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Politics of Misconduct

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

in

Visual Arts

by

Bailey Rivers Davenport

Committee in charge:

Professor Amy Adler, Chair  
Professor Ricardo Dominguez  
Professor Anya Gallaccio  
Professor Anna Joy Springer

2021

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University of California San Diego  
2021

## EPIGRAPH

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.

Audre Lorde

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Thesis Approval Page.....	iii
Epigraph.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures .....	vi
Acknowledgements .....	vii
Abstract of the Thesis .....	viii
Introduction.....	1
Influences.....	10
Description of Work.....	18
Critiques.....	34
Conclusion.....	36
References.....	39

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A painting entitled “We Are Free Women Now” from the series “Testify!” by Bailey Davenport, 2019.....	4
Figure 2: A painting entitled “Ivanka Trump” from the series “Outnumbered” by Bailey Davenport, 2019.....	6
Figure 3: Installation view of a painting show entitled “Politics of Misconduct” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.....	8
Figure 4: Installation view of a painting show entitled “Politics of Misconduct” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.....	9
Figure 5: A painting entitled “Judith Slaying Holofernes” by Artemisia Gentileschi in the collection of the Uffizi Galleries, 1620-1621.....	12
Figure 6: A painting entitled “Acrobats” by Max Beckmann in the collection of the St. Louis Art Museum, 1937-39.....	14
Figure 7: A painting entitled “The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles” by Faith Ringgold, 1991.....	15
Figure 8: A painting entitled “Big Daddy Paper Doll” by May Stevens, 1970.....	16
Figure 9: A painting entitled “I Believe Survivors” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.....	20
Figure 10: A painting entitled “The Squad Speaks Out” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.....	21
Figure 11: A painting entitled “Portrait of RBG” by Bailey Davenport, 2020. ....	23
Figure 12: A painting entitled “Vote In Local Elections” by Bailey Davenport, 2020.....	25
Figure 13: A painting entitled “Allegations of Abuse” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.....	28
Figure 14: Detail shots of “Allegations of Abuse” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.....	29
Figure 15: A painting entitled “Left with PTSD” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.....	30
Figure 16: A painting entitled “Portrait of Tara Reade” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.....	32

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Politics of Misconduct

by

Bailey Rivers Davenport

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2021

Professor Amy Adler, Chair

This paper explores the social and political environment surrounding rape culture and the Me Too Movement, focusing primarily on portraits of major political and social figures that have contributed to disrupting rape culture in recent years. Positive representation of sexual assault survivors and survivors of domestic violence contributes to the disruption of rape culture and functions to destigmatize the survivor experience.

## Introduction

*Politics of Misconduct*, is a thesis exhibition composed of seven canvases that range in size from four by four to four by six feet. The paintings consist of a series of portraits of survivors, journalists, and politicians who have represented key figures in the Me Too Movement and the development of the wider survivor community. In this paper I will discuss personal history alongside key ideas, artists, and texts that influenced me in the making of these paintings.

Representation matters. Particularly representation in the media that we consume as a society shifts and influences the way we perceive ourselves and others. I have experienced such a shift in media representation first-hand through the social and political changes brought about by the Me Too Movement. Founded in 2006 by sexual assault survivor and activist Tarana Burke and popularized in 2017 by the widespread accusations against Harvey Weinstein, the Me Too Movement is predicated on the idea of survivor solidarity. Abusers often convince their victims that they are alone in being assaulted and no one will believe them if they come forward – this allows the abuser to continue their abusive actions in secret, without fear of social, political, or legal consequences. The Me Too Movement challenged that idea, building off of the concept of disclosure of the abuse as the method through which to hold abusers accountable for their actions and prevent them from continuing to victimize others.

My father began sexually abusing me when I was just two years old but I did not publicly disclose the abuse until I was twenty-four. My worst fear prior to disclosure was that someone would find out. I thought if people learned of my history of abuse my life would be over somehow. Shame and self-hatred consumed me. Then I came across a copy of Audre Lorde's

*Sister Outsider* and I read her essay *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*. In it she writes:

My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living. (Lorde.2.)

I was struck by the realization that my silence was indeed not protecting me. Keeping my secret and pretending nothing had happened was eating me up inside. I struggled with depression and suicidal thoughts. Finally, I disclosed in the summer of 2014. The results were immediate. My family except for my brother and my mother stopped talking to me. My mother slapped me and called me a liar when I told her. My brother told me he had known all along but didn't think it mattered. The social cost of disclosure is often high for many survivors. Despite losing my connection to my family I felt lighter than I could ever remember. I knew disclosure was the right choice.

In 2017 everything changed for me with the popularization of the Me Too Movement. I was accepted into the graduate program at University of California San Diego where I went on to create my first year exhibition around the theme of sexual assault and the Me Too Movement. I have continued to create work around the issues of sexual abuse and domestic violence throughout my time at UCSD. After the Me Too Movement I felt a shift in the way that my work was received that mirrored the shift in perception of survivors that was happening in the country and even the world. My work went from something perceived as dirty, inappropriate, or even dangerous to something some of my audience accepted as valid and even important to a certain extent.

It was not long before the push back against the Me Too Movement generated steam. Not only in conservative political circles where the denigration of women is the status quo- but in progressive media and culture as well people are tired of the conversation. With the election of Joe Biden, a moderate Democrat and older white, Catholic man, I've already begun to encounter the attitude that, with the return to the perceived status quo, it is time to move on from Trump and everything he and his followers represent, including movements like the Me Too Movement which gained momentum in part from reactions to the many sexual assault allegations against Trump. But the pattern of covering up allegations of sexual assault has continued into the Biden administration with the almost universal silencing of Tara Reade's allegations that Biden raped her in 1996.

Furthermore, the evidence shows that Trump's supporters have rallied rather than been diminished over the course of his presidency. His nomination of Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barret to the Supreme Court gives conservatives a six-three majority that endangers the relatively newly gained rights of marginalized people such as marriage equality (Obergefell v. Hodges) and the Affordable Care Act as well as post-Civil Rights era protections including Roe v. Wade, and the Voting Rights Act. Now more than ever, citizens of the United States need to be aware of the real threat posed by the conservative agenda of right-wing politicians throughout the country.

The reality is that the country is *still* very much in the midst of a battle with the deficits of the capitalist system, with the institutional and political shadows cast by settler colonialism and with the perseverance of patriarchal privilege of all kinds, from political representation to equal pay, equal justice, and equal opportunity. When basic rights such as the right to choose or the right to vote are in danger of being repealed by conservative justices, we are far from having

prevailed in the struggle for control over women and people of color so characteristic of patriarchal authoritarianism – as evidence by the ongoing conservative backlash to the legalization of gay marriage, and the Me Too Movement, and Black Lives Matter.



Figure 1: A painting entitled “We Are Free Women Now” from the series “Testify!” by Bailey Davenport, 2019.

In 2018, my first year at UCSD, I produced a series of paintings, titled *Testify!*, which featured portraits of women who had survived sexual abuse or gender based violence – as or after, they testified to the abuse (Fig.1). At that time the conservative backlash against the Me Too Movement was just beginning. In 2019 my series of paintings, *Outnumbered*, included a portrait of every woman who had accused then-sitting President Donald Trump of sexual assault (Fig. 2). I completed nearly twenty paintings in the series but the steady stream of allegations out-paced my capacities, and the series is ongoing. Finally, in 2020 I set out to create a series of portraits of survivors, journalists, and politicians who have represented key figures in the Me Too Movement and the development of the wider survivor community. The series consists of seven canvases painted in oil. The dimensions range from four foot by four foot to four foot by six foot. The work is primarily combination portraits – portraits of individuals placed together in an often speculative space they did not inhabit in reality. The combination portraits reflect relationships and influences and refer to specific events as well as representing the individuals portrayed (Fig.3).





Figure 2: A painting entitled “Ivanka Trump” from the series “Outnumbered” by Bailey Davenport, 2019.

I started out by representing politicians and activists from the city where I grew up and spent most of my life: St. Louis, Missouri. St. Louis is located in the geographical center of the U.S. as well as sitting on the boundaries between North and the South, as well as the East and the



West. The city is often referred to by its moniker of “the Gateway to the West”; and one of the most iconic architectural elements of the city skyline is a large public sculpture entitled “The Arch,” designed by Eero Saarinen and completed in October 1965 (a few weeks after the passage of the Voting Rights Act), that was intended to represent a doorway between the eastern and western parts of the nation. St. Louis is also not very widely known outside of the Midwestern United States, despite being a major U.S. city. The central location but general anonymity of the city make it an ideal location from which to represent a specific U.S. urban perspective. In his book *The Broken Heart of America*, Walter Johnson refers to the city as the “crucible of American history”: the very shape and structural assumptions of this history, he notes “has unfolded from the juncture of empire and anti-Blackness in the city of St. Louis.”

I intended to place portraits of local St. Louis political figures next to national figures to suggest that local politicians are just as significant to the lives of their constituents as national representatives, despite the United States cultural focus on national politics. I went on to represent national figures that represent the face of the women’s rights movement today. From a portrait of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg to U.S. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, I attempted to represent people who identify as women and have consistently spoken out against patriarchal authority (Fig. 4).



Figure 3: Installation view of a painting show entitled “Politics of Misconduct” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.



Figure 4: Installation view of a painting show entitled “Politics of Misconduct” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.

Finally, the series also represents my personal perspective on the current situation of U.S. politics and the women’s rights movement. The images in the paintings are appropriated from the media and the paintings themselves interrogate the idea of the screen by incorporating elements of what has become the complicated, media dominated visual architecture of the monitor including chyrons and watermarks. If the paintings stand in for screens, then the series of paintings together presents a collective portrait of viewership. Through the use of psychological strategies such as focusing the viewer’s attention on hands and faces, but also the gestures, symbols, and narratives inherent in the mark-making process, I attempt to elicit emotional reactions. Such emotional resonance frames an attempt to suggest my own positionality as a white, femme-identifying person as well as a rape survivor and give the viewer

a sense of how I perceive the current political situation in the country. In this sense the series is also a self-portrait. The inherent contradiction in the work being both a portrait of general viewership and a portrait of individual viewership is one I see reflected in the role social media plays in our lives today. While things like cable news are constructed to appeal to a wide anonymous viewership, the news a person views on their Facebook feed, for instance, is curated based on complex algorithms to appeal specifically to the individual reader. This contrast is something I hope the viewer of my work becomes more aware of as they consider the piece.

In what follows I will discuss the artistic influences that have contributed to my artistic practice, ranging from the work of Artemisia Gentileschi in the seventeenth century to the recent work of St. Louis-born Aaron Fowler. After describing the work, offering an overview of my process, I will address the history of the media and art, including the influences of political realism on my work. I will conclude by exploring the political and personal context of the work.

## Influences

My work draws on the lineage of western gestural figure painting. I trace the style, approach, and content of my paintings back to the early and mid-1600's, especially to the paintings of the only widely known woman artist who worked in the style of Caravaggio, Artemisia Gentileschi. The experience of viewing Gentileschi's "Judith Slaying Holofernes" (c. 1611-12) was especially crucial to the development of my paintings. During my senior year as an undergraduate I visited Florence, Italy and the Uffizi Gallery with an art history class. As a rape survivor, I was captivated by the story of Gentileschi – a fellow rape survivor, who had not only been raped at a young age by the man her father had probably hired to teach her perspective, but

was also subject to the scandal of a public trial against that man, which she effectively lost (he was given a modest sentence of “exile,” which he ignored). Shortly afterwards, she painted a story from the Bible in which Judith seduces an enemy general Holofernes in order to cut off his head. Painting the well-known scene of Judith in the act of chopping off Holofernes’ head, she seems to have given the historical Judith her own features and appearance (as affirmed by comparing Judith to Gentileschi’s *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (or *La Pittura*,) (1638-39) and her rapist as Holofernes. But she didn’t just paint the Judith story once; she painted three versions and toured around Europe with them, almost like a social media campaign *avant la lettre*. Was she metaphorically cutting off the head of the man who raped her and showing it all over the European continent (Fig.5)?



Figure 5: A painting entitled “Judith Slaying Holofernes” by Artemisia Gentileschi in the collection of the Uffizi Galleries, 1620-1621.

Experiencing the painting was nothing like reading about it and looking at a reproduction, however. It was a totally different experience... as if Gentileschi had reached across four centuries and put her hand on my shoulder and told me that she understood the desire to kill your rapist. Being psychically and emotionally aligned with the painter through the experience of the painting gave me an embodied and urgent level of connection that no mechanical reproduction of the image could have conveyed. Because paintings are like mind/body maps that you take in not just by looking with your eyes but more viscerally by way of the evidence of embodied movements left by the artist on the canvas or panel. This unique ability of painting to function as

both visual document and embodied documentation of the artist's movement and process is central to why I focus on painting in my practice. I am also interested in the historical authority of painting. As the work of Gentileschi shows us, painting has a long history in the West of social and historical documentation. To paint something is to elevate it to a position of historical significance. The contemporary painter Keith Mayerson often refers to his work as "history painting" and I find this to be a helpful framework through which to view my own practice. Regardless of whether or not paintings end up in a gallery or a museum the subject matter of the painting is often historicized for the viewer simply through the act of painting it, in large part due to social associations viewers have with the concept of the painting.

Another major influence in work is the work of Max Beckmann. Growing up in St. Louis, Missouri, I had limited access to the contemporary art world. Most of my experience of fine art, as opposed to the folk art produced by members of my family, was achieved by going to the St. Louis Art Museum as a child. The museum has the largest collection of Max Beckmann paintings outside of Germany, as he fled to the city after the fall of the Weimar Republic and lived there for a significant part of his life. I believe that I have seen more Beckmann paintings in person than any other one artist that I think of as influencing my work. Although I am less familiar with his earlier work in Germany, most of his later paintings depict circus-like scenes of exuberant excess referring to the Weimar Republic in the 1920's. Most of the work is on a large scale, seven foot by five foot or larger, and as a child I conceptualized the paintings as doorways or portals into another world. The sense of the painting as a doorway has stayed with me throughout my practice and the rough expressionist representation of the figures still influences my work today (Fig.6).



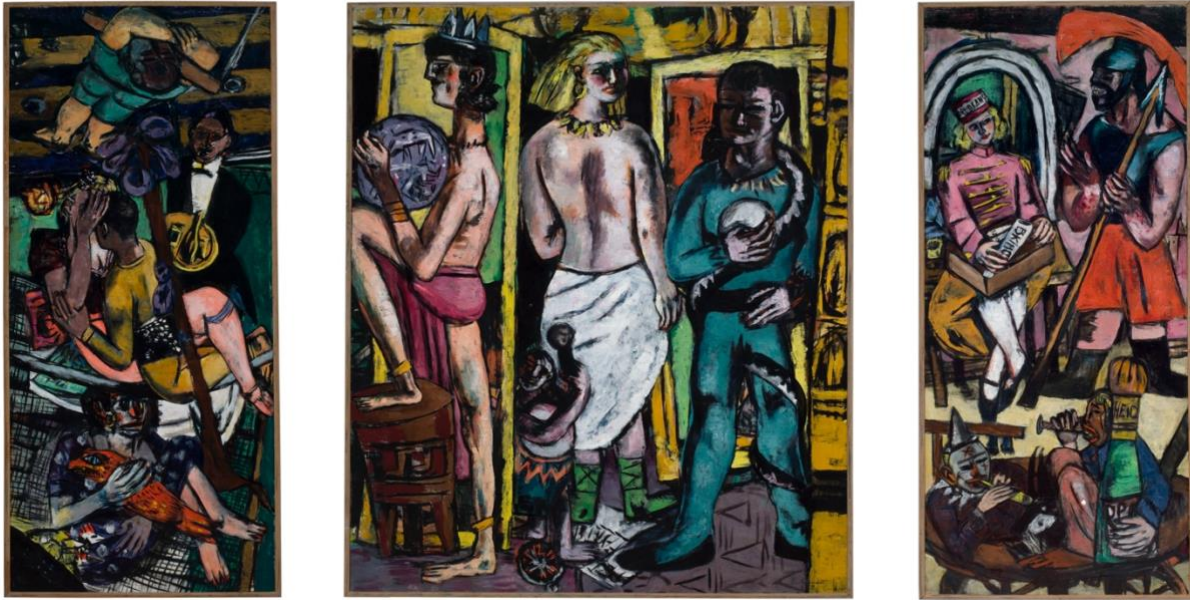


Figure 6: A painting entitled “Acrobats” by Max Beckmann in the collection of the St. Louis Art Museum, 1937-39.

Alice Neel has also been a major historical influence on my work, especially her intimate portraits which are a cornerstone of American figurative painting. The intimacy and psychology she explores in her portraits, many of which were painted from life with sitters in her living room studio, are qualities I aspire to echo in my own work. She was known for encouraging her subjects to remove their cloths one piece at a time between sittings as she got to know them better. Particularly striking is her portrait of Andy Warhol (*Andy Warhol*, c.1970), where the usually impeccably dressed Warhol is depicted shirtless and showing the scar that he was left with after Valerie Solanas attempted to assassinate him in 1968. The vulnerability shown in the portrait is uncharacteristic of Warhol, but a trait that is shared by many of Neel’s subjects.

I have been struck too by Faith Ringgold’s use of portraiture in her story quilts, particularly *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*’ (c.1991), in which Ringgold depicts several significant female figures in the Civil Rights movement working on a quilt together within the



setting of a Vincent Van Gogh painting (Fig.7). The interweaving of historical and contemporary references and the whimsical style of the painting, combined with her innovative representational portrait painting, are strategies that I implement in my own painting practice.



Figure 7: A painting entitled “The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles” by Faith Ringgold, 1991.

There is a long history in western art of political realism and critique through art, particularly through painting. In 1814 Francisco Goya completed his painting *The Third of May 1808*, commemorating Spanish resistance to Napoleon’s armies during the occupation of 1808 in the Peninsular War. In 1937, Pablo Picasso painted *Guernica* in response to the bombing of Guernica, a Basque town in Northern Spain, by Nazi Germany. These historical paintings function on several different levels. They document and commemorate historical events – in

these two cases, they are war-related massacres. The paintings also functioned as contemporary political critiques at the time. Goya was taking a stance against the rise of Napoleon and Picasso was speaking out against the rise of Nazi Germany.

Another series of paintings that function as political critique are May Stevens' *Big Daddy* series, painted in New York in the late 1960s in response to what the artist viewed as patriarchal and racist elements within the United States. Tiernan Morgan with Hyperallergic writes about the series "Stevens's *Big Daddy* series (1967–76). Based on a portrait of the artist's father, the recurring character represents the backward, bigoted, and militaristic patriarchy of America. Pudgy and short-sighted, Big Daddy could be your racist father, a coercive police officer, or the man who voted to deploy your son to Vietnam." The way Stevens utilizes a portrait of her father to stand in as a critique of white patriarchy is a fascinating strategy for looking critically at the social and political conditions in which a person was raised (Fig.8).



Figure 8: A painting entitled "Big Daddy Paper Doll" by May Stevens, 1970.

Another example of American political realism is the work of Hans Haacke. A review of Haacke's work from the 1980s referred to it as "art [that] asks to be approached solely in political terms" (Brenson). His work often targeted relationships between large corporations and art museums and galleries, critiquing the corporatization of the art world. The self-reflexive

methodologies that Haacke employed to critique the art world are the same that I hope to employ to critique our contemporary media environment.

There are several artists working in the contemporary L.A. art scene whose work is also important to my practice. Keith Mayerson's paintings of contemporary politics and life events have inspired a great deal of my interest in working with contemporary subject matter. The style of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's large scale oil paintings and the queer subject matter they explore are another major influence on my work. Dupuy-Spencer often deals with contemporary political subject matter and social commentary, and their work has inspired me to deal with contemporary political issues head on in my own practice. An artist that I looked to when working on the paintings in the series that focus on St. Louis is the work of Aaron Fowler, who is also from St. Louis, although he is currently based in L.A. His large-scale assemblage paintings capture an essential feeling of the city of St. Louis that informed my own work inspired by our hometown. Another L.A. based artist whose work influences the use of text in my paintings is Barbara Kruger. I was first introduced to Kruger's work with text and image while attending undergraduate school in Missouri. The impactful combination of text and image, particularly in such well-known work as *Your Body is a Battleground* (c. 2004), inspired me to work text into my paintings and explore the relationships and power dynamics that exist between text and image.

Others major influences on my practice include the work of Kerry James Marshall, whose series of portraits of fictional black woman painters has greatly informed my approach to portraiture. Marshall's landscapes of urban housing projects from across the United States combine landscape and figure into speculative narratives that influence my own handling of the construction of fictional or docufantasy spaces in my paintings. Another painter who has

dramatically influenced my practice is Nicole Eisenman. Her exploration of queer identity through figurative painting is a central influence to my handling of queer subject matter throughout my work. I also want to mention the portrait paintings of artist Jordan Casteel, whose large-scale portraits and gestural paint handling are constant influences in my approach to painting the figure.

### Description of Work

*Politics of Misconduct* is a series of large-scale gestural oil paintings, predominantly portraits of public figures. The figures are rendered in such a way as to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. The images I use to construct the portraits are drawn from a mix of archival footage and photographs appropriated from the media sources. Visual artifacts from the media framing of images and situations, such as watermarks and chyrons, appear throughout the series along with the depictions of figures and landscapes. Although the paintings function as portraits of the individuals being depicted, they are not portraits in the traditional sense of painting a person who is sitting for the artist. They are based on appropriated imagery taken primarily from screens. It is important for me that the viewer comprehend that the work is appropriated from a screen, and it is also significant that most viewers will experience the work as a screen-based image rather than experiencing the work in person. This relationship to screenality is something I attempt to emphasize throughout the series by including signs and symbols that refer to the mediating presence that screens often include, from chyrons on cable news broadcasts to Getty image watermarks on photographs sourced from online photo archives. The reference to the screen functions as a reminder to the viewer that all the information we receive is mediated by the corporations, news outlets, or individuals who are creating the

content. Being made aware of the presence of the mediator can help viewers identify bias in the information they consume and consider that bias when thinking further about the information, as opposed to just accepting whatever they see or hear as objective truth.

Throughout the series I utilize the technique of “combinative portraiture”. Christopher Allan describes this strategy of depiction in his essay *Cloud of Witnesses: Painting History Through Combinative Portraiture*, Allan states:

what about the history of a community, a nation, a people...to depict that history, you have to bring...portraits together, combine them, and make their combination meaningful. The urge to combine portraits as witnesses to visual culture is old. Assembling witnesses has its roots in ancient biblical texts...[as well as] American history painters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Allan, 117.)

Allan suggests that by combining portraits of important political or religious figures that historical painters were able to construct complex narratives around historical events. One example Allan points out is the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the combination portrait by John Trumbull *Declaration of independence* (c.1818).

I utilize a similar strategy in my work, combining portraits of significant political or social figures in such a way as to create new meanings through the relationships that the figures have to one another. In *I believe survivors*, I combine portraits of some of the journalists and activists who contributed to the media success of the Me Too Movement (Fig.9). In the painting journalists Ronan Farrow, Jodi Kantor, and Megan Twohey stand with activist and Me Too Movement founder Tarana Burke. They are depicted in a heroic light, dressed for the red carpet at Time Magazine’s event for the 100 most important people of the year, which also serves as a reference to contemporary media culture.





Figure 9: A painting entitled “I Believe Survivors” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.

By combining portraits of some of the disparate figures that were direct contributors to the movement and representing them in a heroic light I attempt to construct a cohesive narrative around some of the various people who contributed to the movement for the viewer to apprehend. I attempt to put faces and, as Allan suggests, create a gallery of witnesses to certain significant recent events that I am personally invested in.

One strategy I implement in my paintings in order to create an emotional impact is to focus on the hands and faces of the subjects being portrayed, making these areas much more detailed. When a person is feeling strong emotions about another person we tend to focus in on

the hands and the face of that person. I spend more time focusing on the detail work in the hands and face so that those features pop out of the painting and simulate that emotional experience. I think about the surface of the paintings a great deal and attempt to build up texture in certain areas of the canvas in order to create more visual interest in the thicker areas of the painting and lead the viewer's gaze around the composition.



Figure 10: A painting entitled “The Squad Speaks Out” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.

I utilize this technique in my painting *The Squad Speaks Out*, depicting congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib (Fig. 10). CNN reporter Kate Sullivan describes this group of women as “lawmakers, all women of color, [that] have electrified the progressive base thanks to their social media savvy but have also attracted

controversy, most notably over their criticism of the US relationship with Israel” (Sullivan). In July of 2019 “[those] views, along with their heritage, were the focus of Trump’s attacks ... when he falsely implied they weren’t American and suggested they ‘go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came’” (Sullivan). I appropriated the imagery for the paintings from media photographs of a press conference the group of women, popularly referred to as “The Squad,” gave in response to the tweet.

The members of the group responded by holding a press conference stating that they would not be intimidated by bullying. According to CNN, Ocasio-Cortez stated that what “‘I want to tell children across this country is that no matter what the President says, this country belongs to you’” (CNN). As a consumer of American politics, it was inspiring to see this group of women standing up to Trump’s racism and misogyny. I was also struck when looking at the media photographs of the press conference, how the women, in particular Ocasio-Cortez and Omar, looked like they were striking religious poses or were in the midst of prayer. I focused more attention to detail on the hands and faces of the figures in order to reference my own emotional experience having seen the press conference at the time.

Another strategy that I employed in *The Squad Speaks Out* is the use of the chyron both to refer to the media framing of the situation and also to introduce a second layer of meaning into the painting. The text inside the chyron reads “AOC: ‘No matter what the president says, this country belongs to you.’” The text is appropriated from an MSNBC news article, a more left-leaning news source, and quotes from Ocasio-Cortez’s press conference speech in response to Trump’s tweet. The chyron also refers to the events surrounding the images in the painting: the text and image are mutually articulated to inform the narrative experience of the viewer.





Figure 11: A painting entitled “Portrait of RBG” by Bailey Davenport, 2020.

I develop the same strategy of creating multiple layers of meaning using text and image to explore two contradictory perceptions of the same situation in *Portrait of RBG* (Fig. 11). A portrait of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, dressed in her judicial attire, wearing the jabot she wore to signal she had dissented from a court decision. She is depicted with a halo

around her head, a reference to historical religious depictions of saints. The image offers a personal perspective of Ginsburg as an almost saint-like heroine of the women's rights movement. The chyron, in contrast, was appropriated from a Fox News broadcast and states, "The left's extreme reaction to Ginsburg's death: Tucker Carlson Tonight," as though the conservative news outlet thinks so little of Ginsburg that they need to do an investigation into why some people are having a so-called "extreme reaction" to the tragedy of her death. By including visual references to both the right-wing media treatment of Ginsburg and my own personal image of Ginsburg, I merge two polarized representations of reality, questioning the validity of either or both.

Much like the halo, which is an element of art historical iconography, the chyron refers to the history of the construction and framing of the news media. Paul Farhi of the Washington Post discusses the significance of the chyron, stating that

They've become a facet of almost every news broadcast, as familiar as the anchor sitting behind a desk. Within moments of the start of a newscast or panel discussion, the info-billboards on the lower third of the TV screen begin their silent unfurling... But in an era of shrinking viewer attention spans, chyrons seem almost to have come to life and achieved self-awareness. Now chyrons not only tell viewers what the news is, they tell them what to make of it (Farhi).

Chyrons serve multiple functions within the news media landscape, from giving brief information to fact checking interviews in real time the chyron; according to Farhi, "They snark. They troll. They correct in real time." I appropriate this visual element into my paintings in order to function in a similar fashion. The text contextualizes the image but also in some cases contradicts the image, echoing its function in the actual cable news and media landscape.

The 24-hour news cycle that has developed as part of our global digital culture is constantly changing as pressure to deliver more immediately recent events in even higher quantities accelerates. The nature of the contemporary media landscape is ethereal and

impermanent. Events become old news within days, hours, and sometimes minutes. Painting, by contrast, is characterized by stillness. The image does not move or change over time. This particular characteristic of painting grants permission for a more considered evaluation of the media content that we consume. What does it mean to sit with the images we are presented with over time? Does this stillness change the nature or our perception of the nature of the image? It certainly offers a contrast to the methods through which media imagery is usually consumed.



Figure 12: A painting entitled "Vote In Local Elections" by Bailey Davenport, 2020.

In my painting *Vote in Local Elections*, I attempt to dismantle the media narrative around two St. Louis politicians whose careers I believe represent a larger national story about social justice movements throughout the country, including the women's rights movement and Black Lives Matter(Fig.12). The figure standing at the podium in the painting is St. Louis Circuit Attorney Kim Gardner, whose tenure as Circuit Attorney (an elected position in the city of St. Louis that is similar to the District Attorney for the city), has been marked by reforming and rebuilding trust in the criminal justice system and reducing violent crime. She had increased diversity in the Circuit Attorney's office, brought independent investigations into police use of force, and increased gun control throughout the city.

On December 24, 2019, Kim Gardner claimed she was stopped by police officers on Christmas Eve and threatened with retaliation if she continued her efforts at police reform. She had been criticized by the US Attorney General for her refusal to press charges of looting against individuals participating in the Black Lives Matter protests across St. Louis. The chyron in the painting refers to this incident, especially to a local news chyron that stated "Circuit Attorney fires back at AG, AG: looters, rioters, not being charged."

Standing behind Gardner is US Congresswoman Cori Bush, who at the time that the painting was made was running for office but had not yet been elected. A major organizer in the Black Lives Matter movement in St. Louis, she is depicted speaking through a megaphone at a Black Lives Matter rally. Bush ran on promises of justice and reform and was able to win the seat from longtime incumbent Lacy Clay. Bush has been vocal about her past experiences with homelessness and domestic violence, and her election to the House of Representatives functions as a significant victory for the St. Louis survivor community.

The title of the painting, *Vote in Local Elections*, is an exhortation encouraging the viewer to vote – not just in national elections, but in local elections as well. Kim Gardner was the first African American individual to hold the office of Circuit Attorney, and her much-resisted efforts at reform paved the way for a candidate like Cori Bush to run for US Congress and helped enable her to win office over a longtime incumbent. I paint Bush and Gardner in a heroic light reminiscent of World War II era propaganda paintings to give a sense of grandeur to their actions as political reformers. Ultimately the narrative of the painting suggests that political reform is important work and that a large part of that work is taking the time to vote in all elections.

The work offers a portrait of viewership. The various figures represented throughout the paintings are based in photographic images appropriated from various media sources. Together the paintings represent a curation of articles, videos, and social media posts that are specific to both one regional area, St. Louis Missouri, and one specific viewer: myself as the painter. Although the individual paintings act as mimetic portraits of the figures being represented, the show as a whole becomes a non-mimetic self-portrait through which I attempt to interrogate my own biases and perceptions as well as critically examine the media that is presented to me through algorithms based in part on information such as my gender, geographic location, and political attitudes.

In the painting *I believe survivors*, for example, the figures are portrayed in a heroic light while the chyron at the bottom of the painting, however, states “growing scandals in the me too movement?” reflecting on a culture of doubt and criticism that characterized a more recent backlash to the popular movement. The critical tone of the chyron contrasts with the idealized depiction of the contributors to the movement, representing the internal conflict I have as the artist and the viewer between an almost worshipful attitude of a survivor towards the founders of



a movement that changed my life and the constant contradictory voice of the media that I consume.

Even within the Me Too Movement, there are contradictions and opinions at odds with one another about the direction of the movement and the significance of one survivor's experience over another. Some individuals have pushed forward an agenda that the Me Too Movement should focus exclusively on workplace sexual harassment and not deal at all with issues of domestic violence or non-work-related sexual violence. This, in my mind, is absolutely the wrong approach and limits not only the scope of the movement but hinders the effectiveness of the message of survivor solidarity and the significance of disclosure.



Figure 13: A painting entitled "Allegations of Abuse" by Bailey Davenport, 2021.



Figure 14: Detail shots of “Allegations of Abuse” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.

In the painting *Allegations of Abuse* I depict seven women who have come forward accusing rock star Marilyn Manson of domestic violence (Fig.13). In February of 2018 actress Evan Rachel Wood testified before Congress “about her experiences with domestic violence, multiple rapes, gaslighting, torture, and PTSD. Wood spoke out in order to get the Sexual Assault Survivors Bill of Rights Act implemented by Congress” (Nylon). The Act is a piece of landmark legislation that establishes statutory rights in federal code for survivors of sexual assault and rape. Created by Amanda Nguyen and her non-profit organization Rise, the bill makes it easier for survivors to navigate the complicated hurdles of the criminal justice system, where the burden of proof often lies with the survivor of the assault.

The painting depicts Wood in the act of testifying to Congress (Fig.14). It also functions as a combination portrait, as I found and appropriated images of the other six women to accuse



Manson of domestic violence and placed them within the composition so as to be flanking Wood. Although Wood was the only one to testify in reality, metaphorically all the women who came out against Manson were supporting her testimony and affirming the legitimacy of her allegations. The significance of survivor solidarity cannot be understated. The severity of the issue of domestic violence places the issue front and center in the Women’s Rights Movement today and it should be a central concern of the Me Too Movement.



Figure 15: A painting entitled “Left with PTSD” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.



In addition to *Allegations of Abuse* I painted another piece highlighting the strength and resiliency of survivors of domestic violence. In *Left With PTSD* I represent musical artist FKA Twigs and fashion designer Karolyn Pho, who have accused actor Shia LeBeouf of domestic violence (Fig.15). Survivors of domestic violence are often conceptualized by society as being poverty stricken, unattractive, and unsuccessful members of society. The two women depicted in *Left With PTSD* stand in the face of those false and belittling stereotypes. I attempt to represent Twigs and Pho as glamorous and successful. The image of Twigs is appropriated from a photograph of the musician in couture fashion at a red carpet while the image of Pho shows her standing in front of racks of clothing that she designed for New York Fashion Week. The women show that their experience surviving domestic violence has not held them back from continuing to pursue successful careers.



Figure 16: A painting entitled “Portrait of Tara Reade” by Bailey Davenport, 2021.

The final painting in the series, entitled *Portrait of Tara Reade*, depicts the former Senate aide as photographed by the New York Times during an interview where she discussed her sexual assault claim against current President Joe Biden (Fig. 16). Reade has enduring public slander and explicit threats of violence over her accusations but stands firm in the facts that in

“1993 her former boss forced her against a wall and put his hands under her shirt and skirt after she delivered him his gym bag.” (BBC). Politico referred to Reade as a “manipulative, deceitful, user” in a 2020 article covering the allegations, despite other sources reporting that Reade has been consistent in her allegations dating all the way back to the 1990s when the assault allegedly took place (Korecki). Personal attacks against the character of survivors who come forward is a common strategy to undermine and delegitimize their claims. Reade’s claims are the perfect example of when political strategies are privileged over believing survivors about their own experiences. The Reade accusations have been a personal struggle for me as an individual, I understand the temptation to dismiss her as “deceitful” rather than confront the inconvenient truth that Biden may have committed sexual assault. I voted for Joe Biden in the 2020 election despite my awareness of Reade’s claims against him. He seemed like the lesser of two evils when compared with a serial child rapist like Donald Trump. However, despite my own complicity I feel strongly that whether or not there are repercussions, political or otherwise, for Joe Biden, the most important thing we can do for the survivor community is insist on our belief in the statements of Tara Reade and not allow her to be slandered without speaking in her defense as a fellow survivor. To that end the final painting in my series is a portrait of Tara Reade in the act of testifying to her experience. There is no better method through which I can communicate my belief in and support of Reade than to create a portrait of her as a survivor of sexual violence and place her in the same space as such well known figures as Ruth Bader Ginsburg or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

## Critiques

In this section I would like to address several valid critiques of my work, predominantly related to my responsibility as an artist to the subject being represented in the work. There is always the risk when dealing with sensitive issues such as trauma that the subjects being depicted do not wish to have themselves associated with the idea of rape and sexual assault, even if that representation is intended to be positive. To address this issue within the context of the work I focus on representing individuals in my work who have publicly come forward about their histories of abuse in some way. Many of the people in my work are activists, politicians, or journalists who have written about or testified to their experiences and made it clear that they intend to have their experiences publicized. Central to the idea of my work is the concept of testimony. Although it may place an unfair burden on the survivor, I believe that first person testimony is the primary form of accusation that we as a society should pay attention to. There is a history in the United States of rape and sexual assault allegations, particularly those of white women, being used as an excuse to persecute men of color. This is a serious issue that must be addressed in any conversation to be had about believing survivors of sexual assault. Former President Donald Trump often employed this tactic and is a perfect example of the ways that it is weaponized against both men of color and women survivors simultaneously.

In 1989 Trisha Meili was beaten and raped in Central Park in New York City. She was in a coma for twelve days and had no memory of the incident upon awakening. The police arrested and interrogated five teenagers who were all of black or Latinx heritage, forcing them to give false confessions. Donald Trump “spent a reported \$85,000 ...on four full-page adverts in New York newspapers titled: ‘Bring Back The Death Penalty, Bring Back Our Police’” (BBC). The

five teenagers were convicted of the crime, despite DNA evidence that did not match any of them and the testimony of the survivor that was not considered. This shocking miscarriage of justice not only endangers the lives of men of color by showing that they could be arrested and convicted of any crime whether the evidence points to them or not, but it also prevented justice from being done for Meili, whose real attacker was never convicted despite coming forward and confessing twelve years later. False accusations made by racist police forces and known rapists like Donald Trump undermine the credibility of real survivors. Donald Trump has gone on to publicly accuse Mexican immigrants of being “rapists.” It is an effective strategy for a real rapist to use and one employed by many white men as a method through which to gaslight and shift blame away from their own actions. This disturbing trend covers the actions of real rapists, endangers the lives of men of color, and delegitimizes the already stigmatized claims of all sexual assault survivors. I believe the best way to fight against this disturbing racist and misogynistic strategy is to privilege the testimony of the survivor over that of authority figures involved in the case.

Another valid critique of my work is that I may be appropriating the experience of people of color by myself, as a white person, choosing to paint people of a different race at times. There is a storied history of violent misrepresentation of people of color by white artists. One memorable recent example is the scandal surrounding painter Dana Schutz and her painting of Emmitt Till. Aruna D’Souza explored the situation surrounding the incident with the painting in the book *Whitewalling: Art, Race, and Protest in Three Acts*, stating that “The question of when, and on what terms, a person is justified in taking up the cultural forms and historical legacies of groups (races, ethnicities, genders, etc.) to which they themselves are not a part is always fraught” (D’Souza, 37). This is one of the most serious issues I consider in my work with

representational images, particularly portraits. I have to acknowledge this fraught history connected to representation and contend with as a contemporary artist. When I set out to paint portraits of significant figures in the women's rights movement today I knew many of the individuals I painted would be a black or brown person. Women of color have always led the women's rights movement and racist representations in the past have led to whitewashing that movement and I am committed to not continue the trend of whitewashing in contemporary feminism. I hope my commitment to positive representation of survivors can assist in my goal to resist continuing negative racial stereotypes as a white artist. Of course, there is the question of implicit bias that I may be unaware of. I strive to continually educate myself on the best strategies for positive representation of women and survivors and continue my commitment to representing intersectional feminism in my work.

## Conclusion

The issue of rape and gender-based violence is a difficult one to explore with honesty and sincerity. Although there is an element of pastiche to my work in the handling of propaganda style images, I strive to create a space in my practice that allows survivors of sexual abuse to feel a sense of solidarity and validation. By representing survivors of gender-based violence, rape, and sexual assault in a positive light I attempt to subvert the negative stigma's society places on survivors of sex-based trauma, particularly those who have chosen to publicly disclose and testify to their experiences.

There are a variety of painters who influence my practice, from historical figures such as Artemisia Gentileschi to contemporary painters working today like Celeste Dupuy-Spencer.

There is a long tradition throughout Western figure painting of political realism and social documentation from Goya to May Stevens. Artists have utilized the figure to explore social commentary and perform political critique. In the case of my work, I focus primarily in *Politics of Misconduct* on the social and political environment surrounding the struggle to legitimize the rights of survivors of sexual violence.

As a survivor of rape and incest, I feel that I can offer a unique perspective on the issues and critiques that make up the contemporary dialogue surrounding survivors in our contemporary Western culture today. I create large scale, gestural portraits that often combine public figures who have disclosed to being survivors of sexual violence into a docufantasy space that is partially appropriated from media images and partially constructed from speculative narratives. In the series I explore the origins of the Me Too Movement, the political struggles on both local and national levels to continue to advocate for survivors' rights. I go on to explore the significant role domestic violence survivors play in the Me Too Movement and advocate for their inclusion in the narrative surrounding the Women's Rights Movement today. I attempt throughout my work to construct an intersectional space that does not privilege the white experience over the experiences of individuals of color.

There are several critiques of my work that I attempt to address within the context of this paper. These critiques include the troubling and violent history of accusations of sexual assault being hijacked by white men and weaponized against men of color as well as the fraught history of white artists representing people of color negative and damaging ways. I hope to acknowledge the reality of these issues and their relationship to my work while simultaneously working to subvert them through methods of positive representation and careful construction of narratives.

While it may be a difficult topic to focus on, changing the stigma associated with surviving sexual assault is I believe the first step towards changing the nature of the rape culture in which we currently live. Predators thrive in the shadows. They depend on the complicity of their victims to remain silent and the complicity of society at large to victim-blame and reinforce that silence. To quote Audre Lorde, “our silences will not protect us”. They only serve to protect the perpetrators of rape and sexual violence and allow them to continue assaulting more and more victims throughout their lives. Now is the time for us to speak out in whatever ways we can and to continue speaking our truth, no matter what negative pushback we get from people who are committed to maintaining the status quo. The most important thing we can do as survivors is validate one another’s experiences and create a sense of survivor solidarity in order to combat social and political stigmas. It is time to change the way we treat survivors as a society. Now is the time to believe survivors. Now is the time for us to believe ourselves and each other.



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