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### The Stigmatization of Vaginal Masturbation and Its Effect on Sexual Pleasure

Hannah I. Berk  
*Oberlin College*

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# HANNAH BERK

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## EDUCATION

BA in English & visual art  
honors track, GPA 3.52  
Oberlin College  
May 2019 | Oberlin, OH

Graphic Design Summer Intensive  
Pratt Institute  
June 2017 | New York, NY

Visual Design Summer Intensive  
General Assembly  
August 2018 | New York, NY

varsity athlete  
cross country & track  
Oberlin College  
Fall 2015-Fall 2017 | Oberlin, OH

## SKILLS

InDesign  
Photoshop  
Illustrator  
Sketch  
Figma  
Python

## HOBBIES

Running  
Swimming  
Skiing  
Hiking

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

### Health Made Design | Graphic Design Intern

January 2019 | San Francisco, CA

- Wire-framed and Implemented pages for Stanford funded website, DiabetesWise.org.
- Created brand assets for Health Made Design.

### Thackway McCord | Design Intern

January 2018 & Summer 2017 | New York, NY

- Created Assets for client art auction including stop-motion videos, posters, and social media layouts.
- Enhanced client brand representation in videos, brochures, and handbooks.

### KJK Jewelry | Graphic Design Intern

Summers 2018, 2017 & January 2016 | New York, NY

- Designed bracelet dedicated to Pulitzer Prize winner Edith Wharton. Currently sells for \$100.
- Designed clientele flyers, thank-you cards, and posters for company trade show.

### Magic Software | Design Consultant

Summers 2018, 2017 | New York, NY

- Designed new website for two company branches: Magic Fiserv and Magic Blockchain.
- Designed information architecture, wire-frames, style guide, and final visual mocks.

## ADDITIONAL EXPERIENCE

### Studio Art Classes: CryptoCultural Production Simulations Art and Arts & Interactive Technology | Teaching Assistant

Fall 2018 | Oberlin, OH

- Led and assisted tutorials in the fabrication and printing labs.
- Made promotional flyers for class events.

### Oberlin Media Lab | Media Specialist

Fall 2018 | Oberlin, OH

- Taught the Adobe Suite to faculty and students.
- Made promotional flyers and posters for campus-wide events.

### Oberlin College Adobe Class | Instructor

Fall 2017 | Oberlin, OH

- Created and taught a semester long class to Oberlin students on Illustrator, Photoshop, and Indesign with a classmate.
- 80 people applied for 30 spots.

### The Oberlin Review | This Week Editor

Fall 2015-Spring 2016 | Oberlin, OH

- Wrote and designed the center spread of Oberlin College's weekly newspaper. The leading paper for the town and college.

Hannah Berk

4/14/19

Senior Studio

#### ARTIST STATEMENT:

As someone with a vagina, I had very limited education around masturbation. Throughout puberty, I felt uncomfortable talking about masturbating while my peers with penises communicated about it openly. Numerous studies including, “Masturbation and the sexual double standard,” “Masturbation among Young Women and Associations with Sexual Health: An Exploratory Study,” and “PL-30 Female Masturbation: Prevalence, Characteristics & Therapeutic Implications” reveal that vaginal masturbation is stigmatized compared to penile masturbation. While those with penises are taught that they are entitled to sexual arousal, those with vaginas are not. This double standard results in the devaluation of the vagina as a means of achieving pleasure.

As we became sexually active, I realized that my female friends and I were defining penile-vaginal sex only in terms of the penile orgasm. We qualified sex based on whether or not there was ejaculation, meanwhile, the majority of us with vaginas had never orgasmed. This meant that sex for us was waiting for the person with the penis to cum. We thought this was the norm, because we had not been taught otherwise.

There are so many reasons why it's harder for people with vaginas to orgasm during sex than it is for people with penises, but to know and to be able to communicate about one's body is crucial for experiencing pleasure. Let's start by talking about vaginal masturbation.

Through creating a comfortable environment that encourages engagement and private reflection, my goal is to acknowledge and stimulate conversation around vaginal masturbation in an approachable way.

Please enter the canopies one at a time.

NOTE ABOUT BOOKS (this will be printed next to the books):

These books are centered around a dialog that I found I was consistently having with myself as I worked.

On the one hand, I felt that vaginal masturbation should take up space because it traditionally does not. On the other hand, I felt that if it did, no one would listen — people would be put-off.

I wanted to show that many girls and boys start masturbating when they are young — learning about one's body is important no matter your age or sexual orientation. However, the possibility of inadvertently sexualizing young girls felt dangerous.

I also wanted to represent vaginal masturbation, but I felt that my drawings could be easily misinterpreted as objectifying and over-sexualizing the female body.

These books are my response.

#### NOTE ABOUT SURVEY:

Each square of hanging fabric is a single response from a survey that I sent out about vaginal masturbation. The survey is a small sample size and therefore not an accurate representation of the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation. That said, the trends in my survey are consistent with studies in *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy* as well as the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* and many more that show that people with vaginas who masturbate have an increased satisfaction in sex. At the same time, studies such as, “Masturbation among Young Women and Associations with Sexual Health: An Exploratory Study.” And “PL-30 Female Masturbation: Prevalence, Characteristics & Therapeutic Implications.” Reveal an over stigmatization for vaginal masturbation when compared to penile masturbation.



# HALF TIME SHOW

Mirrored acrylic, repurposed flashlight, wood for shelf.

Dec. 2018

## Vaginal Masturbation

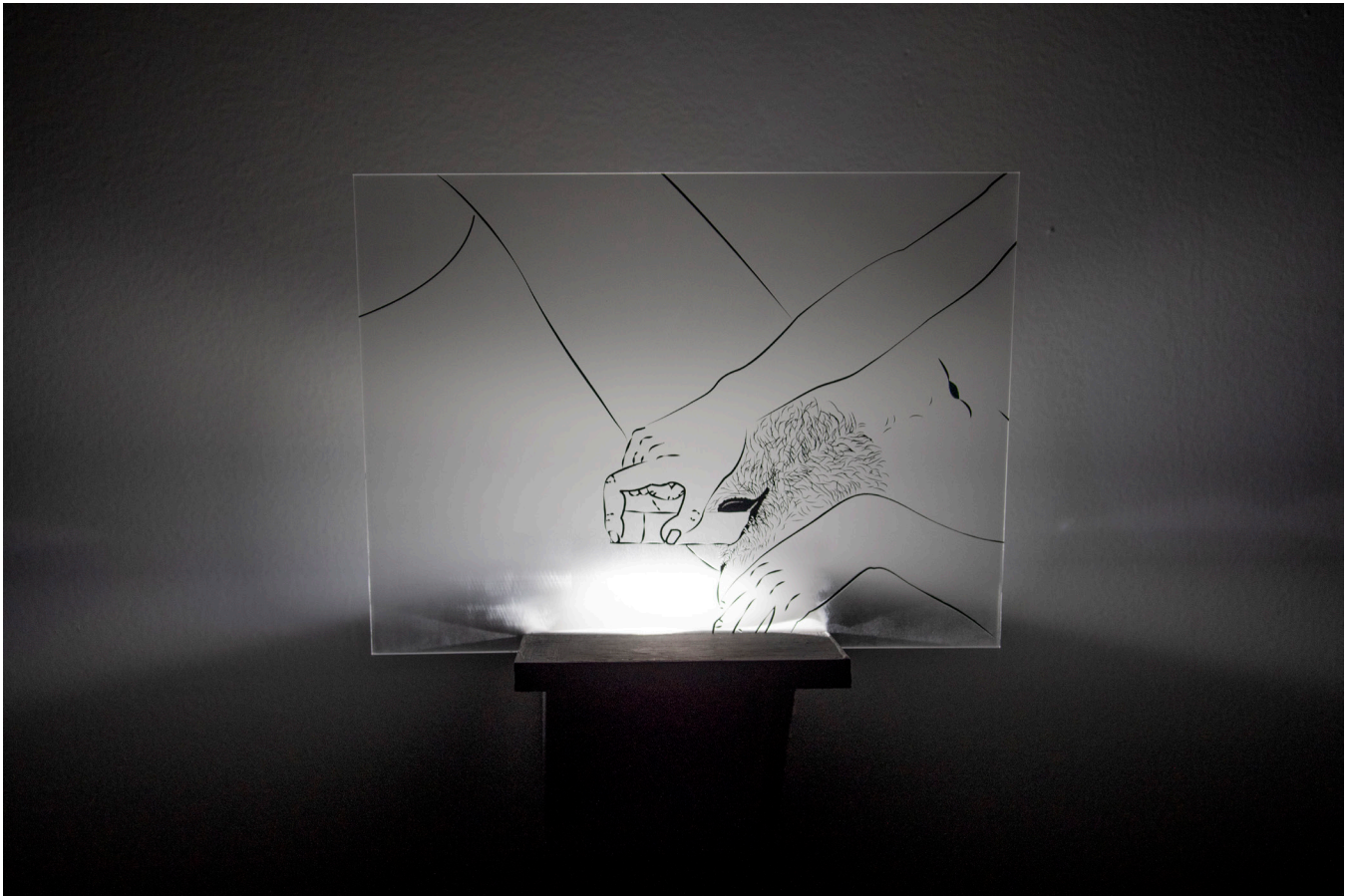
By Hannah Berk


As someone with a vagina, I had very limited education around masturbation. Throughout puberty, I felt uncomfortable talking about masturbating while my peers with penises communicated openly. My research shows that many people with vaginas feel that education around vaginal pleasure is limited. This results in the devaluation of the vagina as a means of achieving pleasure, meanwhile those with penises are taught they are entitled to sexual arousal. This causes orgasms to become more difficult for those with vaginas. Using laser cut mirrors to project illustrations, I hope to shed light on this phenomenon and stimulate conversation.

Around 1.5 Ft. x 1 Ft

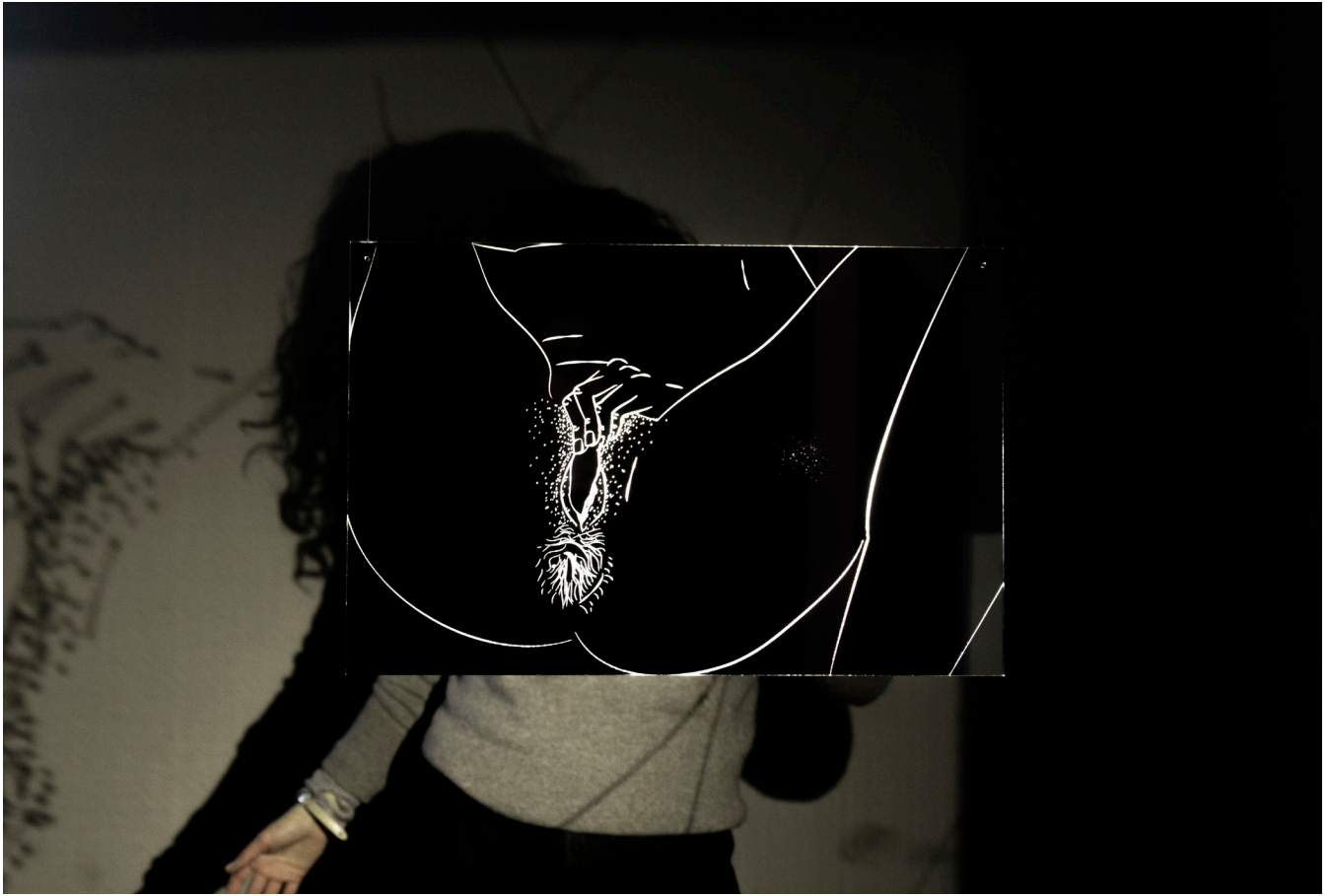






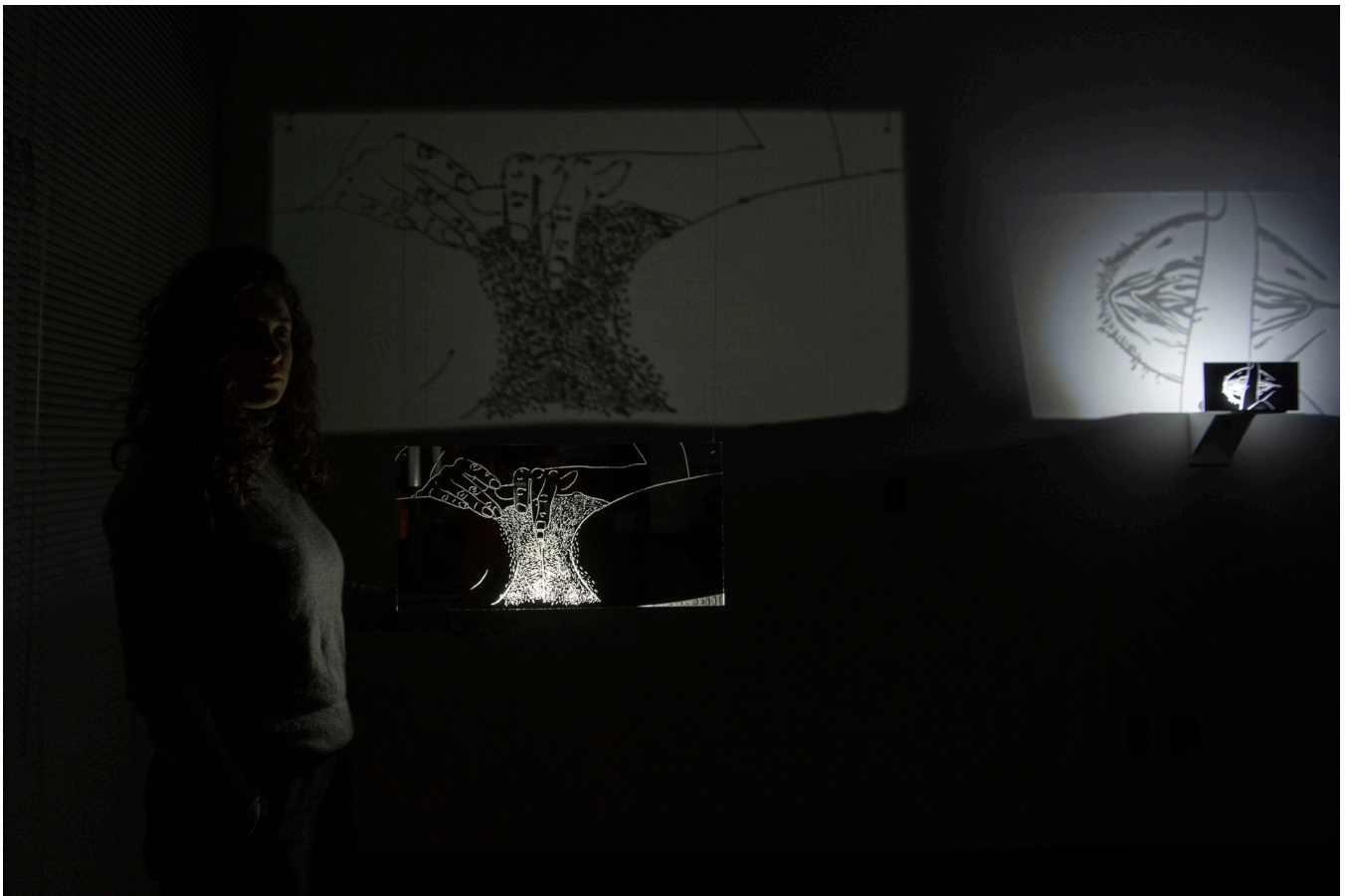
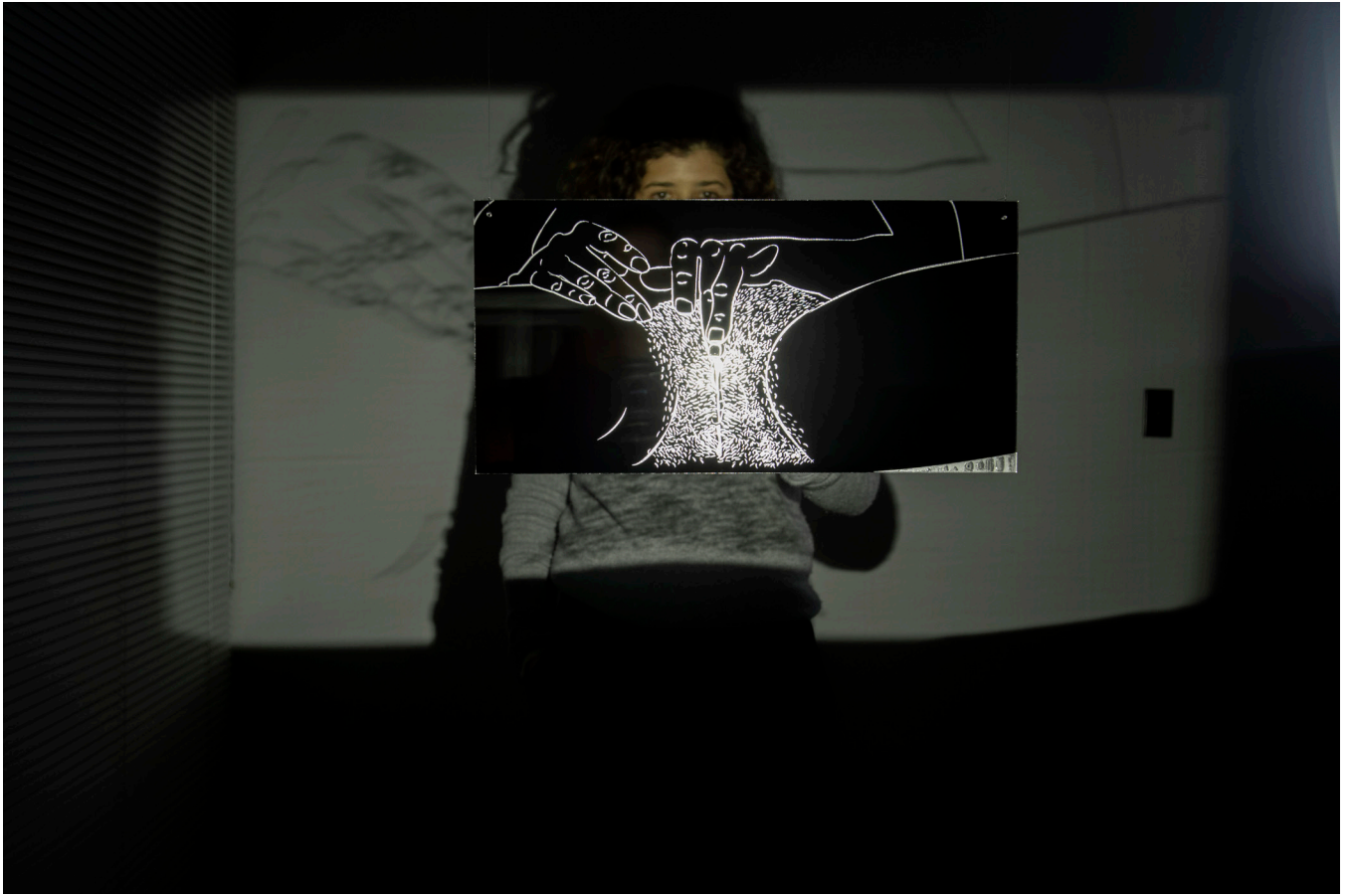


**Shine your phone light on the  
hanging pieces to create a  
projection.**



Around 2 Ft. x 1 Ft







# THESIS EXHIBITION

April 2019

Fisrt pod





**Laser cut natural fabrics (mainly cotton), thread, fabric for curtains, string LED lights, laser cut wood**



## **ABOUT THE SURVEY**

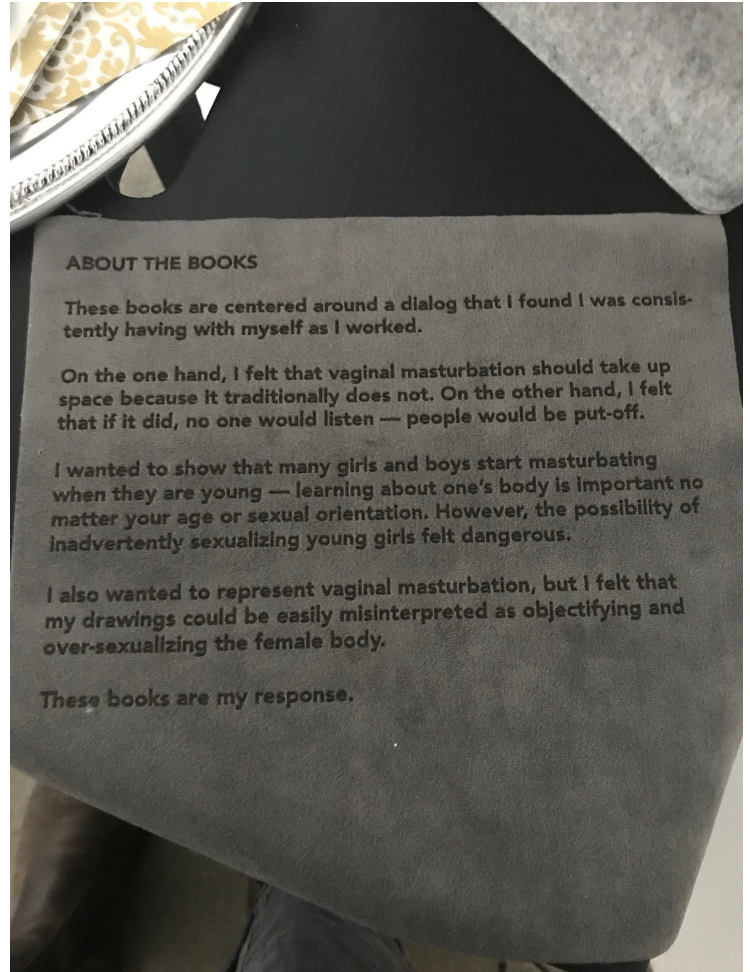
**Each square of hanging fabric is a single response from a survey that I sent out about vaginal masturbation. The survey is a small sample size and therefore not an accurate representation of the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation. That said, the trends in my survey are consistent with studies in Journal of Sex Education and Therapy as well as the Journal of Sexual Medicine and many more that show that people with vaginas who masturbate have an increased satisfaction in sex. At the same time, studies such as, "Masturbation among Young Women and Associations with Sexual Health: An Exploratory Study." And "PL-30 Female Masturbation: Prevalence, Characteristics & Therapeutic Implications." Reveal an over stigmatization for vaginal masturbation when compared to penile masturbation.**

**Note about the survey**



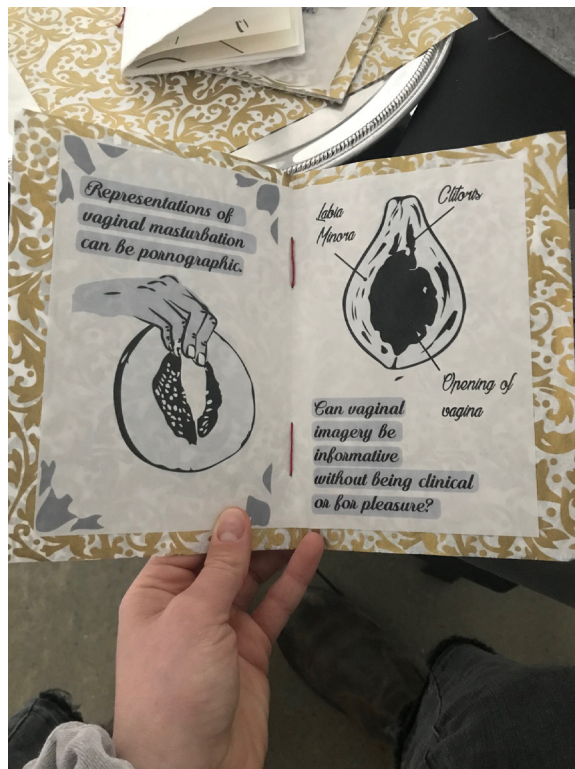
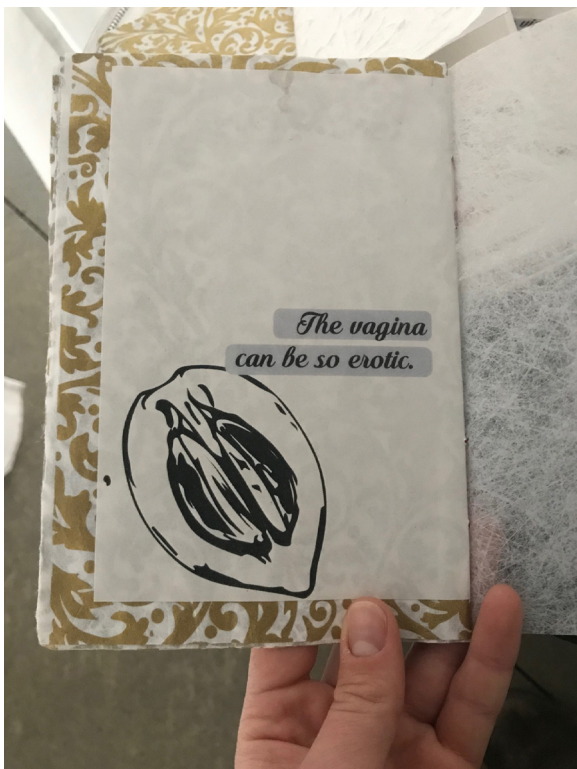
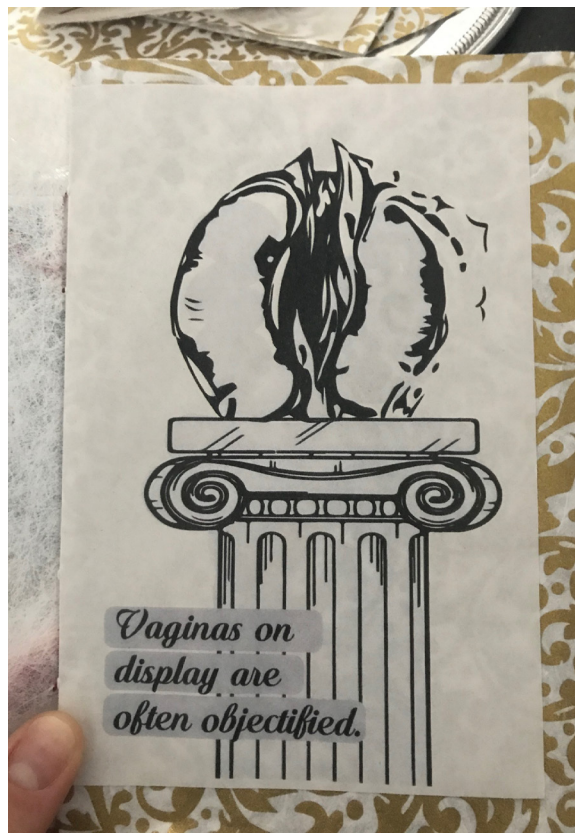
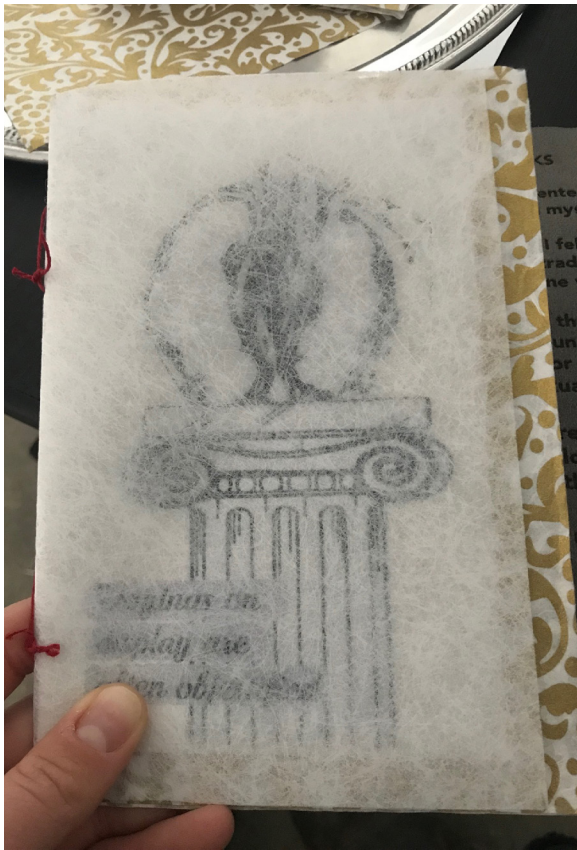
Second Pod



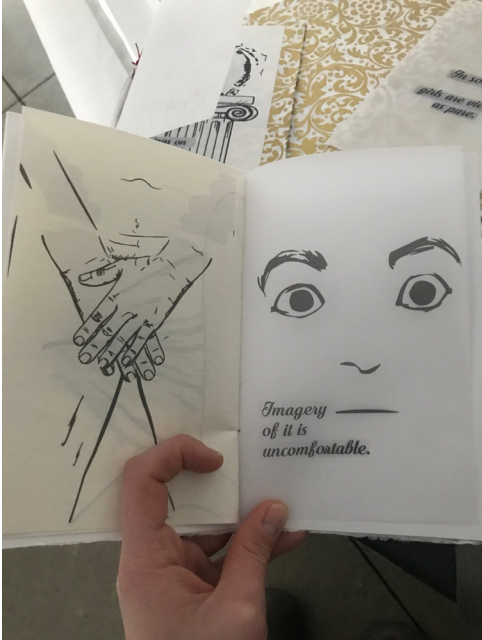
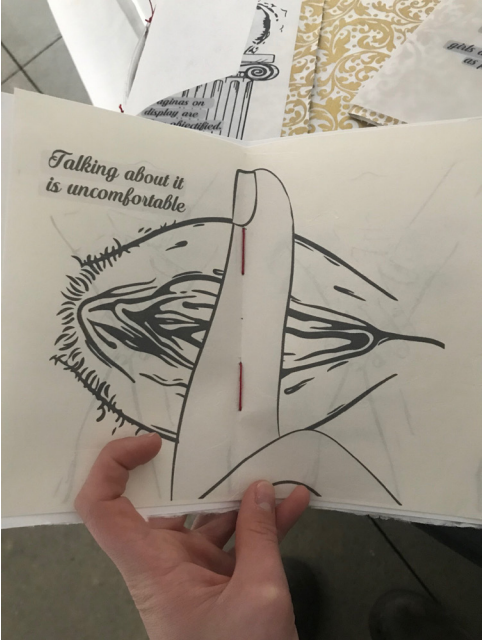
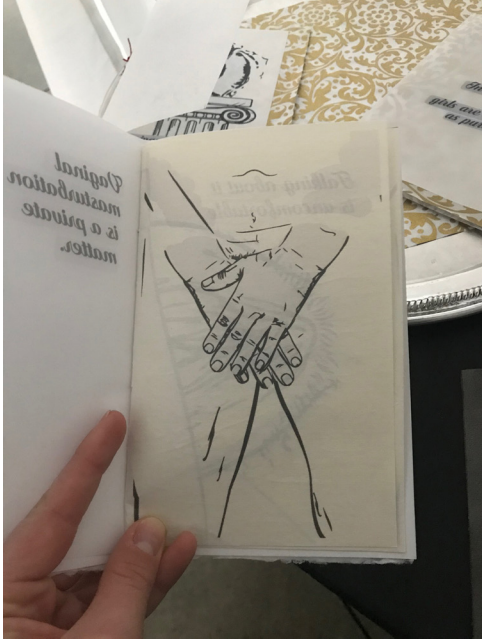
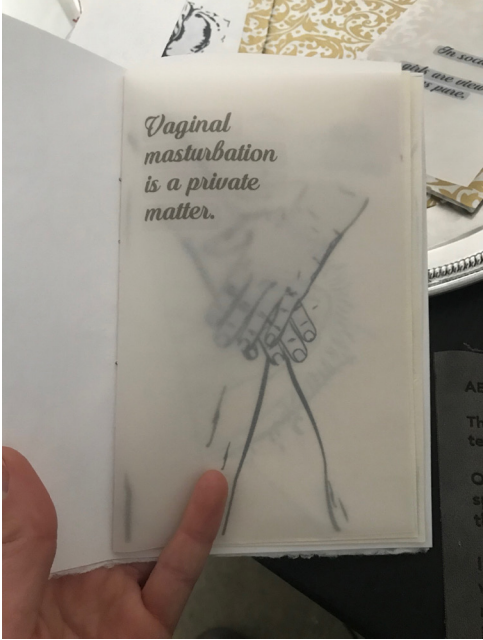
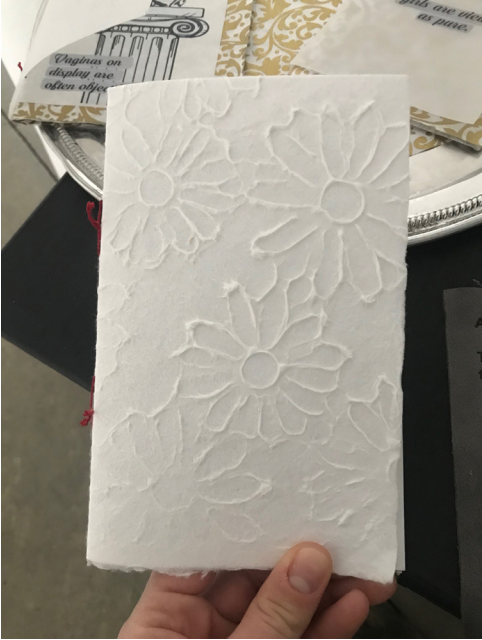


Chair, table, metal plate, felt basket, paper books, laser cut false suede fabric

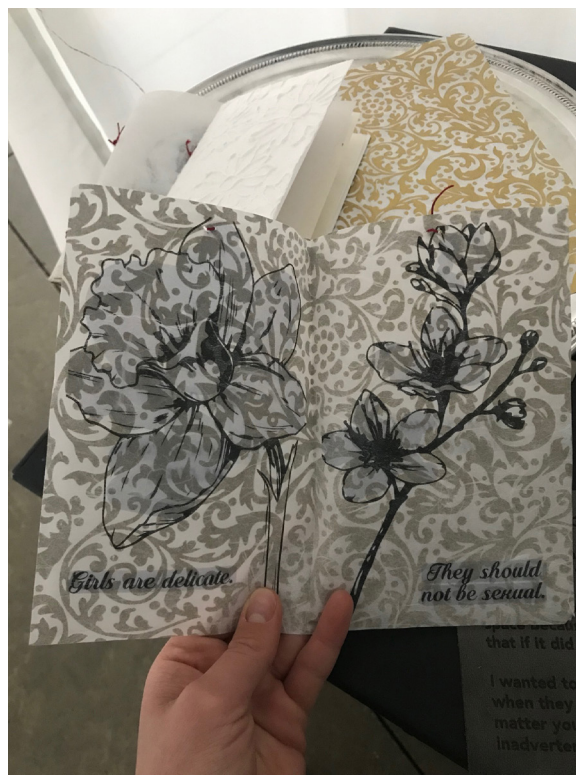
First book, 10 in x 6 in (unfolded)



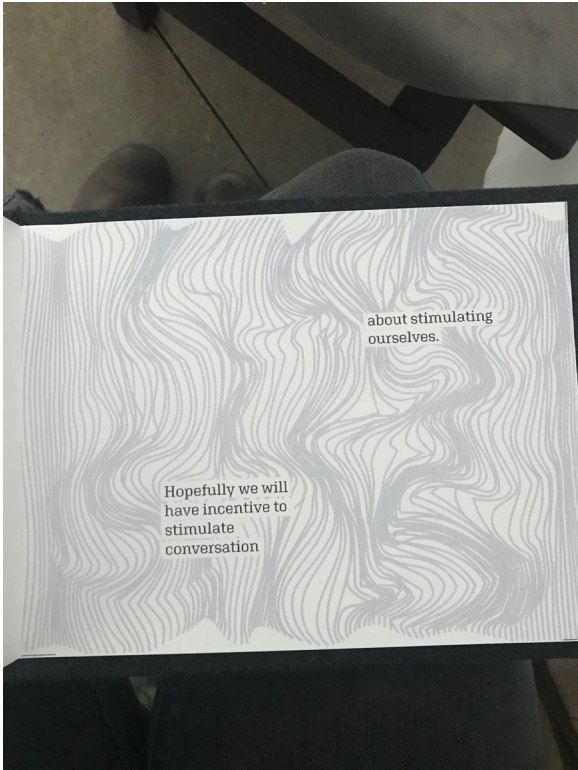
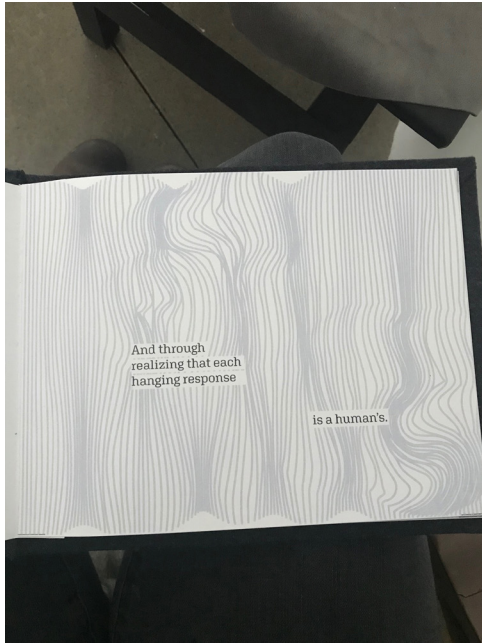
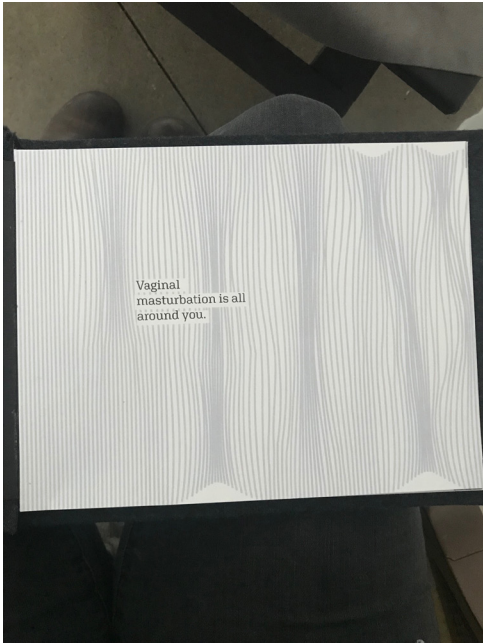
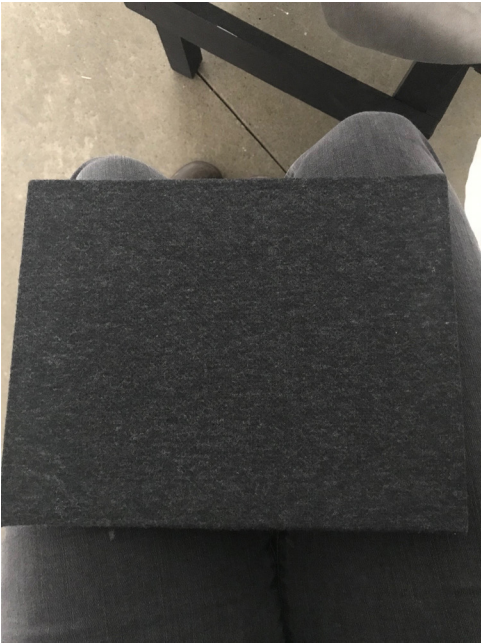
Second book, 10 in x 6 in (unfolded)



Third Book, 10 in x 6 in (unfolded)



Fourth book 10 in x 6 in



Fifth book 10 in x 6 in



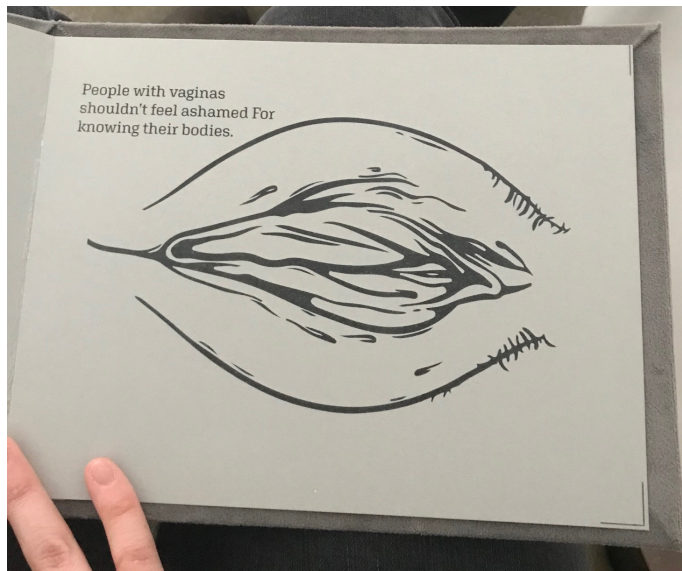
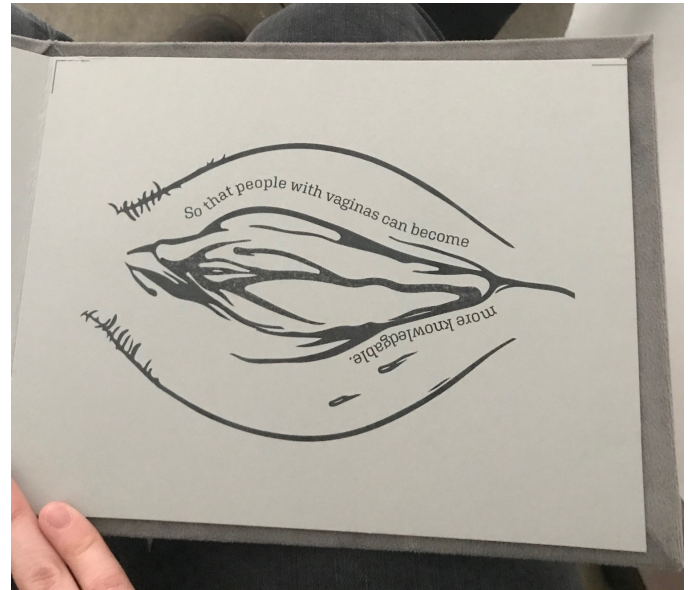
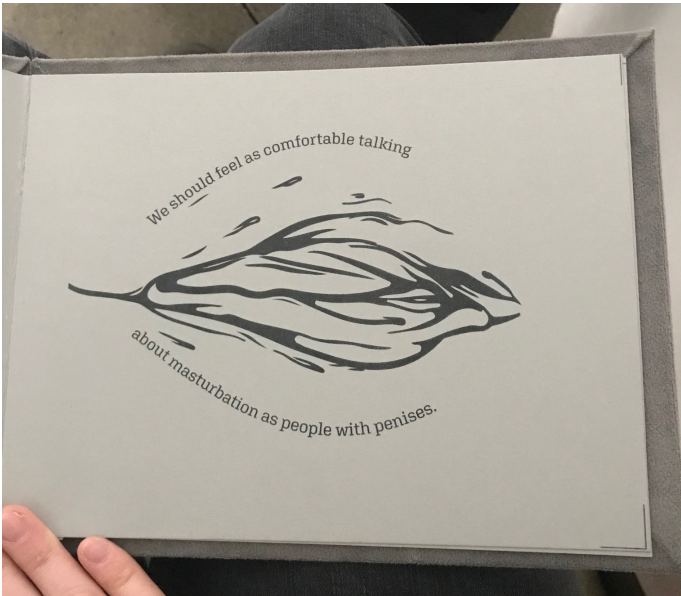
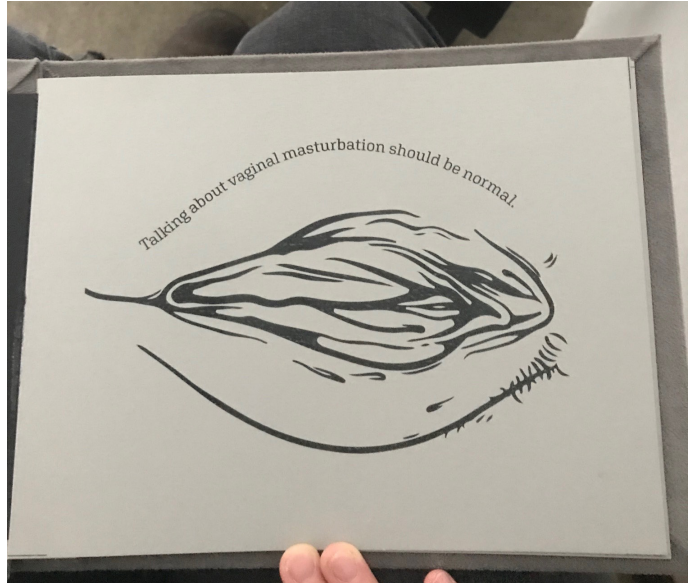
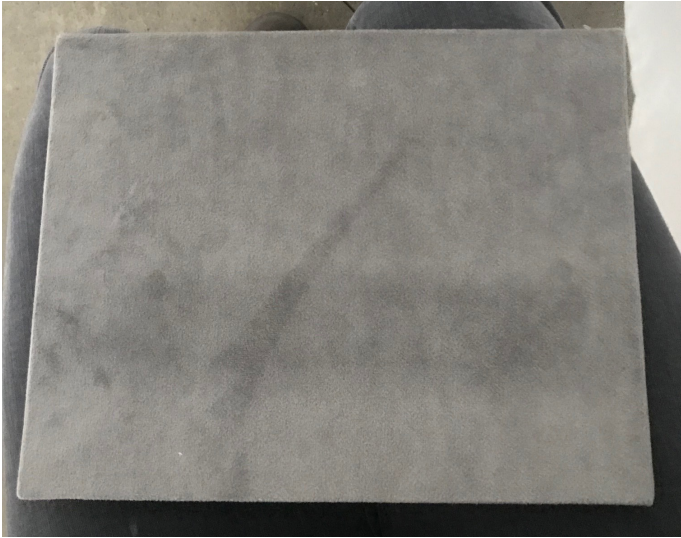
social constructs suggest that young girls should not and do not touch themselves, while it is considered normal for young boys to touch themselves.

But young girls do touch themselves.

IT'S NORMAL FOR LITTLE GIRLS TO TOUCH THEMSELVES. EXPERIMENTING WITH YOUR BODY IS HEALTHY. KNOWING YOUR BODY IS HEALTHY.

47% of the respondents around you say that they masturbated for the first time at the age of 10 or under.

Sixth book 10 in x 6 in





The Stigmatization of Vaginal Masturbation

And its Effect on Sexual Pleasure

Hannah Berk

Oberlin College Class of 2019

Visual Art Department Honors Thesis

April 2019

*Disclamers:*

*When I use the phrase “stigmatization of vaginal masturbation,” I am referencing the over stigmatization of vaginal masturbation when compared to penile masturbation. While both penile and vaginal masturbation are stigmatized, the studies discussed in this thesis demonstrate that vaginal masturbation is far more stigmatized than penile masturbation. I do not mean to devalue the stigmatized of penile masturbation.*

*While the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation is not only relevant for people who identify as female—it applies to everyone with a vagina—for the sake of clarity I will be referring to vaginal masturbation in regards to women and penile masturbation in regards to men. I am not discounting that the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation effects an array of genders.*

## Introduction

Starting in ancient times and continuing for the next several centuries vaginal and penile masturbation was viewed as unnatural in the religious sense as well as unhealthy. Physicians such as Galen and Hippocrates decided that masturbation caused physical damage including spinal cord deterioration. Until the mid-20th-century there was heavy punishment for those who masturbated, these punishments ranged from clitoridectomy and circumcision, to straight jackets. It was not until 1948 when Alfred Kinsey published a study titled, “Sexual Behavior In The Human Male”, that feelings towards masturbating started to shift. The study found that masturbation does not cause ill health. Although this case created a large amount of backlash, it paved the way for the slow progression towards the acceptance of masturbation for males. While masturbation is more accepted today, studies still show that it is more talked about among men than women and that more men masturbate than women.<sup>1</sup> Studies also show an increase in sexual pleasure during intercourse for women amongst those who masturbate.<sup>2</sup> Orgasming during sex

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<sup>1</sup> Haus, Katherine. “Feelin’ Myself: The Sexual Double Standard and Perceived Sexualities of Hypothetical Men and Women Engaging in Masturbation.” *University of Minnesota Duluth*, 2018.

Hogarth, Harriet, and Roger Ingham. “Masturbation among Young Women and Associations with Sexual Health: An Exploratory Study.” *The Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 46, no. 6, 2009, pp. 558–567. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20620466](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20620466).

<sup>2</sup> Adaikan, P. Ganesan. “PL-30 Female Masturbation: Prevalence, Characteristics & Therapeutic Implications.” *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2017, doi:10.1016/j.jsxm.2017.04.101.

Hurlbert, David Farley, and Karen Elizabeth Whittaker. “The Role of Masturbation in Marital and Sexual Satisfaction: A Comparative Study of Female Masturbators and Nonmasturbators.” *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1991, pp. 272–282., doi: 10.1080/01614576.1991.11074029.

for women is not always easy, but usually becomes easier through masturbation. Men have a far easier time orgasming during sex and separately, masturbation is less stigmatized for them. Therefore, I have theorized that as the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation increases, orgasms during sex decrease. In my thesis exhibition, I created a comfortable and private space where viewers could learn about vaginal masturbation. Through making two identical installations that provided space for multiple viewers, I also stimulated conversation.

## Section II: Theoretical Underpinnings

My first underpinning was the complex task of representing both vaginas and vaginal masturbation accurately. An article in The Huffington Post titled, “You Can Start A Small Revolution Just By Drawing A Vagina (NSFW),” stated, “Since what seems like the dawn of time, drawings of penises have been both omnipresent and hysterical (the latter, at least, to men). Memories of first sleepovers are tied to fears of falling asleep too early, lest you wake up with the image of a dick across your cheek. A silhouette of a penis is as recognizable as a stick figure or happy face, and has reared its head (literally) everywhere from films like “Superbad” to mischievous artworks by artists like Paul McCarthy.”<sup>3</sup> Because the image of the phallus has become almost numb to meaning due to excessive representation, vaginal imagery takes on more significance. Through my research on vaginal art, I found that many pieces were overly feminine or too

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<sup>3</sup> Frank, Priscilla, and Priscilla Frank. “You Can Start A Small Revolution Just By Drawing A Vagina (NSFW).” *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 16 Mar. 2016, [www.huffpost.com/entry/stephanie-sarley-vagina-drawings\\_n\\_56e8912fe4b0860f99dae1a2](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/stephanie-sarley-vagina-drawings_n_56e8912fe4b0860f99dae1a2).

sexualized. In some cases, it seemed that artists wanted to create a shock value and cared little about portraying meaning. In representing vaginal masturbation, I wanted everything to be intentional. The goal was not to shock the viewer, but to highlight to create accurate vaginal imagery that was not clinical or sexual, and to start communication about masturbation.

My second underpinning was to represent masturbation accurately. Studies have shown that vaginas range vastly in the way that they orgasm. Techniques range from using just hands and toys or crossing legs and rocking, to just thinking.<sup>4</sup> A long-term goal might have been to represent all types of vaginal masturbation as another attempt to normalize the act. Ultimately, as Bowman stated in her article, “Experiences of Sexual Empowerment in a Primarily Sex-Positive Sample,” “Results lend support to the feminist theory that when women can focus on their own sexual pleasure or learning, without the concerns of pregnancy or pleasing a partner, they may feel sexually empowered.”<sup>5</sup> Bowman didn’t mention the stress of stigmatization, but her emphasis on the importance of worry free masturbation was an inspiring goal.

While these two initial underpinnings were still important to me after my half time show, for my thesis exhibition I decided to change directions. While in my first show I drew accurate vaginas, unfortunately, I found that it was still explicit. I worried that representing masturbating vaginas was explicit by nature. I therefore was concerned that only those who also resonated with the idea would appreciate my art and not be turned away. I wanted to influence people who didn’t realize that the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation was problematic. I didn’t think that

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<sup>4</sup> “The Research.” *Omgyes*, [www.omgyes.com/en/about#/movement](http://www.omgyes.com/en/about#/movement).

<sup>5</sup> Bowman, Christin P. “Women’s Masturbation: Experiences of Sexual Empowerment in a Primarily Sex-Positive Sample.” *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 3, Sept. 2014, pp. 363–378, doi:10.1177/0361684313514855.

my explicit art from the half time show was the right environment to absorb this private matter. My new approach had one major underpinning and goal — to create a safe, private, and inviting space to learn about the importance of vaginal masturbation. To do this I spoke with Oberlin psychology professor, Nancy Darling. Professor Darling explained to me that there were two real ways to create engagement about such a stigmatized topic. The first was through creating a private space, and the second was through making small art that people have to get up close and engage with to view. These two pieces of advice became guiding principles as I began to construct my thesis exhibition.

### Section III: Influences

My interest in the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation started in college after speaking with many friends and realizing that it was normal and the norm for women to masturbate. These conversations led me to reflect on my own experience. In high school, while I had private, embarrassing conversations about masturbation with close friends, the boys in my grade would publicly boast about jerking off, wacking it, slapping the monkey, and who knows what else. Looking back, I realized that the boys gained social points through verbalizing their tendencies, while the girls lost points. This phenomenon set the girls up to lose as masturbation, which meant knowing your body, progressed towards sex. Connecting masturbation to sexual satisfaction seemed obvious, but as I reflected back to high school, I began to wonder how stigmatization played a role.

## *Studies*

After doing research and coming to the conclusion that vaginal masturbation is in fact more stigmatized, my motivation increased. Because knowing your body is incredibly important to be able to reach an orgasm, I connected the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation with ability to orgasm during sex, but I needed to prove this trend. In my introduction I mentioned a series of studies that prove this theory. These studies, and my own survey, showed that while masturbation is certainly stigmatized for everyone, it is far worse for people with vaginas. The research also reveals a correlation between masturbation and pleasure during sex for women. Although I have looked, I have been unable to find research on a direct correlation between the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation and pleasure during sex. But if there is a link between vaginal masturbation and sexual satisfaction, and women are masturbating less due to the stigma, lack of education and shame, logic would suggest a correlation between stigmatization and sexual satisfaction.

Firstly, many studies show that vaginal masturbation is stigmatized at a much higher rate than penile masturbation. In a study looking at how women are judged for their sexual behavior, Katherine Haus writes that “they [the researchers] also encountered more women grappling with the conflict between masturbation as a behavior that is recognized as sexually healthy, while being highly stigmatized, but the majority of male participants were able to easily come to terms with it as a healthy behavior”<sup>6</sup> This same trend reoccurs in Hogarth and Roger’s study. They

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<sup>6</sup> Haus, Katherine. “Feelin’ Myself: The Sexual Double Standard and Perceived Sexualities of Hypothetical Men and Women Engaging in Masturbation.” *University of Minnesota Duluth*, 2018.

found that “many women felt that it was acceptable for men to masturbate, and characterized their own bodies as areas meant for male exploration, and felt strongly that sexual activity was meant to take place within dyadic interactions and not by individuals.”<sup>7</sup> While women definitely learn about their bodies through partner sex, not expanding their knowledge through solo sex limits their experience with their partner. These are just two of the many studies that show or mention higher stigmatization or masturbation for women rather than men.

Secondly, many studies have shown a correlation between vaginal masturbation and orgasm rates during sex. An article titled, “Female Masturbation: Prevalence, Characteristics & Therapeutic Implications” published in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* states,

Masturbation allows the exploration and understanding of the complex female genitalia, and provides a way of learning about the body and sexual responsiveness leading to more positive relationship with the genital body. Thus, masturbation can be seen as a means of achieving sexual health and good marker of sexual function (Coleman, 2001). It can also be a form of helpful technique in the treatment of female sexual dysfunctions (Leiblum and Rosen, 1989).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hogarth, Harriet, and Roger Ingham. “Masturbation among Young Women and Associations with Sexual Health: An Exploratory Study.” *The Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 46, no. 6, 2009, pp. 558–567. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20620466](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20620466).

<sup>8</sup> Adaikan, P. Ganesan. “PL-30 Female Masturbation: Prevalence, Characteristics & Therapeutic Implications.” *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2017, doi:10.1016/j.jsxm.2017.04.101.



Similar results have been found in many other studies, including my own.<sup>9</sup> In the study that I created 68% of people with vaginas showed an increase of pleasure in sex due to masturbation. Responses ranged from feeling better educated about their bodies, to being able to mutually masturbate with their partner, to feeling more comfortable communicating. This research definitely influenced my work. Knowing that I was not the only one that felt this stigma was refreshing. All the responses to my survey were positive and many expressed excitement for being given the opportunity to start a dialog.

### *Artists*

Peter De Cupere, Jamie McCartney, Carmen Winant, Christoph Niemann, Tang Yau Hoong, and Judy Chicago hugely influenced my artistic ideation. My only regret is that while De Cupere and McCartney did great jobs of representing the vagina, they are both male which somewhat undermines their ability to represent the female body.

De Cupere sculpted a statue titled, *The Deflowering*. This sculpture of Madonna is made with disinfective urinoir blocks — a substance that smells like vagina. Cupere stated in an article for The Huffington Post, “A woman’s vagina smells, in general, great and more men should re-

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<sup>9</sup> Hurlbert, David Farley, and Karen Elizabeth Whittaker. “The Role of Masturbation in Marital and Sexual Satisfaction: A Comparative Study of Female Masturbators and Nonmasturbators.” *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1991, pp. 272–282., doi: 10.1080/01614576.1991.11074029.

spect that.”<sup>10</sup> De Cupere combined vaginal smell with themes of divinity, suggesting that the scent of a vagina is holy.

While De Cupere worked with vaginal scent, McCartney’s sculptures normalized vaginal anatomy. De Cupere made a plaster wall of over 400 different vaginas titled, *The Great Wall of Vagina*. In an interview for Artnet News, he spoke about the shame that some women felt about the appearance of their vaginas. He mentioned porn as a possible cause. Through representing these vastly different vaginas, De Cupere gave his audience the following messages. Firstly, he hoped that by showing the immense variety in vaginal shapes—all of which were healthy—he might ease discomforts. Secondly, he hoped to normalize looking at one’s vaginas. Many women had never seen their own vaginas.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly to De Cupere and McCartney, Winant’s work normalized the female body. I met with Winant for an artist critique this past February. She is most known for her art in the MoMa titled, *Birth*. She spoke to me about how after giving birth many people made comments about her child, but nobody asked about the process of giving birth. She felt that this exhausting accomplishment had been pushed under the rug. To combat this lack of dialog, Winant created *Birth*, a wall of photos of women across time, giving birth.

Similarly, Chicago’s installation, *The Dinner Party*, empowered the female body. Chicago created a triangular table with place for 39 historically famous women. On each place setting was a china plate with a vulva on it. Senior writer for Artnet News, Sarah Cascone, wrote about

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<sup>10</sup> Frank, Priscilla. “The Vagina Scent Artists Returns With A Reprise Of That Courbet Painting (NSFW).” *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 6 Dec. 2017, [www.huffpost.com/entry/vagina-scent-art\\_n\\_6249504](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/vagina-scent-art_n_6249504).

<sup>11</sup> Munro, Cait. “Meet Jamie McCartney, the Artist Who Wants to Cast Vaginas in Every Country in the World.” *Artnet News*, Artnet News, 3 Aug. 2015, [news.artnet.com/market/jamie-mccartney-vagina-sculptures-321901](http://news.artnet.com/market/jamie-mccartney-vagina-sculptures-321901).

Chicago's installation, "Perhaps most notably, *The Dinner Party* is a reclamation of the female anatomy. Celebrating the power and beauty of the vulva stood in contrast to the overwhelming dominance of the phallus in visual culture, all the way down to our city skylines."<sup>12</sup> *The Dinner Party* also addressed the omission of women from many historical records, while at the same time, celebrated traditionally female arts such as weaving, embroidery, and sewing.

All four of these artists worked to normalize and celebrate the female body. Each artist inspired me as I worked on and educated myself around vaginal masturbation. I used McCartney's techniques of representation of the vagina and Winant, Cupere, and Chicago's approach to destigmatizing the women's body.

While these four artists helped navigate my work around vaginal masturbation, Niemann and Hoong led my design focused process. Both Niemann and Hoong are well known in their fields. Niemann's work appears regularly on the covers of *The New Yorker*, *National Geographic*, and *The New York Times Magazine*, while Hoong's clients include Nike, Pentagram, and TED. I was most impressed with these designers' ability to simplify complex ideas through art. Niemann expresses the key to accomplishing this in his "Abstract-O-Meter." If art is too abstract, it will be lost to the viewer, but if it is too realistic, it will seem too obvious. The perfect piece of art lies exactly in the middle and a good designer can find that spot. My artistic process was not only about the art that I ultimately produce. How I got to my final project, seemed equally as important. I wanted my art to be understood, but not to be obvious. With so many ideas in my head, I found that Niemann and Hoong's influence kept me conscious of each decision that I made and how it would be perceived.

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<sup>12</sup> Cascone, Sarah. "How—and Why—'The Dinner Party' Became the Most Famous Feminist Artwork of All Time." *Artnet News*, 7 Nov. 2017, [news.artnet.com/about/sarah-cascone-25](https://news.artnet.com/about/sarah-cascone-25).

## Section IV: Process and Ideation

### *Half Time Show*

I began by literally shining light on vaginal masturbation. To do this, I made 4 drawings on Adobe Illustrator. I laser cut all of these drawing on mirrored acrylic. I intended to bounce light off of the mirrors to create a projection from the mirrors onto the wall. To do this I built three shelves. Each shelf had a 1/4" indent where a mirror could sit upright. The mirror sat on the shelf which was drilled into the wall. A light also sat on the shelf in between the wall and the mirror. To find the perfect light to project on the wall, I researched and compared light types.<sup>13</sup>

After settling on the perfect LED light, I addressed the new challenge of stimulating interaction within my art. I wanted the audience to literally shine light onto my art and thus further start conversation. To achieve this I met with Facilities Manager, Richard Wood, to hang a wire across my installation room. I hung my final two pieces from the wire and prompted the audience to use their phone lights to create their own projections.

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<sup>13</sup> I ultimately concluded that it had to be an LED with no filter to project a clean image. I wanted the light quality to be sharp (no filter), but when I tried concentrating it with a tube, the tube would get in the way of the projection. In the end, after meeting with the Educational Technologist and Digital Media Engineer, Kyle Hartzell, multiple times, I cut all of the filters out of three LED flashlights so that all that was left was the LED. I then cut the metal around the light as well so that nothing was obstructing the projection. Finally, I glued each LED plate into place in the flash light. I sat one light on each of the three shelves.

Going into my final exhibition, I wanted to continue my research on vaginal masturbation, but as stated above, I realized I needed a new approach. I didn't just want to preach to the choir, I wanted to create a safe space to for people to learn. My meeting with professor Darling sent my head spinning with 100 different ideas, but before I began, I wanted more verification that the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation was real. I decided to send a survey our to my peers which was completed by 49 people with vaginas. People were excited to talk about their experiences with vaginal masturbation. This fueled me. I wanted the world to see their responses.

### *Thesis Exhibition*

#### The Viewers Experience

I made two canopies that hang across from each other, so that they are in conversation with each other. When the viewer enters the canopy on the right, they will see a sofa chair. Next to the chair will be a side table. On the side table will be a felt basket that is filled with three books, and a silver plater, also with three books. The viewer can sit in the chair and read these books. In the canopy to the left, hanging in-line with the canopy curtain, will be 50 hanging pieces of cloth. Each piece will be a response from my survey. The viewer will be able to pick each piece of cloth up and read it. Hopefully when the viewer exits from one canopy, they will be able to converse with the viewer exiting from the other.

## The Experience in Detail (From the Outside in)

### *The canopy*

The canopy is a light cream fabric that creates a private space for the viewer. It is not claustrophobic and lets in light. I have wrapped battery powered ferry lights across the hoop of the canopy to ensure readability.

### *The survey results*

Each survey result will be laser cut into a white or off white piece of fabric that is 9 by 8 inches and will hang from one corner by thread. 6-3 responses hang attached to each other. The idea is to have a few different types of white to demonstrate that each response is unique. That said, all of the fabric is off white to symbolize the way in which vaginal masturbation blends into the background. It is all around the viewer, but hard to notice.

### *The books*

These books address an internal dialog that persisted throughout the duration of working on this project. On the one hand, I felt that vaginal masturbation should take up space because it traditionally it does not. On the other hand, I felt that if it did, no one would listen — people would be put-off.

I wanted to show that many girls and boys start masturbating when they are young — learning about one's body is important no matter your age or sexual orientation. However, the possibility of inadvertently sexualizing young girls felt dangerous. I also wanted to represent

vaginal masturbation, but I felt that my drawings could be easily misinterpreted as objectifying and over-sexualizing the female body.

The Pure Books: These books are light, simple, and pure. They represent the people who might have a hard time accepting that vaginal masturbation should be talked about. These books are the narratives that I found I had to fight while working on my project. They sit in a phallic shaped glass dome, where a flower might rest. They are fully on display, objectified even. To read the books, the viewer must remove them from the dome, freeing them.

The Expression Books: These books have a presence, they are heavy and tactile. They are warm, inviting, and are built to remind the viewer bed sheets which further alludes to masturbation. These books represent the other opinion. They tell the reader that vaginal masturbation should take up space. They sit in a warm, felt basket.

## Section VII: Conclusion

The more research I do on this topic, the more I feel that not enough studies have been done. My work was really just breaking the ice. While my survey was helpful, I would still love to conduct a more accurate study to demonstrate a correlation between the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation and sexual pleasure.

Through doing this work, I have only gotten support from my family and friends. This illustrated that while it was hard to broach an uncomfortable topic, once I did my peers tended to be all-in. Hopefully, through my art, I showed the viewer that they didn't have to take on the

awkward job of being the first to talk about it, I did that for them. Instead, all that they had to do was respond.

After seeing my work from the half time show, my dad decided that he had to show the photos to his friends. It was hilarious to picture a bunch of 50 year olds talking about the stigmatization of vaginal masturbation. My dad could not only show the images, he had to explain the ideas too, which then turned into an entire conversation—and was ultimately a huge victory for me. My research, my art, and all surrounding conversations, have shown me that I have sparked communication about vaginal masturbation and I can't wait to see where that spark takes me next.



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