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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Stigma Fog

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

in

Visual Arts

by

Angela M. Jennings

Committee in charge:

Ricardo Dominguez, Chair
Amy Adler
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2016

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University of California, San Diego

2016

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Stigma Fog

by

Angela M. Jennings

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Ricardo Dominguez, Chair

Stigma Fog investigates the space of the othered gaze, meaning the gaze of the othered body. Through painting, video and installation I intend to grasp instances of ideological manifestations of the non-human, monster, mythological witch and devil. The formulation of this work has evolved slowly stemming from my critical awareness of my position as a woman and being labeled black; constructs placed upon my being through the systematic norms that penetrate American society. This paper is outlined in chapters divided by medium, each discussing material strategies and conceptual underpinnings.

I investigate both theories of agency and submission found within patriarchal realms and dominions of white hegemony in relation to the other. Through the use of the witch and her familiars as metaphor, video footage of Orca whales at Sea World, the occurrence of black deaths found in Hollywood cinema, and video of my nephews playing with goats symbolically hinting towards transformations of innocence I'm able to manifest power through form.

STIGMA FOG



Illustration 01: Self Portrait with paintings from the series Stigma Fog, 2016

In thinking of conditions under which the othered body is constructed I've come up with a term to describe the state of the doer in this making, *stigma fog*; a condition of hegemonic device. Within states of stigma fog ideals are forged and hierarchies form, you could say it's a symptom of the abject. Through tactics of painting, performance and video, I've explore terrains of the monstrous, witch and innocence; referencing my own subjectivity along with attempts to address the universal circumstances of the othered body felt by those immersed in the fog.

PAINTING PROCESS

The paintings included in *STIGMA FOG* encapsulate circumstances and notions I'm drawn to stemming from subjective issues and constructs of inferiority. In terms of art making, materials that fall in line with conditions of inferiority include materials that are often deemed as unsophisticated and overlooked within traditional forms of making. The materials used specifically in the *STIGMA FOG* series include acrylic, latex paint, yarn, sand, compost and domestic fabrics purchased from thrift stores. Through these materials I've been able to investigate processes of building forms and textures that have the ability to manifest notions of the monstrous and non-human, categories established to comment on the circumstance of being othered. Here I'm looking at the position of otherness encompassing both physical art materials, human bodies, the alien and animals. The material processes have also been used to allow spaces of chance to occur in an effort to allow material agencies to rise.

The process of yarn dipped in paint used as a drawing tool has allowed for moments of happenstance to take place, for I am unable to fully control ways in which the lubricated fibers shift and leave their marks. Included in this process are ideas of material agency, along with the relationships found between chance and mystical territories, embracing the idea that perhaps there are no accidents, every mark has its purpose in the formation of structures and experience. I take pleasure in the analogy that

I'm giving birth through paint smeared yarn functioning as umbilical cords, mindful of the phenomena of being.

The use of yarn also brings up sentiments related to woman's craft. I've combined masculine notions attached to painting and the historic forms of femininity imbued in embroidery. In *The Subversive Stitch*, Rozsika Parker posits "Embroidery has provided a source of pleasure and power for woman, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness."¹ Parker brings up interesting themes here, carving out a space made through that of embroidery where both women's independence and subjugation are found. It's through the ill-mannered use of yarn dipped in paint that I hint upon the paradigms of struggle and womanhood. I've also made a deliberate connection to Mother Earth through the inclusion of earth materials.

The act of adding earth including sand, dirt, compost, and pebbles to fluid paints of latex and acrylic has aided me in the investigation of textures, senses and notions of skin. Through these process chance occurrences have also arose. In most instances I am unable to predict how the surfaces form, not knowing whether they'll crack, crumble or hold. I'm able to develop modes of cement, encasing stigmas of the monstrous, grotesque and the feminine, all the while preserving elements of terrain. Through this process I've become attracted to the relationships found between the processes of collecting earth materials and concocting potions much like the figure of the mythical witch. "Witchcraft, "the craft of the wise," is the last remnant in the west of the time of women's strength and power."² – Mariam Simos

There seems to be something intrinsic about the use of earth in the formation of art or ceremonial rituals, spiritually bringing one closer to the world or one's being.

“The craft is earth religion, and our basic orientation is to the earth, to life, to nature.

There is no dichotomy between spirits and flesh, no split between Godhead and the world.

The Goddess is manifest in the world; she brings life into being, is nature, is flesh.”³

In relation to materials emerging from the everyday, I was primarily drawn to fabric-objects that could function as surfaces for the paintings. The fabrics used include tablecloths, a bedspread and quilt. These fabrics were chosen due to their economic value, physical practicality in relation to functioning as supports for paintings, and the vast variety sold and found at thrift stores. Initially I was interested in utilizing fabrics that were made from tropical or ethnic prints, sold and commodified to bring ‘diversity’ into one's household. With these fabrics I was trying to touch on notions of colonization and transform them into something other, this gesture soon expanded for I've permitted other fabrics to be turned over, including a red table cloth with fringe, and a king sized red velvet bedspread cover.

In addition, the fabric surfaces chosen for this series of works have the ability to push up against the boundaries of stretched primed canvas or panels, the square, hegemony. Through these chosen surfaces I'm able to protest domination, and transform preconceptions dealt to that of the fabrics and paintings, altering the ways in which they function. I'm also thinking about directionality in terms of horizontal and vertical, these fabrics were made with the intention of being used upon the horizontal axis, but they now

reside in a field of up-rightness. I view this gesture symbolically as one of disrupting normative structures. The domestic realities of these fabrics have been given a new existence while continuing to carry with them their origins, for there is something familiar that lies beneath the paint.

In addition to domestic realities, the fabrics chosen also have the ability to conjure up spheres of traditional and historical circumstances of woman's work within the home, including, servitude, sex and the domestic slave. This historic multifacetedness is paralleled through the surfaces that literally allow for a visibility of two sides, exposing the previously intended functions of the objects; to cover, protect, and decorate. The paintings that allow for both sides to be experienced hang from twine; here references can be made to the tragedies of hung bodies. This act organizes the viewer's body and the paintings into a further corporal realm; these surfaces have the ability to be experienced as skins pointing to skin as modality; an unbound sheath.

In a sense, painting or perhaps visual art in general can and is experienced at times as ornament. Using objects whose purpose is to decorate and protect other surfaces has allowed the paintings to be given a 'head start', an everyday platform. Here the idea of decoration can similarly be linked with that of diversity, a category I fall-into in terms of race and gender amongst our imperialist, white supremacist, patriarchal society.⁴ The process of painting on decorative surfaces could be seen as an equation pointing towards the circumstance of the other as adornment.

FIGURES, FRAMILARS, DAEMONS OR DIEITIES?



Illustration 02: Dragon Lady, 2016

“The monster, and the disorder it initiates and concretizes, is always that which disrupts and challenges the definitions and categories of the “human” and the “natural.” Generally speaking, it is in the monster’s body which focuses the disruption. Either disfigured, or marked by a heterogeneity of human and animal features, or marked only by a

“nonhuman” gaze, the body is always in some way signaled as “other,” signaled, precisely, as monstrous.”⁵ - Stephen Neale

The figures depicted in the series of painting in *STIGMA FOG* are in relation to theories of alien, animalization and monstrosities. These notions are meant to parallel circumstances of the abject, a field laid out for the other. With these painting I’m trying to express the circumstance of persons being seen as a non-human, bodies that are viewed as dangerous; the weaponization of skin, a violence leading to the evil. Through these painted figures I am illuminating the othered body being equal to that of the monster, exploiting absurdities and confinements found in spaces of white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal gaze.⁶

Within this space concepts and ideas of taming are linked, one might say these figures and painted fabrics need to be tamed for they are non-conformist. *Dragon Lady*, for example exudes a sense of wildness and sexuality through her placement in a sea of crimson, her crusted flung limbs, exposed genitalia, framed by a ring of teasing fringe. In *Body Politics and the Fictional Double* Debra Walker King suggests “Using images of blood and bald assertions of female sexuality and desire, women writers today challenge patriarchal norms by appropriating formerly negative associations as active, positive means of expressing discontent.”⁷ This closely relates to what I’m positing, for I’m irritated and dissatisfied with the condition of being othered. Through these paintings I’m able to lead with this dissatisfaction and embrace the constructs, echoing the liminal space in which I reside.

“if women today cannot be revered or worshipped as the creators of life, they prefer to be feared as agents of death, as decreed by myth, rather than bow down meekly as the oppressed Other.”⁸ -King

Through the development of a witch persona I developed at the *La Poch Nostra Summer School* in Tijuana, Mexico, I’m also able to see these painted figures through the lens of the mythological and historic constructions of the witch.



Illustration 03: *Witch Persona*, 2016, documentation by Rodrigo Dorfman

“The figure of the “witch” represents here a dimension of radical (feminist) identity that inserts the history of her oppression into contemporary ideological and political spaces.

Conveying the tension between past and present, the witch becomes a central signifier of women's cultural un/belonging, a metaphor for herstory, that is, a form of feminist mythology constituted in relation to and as an alternative to the established male-centered master narrative.”⁹ -Justyna Sempruch

In the witch's dominion the painted figures represent familiars or daemons; supernatural entities that most often take the form of animal creatures, who's condition is put on display, hinting towards the performativity of race. These paintings allow for magic to be found, and illustrate the frustrations of being abused and cast aside. It's tempting for me to label these painting as shrines or alters, positioning their abjectness as something holy and worthy of praise. I have had thoughts of conducting a ceremony in which I will sit and meditate in front of each painted figure in hopes of unfolding further knowledge in relation to the other and honoring this circumstance. Through this instance of praise and offering the paintings have the ability to transform into deities, formulating a holly abjectness.

In relation to the witch and sacredness an aspect of Satan and evil can be found, in terms of both medieval and contemporary conceptions. In *Witchcraft and the Mysteries* Luran Paine discusses how the formulation of Christianity effected perceptions related to the witch, “Witchcraft was associated with Satan only because Satan was the symbol of opposition – not ‘evil’ – opposition to whatever entophyte-man proposed. Witches were persecuted, not for Satanism, but for non-conformity, for using the powers entophyte-man had rejected, meaning the forces of cosmic power, natural law.”¹⁰ This situation closely

relates to the condemnation of the ethnic female body, one in which I reside. “Even in the church eyes a ‘good’ witch was anathematized because it was claimed all supernaturalism that did not come voluntarily from God, came from Satan,”¹¹ These notions discussed by Pain allow me to draw parallels to racism and formulations of the other whom are considered wicked, corrupt and are caged.

VIDEOS

The three video works shown are meant to further establish and reveal notions found in the painted figures, allowing for further transcendence into the realms of black bodies, animalization, innocence, and thoughts of evil. Considerations were made in terms of the types of technologies used and how they function in relation to the process and materials used in the paintings. Through the use of ‘horrific’ technology I’ve been able to touch on hierarchies found in digital media. Here my interests reside on the impact of ‘low quality’ which I establish through the use of a 32’ Panasonic Tube TV, pirated scenes taken from Hollywood movies, and the use of footage taken with a lo-fi *Aiptek* hand-held digital video camera. As I describe these forms of technology thoughts of patriarchy can be related, for these technologies can no longer be fine tuned, their outputs are seen as unsophisticated and ugly; perhaps too ‘wild’ such as the woman.



Illustration 04: Digital still from Shamu, 2016

Ideas of taming led me to *Shamu*, a one hour and 12-minute digital video of Orca Whales shot at *Sea World*, San Diego. Here the capturing and taming of an animal is depicted transparently. In *Goddess and Monsters*, Jane Caputi discusses this idea in the chapter *Jaws as Patriarchal Myth* testifying “that this great white shark, and whales, dragons, serpents, and sea monsters as well, represent the untamed female, the Mother, the *vagina dentate*, the Lesbian, the White Goddess, Tiamat, the wild, the unconscious.”¹² Orcas are matriarchal, and I expand here on Caputi’s thoughts and link the captive and tamed Orcas to conceptions of the exotic, caged, and commodified; which, fall in line with conditions of blackness.

While shooting video at one of the Orca pools at Sea World I overheard an attendant on multiple occasions state that the Killer Whales (the Orcas) we’re just large dolphins; like *Flipper* I thought. Ha! It seems Orcas have been labeled as Killers due to their size and coloring. Here I see blatant connections between black bodies and the weaponization of skin. The inclusion of *Shamu* in *STIGMA FOG* is also a tactic that allows viewers to divert their gaze while viewing the video *Black Deaths from Hollywood Cinema*.



Illustration 05: Digital still from *Black Deaths from Hollywood Cinema*

Black Deaths from Hollywood Cinema is a video montage made up of movie scenes where black actors play the role of Black Death, they are killed whilst the white lead characters go on to save humanity. This video piece was formulated during the rise of Black Lives Matter, and due to my recent interactions with Los Angeles it only seemed natural to address the parallel issues found in Hollywood cinema in regards to the treatment of black characters and the lives of those in reality. I include this piece to allow societal realities to be experienced by those in the fog. This work relates back to the wicked gaze embedded within the paintings, clearly illustrating standard norms that permeate American society in both reality and fiction. The work is meant to keep viewers alert, perhaps allowing them to add a further depth and understanding in regards to the conceptual framing in which the paintings were made, and the confines of the gaze.



Illustration 06: Digital still from *Goats with Westin and Tyson*

In *Goats with Westin and Tyson* I record my nephews' interactions with goats at an animal rescue farm located just next to their house outside of Madison, Wisconsin. Here I'm attempting not only to capture scenes of innocence and a sentimental memory of my nephews, but to address the historical notions attached to goats including that of witchcraft and supposed relationships to Satan, 'for he is able to speak through them'. I question the historic and mythological misunderstandings associated amongst witchcraft in relation to Satan, the Devil being marked as the father, lover, all. This relationship also brings me back to states of patriarchy, for Satan is a male ruler whom dominates the witch. The inclusion of my nephews is important for they have the ability to symbolically represent the budding nature of patriarchy and innocence at play with evil. And it's through the symbolic use of sound developed from a recording of HVAC system that I'm able to create a further absorption into states of *STIGMA FOG*.

The use of sound has been one of the last investigations in relation to the formation of this show. Through sound I'm symbolically able to penetrate bodies of the viewer, placing them for a moment in the position of the other who is gorged. I suppose if the viewer is already othered perhaps this gesture can be experienced as something sacred, a space to acknowledge otherness as having divine power.

CONCLUSIONS



Illustration 07: *Performance, Organic Play Time*, 2014, documentation by Emily Grenader

It seems my work has slowly transitioned into the lens of witchcraft, which I still don't know much about; it seems though that tangible connections can be made. For example, while thinking back to my first year show *Organic Playtime*, the gestures established during the *Dunce Performance* can be seen through witchcraft. For I the dunce, was in reality perhaps playing the role of a witch, surrounded by her familiars all the while delineating the black box theater with ritual chalk and hat. Tracing the bodies of the audience and architectural fixtures, a formation of protection related to practices found in both Voodoo and Wicca.



Illustration 08: *The Girls of Karen Black* with Kembra Pfahler

I think about my relationship to performance and its significance related to ceremony and spirit. I recall on my interactions with other artist including Kembra Pfahler, Marina Abramovic, Narcissister and those I worked with at La Pocha Nostra, for these interactions have impacted me in terms of experiencing a specific form of energy that I'm unable to formulate here. Through my exploration in performance works and through processes of making, my body has been implicated and used as sacred device. I now question magic and myths and realities related, for in states of making ritual is found, objects and gestures are made; a conjuring.

As a graduate student who's been asked to position herself amongst both the historical and contemporary canons of art I will attempt to do this now, here in the last paragraphs. I'm fond of artist whose interests are analogous with those of mine including humor, violence, the sacred and identity. The list now includes, William Pope L., Adriane Piper, David Hammons, Paul McCarthy, Genesis P Orridge and Kembra Pfahler. These

artists are positively aggressive and sophisticated in their approaches, elements that I hope have been manifested throughout my work. Notions of the absurd and the use of the subjective body as device are also explored by these artists; elements used to jolt, awaking the viewer. I attempt through processes, material, and the use of my subjective form that I'm able to manifest powers found in works created by the artist listed above.

I hope to continue pursuing my investigations in performance and painting, expanding upon my knowledge, skills and thoughts. I for see myself continuing to work within the ideals of the sacred and profane; leading with the other as a form of resistance.

Notes

1. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010), 11.
2. Carol P. Christ, and Judith Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising A Feminist Reader in Religion* (HaperCollins Publishers, 1979), 261.
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4. Bell Hooks, “*This Ain’t No Pussy Shit*” The New School, October 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hb5kteC3UEk>.
5. Fatimah Tobing Rony, *THE THIRD EYE* (Duck University Press, Durham and London, 1996), 163.
6. Bell Hooks, “*This Ain’t No Pussy Shit*” The New School, October 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hb5kteC3UEk>.
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9. Justyna Sempruch, *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature* (Purdue University Press, 2008), 172.
10. Lauran Paine, *Witchcraft and the Mysteries* (Taplinger Publishing Company, 1975), 86.
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12. Jane Caputi, *Goddesses and Monsters, Women, Myth, Power and Popular Culture* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 38.

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