



*In the Flesh*

by Courtney Sierra Johnson



## *Acknowledgment*

*I would like to acknowledge those who have helped guide me through this journey providing encouragement, constructive criticism and honesty: Chris Stanley, Mario Kiran, David Katz, Lesley Baker, Katy Schimert, Nicole Cherubini, Glenn Adamson, Anina Major, and William Miller.*

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*In the Flesh*

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics in the Department of Ceramics of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

by

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2020

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# *In the Flesh*

Abstract

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This thesis is written in two parts:

Part one discusses the history of artistic swimming and its correlation to understanding the fluidity of gender. I adapt the analysis to interpret the underlying theme of critical theory. Tying to my work, I use the notion of the fountain to justify the theory of abjection towards the body and the suppression of natural bodily behaviors within society. Furthermore, the fountain explores water as a symbolic place of equality and gathering.

Part two was written during quarantine of the Coronavirus pandemic. It describes my inability to complete my original thesis and how my practice evolved within a home studio setting. Resulting from a thorough investigation of available materials, a new body of work was produced.

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Figure 0, Detail of *Teeny Weenies*



## Dedication

For unconditional love and support and pushing  
me to dream big,  
Thank you Mom and Dad.

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Grant,

Without you, none of this would be possible. I  
am so thankful to have you.

A collection of various embroidered fabric pieces, possibly for jewelry or small accessories, featuring intricate stitching, beads, and sequins in shades of pink, red, and blue. The pieces are arranged in a cluster, with some showing detailed floral or geometric patterns.

# Part I

# *Chapter One: Introduction*

*The inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it. This' is religious sensibility, and it always links desire closely with terror, intense pleasure and anguish.*

*-Georges Bataille, *Eroticism Death and Sensuality* (38-39)*

*I don't care what anybody says, Chuckie! Nakey is good. Nakey is free! Nakey is... Nakey!*

*-Tommy Pickles, *Rugrats**

My work initiates from an evolving interest in the nude body cast through a contemporary feminist lens. Challenging my conservative upbringing, my concepts draw on my experiences as a woman relating to body, abuse, gender, otherness, visibility, fetishism and most importantly the sport of artistic swimming. While providing the framework for societal critique, I use artistic swimming as a metaphor to analyze traditional gender norms, body hierarchies, and gender power dynamics found in today's culture.



Figure 1.1, *Escaping Gender* (alt. view)

I believe gender revolves around a spectrum. There are binaries on either side with varying levels of intersectionality. I believe people tend to fall somewhere between the binaries of gender, sex, and particularly sexual orientation. As these three characteristics are universally recognized and understood by every person, I encourage the viewer to find personal connections to my work. I want the universal viewer to understand that their own psychological and emotional baggage and experiences have an immediate and direct impact to how they perceive and ultimately interpret the work. These deep personal connections act as a catalyst, further expanding the viewers analysis and may even shed new light to topics of gender and sexuality in a way not previously understood.



Figure 1.2, *Escaping Gender*

# *Chapter Two: Artistic Swimming*



My personal relationship to artistic swimming has heavily crafted the way I view the empowered female body and the way it can interact with other beings and manipulate space. I utilize this relationship within my practice to investigate the unity and separations of gender and identity. There is a stigma surrounding artistic swimming that everyone needs to look and be exactly the same. Realistically, a broad number of body types, races, and expressions of self are coming together to form a cohesive unit or singular being.

Just as there is fluidity in gender, there have been transitional movements in synchronized swimming. The sport began as a female performance during the roman era. Gladiatorial arenas were trenched and filled with water to reenact famous naval battles. (Valosik par.3). During the performance, swimmers made elaborate patterns and transitioned from one aquatic formation to the next. The women who participated were often nude, resembling a lower-class patron or slave and depicted water nymphs or sirens. (par. 3).



Figure 2.2, *An illustration of the no-hands stroke* from *The Art of Swimming*

During the 1700's, synchronized swimming, or ornamental swimming as it was known at the time, transitioned into a male dominated sport lead by Benjamin Franklin. The first official male synchro competitions were held in Berlin in 1891 and then another London 1892. (Gracegemin A.3 par.3).

Succeeding these competitions, it slowly became more acceptable for women to participate as their bodies were more suitable for the performance.



In the 20th century, changes in gender roles and cultural norms propelled synchronized swimming into the exclusively female dominated performance of Water Ballet. Iconic visions of beauty, grace, rhythm, and glamour of the water deemed the performances as more of a show-girl exhibition rather than sport. This dynamic shift of performance parallels the western culture of the 40's and 50's, over-sexualizing and fetishizing women and enforcing typical gender boundaries, imposing that women may perform but cannot be seen as an athlete nor the overall performance as athletic. Only the overrated beauty of feminine performance prevailed.



Figure 2.3, Still frame, Esther Williams in *Ziegfeld Follies*, 1945



Figure 2.4, Japan at 2012 Olympics, Photo by Adam Pretty

The International Swimming Federation (FINA) officially changed the name of the sport to artistic swimming in 2017. (Butler par. 1). The sport has adapted a ‘higher, faster, stronger’ mentality transitioning the performance into the extremely athletic sport we know today. Due to athletes continuously pushing to equalize the gender gap, men are now allowed and encouraged to compete in the sport at the internationally elite level.

By men competing in the sport, they are challenging heteronormative gender biases and actively participating in a genderbending movement through the adornment of outrageously “femme” attire and the performance of synchronized actions. The sport resembles queerness and fluidity in itself through transitioning the participating gender binaries and drastically altering how the body progressed from a spectacle to empowering it from heteronormative stereotypes. This radical shift was only possible due to a growing contemporary sensitivity and awareness of capitalist power structures and dynamics which can ultimately be interpreted as critical theory.



Figure 2.5, Mixed Duet at 2015 FINA World Championships, Kazan, Russia. Photo by Mia Rossiya Segodnya



*Chapter Three:  
Critical Theory and  
the Abject*

Critical theory draws on concepts set in place by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud emphasizing the idea that philosophy should be used to confront the cultural, historical, and social structures through which people are dominated and oppressed. (Britannica Encyclopedia).

The idea of conscientization is paramount when analyzing the basic concepts of critical theory. Conscientization enforces the awareness of how political, social, cultural and economic power manipulates and ultimately shapes our personalized views of the world and therefore can be justified as the first step towards achieving social justice. (Sommers 2.2.1 pg. 11).

This theory involves locating one's self in relation to the social, economic, and political hierarchy power structures within society in order to self-evaluate and analyze why and how we view and/or separate ourselves from others. This also allows space for questioning our societal values and ideologies of power which leads to a more knowledgeable and open minded social order.

Critical theorist Bell Hooks describes critical consciousness as an individual's recognition that they are a product molded by a society that values whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality and monetary richness. Once we understand our place in such an elitist, sexist and racist culture, we can initiate the process of generating a more equitable society. (2.2.1 pg. 11).



Figure 3.1, *Untitled*



Figure 3.2, *Untitled* (alt.view)

Bodily hierarchy and privilege stemming from that hierarchy is an ongoing topic of investigation throughout my practice. Historically, a white, cisgender (someone whose sense of identity or gender aligns with their birth sex), straight male is at the top of that pyramid with women, LGBTQ, and people of color being underrepresented. I cast this concept into my work by composing bodily forms in a configuration of controlled chaos seeking to relieve the body from privilege and hierarchy. I attempt to embody basic concepts of critical theory into my sculptural forms and erotic fountains through pushing the viewer to evaluate their personal relationship to gender, sexuality, race and identity of self. Once the viewer recognizes their place in the social order, they have the ability to manipulate power structures for the generations to come.





Figure 3.3, Detail of *Untitled*



Figure 3.4, *Untitled*

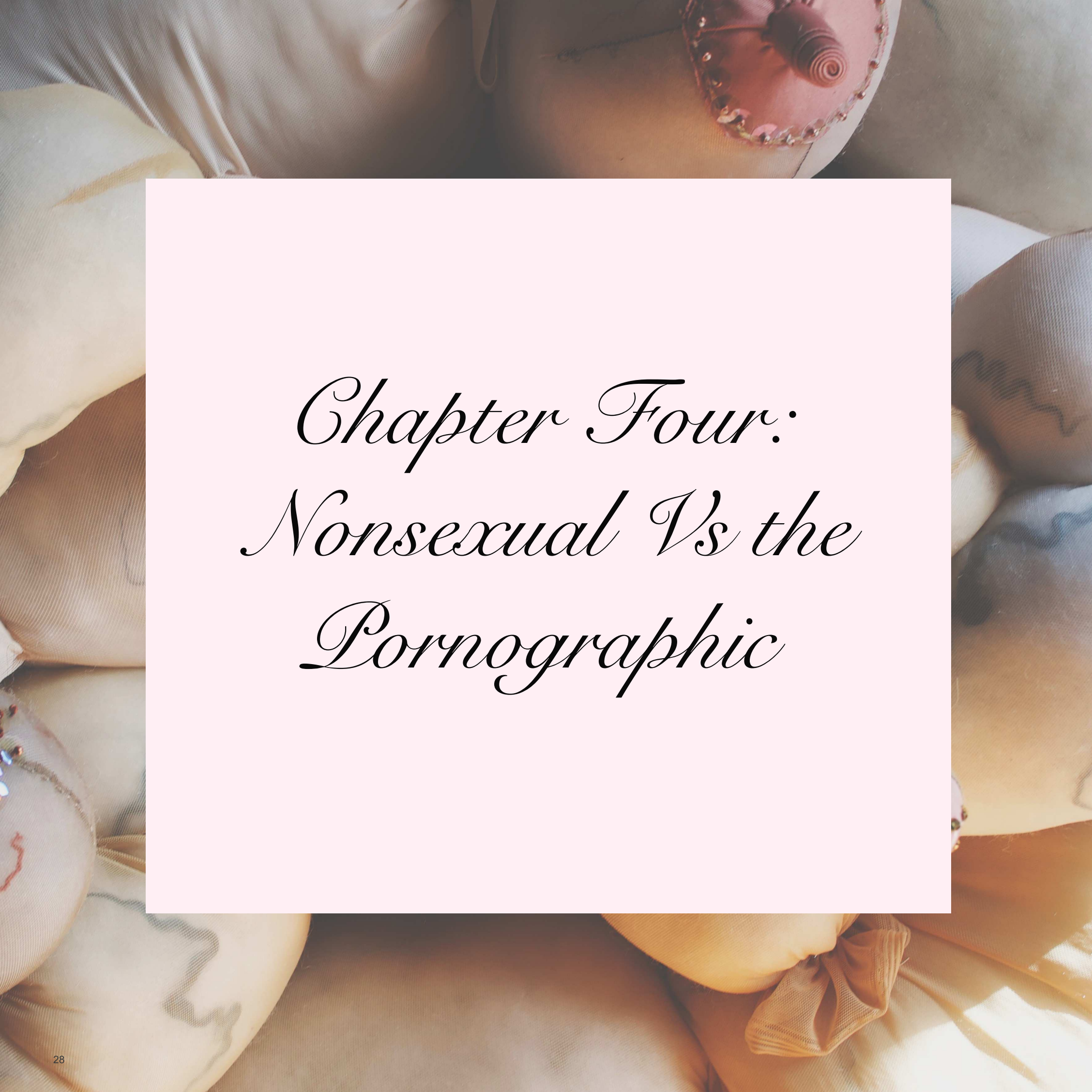
The separation of other and self as demonstrated by critical theory can also be seen in the theory of abjection. Julia Kristeva discusses abjection in her 1980 book *The Powers of Horror*. The word abject refers to “the state of being cast off” and means to experience something to the worst degree mostly in reference to horror and disgust. However, abject is closely related to the terms eject, reject, and deject in the sense that an object is being expelled or cast away from another object or being. A PhD dissertation titled *Back to the Body Margaret Atwood and the Reaffirmation of the Female Physicality*, further investigates Kristeva’s theory of abjection as follows:

“It is the border zone between being and non-being, and according to Kristeva “the border of my condition as a living being” (*Powers of Horror* 3). It is a zone of self-annihilation or self-extinction into which woman voluntarily casts herself. Kristeva also suggests that abjection can explain the structural and political acts of inclusion/exclusion which establish the foundations of social existence. She asserts that the abject has a double presence, it is both within us and within culture and it is through both individual and group rituals of exclusion that abjection is acted out. Abjection thus generates the borders of the individual and the social body.” (Lakshmi 84-85)

Abjection therefore suggests that denial or rejection of those separate or distinct from our constructed idea of the human proper is abject. Furthermore, it is considered anything that goes against societal norms in forms of disgust, ugliness, uncleanliness or unpopular differential. All bodily functions that are deemed publicly inappropriate, impure, or unapproachable for discussion also fall under the category of abject. The theory of abjection has a strong feminist context in that female bodily functions in particular are abjected into the patriarchal social order. (“Abject Art”). Bodies eject (abject) or reject waste and bodily liquids such as lactation, urination, menstruation, ejaculation and so on thus exhibiting a separation of other and self, or subject and object. For instance, a substance originates from within the body and is considered part of the self. Once the substance leaves the body it is still technically one’s self and yet it is no longer one’s self. It was part of the subject, and now has been abjected into an object separate from the self, resulting in the subject’s horrific realization of the loss of distinction between the object/subject dynamic.



Figure 3.5, still image from video *The Fountain of Pleasure*



*Chapter Four:  
Nonsexual Vs the  
Pornographic*

The erotic, or lack of, plays a large role in my practice. Stemming from a traumatic childhood experience, my work engages my past through the way I view the body, sexuality, and the power dynamics of gender. My personal relationship to the male vs. female power dynamic brings a contemporary context to the contrasting ideas of harassment, abuse, and empowerment of the body. However, these concepts are mostly hidden within the work and yet are very identifiable to a specific group of viewers. Using my personal experience as a frame of reference, I attempt to divert the male gaze from perceiving the nude female body as an object of sexual pleasure or desire thus desexualizing the body.

It is important to note that although I use genitalia, my work is not meant to be pornographic or meant to arouse or cause sexual desire for the viewer. Audre Lorde, American writer and feminist, further investigates the lack of eroticism in pornography as follows:

For this reason, we have turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. (Lorde 1)



Figure 4.1, *Enlightened Flesh*



Figure 4.2, *Enlightened Flesh* (alt. view)



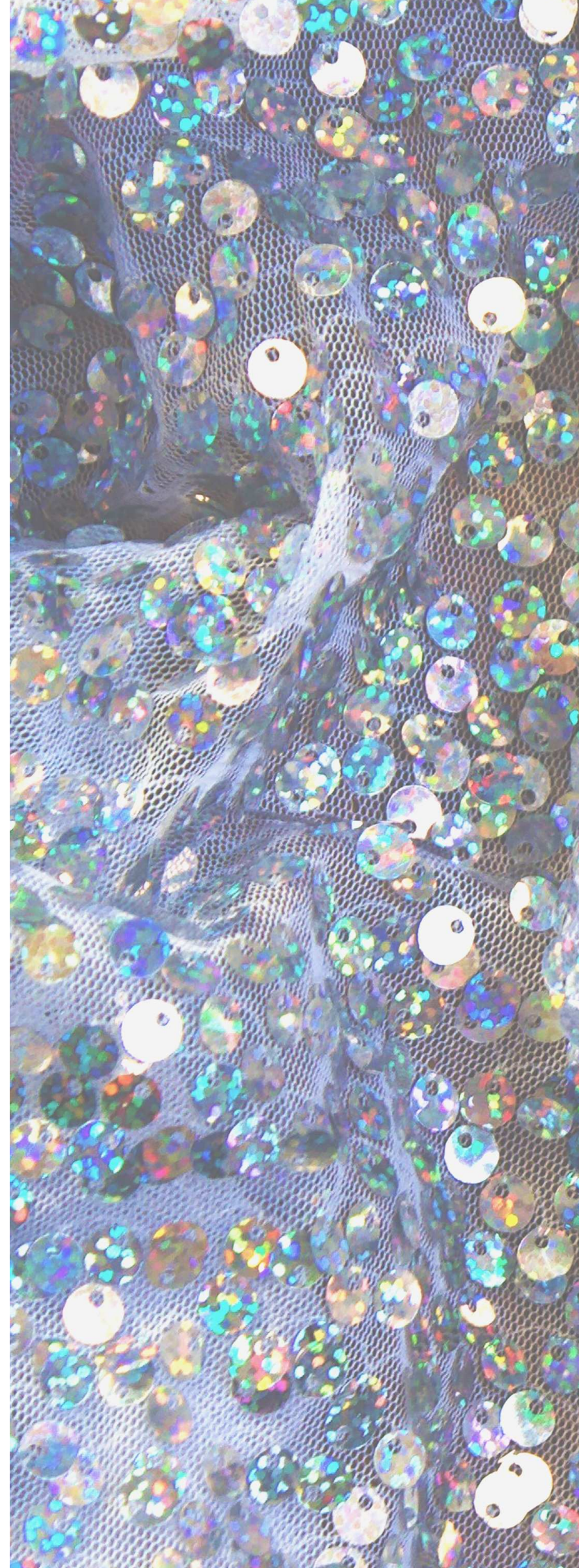


Figure 4.3, works in progress

My work adheres to this notion, denying the pornographic and its relationship to false performance. Alternatively, my work utilizes the nude body because I believe it is the purest form. It denies exterior barriers to hide behind such as wealth and demonstrates a lack of self-possession.

The renderings of genitalia are meant to convey the notion of empowerment and desexualization. It is the most literal, provokes the rawest emotion, and allows many interpretations from many viewers. For instance, within my *Fountain of Pleasure* (pg.49), various genitalia expand outward from a centralized point where layers of breasts, phallus's, and yoni are intermingled to the point of anarchic unison. Yet, through this chaos, I aim to create a sense of physical balance and order to reflect the constant need for equality in all spaces whether domestic, public, or some form of other. I strive to convey the notion of having power over your own body while celebrating the unique variety of other bodies. In this way, individual differences are recognized, utilized, and valued as a resource, working together towards a common inclusive experience.

*Chapter  
Five:  
Materiality*



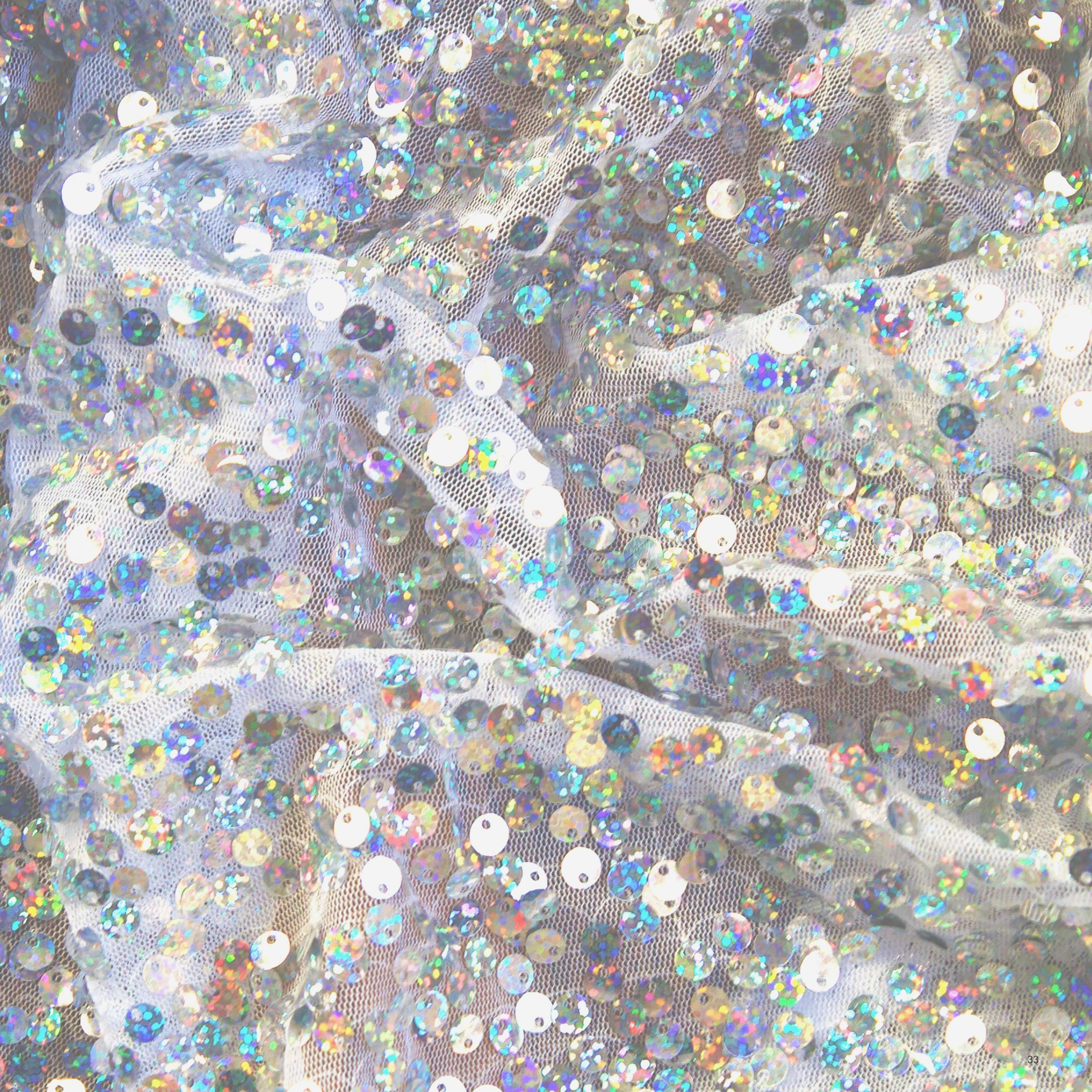




Figure 5.1, *Pink Vessel* (left), *Yellow Vessel* (right)

I utilize aspects of stereotypically female craft-based practices, yet tension manifests within each sculpture due to the rejection of the conventions of craft. By combining textile and ceramic arts, I explore the dichotomy of hard and soft, masculine and feminine, obscurity and familiarity, while presenting a strong sense of materialism.

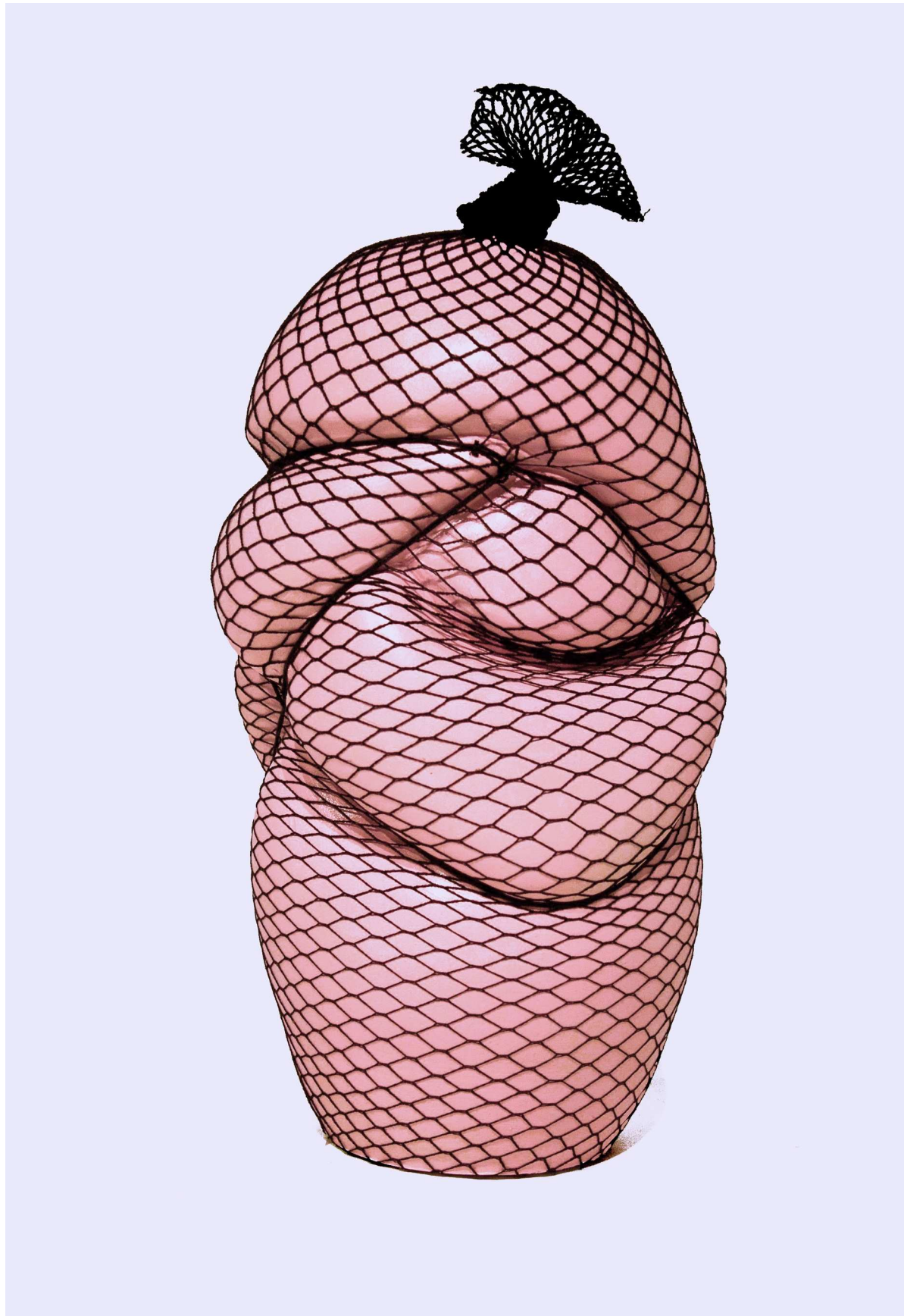


Figure 5.2, *Pink Vessel*

My work draws on aspects of the surrealist movement utilizing the creativity of absurd imagery and odd arrangement of objects. By layering unconventional body parts together and creating intriguing formations with the body, I attempt to summon the surreal and the way the body interacts and interconnects with its surroundings. The fragmented anatomical configurations allude to elements of visual abstraction and reference the bodily arrangements or patterns observed in artistic swimming. My forms are androgynous and ambiguous in order to emphasize a sense of disembodiment. By grabbing and pulling sections of the body and collaging them together into a visual object, the work becomes centered around the choreographed form and relieved from the hierarchy of body identity. Ultimately, the final object is of bodily origin but is represented in a way that exerts a disconnect from the self.



Figure 5.3, *Morphosis*, in progress studio shot



Figure 5.4, *Euphoria* (front view)



Figure 5.5, *Euphoria* (back view)

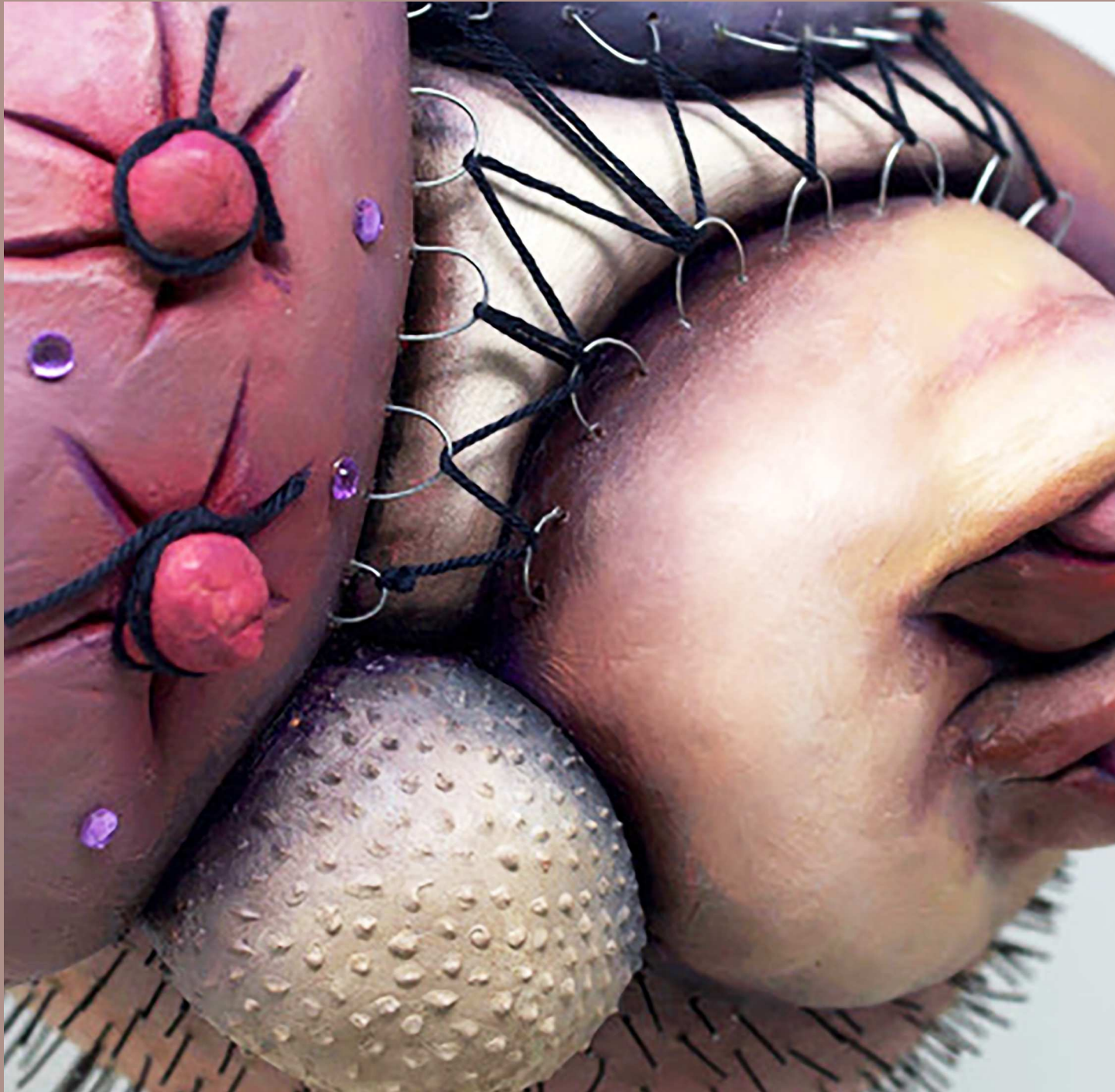


Figure 5.6, Detail of *Euphoria*





Figure 5.7, *Euphoria* (right side)



Figure 5.8, *Euphoria* (left side)

Additionally, my work highly references and is inspired by the Baroque era. My work plays on the classic ideologies of the Baroque in that they are overly ornate, decorated, and suggest the grandeur. I often use rhinestones and specialty fabrics that are used in competitive artistic swimming costumes.



Figure 5.9, *Euphoria*

Traditionally, one thinks of adornment as ornamentation for the pureness of decoration and beauty. However, I purposefully use embellishing materials in order to directly represent the empowerment of the body and confidence that beauty brings to an identity. Employing ornamentation as a tool, I 'seduce' the viewer in with something immediately appealing and striking. This seduction brings into question the notion of what is beautiful or attractive and for what reason.



Figure 5.10, *Teeny Weenies*

For me personally, the decorative aspects of my work symbolize the solace of sexual and emotional healing that the sport of artistic swimming has provided for me. It is a way to reclaim the body, its worth, and a way to renounce any personal convictions of otherness.



Figure 5.11, *Teeny Weeny 1*



Figure 5.12, *Teeny Weeny 2*



Figure 5.13, Detail of *Teeny Weenies*

A close-up photograph of a fountain sculpture. The central focus is a vertical, pink, textured column with a series of small, raised bumps. To the left, a portion of a white, perforated cylindrical structure is visible. In the background, there are white, curved, branch-like structures and some green foliage. The lighting is soft and natural, highlighting the textures of the materials.

*Chapter Six:  
The Purpose of Water*

Figure 6.1, Detail of *The Fountain of Pleasure*

Fountains classically symbolize a place of community, gathering, health, romanticism, and sanctuary. As early technologies developed, so did the purpose and meaning of the fountain. Within the middle and medieval ages, fountains represented innocence, purity, life and wisdom. (“The History of Fountains”). Originally, fountains were a place of gathering for patrons to drink but eventually they evolved into a source of socialization and entertainment. During the Renaissance, fountains shifted to symbolizing wealth, status, and power. Imagery on Renaissance fountains often depicted historical imagery, biblical stories and societal virtues.

(Section 2, par.2.).



Figure 6.2, still image from video *The Fountain of Pleasure*, (0:18)

Fountains have continually acted as a space of congregation for all individuals independent of social status which directly parallels my connection and analysis to artistic swimming. Fountains and artistic swimming both involve a gathering of individuals to the access and fulfillment of water and can therefore be seen as a way to draw people together.



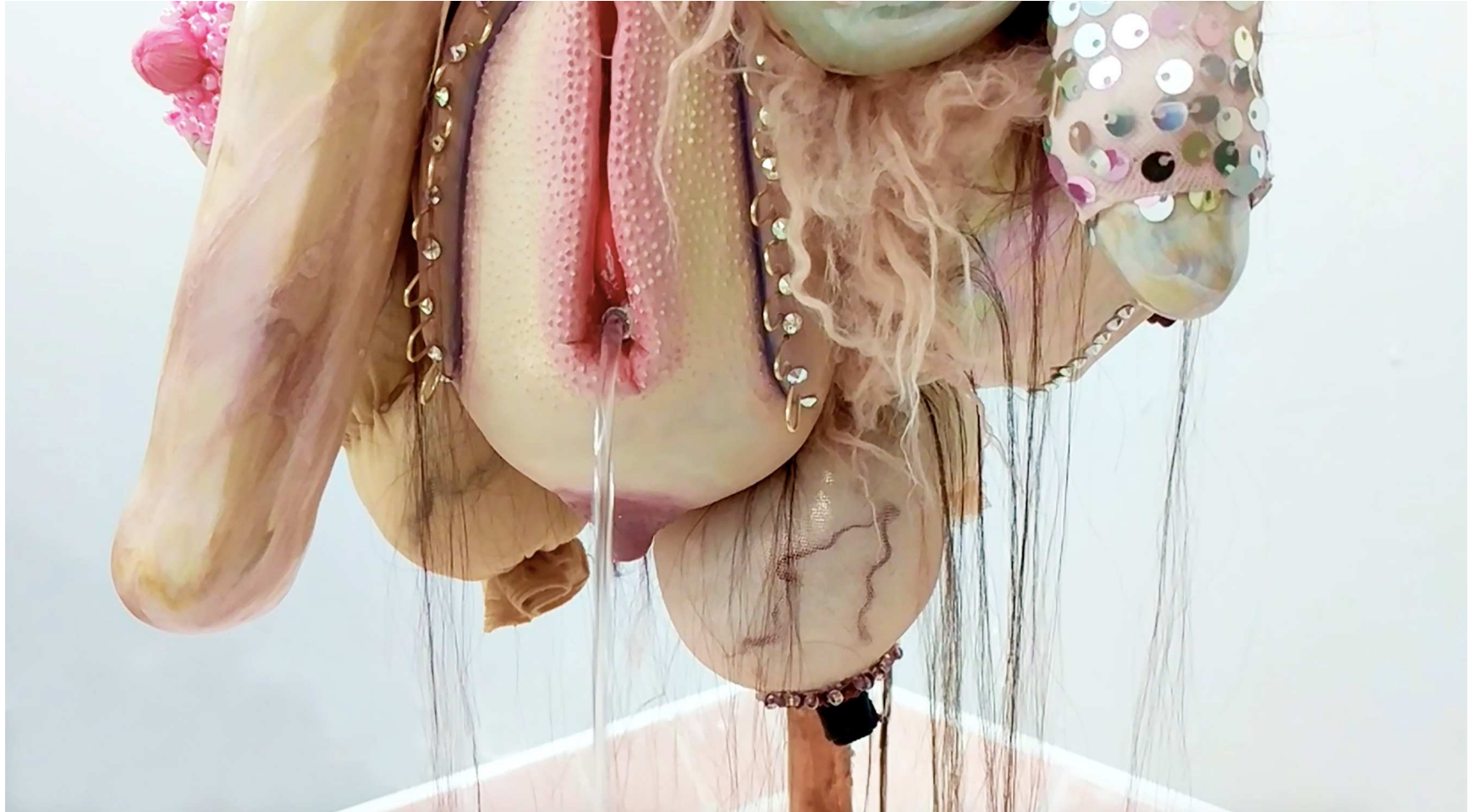


Figure 6.3, still image from video *The Fountain of Pleasure*, (0:04)

I use the concept of the fountain as a commentary to approach marginalized and subjected groups of individuals through means of bringing awareness to the privileged and giving a voice to those who may not have the power to do so.



Figure 6.4, still image from video *The Fountain of Pleasure*, (0:37)



Figure 6.5, still image from video *The Fountain of Pleasure*, (0:43)



Figure 6.6, Detail of *The Fountain of Pleasure*

My sculpture, *The Fountain of Pleasure*, is the first fountain within this body of work. It examines current social and political structures pertaining to gender, class, and power. My inspiration is founded upon the ideologies of the abject and its continual reflection to social order and bodily implications. My fountain aims to manifest the notion of abjection as a way to examine the naturalness of the body and its functionality as it pertains to acceptable political and social gestures. I exemplify the absurdity of the non-norms and how they should ideally be viewed in the contemporary time of heightened political awareness. By using the grotesque, or abject, I reinforce the most primal and animalistic aspects of survival which have been culturally suppressed while also rejecting the traditional notion of the fountain.





# *Chapter Seven: The New Normal*

My original thesis proposal was to create a 3-tier baroque fountain roughly 7ft tall and 8ft in diameter. The fountain was to be made out of ceramic, wood and fabric. The bottom tier, a large octagonal waterproof wooden basin, was to hold 8 inches of water. Central in the fountain, a ceramic column composed of several contorted bodies were to hold up the 2nd and 3rd tiers. Water squirting out of the tallest tier would cascade from basin to basin flowing down over the bodies back into the largest basin below. All ceramic elements, including the bodies and top two tiers, would be covered in an iridescent Mother of Pearl ceramic glaze. Fabric body parts, Swarovski crystals, and decorative beading would adorn all tiers of the fountain resembling the ornate decorative elements of historic Italian fountains.





Images of fountains I was inspired by while designing my thesis fountain.

Figure 7.1, Italian fountain given to New York City, better known as Rockefeller Fountain, Photo by Wally Gobetz



Figure 7.2, The Trevi Fountain in Rome, Italy, Photo by Peter Beljaards

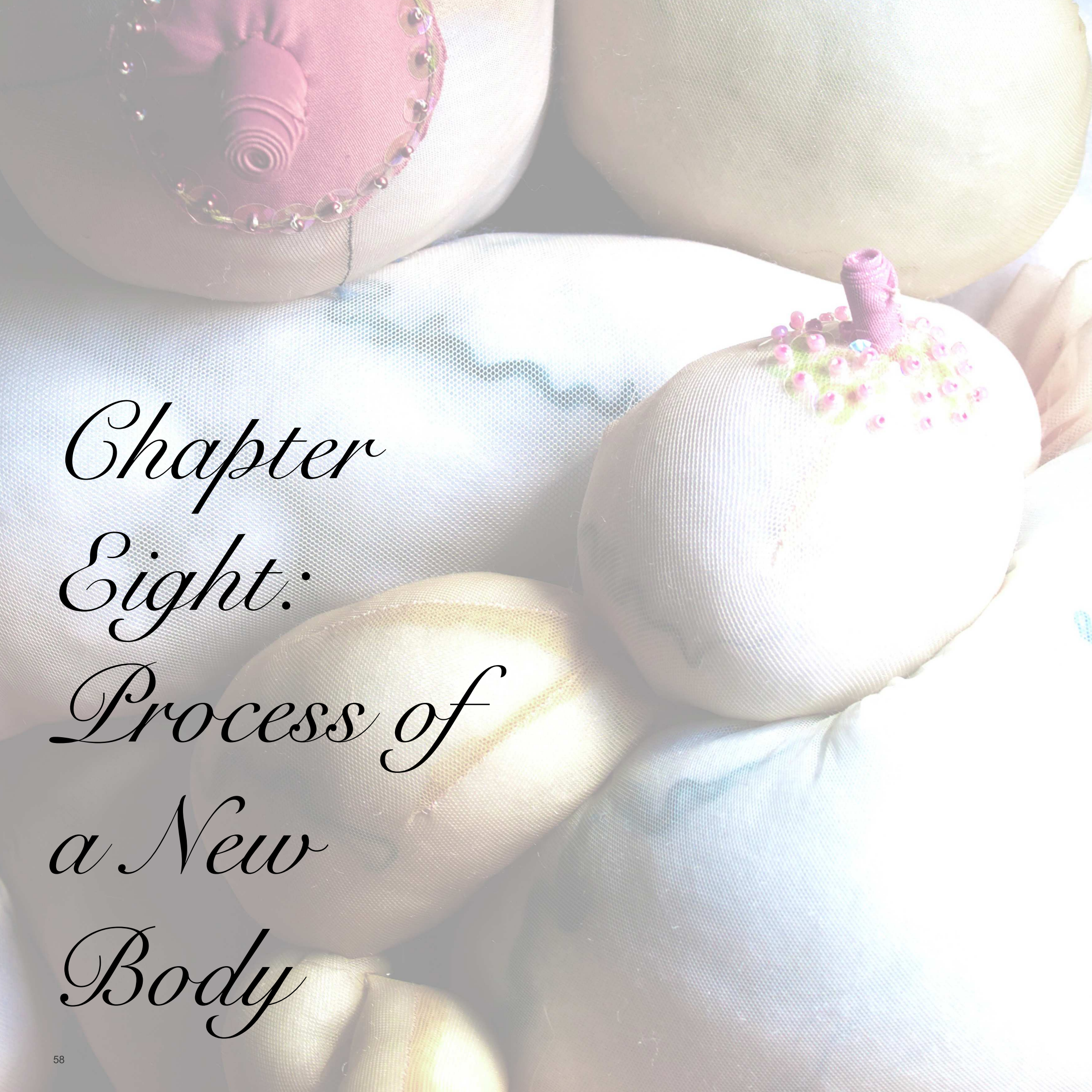


Figure 7.3, *Thesis Proposal Sketch*

# However

During January 2020, Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) hit the United States. Two weeks into March, The Rhode Island School of Design required all students to evacuate campus and transition to an online schooling system for the remainder of the semester. A Stay-At-Home Order was implemented by the state forcing everyone to be homebound.

Grabbing the few materials I could from my school studio, I created a temporary studio space in my home apartment to complete my thesis work. However, I do not have access to clay, kilns, or the necessary facilities to complete my thesis fountain. This has forced me to rethink my thesis work and experiment with methods and materiality.



*Chapter  
Eight:  
Process of  
a New  
Body*



Figure 8.1, *Test Sculpture*

My first thought during quarantine was to down-scale my work. Creating smaller sculptural pieces would be more manageable in my small makeshift studio space. In order to see if clay was still an option, I bought some air-dry clay. Utilizing the materials I had laying around my apartment, I decided on nail polish as a ceramic "glaze". Nail polish demonstrates similar physical qualities as glaze such as shine, luster and a protective outer layer. The clay body proved workable but had a less plastic consistency than a regular hand building body. For this reason, I decided against using this medium.

Playing with new ideas, I began to organize fiber pieces into groupings. Beginning with yarn, my thoughts quickly transitioned back to artistic swimming fabric and the body. I became obsessed with making as many fabric breasts as possible.



Figure 8.2, *Yarn Grouping*



Figure 8.3, *Breast Grouping*



Figure 8.4, *Face Mask*

Around this time, Rhode Islanders were recommended to always wear a protective mask in public to avoid spreading disease. With all store-bought masks being sold out, an emphasis was put on making your own mask at home. Adhering to the notion of self-protection, I had an idea to sew all the fabric breasts into a protective helmet or shield.



Once completed, I decided to push the concept further by making wearable sculpture. By sewing additional plush components and organizing them into a tangled knot formation, I completed a body suit.



Figure 8.5, *Body Suit*

During my research, I came across an image of a long exposure photograph. I adopted this technique while documenting my wearable sculpture. The result was a photographic series titled *Body Armor*.

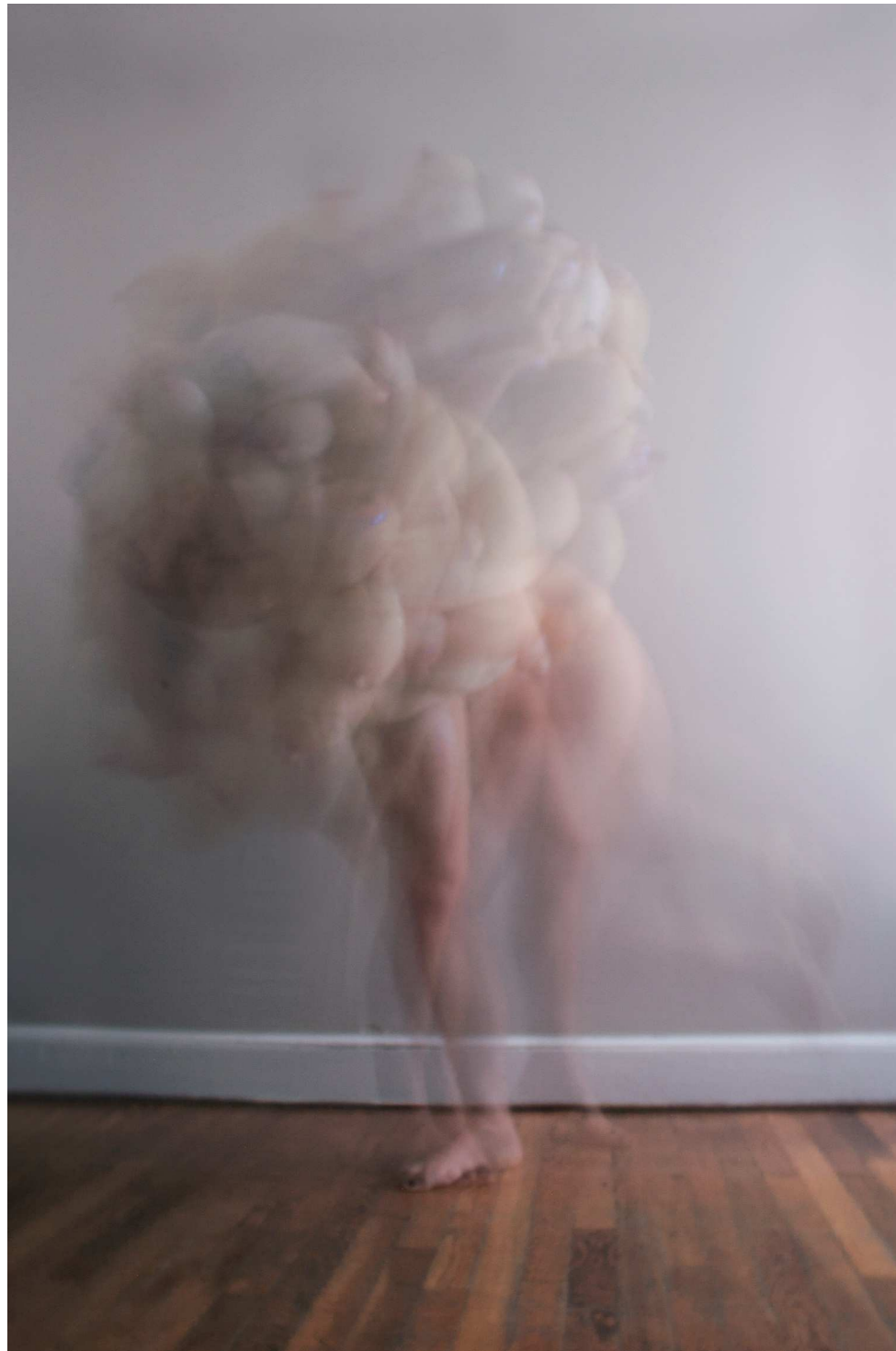


Figure 8.6, *Body Armor No.1*



Figure 8.7, *Body Armor No.2*



Figure 8.8, *Body Armor No.3*



Figure 8.9, *Body Armor No.4*



Figure 8.10, *Body Armor No.5*

Figure 8.11, *Body Armor No.6*

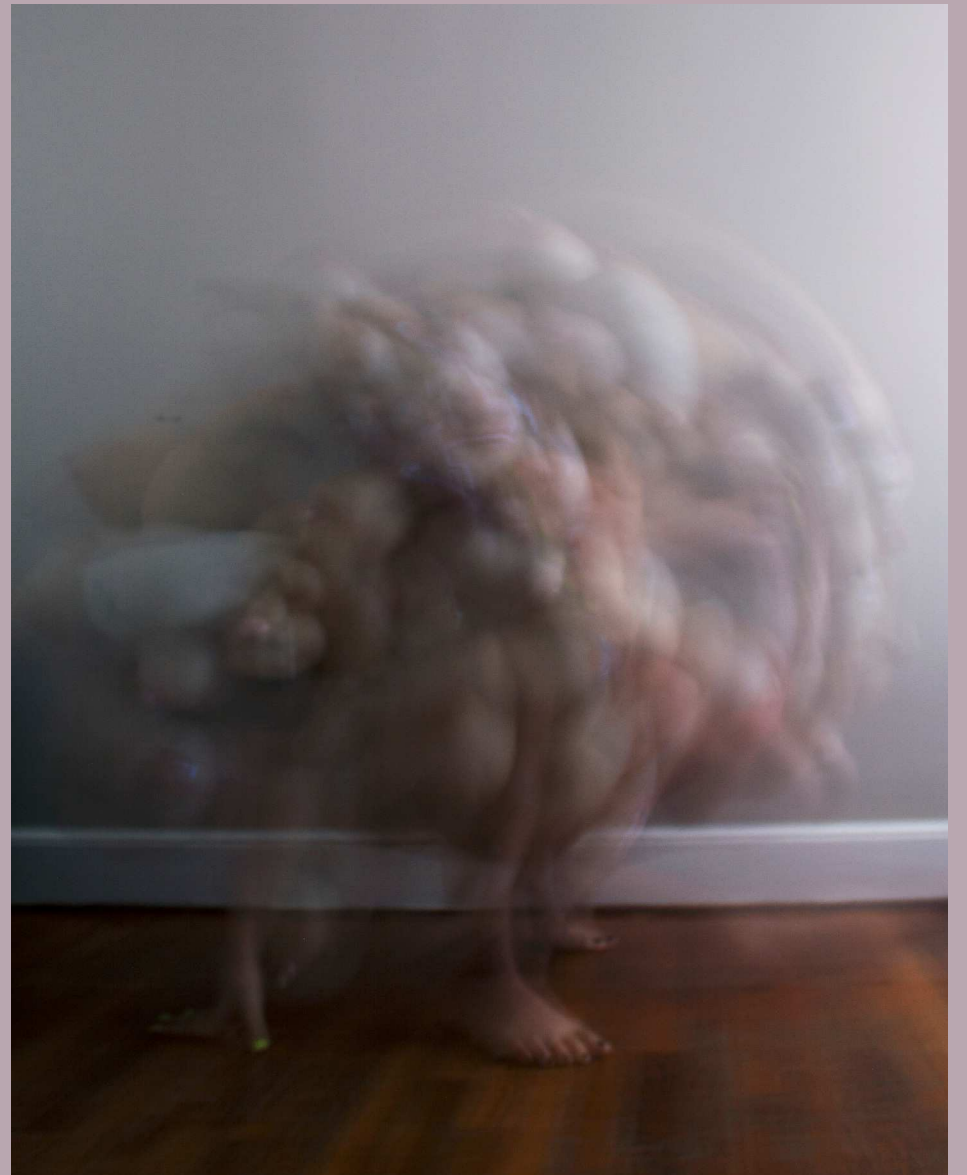


Figure 8.12, *Body Armor No.7*

The title *Body Armor* felt appropriate for the series as it derives from a time when populations are protecting themselves not only from disease, but also from many forms of prejudice. The work serves to embrace the body, a place of empowerment, with all its unique flaws and raw power of the unedited. It is a way to accept one's self and to view others without judgment of the physical body.





Figure 8.13, *Body Armor No.15*

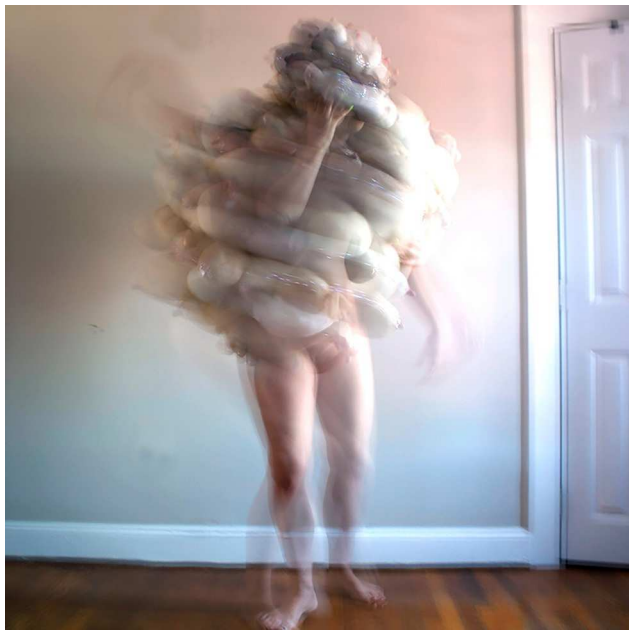


Figure 8.14, *Body Armor No.8*



Figure 8.15, *Body Armor No.9*



Figure 8.16, *Body Armor No.10*

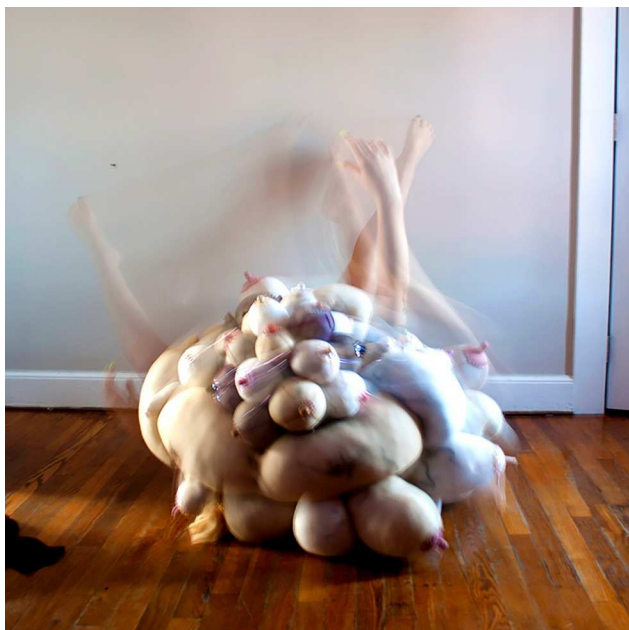


Figure 8.17, *Body Armor No.11*



Figure 8.18, *Body Armor No.12*

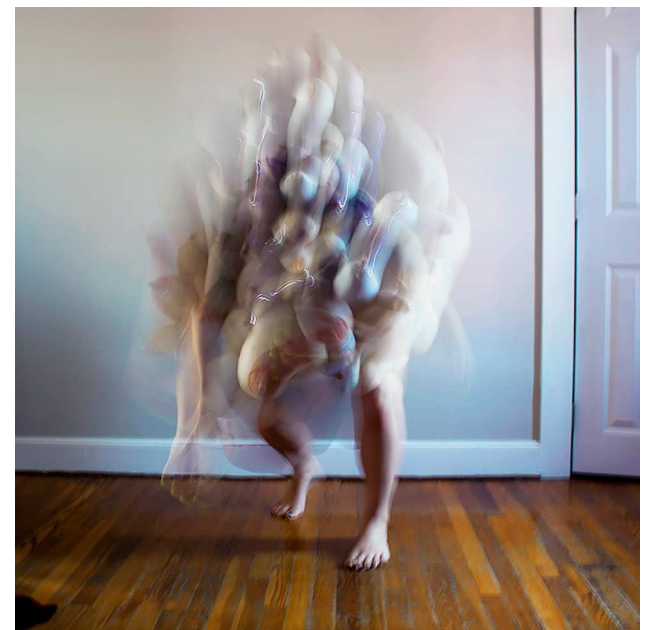


Figure 8.19, *Body Armor No.13*

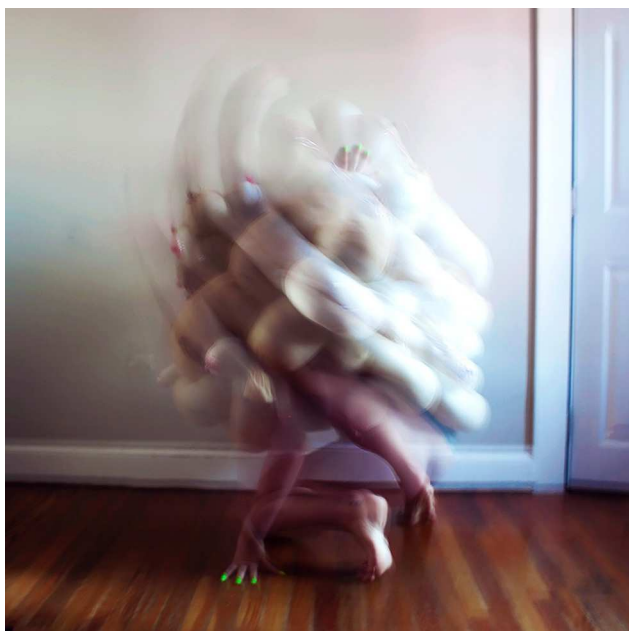


Figure 8.20, *Body Armor No.14*

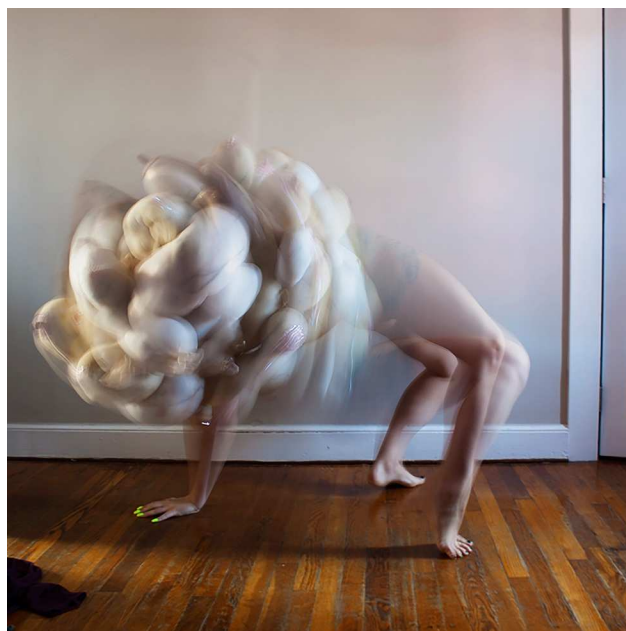


Figure 8.21, *Body Armor No.15*



Figure 8.22, *Body Armor No.16*

Using myself as a model, I began exploring the relationship I have to my body and the performative movements of artistic swimming. Being blind within the body suit, the actions I perform depend on mood, physical touch, how I navigate my environment, and the surrounding noise. The blindness furthermore allows me to explore choreography that flows naturally throughout my body. The process partially resembles an interpretive dance.



Figure 8.23, *Body Armor No.12*



Figure 8.24, *Body Armor No.17*



Figure 8.25, *Body Armor No.18*



Figure 8.26, *Body Armor No.19*

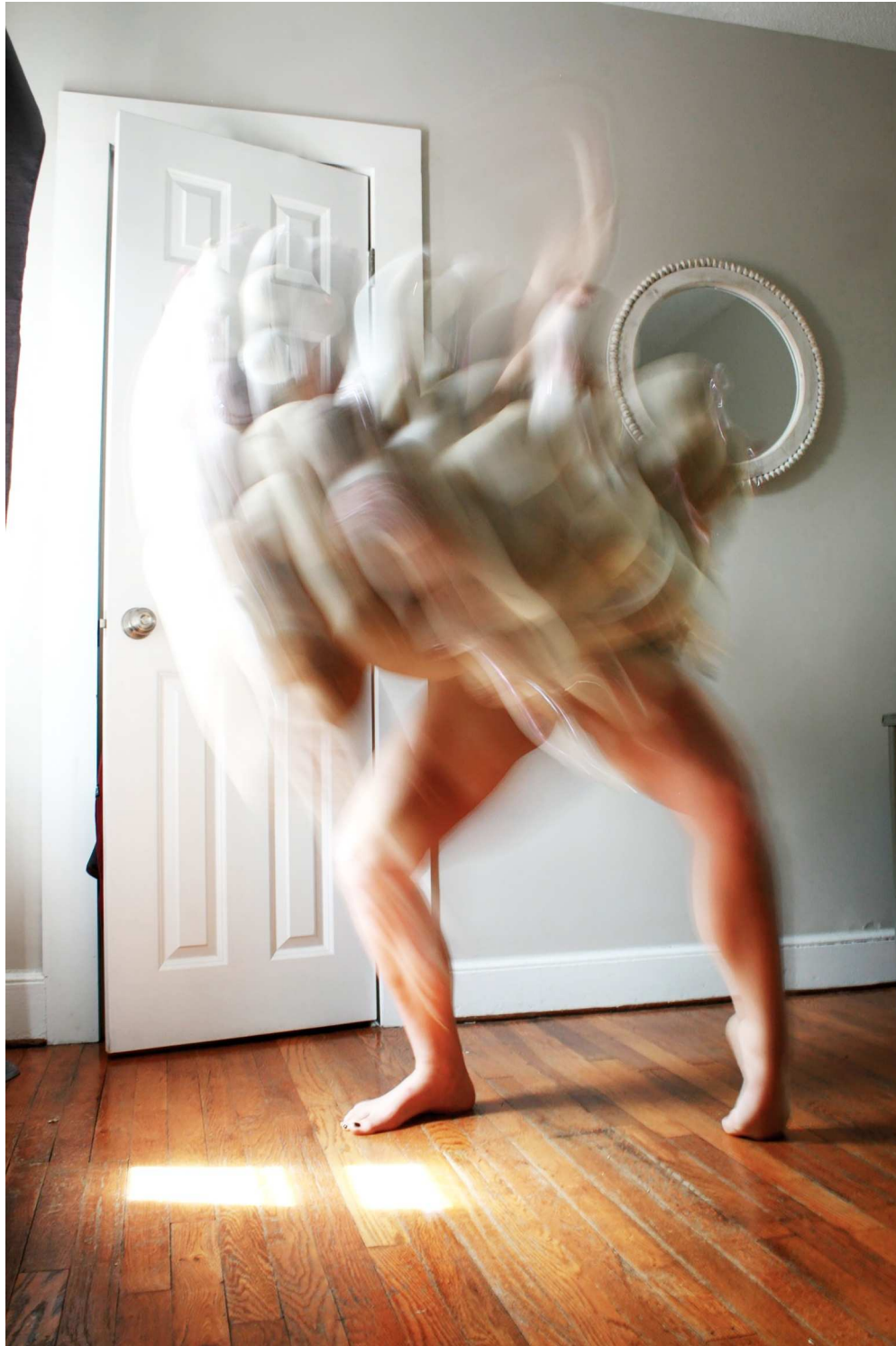


Figure 8.27, *Body Armor No.20*



Figure 8.28, *Body Armor No.21*



The long exposure captures my movements rendering them continual and fluid, comparing the blending of bodies to the fluidity of water. Yet, unlike water, I was now restricted to a confined space with the physical force of domesticity literally fighting against my body and its actions.



Figure 8.29, *Body Armor No.22*

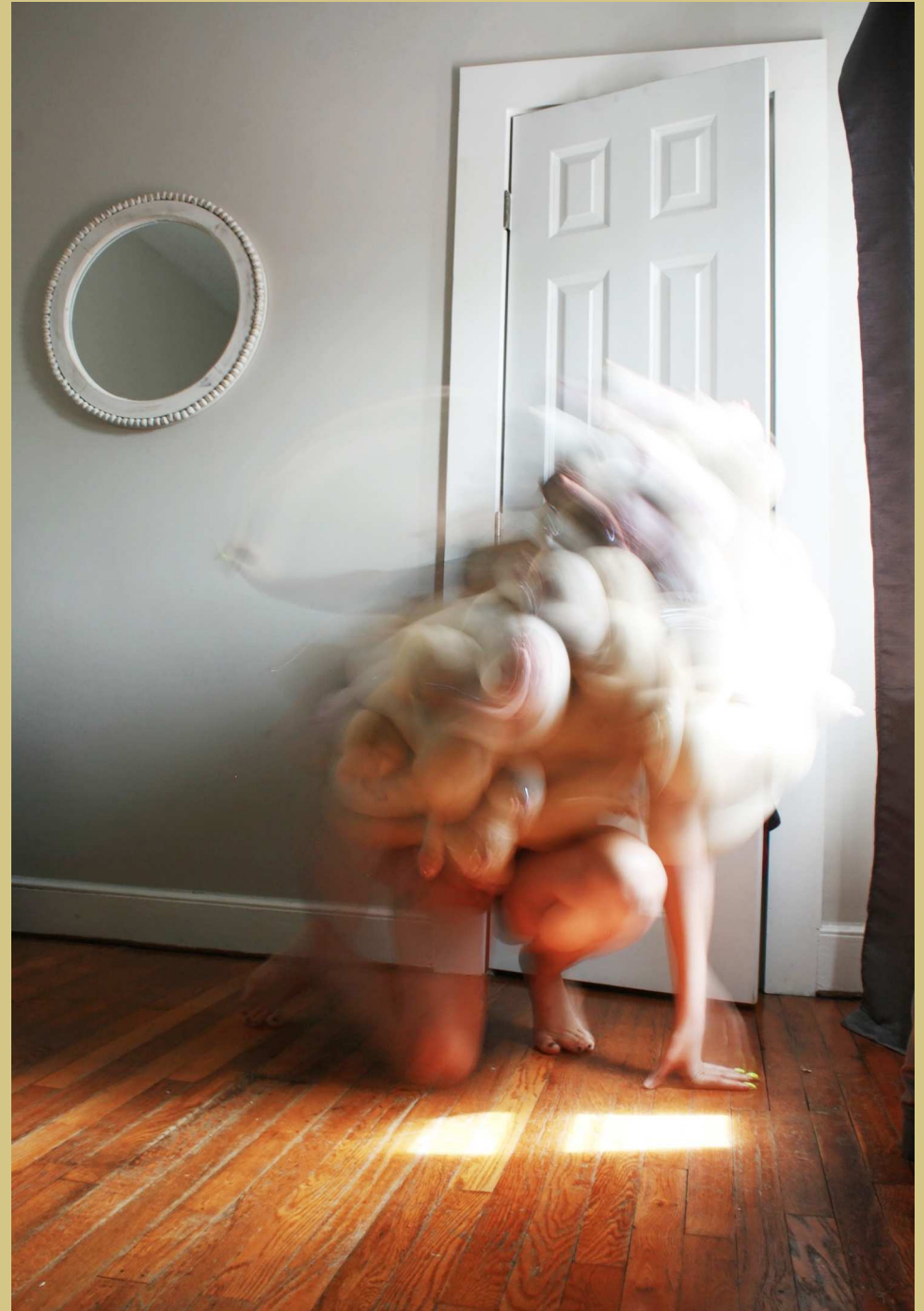


Figure 8.30, *Body Armor No.23*



Figure 8.31, *Body Armor No.24*



Figure 8.32, *Body Armor No.25*

It can take a long time to understand what a new body of work means and what it represents. I cannot say I have all the answers at this point in time. The circumstances surrounding the work and the steps leading me to this point are extremely fresh. But, I can say quarantine and the resulting photographic series has pushed me to examine domesticity, performance, gender, and fluidity in a unique and distinct way from my past works.

*Chapter Nine:*  
*Conclusion*

*You might as well ask an artist to explain his art or ask a poet to explain his poem. It defeats the purpose. The meaning is only clear through the search.*

-Rick Riordan

The evolution of my work continually investigated new concepts, theories, and questions. The more I created and experimented, the more connections I made conceptually and theoretically. The process of researching and making was complimentary, for without one the other did not succeed. Only through the past two years of a rigorous studio practice and receiving brutally honest criticism was I able to produce the works I have. Through my inquiries of bridging gender, sexuality, artistic swimming and cultural norms, I was able to make breakthroughs surrounding the empowered raw body and the beauty of diversity.

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I DID IT.



