on gender it is placing it on identity. As a cis-woman I have mainly felt the effects of it through being treated differently in professional environments, being shamed for my choices in personal appearance by “feminists”, and an overall dismissiveness of my demands and desires. Femmephobia however can manifest in

much harsher and detrimental consequences, often compromising both mental and physical wellbeing of feminine individuals.

It is ingrained in society that femininity is not a valid identity- it exists only for the male gaze and male consumption, and the only reason to present as feminine is to cater to such. While seen as attractive, it is also met with disdain and hatred.



Figure 7. *Girth*. Installation. 2019

With all of this in mind, I try to celebrate the feminine within my work. My installations incorporate elements of softness, pink, bows, make up, and fluid materials. In my aforementioned video work, I make specific editing choices, repositioning feminine bodies as sexually powerful. In one presentation of the video *Girth*, it is projected onto structures of varying rigidity, the image being broken up by their forms. Immersed in a world of pink fluffy clouds and rainbows, the feminine body is disrupted by the structure, but prevails, nonetheless. (Figure 7.)

Along with the celebration, I also express the frustration that exists. The reoccurring title within my work, *I Wish I Was a Cowboy*, draws attention to the devaluation that is placed on femme and femininity. Within my material choices, imagery and videos I aim to create my own femme version of being a “cowboy”.

V. CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS: The violence of “purity”

Religion and capitalist desire to control bodies are deeply rooted causes in the suppression of human sexuality and the freedom to choose our own identities. Society’s obsession with virginity, and concepts of purity and self-respect are violent and oppressive, with examples such as slut shaming, virgin shaming, and victim blaming as results and reinforcements of this ideology.

With considering this focus on shame and purity, my installations often comprise of forms that reference architecture found in barns, bathrooms, pools, and religious altars-

tiled to create cold, sterile exteriors. The white tiles emulate the slick surfaces of shower rooms, bathrooms, bath houses, and locker rooms: spaces created for naked bodies and where what Americans consider typically “private” acts occur. The bright white color allows for a clear distinction of any areas which are not perfectly clean.



Figure 8. *Chlorine (pt. 2)*. 2018.

Chlorine (pt. 2) (Figure 8.) is an example of one of these spaces. *Chlorine (pt. 2)* is a fragmented portion of a basin, reminiscent of a shower stall floor or small pool. At the bottom of this structure is a fantastical horse poster, with the mighty animal emerging from clouds at sunset. The digitally printed image is protected by a slimy layer of gel, with chlorine over top of that layer. Over time, the strongly scented chlorine eats through the gel and deteriorates the fantasy underneath. Another basin, *Chlorine (pt. 3: Salt Lick)* (Figure 9.) and its altar counterpart *Chlorine (pt. 4: Jawbreaker)* (Figure 10.) feature equine and female imagery. A horse, tongue out, pulling at its bit, and two girls' mouths sharing a piece of candy. Inside the altar the image reflects onto the tiles, a smear of slimy, wet gel enhancing this affect while inside of the basin, the image is distorted by a foot of chlorinated water which again, slowly eats away at the image.

These spaces also reference the view of the public, how the view of others can have such a deep and lasting effect on our behaviors and what we think of as acceptable and not acceptable.

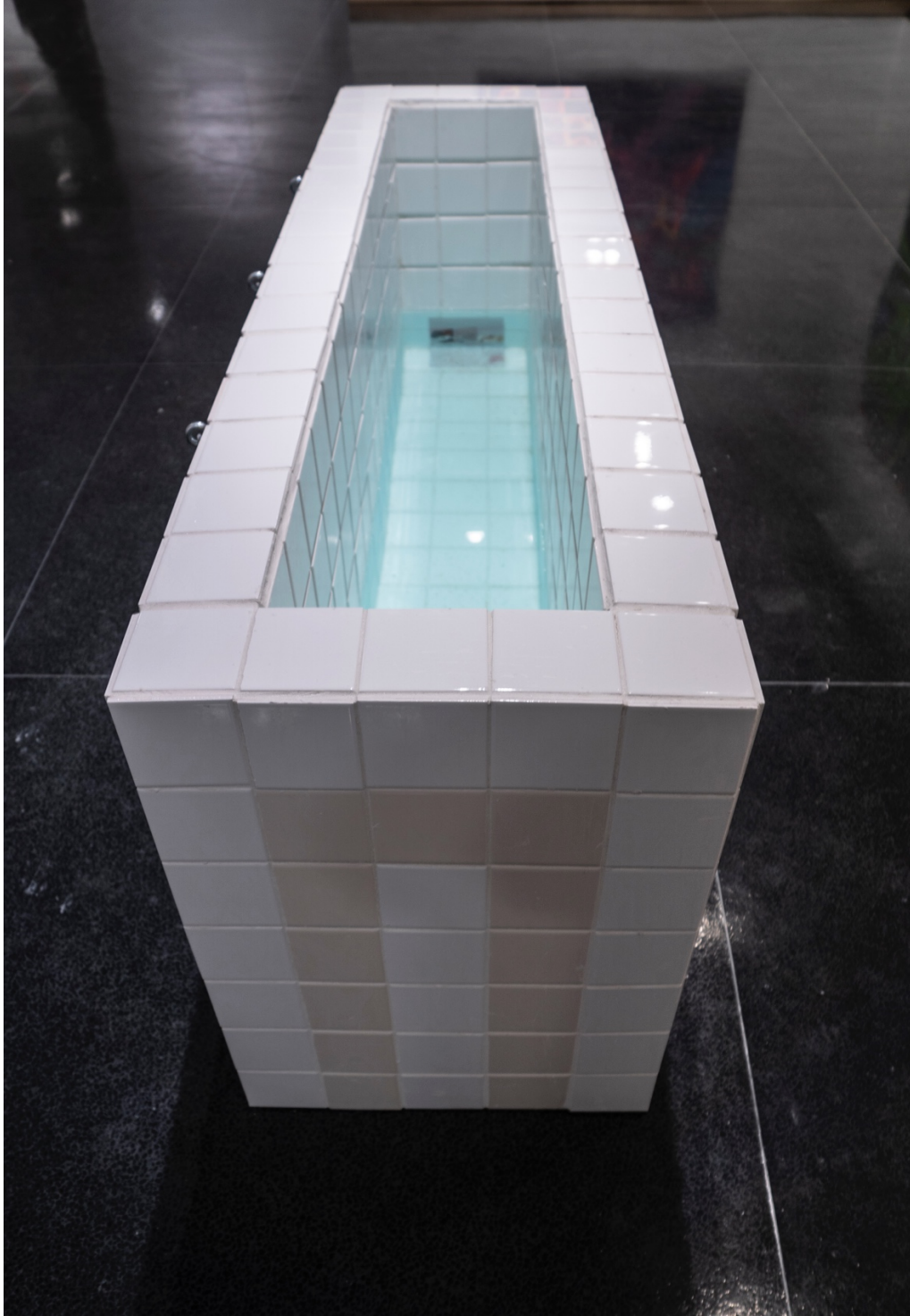


Figure 9. *Chlorine (pt. 3: Salt Lick)*. 2018.



Figure 10. *Chlorine (pt. 4: Jawbreaker)*. 2018.

Turning towards nostalgia again, *Pure Vanilla* (Figure 11.) is a piece from my idyllic horse poster series featuring a frothing horse and Jessica Simpson, posing with her ex-husband, Nick Lachey. A popular 2003 reality show on MTV “Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica” focused on the marriage of this pop couple and their sex life after Jessica had worn a purity ring given to her by her father at age twelve, finally married and was then able to have sex. Jessica Simpson was one among many celebrities in the early 2000’s to publicly boast their “waiting until marriage” promise. This idea of purity was a theme that denoted self-worth across young women in the public eye as well as all other girls in America. The concept stemming from Christian beliefs infiltrated all lives through peers, superiors, and celebrities. Instead of parents being comfortable helping their child through understanding their physical existence and sexuality, they were taught to violently suppress it with threats and promises alike, gifting jewelry that functions like a bribe and a badge of honor. To break this promise was not to let down only yourself but also your father, your entire family, your entire church, God.

This is ultimately a control of bodies enforced by fear, shame and censorship in a variety of communities (not strictly religious) through coercive language including “slut-shaming” and “victim-blaming.”

I address both physical and digital public spaces in my work as contemporary censorship continues increasing on the internet and social media platforms, including

bans on accounts/forums/hashtags that talk about anything remotely related to sex, the absurd community guideline on both Facebook and Instagram restricting images of women's nipples, and Facebook's recent (2018) extensive guideline update banning "content that engages in implicit sexual solicitation."

This amendment to Facebook restrictions as well as similar limitations on websites such as craigslist and reddit spawned after FOSTA-SESTA acts were passed. These acts claim to prevent sex trafficking by allowing officials to police websites, however within this there is no differentiation between consensual and non-consensual sex work and is actually making it much more difficult for sex workers to do their work safely. The acts have set up a template for broad-based censorship and over-policing of sites.



Figure 11. *Pure Vanilla*. 2019.

“Personal and societal shame around sex is product of internalization of our misogyny driven capitalist world.” (Sumac, P.)

We are in a time of simultaneous progress and regression. Sexuality is something that has been and continues to be more openly celebrated, but pleasure is still highly hindered and stigmatized. Even most of the “sexually explicit” or sex positive outlets, institutions, and websites have content deeply ingrained in heteronormative ideas of pleasure and sex.

VI. (ASKING FOR A FRIEND): Shame of the “un-natural”

“Formed in the paths of the vicissitudes of the drives, all human sexuality is deviant. Nothing about it belongs to anything that could be described as a “natural,” instinctual process. In the natural world instinctual behavior is hereditary, predictable, and invariant in any member of a given species. In the human animal, what might once have been instinct now lives only in shifting networks of symbolic forms, from social laws to image systems: those we inhabit in our increasingly “media-intensive” environment, and which inhabit us- in our memories, fantasies, and unconscious formations. Human sexuality is not natural, it is cultural.” (Burgin, V.)

With all of the pressures of societies view and cultural stigmas, we forget that our bodies are our own. Through my work I am interested in promoting a transition out of sexual shame, and into erotic empowerment. I hope that while I address the frustrations of this uphill battle, I can also instill the idea that we do not need to perform in a particular way in order to be worthy.



Figure 12. *#AskingForAFriend*. Video Still. 2019.

#AskingForAFriend (Figure 12.) *#AskingForAFriend* (Figure 12.) is a video of using an equestrian bit on myself. By choosing to put myself in the position it is a moment of both struggle and power. It presents a grey area/ back and forth of disgust and desire, degradation and empowerment. Power, however, like identity, is not (or should not be) simply binary, but a fluid range. *#AskingForAFriend* addresses intricacies of sexual relationships, power relationships, and relationship with self. Aside from use in controlling horses, bits are used as a “gag” in human sexual play, especially BDSM. Arousal from either using these devices or watching them be used has been deemed to fall under the category of “paraphilia”- previously referred to as “sexual deviance” or “sexual perversion”. This categorization using words or phrases with typically negative

connotation is a demonstration of our society's demand for sexual normativity. This dictation of what is acceptable to do with one's body or what is OK to find arousing can be particularly harmful to adolescents as they begin to navigate their own sexualities. The title *#AskingForAFriend* comes from a popular social media hashtag, referencing the concept of being too embarrassed to admit interest in a topic, but simultaneously purposefully exposing their interest by using this hashtag.

In Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horrors*, she defines abjection as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules." (Kristeva, J.) I consciously strive to create moments of this kind of abjection, and also believe that it is inherent, given the subjects that I am working with. I use imagery and/or physicality of materials that are both revolting and familiar to invoke a reaction of disgust and a forced recognition of our own human materiality. Silicone and hair are combined to create restraints or leads that are simultaneously reminiscent of phallic flesh and sex toys in my series titled *Lunge*. Contorted forms, bodily gelatin and alluring yet gross slime come together to create an installation titled *Nude Beach*. As I am displayed drooling through a bit in *#AskingForAFriend*, abjection manifests in feelings of repulsion and familiarity.

In my video work utilizing digital video games I will zoom the view of the camera in too close to the avatars, penetrating their digitized bodies so you can see through parts of them, what is happening inside of them, creating an abstract scene. (Figure 13. And Figure 14.) Body parts and glitchy movements comprise scenes of group sex, digital vulnerability mixed with digital pleasure, a removed form of the sex in which humans can be reluctant or unwilling to engage in real life.



Figure 13. *Kitty3000k(Clean Hands)*. Video Still. 2019



Figure 14. *Kitty3000k(Clean Hands)*. Video Still. 2019

VII. FANTASY NOW

We live in a toxic culture where social stigmas and even laws dictate how we relate to our bodies and our sexuality, creating a sense of anxiety and need to act in accordance to these norms. I look to nostalgia to analyze our policing of bodies, looking to the time before the shame really began, and when the idea of becoming an adult was one of eagerness, full of hope and excitement for an ultimate freedom; A time when fantasies felt one-day obtainable.

There is an overwhelming optimism for the future in our culture, constantly focusing on working towards ideals that may or may not ever manifest and may or may not actually be positive- but is perhaps just what society pushes as such. It is important to consider ways of detaching from lives that do not work. (Berlant, L.)

In the video *Kitty3000k(Clean Hands)* (Figures 13, 14, 15.) Glimpses of male, female, and non-human bodies, angel wings and BDSM attire, all make an appearance in this compilation of scenes of pleasurable interaction. Cut with clips of masturbation, voyeurism and my avatar scrubbing her hands clean, this video is simultaneously a celebration of sexual openness and freedom, as well as acknowledging the still-present stigmas. I think it is important to explore beyond what was assigned to us as individuals, and into constructing a self-actualized identity. I aim to present optimism as a provocation of seeking out fantasy in an accessible way rather than a hinderance or unobtainable dream for the future.

I see the horse functioning within my work as the source of power and also what is being bridled and controlled. I think of sexuality and identity in a similar way, the source of the power existing within us but societal structures bridle our expression and pleasure, in a way that we are not just policed by others but are conditioned to do a great deal of it to ourselves.

This policing begins long before adolescence, but that seems to be around the time that we begin to become aware of our choices and desires.

Through my work I acknowledge the pressure to limit our sexual interests and identities to what is deemed “normal” or to benefit capitalist and patriarchal ideals, while questioning the potential for change, demanding space to be soft, to be feminine, to be erotically empowered in whichever way we choose.



Figure 13. *Kitty3000k(Clean Hands)*. Video Still. 2019

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