UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Glance Gaze Look

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

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Committee in charge:

Professor Lisa Cartwright, Chair
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Professor David Serlin
Professor Alena Williams

2018

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The Thesis of Jessica Marie Buie is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Co-Chair

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2018

DEDICATION

To my love, Katie, for lending me confidence when I had none.

EPIGRAPH

To Jessica:

In regard to your question: My initial impulse is to say yes and no simultaneously, which is to say I don't have an answer except to look within and assess my own gaze outward, framed first by my glasses and next by my camera.

A gaze which discriminates, yet is prone to dalliance: I fall for crooked noses, long fingers, toothy grins. These are the subjects of my obsession: the punctums of intrigue. That which prick me and consume me – penetrate and envelope. And in such hermaphroditic terms are not specific to gender, but in fact stem from a more amorphous libido: a crotch, so to speak.

But the camera itself does not lust for its subject. The portrait is not inherently charged. Isolation is not the product of fetishism, but of aperture and shutter. The camera blinks but does not swoon.

It is an apparatus that flattens. My beloved loses all internal organs, left only with skin that vibrates against 18% grey. This is a beautiful body, albeit one made of grain; one that is dissolved into clothing, background: context. Woven into the very fibers of the paper. And in this way the object of desire becomes the art object: photograph; and in turn, the lover: me: technician.

–Sarah Farnsworth

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Glance Gaze Look

by

Jessica Marie Buie

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego 2018

Professor Lisa Cartwright, Chair
Professor Jordan Crandall, Co-chair

Through traditional studio photography, appropriation, and collage techniques, *Glance Gaze Look* seeks to identify and question representations (or the lack thereof) of queerness in contemporary image-culture, in particular the mechanics of representation and the gaze as they relate to the act of looking at and consuming the body. Presented in whole, the exhibition speculates on and attempts to ameliorate the inadequate representations of queer female desire as told through past, current, and personal image systems.

Glance Gaze Look

Through traditional studio photography, appropriation, and collage techniques, the exhibition *Glance Gaze Look* seeks to identify and question representations (or the lack thereof) of queerness in contemporary image-culture, in particular the mechanics of representation and the gaze as they relate to the act of looking at and consuming the body. It comprises an installation containing multiple related photographic series, all of which occupy a unique function of the act of looking. Like the footnotes of a book, the works contain self-referential images and text, consistently leading back and forth to one another. Each series is notably constructed through the use of historical and contemporary source imagery, text, and subjective material from the artist's own camera and writings. Presented in whole, the exhibition speculates on and attempts to ameliorate the inadequate representations of queer female desire as told through past, current, and personal image systems.

Exposing

The torso appears as a proscenium, a stage where clothing is a curtain of denim or leather, opened up to reveal skin or hair. The surface of the body is a stage where the action of desire takes place, activated by a look. Buttons and belt buckles and zippers and other accoutrements not only individualize each image, but give more reason for the gaze to remain along the most private parts of the body. Cruising, one may find recognizable detail to take comfort in. The torso beckons, provoking touch, exposing its erotics, attempting to stimulate desire.



Figure 1: Will, from the series *Exposure*, 2016.

Looking



Figure 2: *The Girl Maker,* 2018.

I've long been interested in the act of looking:

The gaze of the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*[1] as he stares seductively at the viewer. The Chanel model in the advertisement (whom I was never entirely sure if I identified with or desired or both). A snapshot of a past lover.

[1] Caravaggio. *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, 1593, oil on canvas, 70 by 67 cm, Rome, Galleria Borghese.

Their gazes pierce me and acknowledge my own existence[2]. Our relationship is complicated beyond the photographic binary of active viewer and passive subject. There is a constantly shifting exchange of power as we share our looking at and being-looked-at with one another, moving between subject and object seamlessly. We do not meet along the binary of the looker and the looked at, but rather within the spectrum of subject and object. There is a power structure inherent in this relation: who is allowed to look at whom? Whose gaze transforms the other into an object? In what ways is our looking mediated? By our own subjectivities? By the strains and expectations of popular culture?

[2]Jean-Paul Sartre. "The Look" In *Being and Nothingness*. (Philosophical Library: New York City, 1956).

Representation



Figure 3: *To Dotty*, 2018

The complexity of the act of looking is suggested by the many variations of the word itself: glance, gaze, stare, glimpse. All facilitate a particular meeting of subject and object. Each imply a different operation and a slightly different relationship between the looker and the looked-at, and perhaps even varied implications of desire, identification with the subject, or rejection. How does the body relate and react to these varied forms of looking, and specifically the interaction between looking and representations of the queer body? The power of the image is such that repeated representation of an idea has the power to transform it from subjective perception to objective reality.

“Reality can be known only through the forms that articulate it, there can be no reality outside of

representation."[3]

How certain can I be that the bodies in the images I saw on the television screen or in the pages of my father's newspaper or my mother's People magazine informed and crafted the self-image I inhabit today? Was there a singular image that cemented my eventual desire for a particularly gendered body?

[3] Kate Linker. "Representation and Sexuality." In *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*. (Boston: New Museum of Art, 1984), 392.

Image-culture

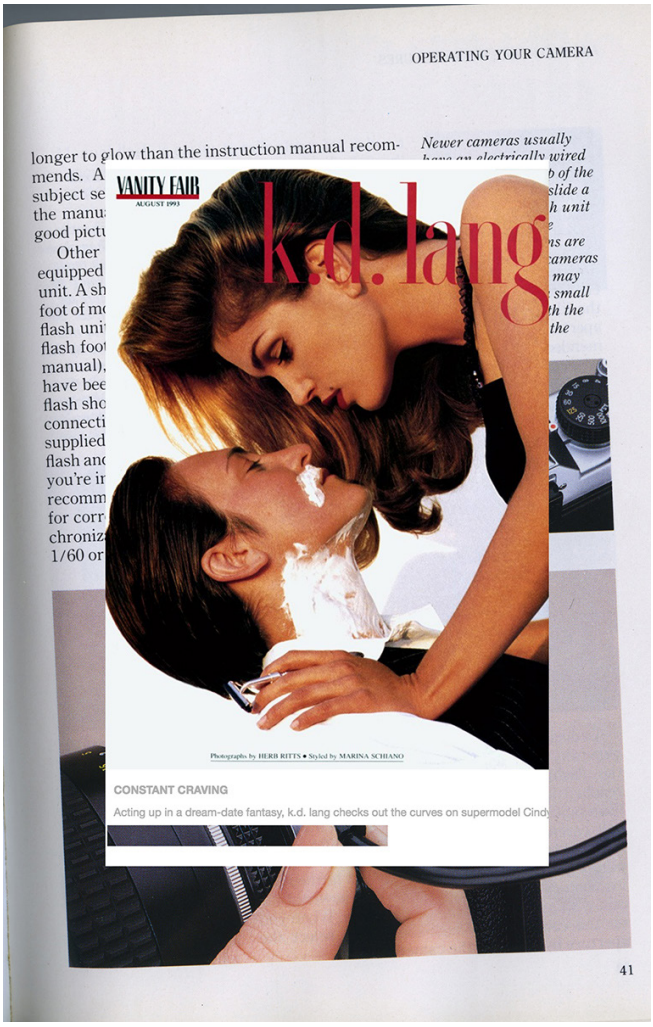


Figure 4: *Dream-date fantasy*, 2018

"Looking is not indifferent; it is always implicated in a system of control."[4]

The exchange that occurs in looking is sexual in nature, reminiscent of an anonymous sex act and parallel to the experience of photographing or being photographed. To look at a photograph is to cruise, to slide your gaze along the subject until you find something recognizable, something (someone) you want to have an exchange with. The exchange is always multiplicitous. Contemporary image-culture, or the images we unconsciously look at on a day-to-day basis

[4] Linker, 407.

(a side glance at the cover of a magazine in the grocery store, a glimpse of a passing billboard while driving down the highway), asks us to consume images of the figure by assuming a gendered and heterosexual gaze. We consume bodies cannibalistically, vampirically[5], scopophillically, and voyeuristically as image-culture asks the viewer to first and foremost identify with the subject, to project themselves onto the image surface, and then to desire the subject (or most times, the product the subject is selling).

[5] Diana Fuss. "Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look." Critical Inquiry 18, no. 4 (1992): 729.

Desire

Here, I must acknowledge "the always complicated relation between desire and identification in the formation of the subject's identity."[6] To rectify this barrier that keeps us from fully submitting to an unimpaired erotics, what must occur is a subversion of the notion that "identifying with one sex is the necessary condition for desiring the other."[7] The solution, for me, is ambiguity as a methodology, a complete dissolving of the relationship between desire and identity. What this may look like is a presentation of gender and identity that is neither one nor another, but a combination of codes, a queering of the subject both literally and figuratively. For me, it is a documenting of oft-ignored female masculinity, or a synthesis of historical, contemporary, and personal visual material: lesbian pulp novels, fashion advertisements, chronicling language and image of my personal erotics.

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[6] Fuss, 737.
[7] Ibid.

Frame. Capture. Own.



Figure 5: *Objects for life*, 2018

As a queer woman, my gaze as a photographer is unique and sexes the framing of the images I consume as well as the images I produce as somewhere between male and female. Through this act of queer looking, I keep myself conscious of the traditional structures of looking and consuming that a long history of patriarchal and capitalist structures continue to engineer. I cannot help but to give a side glance to the bodies I'm forced to confront as I scroll through and swipe away ads on this or that device. Though I may want to avoid them, as soon as our eyes meet, I am implicated. I once again participate in the machine that uses bodies and gazes to sell things and to define an inescapable mainstream.

To release myself from implication, or to distract myself, I take photographs, not just as a photographer bringing new images into existence, but by taking images of and from original sources and altering them into new evolutions and meanings. Frame. Capture. Own. This 'looking for images within images' is a gesture of bringing focus to figures and perceptions that perhaps have been largely ignored or devalued as irrelevant to a contemporary image-world — scans of notes written in the margins of books, long-forgotten personal ads, models in product catalogs. What is the role looking plays in a deeply gendered and capitalistic field of image saturation?

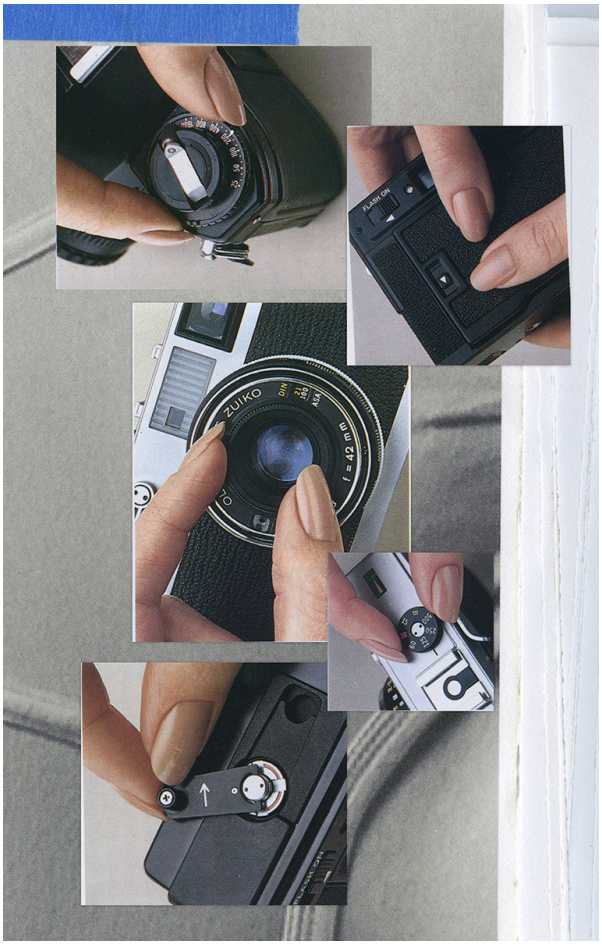


Figure 6: *Zuiko*, 2018

After three years of calling myself a photographer, I am now wholly unconcerned with the gesture and techniques of taking good photographs. In my brief attempts at performing what I thought to be a photographer's activity (shooting portraits in my studio, hours spent squinting at light tables and medium format scans, amassing stacks of work prints), it quickly became apparent to me that this was not where my central questions would be answered. This was not the thing that teased and tantalized me about photography. And assuredly, many other photographers throughout the history of the medium have sufficiently explored the nature of erotics and queer desire already. I would hesitate now to call myself a photographer, as my current position more

accurately reflects a curatorial role. I don't frequently take images, but I do take images from many sources and push them around until they produce something new.

I use image transformations as curatorial actions (crop, erasure, scaling), conceptual and physical castrations of source imagery (whether found, mined, or produced through my own camera) down to its bare minimum, a re-aversion of an image's original intention to something unexpected or skewed. The Pictures generation did this frequently, artists such as Sherrie Levine, Sarah Charlesworth, John Baldessari, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman. They particularized similar transformational gestures within their own practice as methods of producing or revealing new meanings from source imagery while bridging conceptual art and photographic practices. Their use of images, an engagement "with how contemporary life is mediated and governed by pictures, specifically as we experience them in newspapers and magazines, on television, and in film,"[8] mirror my own curiosities about the role of images in the disjointed fields of physical and digital space.

[8] Rochelle Steiner. *Sarah Charlesworth*. (LACMA: Los Angeles, 2017), 179.

Eroticism

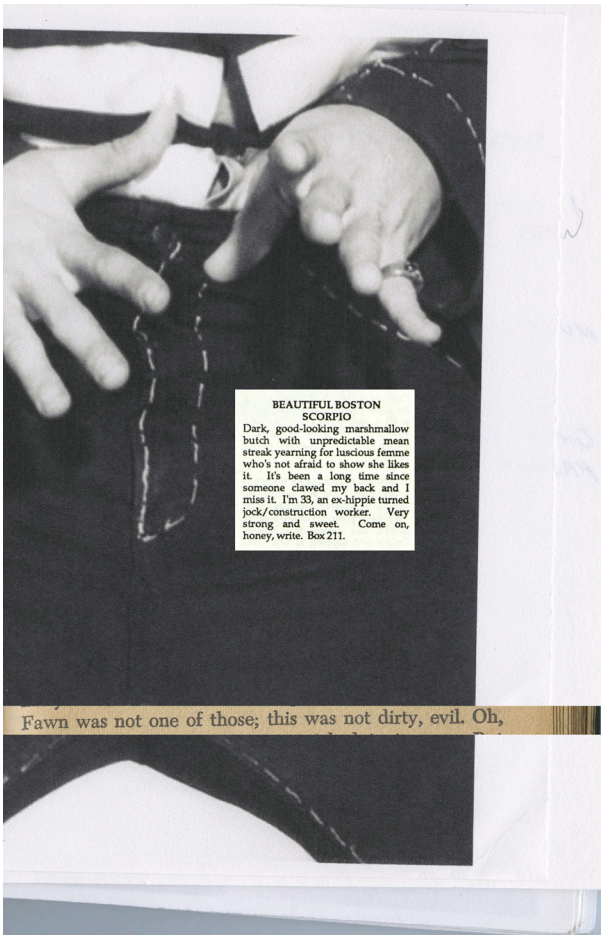


Figure 7: *Scorpio*, 2018

Eroticism is more than a dialectical interest to me. It is something I seek out in my day to day activity, a feeling of simultaneous fullness and emptiness that I find both alluring and disturbing. The erotic is present in nearly all social interactions I am tasked with participating in everyday, but it is weighed down by the heft of codes that keep it from rising to the surface, or from being immediately readable by its participants. When it does manage to escape the layers of social niceties, it is typically in the form of a gaze, or a brushing touch, or sometimes a verbal caress. The characteristics of eroticism I find so intriguing are its dichotomies. At once, it can be unambiguously present and yet fleeting, transparent and yet opaque. This enigmaticness eludes specificity and requires no particular gender or sexual identity to operate.specificity and requires no particular gender or sexual identity to operate.

Primarily, it is the tactility and materiality of eroticism that is so tantalizing. What are the mechanics of this inevitable ritual we helplessly perform? Is it possible to give visuality to such a gaseous experience? Maybe the more pertinent question is: why do such a thing? Desire and erotics have long been common subjects of artistic perusal and undeniably take up a sizeable chunk of art history, however, my practice differs from existing experiments in decoding the erotic in its discriminatory interest in female masculinity. More specifically, I obsess over the confusion of gendered codes, the interactions between the photographic functions of the gaze and staging and posturings of queer women, and the materiality of queer erotics.

Deviance

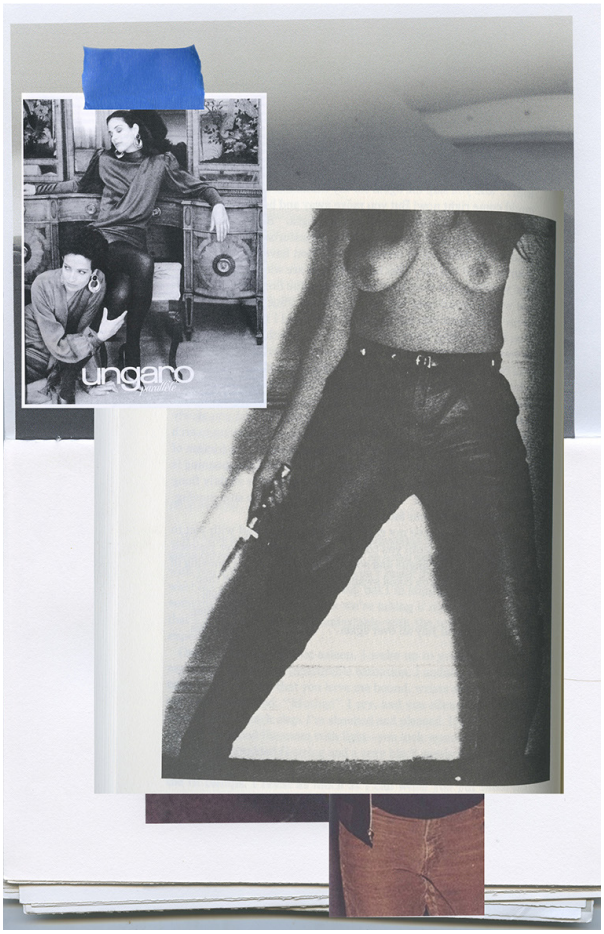


Figure 8: *Ungaro*, 2018

The crotch is a motif presenting the act of looking as deviant, not only because of the image's inherent queerness (there is an acute indeterminacy about the identity of the subject due to the physicality and staging of the subject), but because contemporary etiquette vehemently condemns this type of looking (direct engagement with the site of another's body where the enaction of erotics takes place). By making the act of viewing these images a deviant action for any viewer, the particular feeling of criminality imposed on queer acts of desire can be felt universally. The gesture of both photographing and looking at the crotch refuses the conventional relationship a viewer has to a photographic subject and demands an unnatural relationship to a sexually charged subject-object. It asks the viewer to consider the voyeurism inherent in photography by

exposing itself as a genderless surface to be projected upon. The crotch offers itself, encourages anonymous cruising regardless of the subject or viewer's gender or identity. Here, the image presents gender as a "complex set of negotiations between bodies, identities, and desire."[9]

[9]Jack Halberstram. *Female Masculinity*. (Duke University Press: Durham, 1998), 38.

Ritual

The images of my subject's crotch document a laborious, erotic ritual shared between the artist and the subject (me and my love), a document of a history of intimacy. We reenact our lineage of erotic encounters by performing the roles of artist and model. Preparing the large format camera: lifting the body onto the head of the tripod, adjusting the bellows, covering my head with the sheet, staging the composition through upside down frosted glass, micro-adjusting the focus with a magnifier, loading the film in cover of darkness, setting the aperture and shutter speed, attaching the shutter release cable, and finally the release. The laborious ritual of taking a photograph so delicately mirrors the labor of erotics we have performed together.

And then, there is this document of our encounter.

As Barthes would have it, I may induce others into desiring my loved one, much as I have been induced into desiring photographic subjects through the gloss of magazines and billboards for much of my life. "The loved being is desired because another or others have shown... that such a being is desirable..."[10]

[10] Roland Barthes. "Induction." In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments.* (Hill & Wang: New York City, 1979).

Permissions



Figure 9: *Off-beat*, 2018

The difficulty of erotic images is that what one may find paralyzingly desirable, another may find empty and unfulfilling. But rather than inducing desire for my individual subjects (photographed and found), it is preferred that I induce a raised awareness of the politics of looking, a politics that constantly pushes and pulls at the (queer, female) body with unattainable requirements: sell a product, be an object, be a subject, own your sexuality, give it away. You do not have to experience erotic desire for a body to sympathize with it, nor to recognize the frameworks that dictate its existence. It does not require erotic desire to ask: who is allowed to look? Who is allowed to be looked at?

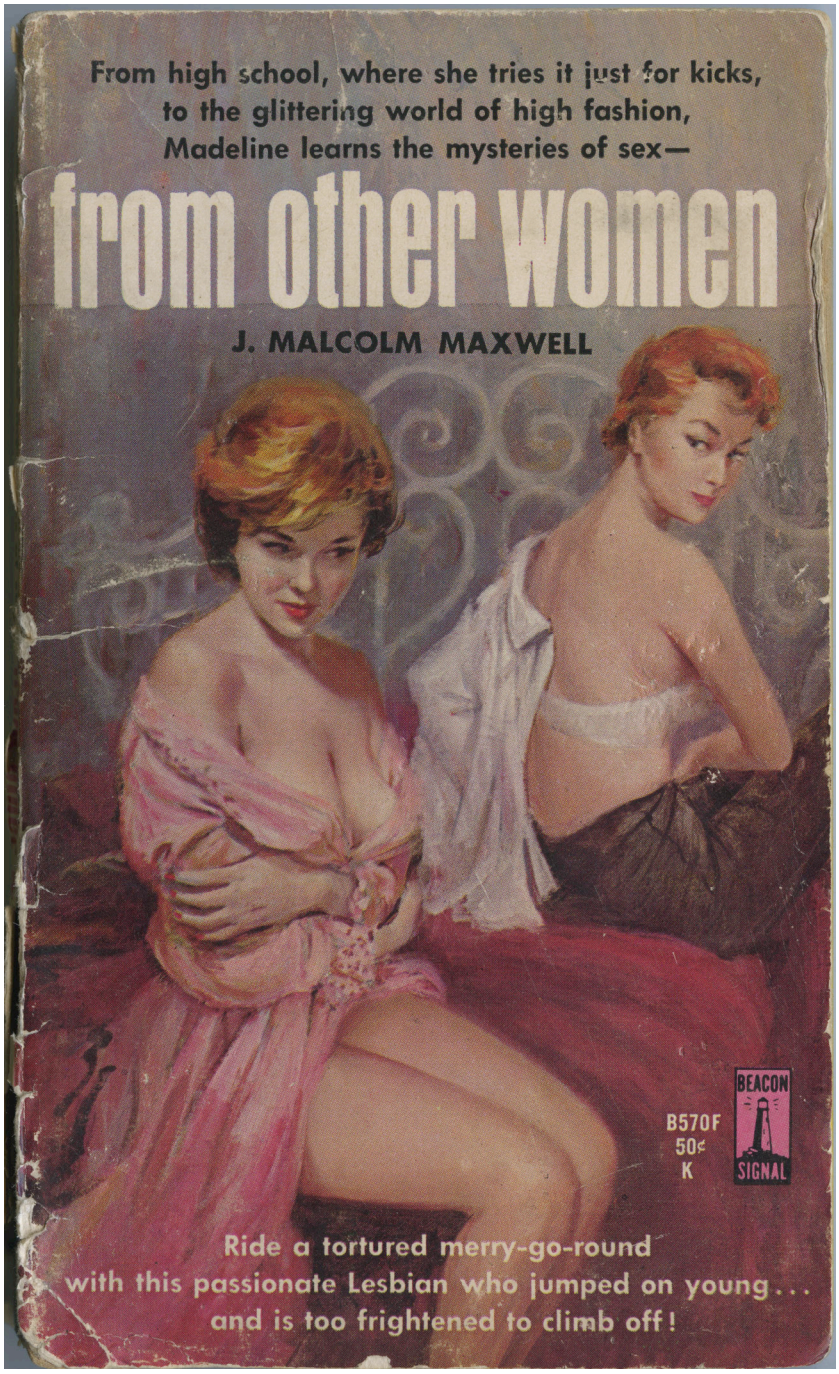


Figure 10: Illustrated cover of *From Other Women* by J. Malcolm Maxwell, 1963

Twilight Romance

In 1950, Gold Medal Books became the seminal American publisher of pulp novels. Made from a substandard wood pulp instead of a traditional paper source, pulp novels offered cheaply made escapist fantasy tales with often lurid and sensational content for a mainstream audience. In 2013, I began working for the fifth-largest comic book publisher in the United States, headquartered in San Diego, California. Amassing a bloated personal comic book collection quickly led my collecting interests to other "lowbrow" cultural objects, such as the now rare and mythologized pulp novel. Now difficult to find outside of eBay auctions and specialty comic conventions, the pulp novel once provided mid-20th century American readers a private place to engage in provocative content that was not frequently portrayed in media. Their low-cost and unpretentious qualities produced a sense of disposability, as if a reader could simply leave the book on a park bench once they were finished with it.

In these books' tendency to speak on fantastical and 'unsavory' topics (homosexuality, interracial relationships, incarceration), a subgenre of pulp fiction developed solely dedicated to stories about same-sex desire between women. As I collected these curious objects, I started to discern a relationship between their archetypal depictions of queer women and the object's own disposability. The characterizations of the protagonists was done so carelessly, so flippantly, as to suggest that the narratives they expressed were so worthless that they could literally be disposed of after reading. The narratives operate frequently within the scope of myth and cliché, suggesting that masculine women are prone to violence, the right man can cure lesbianism, and women, butch or not, have a penchant for melodrama. While the pulp stories disturbed and confused me, their cover illustrations vastly impacted my understanding of queer subjectivity through the lens of popular culture's wildly uninformed imaginings of lesbianism.

In these novels' narrative and visual content, the two protagonists are always white, usually scantily clad, and subscribe to traditional standards of beauty prescribed by 1950s American social conservatism. The depictions of specific characters also appear across multiple novels, signalling not only the narrow scope of illustrators tasked with creating images for these stories, but

also the implication that it was impossible to imagine a queer woman whose appearance extended past a white career girl for whom money never appears to be an issue. It is hardly surprising then that the images and narratives that came to define the lesbian archetype in pulp novels were created primarily by heterosexual men writing and illustrating under female pseudonyms, nor is it a stretch to suggest that the development of the visuality of queer women during this time was framed through a lens of the heterosexual male fantasy. It is worth noting, however, that many female authors penned lesbian pulp novels, and these particular stories do offer useful and important imaginings of a queer, female subculture, though they are few and far between.

The cover illustrations are composed of absurd dramatizations of female erotics by almost exclusively male authors and illustrators. Programmatic and formulaic in their portrayal of same-sex desire, the two primary characters are placed in a spatial configuration which suggests through body language and the direction of their gazes that they are experiencing desire for one another. However, for a myriad of reasons both visual and conceptual, they cannot enact that desire. This primarily occurs through the denial of meeting gazes. Though they may be looking towards one another, their erotic looks are interrupted by the presence of a third character, who is typically male, or a planar space that keeps them physically out of reach and makes looking at one another impossible, such as a separation between foreground and middle or background. The language of the covers is coded so as to not outright suggest that the premise is centralized around exploring female desire, but rather to equate it with unnaturalness and oddity. Frequently, the language utilizes words and phrases with supernatural connections, such as twilight, midnight, shadow, odd, unnatural and strange.

This conceptual separation is formalized in the plotlines of most lesbian pulp novels. Due to censorship laws enforced by the United States Postal Code, publishers legally could not distribute books containing any support for deviant lifestyles without facing criminal prosecution. As a solution, many lesbian pulp novels were ended with a decidedly unhappy ending for one or more of its protagonists: death, incarceration, insanity, or a return to the safety of heterosexuality. Pulps that fall outside of this formula are typically authored by homosexual women, and today

remain treasured artifacts for their readers.[11]

Twilight Romance attempts to rewrite the history of queer female portrayal in modern culture by dismantling the structure that posits "woman as image, man as bearer of the look" and reconfiguring that relationship to position woman as the originator of the look. This gesture speculates on what a queer visuality could look like had these cultural objects actually been created by queer women, and attempts to present a more complicated and nuanced vision of female desire. Using my collection of pulp novels as source material, I scan and crop the cover illustrations to include only selected characters' gazes. I wrest control from the ideological denial of same-sex attraction by both the original authors and illustrators and realign the gazes to actually meet one another. By arranging these images so that the directional gazes are not only met but returned to the respective characters, their autonomy as valid, queer erotic figures is enacted. Their gazes become exclusive, cutting out the viewer from any participation in their courtship, emphasizing their knowing glances as unaffected and uninterested in the viewer's presence.



Figure 11: Documentation of *Twilight Romance* in the exhibition "Glance Gaze Look", 2018

[11]Murdoch, Joyce, and Deb Price. "Chapter 1" in *Courting Justice: Gay Men and Lesbians v. the Supreme Court.* New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Through my manipulations of these illustrations, specifically zooming, cropping and presentation, this installation attempts to return agency and validity to the act of women desiring (and looking at) other women by re-averting the character's gazes towards one another.

As an appropriative gesture, Twilight Romance is reminiscent of the work of Pictures Generation artists such as Richard Prince and particularly his series of paintings based on pulp novel covers, Original. Prince's appropriative and conceptual photography practice confronts the malleability of archetypal American imagery, like the mythical cowboy or sexy nurse, through a close-reading of their place and function in the canon of contemporary culture. While employing a recontextualization of images as a method of studying cultural imagery and attached narratives, Twilight Romance utilizes cropping and arrangement as a gesture to re-avert focus, a re-presentation, creating both a new object and a new narrative from the image's original intent. My gesture activates the pieces of the illustrations I've appropriated as tools in my own examination of the validity of pictorial depiction made by members outside of a depicted group. By removing the portrait from its contextual information, enacting a gesture of erasure, the series denies the artist's original intent and produces a new narrative and context to exist in.

The images on these covers, as well as their narrative contents, have haunted me since I first became aware of them. They are frustrating as source material particularly to me as a queer woman in that I must simultaneously recognize their power and significance to the construction of lesbian identity before the advent of second-wave feminism, however, their absurd use of myth and fantasy to create images and tales of women's sexual adventures for the titillation of a culture and mainstream that frequently cares little about homosexuals. This places me in a precarious situation where I've come to love these images but hate their genesis and most of their creators. I'm stuck in a continual conversation where I must convince myself that I am lucky to have such images, damaging in reputation as they may be, but I would like to hold them and myself to a higher standard. And perhaps that's where my practice begins.

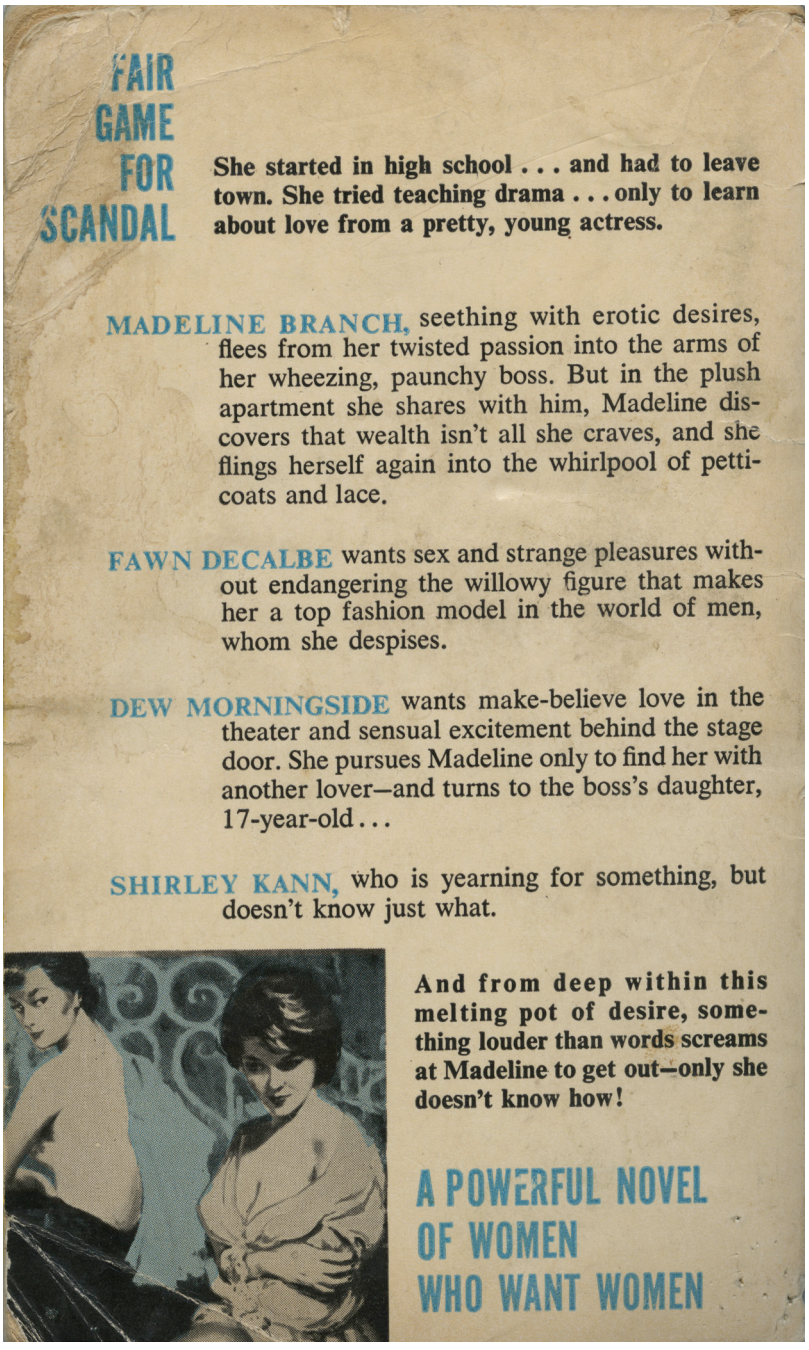


Figure 11: Illustrated back cover of *From Other Women* by J. Malcolm Maxwell, 1963

Documentation of the Exhibition 'Glance Gaze Look'



Figure 13: Documentation (1) of *Glance Gaze Look* at Main Gallery, UCSD, May 2018



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