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FOR ALEXANDER: AN EXPLORATION OF GOOD OLE BOY
IDENTITY AND MORTALITY

by

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B.F.A. University of Alabama - Birmingham, 2010

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the School of Visual Arts and Design
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term

2013

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ABSTRACT

“For Alexander” is an exhibition about masculinity as it is exhibited by Southern “good ole boys”. I rely on original and appropriated imagery, as well as memories of loss and humor from my childhood in Alabama. Combining mixed media and sculptural elements has allowed me to investigate the subjects that interest me. I explore and artistically comment on these subjects through a mix of personal and culturally loaded imagery that records what I have either experienced or researched, and which I realize through the ironic use of non-traditional materials, such as sequins and rhinestones.

My work examines stereotypes and my own beliefs about Southern good ole boys. I also reflect on elements of Southern hypocrisy, and I question long standing social practices with the help of historical and contemporary media sources.

My exhibition is dedicated to my great uncle, who was murdered by his father, a preacher, during the Great Depression.

This paper is dedicated to my mother, Tracy Joe Craft.

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INTRODUCTION

When I entered graduate school, my earlier work addressed my personal awareness of my surroundings. I was dealing with specifics of Southern culture and anything that projected a Southern sense of storytelling, pop culture and irony. Though I wasn't yet addressing the subject of Southern masculinity, my earlier work became a foundation for my current work.

The research for this series addresses traditional and contemporary views of Southern masculine identity that are communicated and understood through historical, cultural and personal perspectives. The research has strengthened the relationship between me as an artist and my body of work.

The mass commercialization of the good ole boy image for mainstream audiences can be traced from the mid 20th century and onward with the rise of country music stars, such as Hank Williams, George Jones and the Grand Ole Opry, as well as with the rags-to-riches success of Elvis Presley; the poor boy turned rhinestone sex god of his generation. The portrayal of film stars like Burt Reynolds (*Figure 2*), along with shows like the "the Dukes of Hazzard" (*Figure 1*), fueled the preconceived notions of the good ole boy, which was sadly accepted as a standard of male behavior for many in the South. Programs such as "Leave it to Beaver" and "The Andy Griffith Show" tried to inoculate American men against their fears of conformity in suburbia. But these shows did little for good ole boys who were adamant about protecting their households and communities from integration and about preserving their uniquely Southern social identity (Estes, Watts 112).

My development of a good ole boy identity began with my upbringing in a paternalistic culture whose definitions of masculine roles and assertions were projected onto me at an early age. I am influenced by pop culture and subcultures associated with punk rock, hot rods, and pride in Southern heritage. The notions of male-dominant behavior, a lack of compassion and violence associated with a narrowly defined notion of manhood powerfully affected me as a young male. I mock hypocrisy that purports to express Christian values, but doesn't, when I artistically depict so-called masculine imagery with traditionally "feminine" materials.



Figure 1: *Daisy Dukes*, 36" x 36", Photo by Author, 2012



Figure 2: *Burt*, 36" x 36", Photo by Author, 2012.

MATERIAL

The work was heavily influenced by simple imagery employed by consumer product advertisers to appeal to males. The artwork consists of 36" x 36" framed wood (*Figure 3*) representational images that are created by arranging thousands of individually glued sequins on wood. The overlapping fish scale-like pattern of the sequins reinforces the surface of the pictures and greatly reduces the chance for damage (*Figure 4*). The size of the sequins ranges from 5 mm to 10 mm. They are affixed to the surface using an over-the-counter industrial epoxy. The typical result is a vibrant eye-catching surface characterized by unexpected materials (*Figure 5*). My use of so-called feminine materials can be traced back my early encounters with cultural icons from country music, professional wrestling, and other purportedly masculine activities in with "masculine" performers adorn themselves in rhinestone and sequin suits. The cropping and rotation of my artistic images hinders the viewer from a quick "read" of the work, while eliciting a sense of identification with my images.



Figure 3: *Mack Truck*, 36" x 36", Process photo, Photo by Author, 2012.

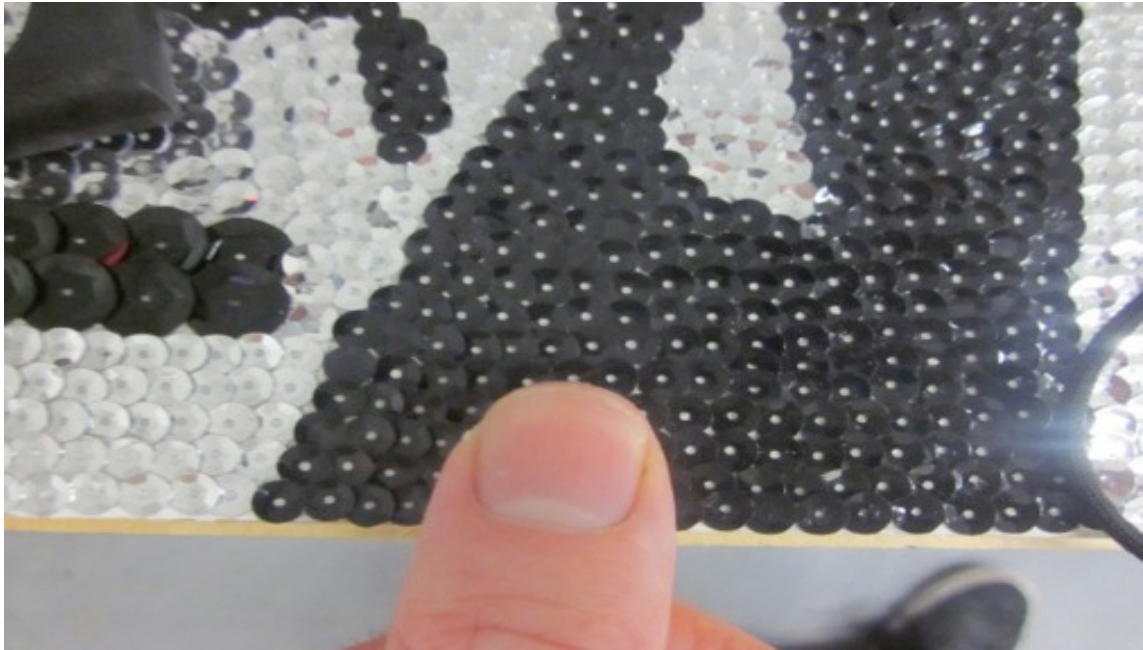


Figure 4: *Mack Truck*, 36" x 36", Process photo, Photo by Author, 2012.



Figure 5: *Mack Truck*, 36" x 36", Photo by Author, 2012.

My earlier work reflected my unhappiness with being a good ole boy. My depiction of punk rock icons, such as the infamous Misfits skull (*Figure 6*) and the cover of Iggy Pop's "Lust For Life" album (*Figure 7*), mirrors my influences despite their ambiguity for audiences unaware of the imagery. Later, I incorporated commercialized images, such as Ed Roth's "RatFink"

(Figure 8) and the Vans' "OFF THE WALL" logo (Figure 9), into a depiction of "falsified rebellion", or images I believe projected "rebellion" towards consumers. I adapted my aesthetic to my upbringing and to my long held notions of what it means to be a good ole boy.



Figure 6: *Skull*, 36" x 36", Photo by Author, 2011.



Figure 7: *The Passenger II*, 36" x 36", Photo by Author, 2011.



Figure 8: *RatFink*, 36" x 36", Photo by Author, 2011.



Figure 9: *Off The Wall*, 36" x 36", Photo by Author, 2011.

BACKGROUND

The idea of studying the good ole boy's identity was triggered by my childhood in a strict, paternalistic society and by my having witnessed the contradictory traditions and gender roles projected on generations of Southern white men. Growing up without a steady paternal figure made me question my own masculine identity, but it also protected me from the usual social constraints and allowed me to view the gender roles of Southern society with greater clarity. To males born without the privilege of a steady paternal figure, the social pressures to conform to conventions of masculine identity can change a young male's attitude from compliance to rebellion. Author David D. Gilmore explains, "The norms of masculinity are projected outward from the individual psyche onto the screen of culture; public culture is individual fantasy life writ large. I think this explanation is useful in some cases but supererogatory. More damaging, it fails to give social constraints that enforce male conformity to manhood ideals; as we shall see, boys have to be encouraged – sometimes actually forced – by social sanctions to undertake efforts towards a culturally defined manhood, which by themselves they might not do." (Gilmore 25). Undermining masculinity is my ultimate rebellion in a society of strict and regimented manhood as it is prescribed in the Deep South. To defy--even artistically--gender norms in the South is to invite scorn and exclusion.

My father was born in the South and raised on a farm in west Alabama and in suburban Birmingham. His nonviolent, enlightened approach to his environment and those around him was a departure from traditional masculinity, and his approach had a great impact on me as a child. Though my father enjoyed the pleasures of muscle cars, loud music, and other ostensibly manly things, his mild temper and liberal ideology were at odds with his conservative upbringing under

his father's watchful eye. At the age of six, I experienced my parents' divorce. As a child of a single mother, I was exposed to other father figures who sought to perpetuate the notion of being a good ole boy, and who felt it necessary to forcefully educate me in accordance with their ideas of masculinity. The physical and mental abuse that these individual men subjected me to had a lasting impression on me, and that is what led me to doubt the traditionalism that defines so many men in my surroundings.

I try to expose the hypocritical views and insecurities associated with the good ole boy identity through my selections of Pop and Southern imagery and icons. Most notably, my use of historical imagery establishes a frame of reference for the viewer and helps connect figures and images to each other that would otherwise not be connected. Most cultures endorse an image of the male role as something that is achieved through conscious development and rituals, and not automatically (Gilmore 11). The commercialization of the antebellum South following the Civil War created an ideology of manhood for Southern white men based on their defiance to changing contemporary standards, which they achieved by clinging to secessionism, segregation, conservatism, and the refusal to recognize female and minority rights. The rise of pro-segregationist behavior during the 1950's and 1960's was not just a counterattack from by insecure white men against a more integrated society and intrusive federal government; it was the angry response of white men who had benefited from low wage black labor and who sought to rally working class white men by propagandizing "Southern traditionalism" (Estes, Watts 100).

The influence of Southern culture in my work also stems from ethnic and cultural differences that I have noted among whites in the South. Having been brought up in an Appalachian family and raised in the Deep South, I found that many of the traditions of my family history conflicted with some of the other Southern social norms of my surroundings. This fueled my discontent with local assertions of masculinity that I felt were not congruent with what I experienced. In contrast to the standards of the Anglo Saxon-based Deep South, the clannish structure of the Appalachian household was much more flexible when it came to defining gender roles, due to the economic woes facing the Appalachian region. Although paternalistic, the heads of households, as well as many other men in the home, were accustomed to performing some of the traditional roles of their female counterparts, such as cooking, sewing, cleaning and various other crafts--as a form of self-reliance during hard times. Likewise, many Appalachian women were not bound to the traditional duties of the household and participated in the upkeep of livestock, hunting, and farming. (Bercaw, Ownby 23). I acknowledge the less strict gender roles associated with Appalachian identity when I incorporate traditionally feminine materials in my artwork.

INFLUENCES

Influences on my art range from the work of contemporary artists to folk artists to non-art related purveyors of Southern culture. Banks Violette is a contemporary artist known for creating large-scale sculptures and installations inflected with heavy-metal references and his notions of social entropy. Violette debuted genres not familiar to the fine art world and gained notoriety for the directness of his work. Violette's installation "Untitled (Church)" 2005 (*Figure 10*) at the Whitney Museum of Art created a stir due to its morbid, menacing approach to different subject matter. The installation included the replica of a burned church, made of salt and resin, and a sound installation by prominent members of the Scandinavian death metal scene. One of his collaborators is imprisoned in Norway for the murder of a band member in 1991. Violette's use of light fixtures and minimal music equipment created a sense of materiality that has come to be associated with his work. My use of non-traditional materials and quirky subject matter is parallel in many ways to those in Banks Violette's work.

Anselm Kiefer's art has influenced me because of his use of culturally charged imagery, subject matter and--like Banks Violette, --a reputation for using unexpected materials. His book series, which is made of lead, is a good example of (*Figure 11*) a surprising choice of material. Kiefer's artistic evocation of post-WWII German guilt is similar to my exploration of White racism manifested during the post-Civil War Reconstruction in the American South.

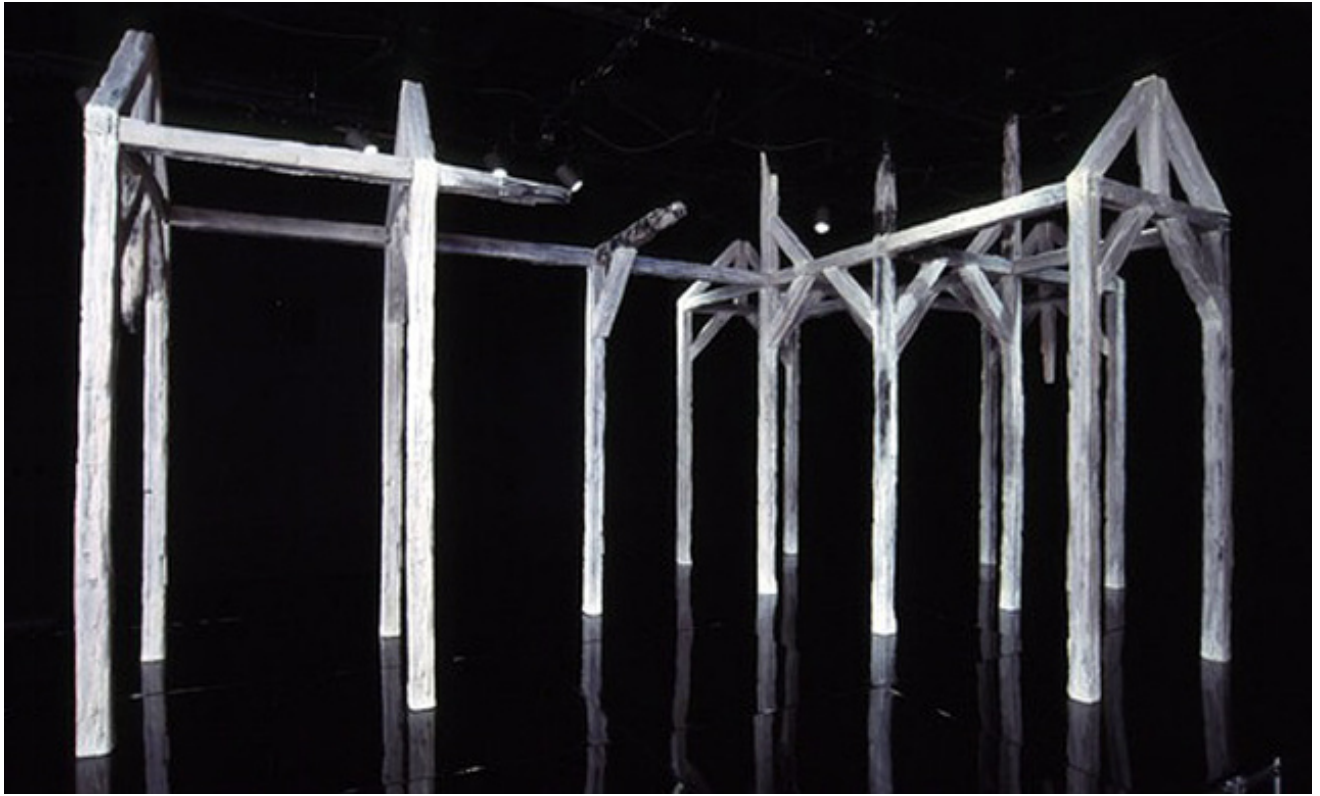


Figure 10: *Banks Violette "Untitled (Church)". 2005*



Figure 11: Anselm Kiefer “Book With Wings” 1992-94.

Shaun El. C. Leonardo is a contemporary artist based in New York City. His work explores personal masculine identity by employing traditional and contemporary figures ranging from comic book characters, athletes and masculine mythological characters. Leonardo’s endurance pieces have included physically demanding three-hour bouts of professional wrestling inside a caged ring (*Figure 12*). I enjoy his work because of his over-the-top “take” on masculine identity.



Figure 12: *Shaun El C. Leonardo “Battle Royal Performance” 2009. Photo by Bob Martus.*

Loy Allen Bowlin has had an influence on my work because of his use of rhinestones and his compulsion to decorate just about anything in his possession with them. Known as “the original rhinestone cowboy”, Bowlin achieved folk art cult status. His Cadillac, wardrobe items, eyeglasses, and even dentures, glistened with rhinestones. After Bowlin’s death in 1995, the Koehler Foundation acquired his house and moved it to the corporation’s museum in Wisconsin (*Figure 13*).



Figure 13: *Loy Allen Bowlin, Self Portrait, n/d.*



Figure 14: *Loy Allen Bowlin’s “Beautiful Holy Jewel Home of the Original Rhinestone Cowboy”* in McComb, Miss. n/d.

My mother raised me in a “house of Elvis”. I was named after Elvis’s character in the movie “Blue Hawaii”. I grew up with a picture of Elvis on every wall, and I learned to celebrate “the King’s” birth and death dates (January 8th and August 16th, respectively). Images of flashy suits, to pink Cadillacs, and Las Vegas-heyday show tunes were the norm in my household. I came to respect Elvis as an individual who had challenged racial segregation in the music industry in a turbulent era. Elvis’s story of “po’ boy turned rhinestone sex god” is, in my way of thinking, the epitome of American success, and Elvis ultimately changed cultural perceptions of the good ole boy identity for the better.

EXHIBITION

Some pieces from my MFA exhibition reference my experiences dealing with race and identity in response to the good ole boy mentality. “Cullman, AL” (*Figure 14*) connects an unpleasant childhood memory with materials that are also connected to my upbringing. When I was a child I would spend summers with my grandparents in Cullman, Alabama. At night I could hear the terrifying, high pitched howl of coyotes and see their shadows as they darted between the backyard floodlight and my bedroom window. As I got older I learned that Cullman was notorious for the Ku Klux Klan’s and other white supremacist groups’ activities. I began to associate my childhood fear of those country nights with the horror stories of brutality in the Deep South. The dead coyote serves as a metaphor for the survival of bigotry because of the coyote’s fearsome reputation as a scavenger and because of my triumph over fear of the animal at an early age.

The recent passing of my mother has persuaded me to incorporate materials associated with her hobbies of craft making. I employ rhinestones, sequins and puff paint to resurrect elements of my childhood. My mother and my aunts were part of the puff paint craft craze of the 1980’s, and most of my childhood wardrobe consisted of similar or related materials.



Figure 15: “Cullman, AL” 36” x 36”. Photo by Author, 2013.

I recently appropriated historical photographic artifacts that depict socially acceptable killing. In particular, I had become interested in a chapter in the history of violence in the Deep South and reflected on what I believed to be its roots in the traditional Southern family. I approach the subject by selectively cropping lynching photographs. The compromised moral

development of the lynch mob is at odds to strict Judeo-Christian fundamentalism associated with the region. A public lynching of African-Americans by white men occurred in the South for many decades after the Civil War. These otherwise conservative men carried out such atrocities to assert their social dominance over African-Americans and to reaffirm their own sense of masculine identity (DuRocher/Friend 47). During the early 20th century, a public lynching was treated like a town social event. The schools dismissed students early, workers would stop working, and vendors would take to the streets to sell food and memorabilia for the day's main event. In many cases, participants in the lynching mob would have their pictures taken next to the murdered (predominately African-American) victims for postcards and souvenirs. The observing and the participating white men, women and children are often photographed wearing smiles (Figure 15). Many of the adolescent boys present at a lynching were inclined by their elders to participate in the violence (DuRocher/Friend 54). Few men look into the camera with a somber tone. The crowds' expressions of joy, combined with self-righteous vitriol, represent the brutal face of Southern ideology from an earlier era.



Figure 16: “Lynching in Marion, Indiana” 1930.

The charged imagery of the lynching photos is carefully edited by me to decontextualize the depicted situation and to generate ambivalence in my viewer. My use of rhinestones and sequins also distorts the images and constructs disorienting focal points within the work. “Harvested By Predators II” (*Figure 15*) metamorphoses from a grotesque depiction of racial brutality into an intimate photo of young adults in a crowd. The emphasis of the editing is to question the purpose of the photographs and imply a sense of hypocrisy in the pictured outcome.



Figure 17: “*Harvested by Predators* ” 32” x 32”. Photo by Author, 2013.

I also use lynching photographs to emphasize the role of fathers by focusing on the relationship between father figures and children in the pictures. The traditions of bigotry and racial intolerance are forcefully transferred to younger generations by their elders. This series is a reflection on my exposure to racial propaganda and rhetoric at a young age. The two figures in “*Harvested by Predators*” (*Figure 16*) clearly indicate a paternal influence. The use of translucent

sequins isolates specific figures in the background and elevates their relative importance in the eyes of the viewer.

“Harvested by Predators” shows an all-male crowd posing for a photograph with the visually cropped feet of the lynching victim hanging down from above the frame. The position of the father figure at the center of the photo informs the viewer of the man’s preeminence in his household. The child in the bottom right is meant to verify the father-son relationship and the passage of traditions in Southern culture. My rhinestone treatment of the feet of the lynching victim allows an ostensible disconnection in the viewer’s thinking from the horrifying scene. The picture is edited to create a macabre contrast, highlighting the severity of the subject matter without revealing too much. The hazy, distorted quality of my “Harvested by Predators I & II” pieces mimics memory and cognition being distorted by my creation of a dreamlike state.

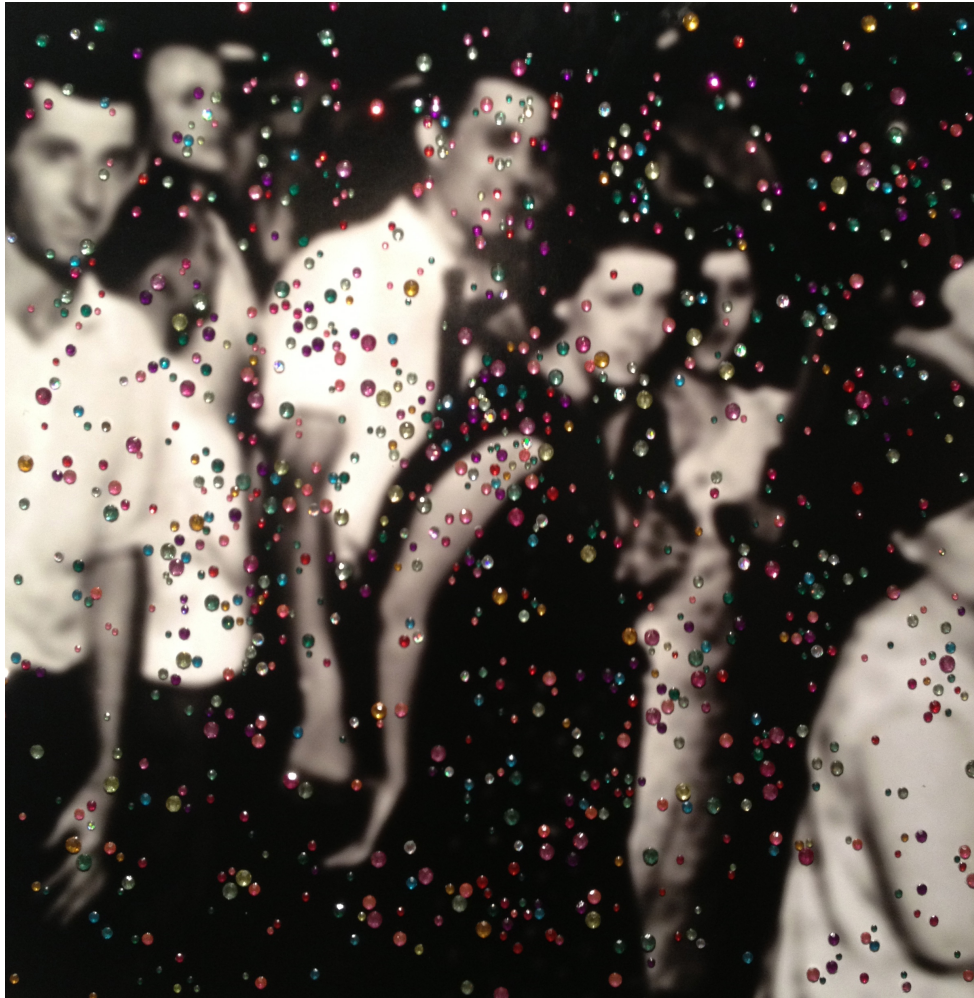


Figure 18: “Harvested By Predators II” 32” x 32”. Photo by Author, 2013.

CONCLUSION

I intend for my graduate thesis to address social stereotypes about the good ole boy identity and how it has reinforced particular attitudes of gender, race and identity in the Deep South . My ironic use of materials and imagery is intended to underscore my own understanding of prevailing standards of masculinity in Southern culture.

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