

REICHHARDT, MIRANDA, M.F.A. Unstretched: Wants, Palms, and Pits. (2019)  
Directed by Mariam Stephan 30 pp

This thesis explores my final series of paintings. In the writing, I consider unfulfilled wanting channeled through the surrogate, female self-portrait. Here, I assert the power of yearning as related to female desire (and subsequent agency) and ultimately unpack my relationship to the contemporary as a figurative, female painter.

UNSTRETCHED: WANTS, PALMS, AND PITS

by

Miranda Reichhardt

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2019

Approved by

---

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Miranda Reichhardt has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_  
Mariam Stephan

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_  
Barbara Campbell Thomas

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jennifer Meanley

\_\_\_\_\_  
Andrew Wasserman

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. PAINTINGS (AND WANTINGS).....	4
III. THE SURROGATE SELF .....	8
IV. FORMAL ELEMENTS .....	10
V. SYMBOLS (GENERALIZED) .....	13
VI. SYMBOLS (SPECIFIED) .....	15
VII. CONCLUSION.....	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	20
CATALOG OF IMAGES.....	21

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The socks I was wearing were almost knee high—green with red trim. Each one sported a stitched image of a woodpecker, black and white with small red heads. I’m a redhead too—I always have been.

That January, I lay there on the metal table, paper crackling beneath me; my legs spread wide in the stirrups. I was twenty-one and a pelvic floor therapist had just broken my hymen with a q-tip. I hadn’t even noticed amidst the rest of the pain.

Vaginismus, like many things, has been complicated—painful, exhausting, unfair, funny, and persistent. Trauma, repression, shame: they all took their toll and now, at twenty-five, my body does not open. Instead it shuts; independently of my conscious desires.

But it’s taught me a lot—made me consider self-protection and contradictory notions of vulnerability, openness, or invitation. In the early days after the diagnosis, I spent hours doing my exercises, crying from pain and then relief as I trained my body to open—first for a q-tip, then a finger, and then various phallic-like dilators, culminating in a terribly large purple phallus that would put most men to shame. But as time slipped by, so did my diligence. And today, I’ve been demoted to “tampon tolerance” at best.

Vaginismus is considered cured when intercourse is fully pain-free. But I've touched no one since that day in the doctor's office. So then what was I working for? Why was I doing these exercises?

At first I thought it was to prove to myself that if I worked at it, I could do it one day—take somebody inside me—that my body wasn't beyond repair. But the more I thought about it, I understood that my persistence in those days had far less to do with hopes for my body than it did for hopes of love—a desperate longing for a fantastical romance that might culminate one day, in a physical, communion declaration.

(Clown horns blare) That hasn't happened either. But as time moved on I thought about what it meant to hope for something unexpected, difficult, and not at all guaranteed. And through that, I realized that far more than hoping, I was instead *wanting*.

*Aha!*

So what do I want? A vegan pot pie, a cigarette, a cheap haircut, and reruns of old murder mystery TV shows—those all sound nice. But what I really want, more than anything, is tenderness—tenderness in unpromised romance, sexuality, and love—a tenderness of humanity. And here arrives the strangeness of yearning within a world so often cruel and indifferent. Yet still, it persists.

So what does it mean to *want* anyway? To want as a way of reclaiming my own agency? Or to want in answer to all the disillusioning realities *wanting* must persevere against? I'm still trying to figure that out.

With my work, I examine these questions by considering how a young female artist might explore self-portrait as a surrogate to self—a surrogate to desires, emotions,

sexuality, sorrows, wants, and expectations (or a lack thereof). With this in mind, through my thesis body of work, I am exploring my place within the contemporary—as a painter, as a figurative artist, and most importantly, as a woman wanting

CHAPTER II  
PAINTINGS (AND WANTINGS)

Through painting, I seek to explore the poetics of self, trauma, gender, shame, sexuality, and sexual dysfunction; of figure existing within the facets of voided worldspace. In such spaces, I am concerned with figural agency (or a lack thereof), desire's inevitable disillusionment (and its persistence nonetheless), and how the self-portrait might ultimately function as surrogate to self. Within these painted worlds, I offer a longing for tenderness amidst indifference and unease, which exists both inside and outside of the canvas. Here, there is power in wanting—a painted reclamation of woman's desire. Such explorations are considered with melancholic yearning, contradictory notions of openness or self-protection, and potentially anguished ha-ha-has, ultimately manifesting as unstretched painting—raw, symbolic, and proclaiming.

While my time in graduate school resulted in the production of several different (and varyingly successful) bodies of work, the intent of my thesis is to focus on the final five paintings, which in themselves represent their own questions, symbols, and language.

These final paintings all hang unstretched, sagging from the burden of their own weight. The first, *Vaginismus (The Point)* (Image I), 64 x 78" depicts a nearly life-sized self-portrait on the left side, dressed only in a pair of white socks and slate blue panties.



She points towards the opposite side of the canvas, where a cropped erection juts from the edge; the tip of a nose and the toe of a sock also cropped. Between these two pointing figures rest a collection of vaginal dilators, descending in size. The void space is pale and fleshy—swatches of cream and pink to mirror that of my own, milky white skin.

The next painting, *The Unicorn and the Red Lusties* (Image II), 64 x 80” shows an almost to scale self-portrait, (once more clad only in a pair of blue underwear and a set of white tube socks), her arms raised and her palms open to the viewer. Above, the legs and torso of a dapple gray unicorn swim through the air, her head (and subsequently any indicator that she is indeed a unicorn) cropped off the canvas. And below her sit two kneeling men—red silhouettes with flaccid yellow and pink penises respectively. They point to the ground. The background is again fleshy—though here, the tones are richer; undulating reds and pinks to represent the flush of my pale skin.

The third painting is titled *Suctioncup Ballroom* (Image III), 64 x 86”—the largest of the series. Five nearly life-sized self-portraits stand in a frieze-like composition, varyingly avoiding eye contact and reaching towards one another. The first three figures are each dressed in underwear, a pair of white socks, and a pair of white, debutante gloves. They are all touching, unlike the final two figures, one in a pair of underwear and socks (no gloves), and the other in gloves and a pair of underwear (her socks are missing). Both figures, despite reaching out, remain untouched. At the final figure’s feet sits an “all-American silicone” dildo—grotesque in its attempted realism. The space in between the figures is fragmented and cloudy—blue, gray, and stormy.

Next, is *Inside (The Altar)* (Image IV), 58 x 46". Smaller than the three before, and vertical in its orientation, a naked self-portrait sits with her back to us (the soles of her socked feet resting beneath her). Above, floats a cropped white semicircle stretching nearly across the entire top of the painting. On either side are two cropped male nudes churning through the scene, green in hue, their pink erections jutting towards the kneeling self-portrait. Behind the arches of their torsos are empty white spaces. Indicating a perspectival ground plane, two empty plates rest to the back left of the central self-portrait. As a whole, the space is filled with peachy pastels, pink and green and rich—stretching all the way to the edges of the canvas as though the world might continue beyond this staged glimpse.

Finally, comes *Inside (The Vessel)* (Image V), 58 x 46". Here, the scene exists in similarly peachy pastelled space, another white semicircle cropped, this time at the bottom of the canvas. Atop it rests the pelvis and legs of a cropped, larger than life self-portrait. She is bare except for a pair of white socks, her vulva shaved. The perspective here is that of her looking down at herself. Meanwhile, above her sit three glasses filled with differing levels of white liquid—their ground plane fundamentally separate from that of the figure. And lastly, cropped from the top extend two red erections, one with a pair of kneeling green legs attached and one pointing all by its lonesome.

Across this collection of paintings runs similar imagery: a self-portrait (or various selves) functioning as surrogate, red-haired and clad in socks or a pair of underwear respectively. Many of the paintings include bare breasts or phalluses (be it in the form of

penis, dildo, of dilator). And in each painting the objects and figures (both cropped and uncropped) rest in some sort of fleshy or cloudy void space.

In all these paintings appears an impossibility of coexisting symbols, objects, and figures. Here the space is not necessarily fantasy or dreamlike. Nor is it housing figural scenes of domestic upheaval—snippets of daily life made psychologically or sexually uneasy as artists like Ida Applebroog have explored since the late 1960's (Applin 1). Instead, I am concerned with depicting the preposterous conceivable—a space of absurd happenstance and coexistence of (mostly) recognizable figures and creatures; of uneasy or contradictory cohabitation. Through this, I strive for a palpable vulnerability of imagery, which spans across the paintings—of shifting figures (of shifting self) calling out in a shifting world, utterly headless of expectation. Like those female artists who have come before me, I search for a vulnerability in nakedness—my female figures are not traditional female nudes (passively laid out for the active male gaze), but rather exposed and confrontational naked, surrogate selves. The figures are at once both graceful and mortified—yearning and disillusioned (or perhaps even indifferent). With such vulnerability, I want to offer the viewer a glimpse of limitless and shifting worldspace; of a space housing moments of happenstance equally as tender and yearning as it is absurd or agitated.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE SURROGATE SELF

To begin the formal breakdown of these paintings as a collective, I start by examining the concept of female self-portrait as surrogate. For me, these surrogates represent an agency of wanting—one that is tender, brave, hopeless, vulnerable, and at times, desperate.

When I think of self-portrait, I think first of Alice Neel's 1980 *Self-Portrait*. The painted portrait sits naked and elderly in a striped chair. Like all Neel's works, this portrait is psychologically charged and expressively rendered—captured with empathy and purpose in pursuit of a representation of self and identity (Garrard 4). "The painted self appears active, holding herself perched holding herself perched in the chair rather than held up by it; simultaneously aware of and defiant towards the viewer's gaze—meeting our stare with a cocked brow and an alert (almost combative) look of her own." (Reichhardt 7) In this way, not only is Neel representing self, but also subverted historical notions of gendered looking—of who has the right to look.

On this note, I have also looked to Joan Semmel, an artist who has similarly overturned the traditional representation of passive female nude on presentation for the active male painter (or viewer). (Brodsky 331) But perhaps most significant to my discussion (for its relevance to the final painting of my thesis work) is the way in which Semmel not only challenges gender roles, but also asserts the female figure as painted

from her (both the figure and the artist's) own perspective. (Brodsky 331) Once more, painted self becomes a surrogate to both identity and body.

I would be remiss not to mention Tracey Emin, an artist whose work, as Alex Greenberger describes, focuses on “sexual misadventures, heartbreak, masturbation, and childhood trauma, among other things that most people avoid discussing.” (Greenberger). Ultimately, Emin’s artwork asserts the relevance of her own bodily identity—the female figures sprawled across her paintings and etchings serving to embody her own experiences of self; both sexually and emotionally. With Emin, once more the painted self (I might hesitate to call her works “self-portraits”) acts as a surrogate to body and self; to Emin’s individual and lived experience.

Lastly, considering tensions of various roles or statuses a figure might fill in one moment, I look to artists like Maria Lassnig who so elegantly “dehumanizes and rehumanizes herself repeatedly” (Cotter 2) in her works. The figures, much like self, are not one-noted, but rather contradictory, shifting, and full of multiplicities.

CHAPTER IV  
FORMAL ELEMENTS

First and foremost, I want the viewer to be confronted, not only by the size of the paintings, but by the relative size of the figures. Back in my first semester of graduate school, Falk Visiting Artist Kukuli Velarde stepped into my studio. At the time, my drawings and paintings were small, formulaic, and one-noted. Still, she was generous. And in a discussion about asserting female agency (in addition to agency of self) through painting she brought up the importance of size. I cannot recall her exact wording, but she mentioned her own large-scale, life-sized self-portraits—naked, open, and confrontational—and cited a desire for the figure to be treated as a bodily equal by the viewer; to offer a shared, bodily relationship between painted figure and physical viewer. Otherwise, she said, the figure becomes reduced—both in agency and in size. Otherwise, the female figure becomes small; on display for the viewer. Thus, I changed gears. In these thesis paintings of mine, the figures are nearly life-sized (if not slightly larger in some cases). I want the viewer to have to engage bodily—I want the surrogate, painted self to demand this first and foremost with their size.

So these paintings are large(ish). But perhaps more instantly noticeable: they are unstretched—the surface of the canvas marred by sags, droops, and creases—the fabric responding to the pull of its own weight. In this way, the paintings themselves remain bodily—imperfect and undulating. This is not new—many artists before have hung

paintings in such a way, but it is the femininity of subject matter coupled with presentation that begins to function differently within the contemporary. These paintings are not confined by the rigidity of a frame, but rather sensitive and soft. Here, they are not only bodily, but also coded (within the limited constructs of a gendered binary) as “feminine.” Beyond this, to leave the paintings in an unstretched state preserves their rawness—there is no attempt to hide their fragility, malleability, and by extension, their vulnerability. In this way, the paintings are open.

In addition to the unstretched nature of the canvas, the painted void begins to further suggest the bodiliness of the works. In the background, the paint is applied in fleshy strokes—pinks and blues that are squishy, cloudy, and yielding that fill the space. Thus the void that the figures reside in becomes ephemeral and murky—nebulous or vaginal (or even interior)—as if the space is limitless and rich.

This suggestion of limitless space fundamentally brings drawing into the conversation—the infinite quality of a sheet of white paper. Ida Applebroog once said, “drawing [is] like instant coffee—I could just draw and draw forever.” (Applebroog). A relatable sentiment. I still struggle with calling myself a painter—my roots are in drawing and drawing remains my most immediate form of expression—the way in which I see these paintings. For me, the inexhaustible constitution of the painted void functions within the language of drawing.

Finally, I hope for the paintings to suggest, not only limitlessness in relation to the drawing experience, but also in relation to the painted/drawn worldspace and the figures within it. Here, the figural relations within the scenes are just one moment amidst a sea of

endless possibilities. Pushing paint to the edges of the canvas, cropping figures, and including a fleshy voidspace hint at something more—possibilities beyond each painting. And with this in mind, I look to the tradition of scrolls—of what it means to offer a brief window into a world, one scene at a time. Traditionally the entire scroll is never unfurled, rather the displayed scene exists in some specific moment of inbetween. And thus these large-scale, wanting, confrontational surrogates to self exist in a static, frozen moment, hinting at potentially ongoing worldspaces and joined by various casts of figures, objects, and symbols—one painting at a time.



CHAPTER V  
SYMBOLS (GENERALIZED)

The trajectory of symbols in my paintings started with one-noted self-indulgence and has landed much more solidly in the realms of meaningful and nuanced legibility. The inclusion of an obese grey tomcat, the repetition of wine bottles, the presentation of a spatula (necessary for cooking the soy nuggets, which make up 50% of my diet) came and went—replaced by more complex objects and figures born of new ways of thinking, thus increasing the intricacies of both composition and meaning.

Here, the shift of symbolic directness is not truly separate from self-indulgence—in many ways, the specificity of the symbols included in my thesis work are still as deeply intimate as they are universal. I think about this balance, of how on one hand, I might use symbols to speak to my personal, sexual sentiments (as many have before me) (Semmel and Kingsley 4). And how on the other, I might speak to more general readings of pleasure, pain, and universal symbols of sexuality. I find myself straddling this line and considering the inclusion of objects and symbols slightly differently across these five paintings. However, there are several recurring elements that remain consistent across the works—elements worth clarifying.

First and foremost: the phallus. Or rather, the penis. This spring, Falk Visiting Artist Ricardo Dominguez dropped in for a studio visit. He said on first glimpse that he'd read my pieces as castration paintings. But he said after just a few more seconds, he

immediately understood that was not the intent. He said, “of course they aren’t [castration paintings]. That’s not even a phallus—that’s a penis!” For my part, I was relieved, (I loathe the interpretation that my surrogate figures are vengeful or violent). And indeed, most often I am not painting a phallus—but rather a key part (*the* part) of the cis male body. Like Eunice Golden, I search for something erotic, romanticized, shameless, and demystifying about the painted penis (Semmel and Kingsley 5). At best, the penis, when compared to the phallus, is vulnerable and intimate rather than oppressive and aggressive. But of course, things cannot be so straightforward. For, the penis is still ultimately a phallus (similar to how all squares are rectangles but not all rectangles are squares) and thus, the penis straddles legibility of meaning—at once as equally fragile and tender as it is domineering and violent.

And now for the underwear—the socks and underpants. In each of the five paintings, there is some variation of underwear on every surrogate painted self. Chiefly, the underwear conceals—protects the soles of the feet and the vulva—protects that which might otherwise be laid bare. But much like Manet’s *Olympia*, its inclusion also serves as a reminder of the figures’ nakedness—the breasts exposed repeatedly. In this way, across the works, the underwear exists in a state of contradiction—protecting modesty (and agency) while all the while directing to the figures simultaneous vulnerability, and that which she truly does bare.

CHAPTER VI  
SYMBOLS (SPECIFIED)

But other symbols do not function equally across all five paintings. Rather, there are certain figures or formal elements that seem to shift roles (and perhaps legibility) throughout the development of the work. *Vaginismus (The Point)* is the only painting to explicitly depict a set of vaginal dilators. Here, the symbolism is specific to the point of obviousness. However, for the casual viewer, my expectation is that the truth of their function is not quite legible. But that is, in some ways, the point. I don't quite expect the average viewer to linger long enough to understand the painting's meaning—to pull out their phone and google vaginismus. And yet, I'm showing it anyway—calling out for a moment of pause, tenderness, and understanding. Here, I think of Ingmar Bergman or Samuel Beckett—of what it means to search or wait for something all the while knowing you won't find it. And while these classic existentialists might deal more explicitly in notions of religious faith, the simple decapitalization of the religious *Him* (pulled directly from Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*) falls in line with my more secularly unfulfilled desires: “I call out to *him* in the darkness. But it's as if no one was there. Perhaps there isn't anyone.” (*The Seventh Seal*). And perhaps there isn't, but still, a call is made.

*The Unicorn and the Red Lusties* moves away from symbol quite so literal. I can't quite say what a “red lusty” is, but they seem to be these red, cis male silhouettes who are impish and servile while also being indifferent and un beholden. For me, they

represent the anonymous possibilities of men in the world and my own related desires and trepidations in wanting their attentions. Their size suggests their deference to the surrogate figure who towers above them, but she seems less sure of her dominance. In fact, she ignores them all together, instead baring herself for the viewer—beckoning. Above floats a prancing unicorn, cropped at the neck—its horn not seen (its existence only suggested by the title). In this way, the horn becomes a symbol of wanting—of female desire for a phallus. The horn’s possibility is hinted at, but remains ultimately nonexistent—the wants of the surrogate unrealized.

In *Suctioncup Ballroom*, the most startling moment is perhaps the addition of the synthetic dildo. It sits suctioncupped to the ground, poised and pink, almost as if it’s the sixth figure in the scene. The dildo is funny for me, and I think about artists such as Judith Bernstein using phallic imagery to cast projections of humor and anger. (Semmel and Kingsley 3). Here, the humor is defiant—claiming a woman’s right to look; to laugh. Part of the humor rests in the dildo’s attempted realism. But that humor is quickly undercut by uneasy disappointment. Once more, the longing for cis male anatomy is unrealized—unfulfilled with an “almost but not quite” inclusion of a detached, mechanical imitation phallus. Beyond the dildo’s anxiety is the pointed exclusion of gloves and socks on certain figures. In fact, only the final two figures are want for some covering (one missing her socks and the other her gloves). At first these figures do not seem particularly different from the other three. However, upon closer viewing it becomes clear that they are the only two figures who are not touching—who are not

being touched. Yet still, they reach out—their wants for contact perpetually unmet; suspended in the stillness of the painting.

With *Inside (The Altar)* and *Inside (The Vessel)* there are similar inclusions of symbol. Both paintings depict a large, white semicircle cropped off the page. The white is unmarred by paint, but remains pure and untouched. With *Inside (The Altar)* the circle looms above as if in position to be worshipped, but *Inside (The Vessel)* sees the circle at the bottom of the canvas. Here, a figure sits perched atop it—naked except for her socks (equally white). In this way, the figure's sex is corralled by white—as if to preserve and protect her purity. The white circle becomes a forcefield, the white socks flanked in front as if guarding some hidden entrance. Surrounding the white is pink, pastelled worldspace—bodily and rich.

In both these final paintings, sit various plates and cups. In *Inside (The Altar)* two plates rest empty, as if sitting out for collection that has yet to come. Once more, these vacant platters signify the unmet nature of wanting; of vaginal and emotional vacancy. Still, the plates are laid out, waiting, wanting, and challenging. Alternatively, with *Inside (The Vessel)* the cups are filled to differing levels. The liquid inside remains untouched by paint, once more suggestive of its purity or sacredness. Milk or semen? It remains open. Nurturing or potent? That remains open as well. Regardless, the cups separate the male figures from the female painted self. And while this female figure might not initially be read as specific in identity (missing the identifying red hair) upon closer looking there becomes an awareness of perspective. Here, like with Joan Semmel's works, the view is from that of the figure. We are seeing her body—her viewpoint. And in this way, she

becomes a distinct individual. I don't intend for the figure to be strictly read as my own surrogate self, but rather I want for her to be understood as her own—as self.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

Ultimately, through this body of work, I am exploring unfulfilled wanting expressed through the surrogate self-portrait. To put these paintings out in the world mirrors this wanting—a desire for tenderness, validation, fulfillment, and understanding despite the awareness that such wants will remain fully unsatisfied. Still, they exist—persist in their presence; in their wanting. There is power in yearning and I seek to reclaim the agency of female desire—a desire that endures despite trauma, disillusionment, fear, and dysfunction—a desire that endures because it must.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Applebroog, Ida. "Power, Feminism, and Art." *Art 2, Inc* (2005).
- Applin, Jo. "Generational Objects: Ida Applebroog's History of Feminism." *Oxford Art Journal* 40.1 (2017): 133-151.
- Brodsky, Judith K., and Ferris Olin. "Stepping out of the Beaten Path: Reassessing the Feminist Art Movement." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33.2 (2008): 329-342.
- Cotter, Holland. "The Art of Feminism as It First Took Shape." *The New York Times*. March 9, 2007." *The New York Times*(2007).
- Garrard, Mary D. "Alice Neel and Me." *Woman's Art Journal* 27.2 (2006): 3-7.
- Greenberger, Alex. "Tracey Emin's Heartbreakingly Erotic Art." *Artspace*. December 5 (2013).
- Reichhardt, Miranda. "A Casting of Agency: Alice Neel and the Motherhood of Figure." November (2017).
- Semmel, Joan, and April Kingsley. "Sexual imagery in women's art." *Woman's Art Journal* 1.1 (1980): 1.
- The Seventh Seal*. Directed by Ingmar Bergman. AB Svensk Filmindustri, 1957.



## CATALOG OF IMAGES

Image 1. *Vaginismus (The Point)*

Image II. *The Unicorn and the Red Lusties*

Image III. *Suctioncup Ballroom*

Image IV. *Inside (The Altar)*

Image V. *Inside (The Vessel)*



Image I. *Vaginismus (The Point)*



Image II. *The Unicorn and the Red Lusties*



Image III. *Suctioncup Ballroom*

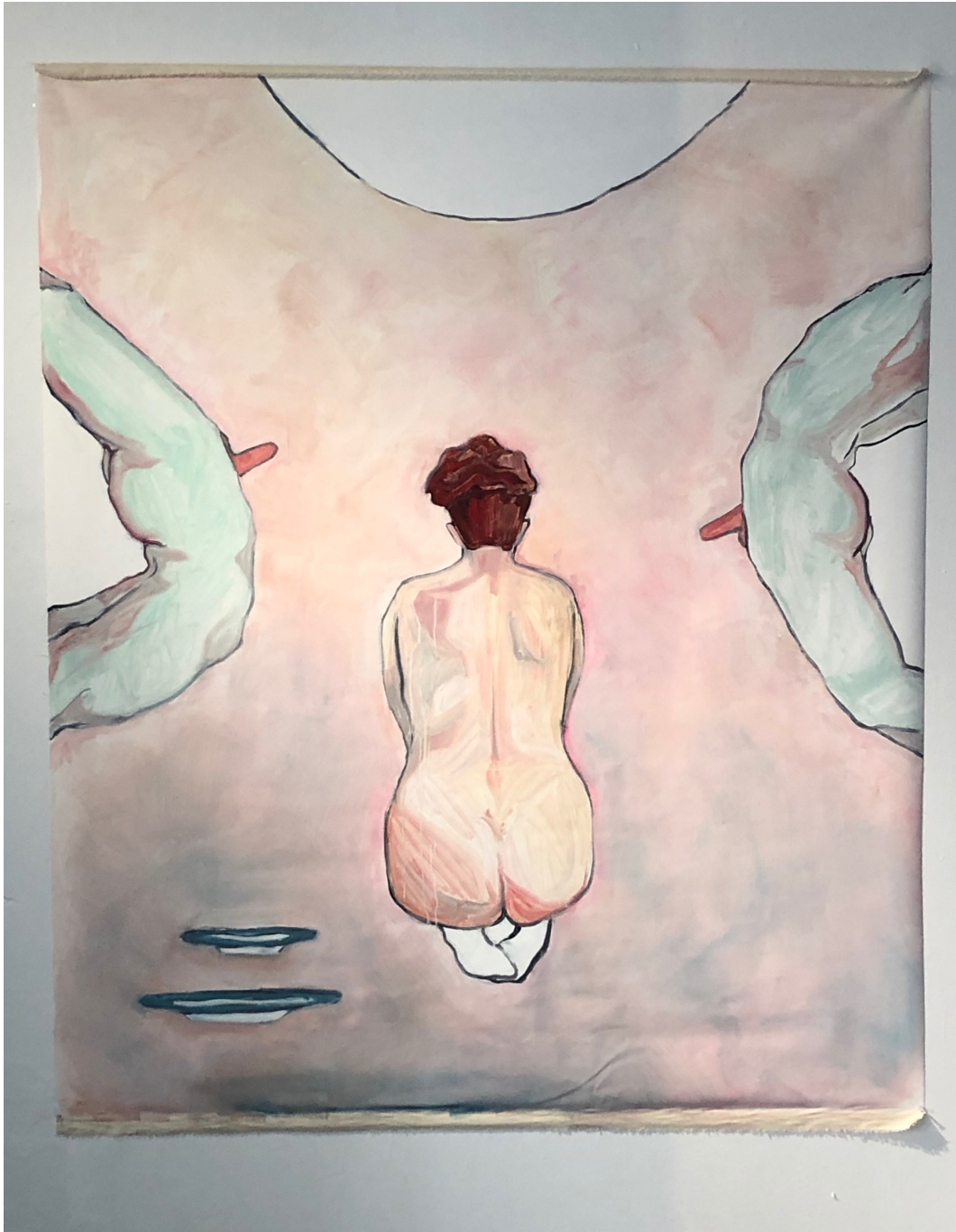


Image IV. *Inside (The Altar)*



Image V. *Inside (The Vessel)*