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Where do we put our flesh? Intersecting Feminism with Art and Contemporary Printmaking

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Where do we put our flesh?

Intersecting Feminism with Art and Contemporary Printmaking



Honors Thesis

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Department: Art and Design

Advisor: Emily Sullivan Smith, MFA

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Abstract

My work is concerned with the correlation of society's standards for women, their bodies, and the resulting effects on their perception of themselves. Due in part to society's obsession with a universal female beauty and the treatment of the body as an object to be controlled by the mind, many women experience a form self-objectification, putting their body through rigorous self-analysis in an attempt to target their perceived flaws. Through my chosen medium of relief printing, I endeavor to represent this objectification of the self and the detrimental effects it can have on the female presence in the world. In this paper, I will lay out how I developed this body of work through all of its conceptual stages, the research behind my concepts, as well as the meanings embedded within the technical execution.



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Introduction

When one studies their own reflection, most can't help hearing the hyper-critical voice in their mind reminding them of what needs improvement. The nose is too big, stomach too round, muscles not defined — all work to create a disconnect between the mind and body, separating the entities and forcing a self-objectification. My work is largely concerned with the correlation of society's standards for women, their bodies, and the resulting effects on their perception of themselves. As a young woman who has faced several of these issues and discussed these concerns with her peers, I seek to address and expose these aspects of our society in the hopes of starting conversations and eventually moving beyond them, joining the global effort in working toward a more equal and diversely accepting world. Through my chosen medium of relief printing, I endeavor to represent this objectification of the self and the detrimental effects it can have on the female psyche and physicality. In this paper, I will lay out how I developed this body of work through all of its conceptual stages, the research behind my concepts, as well as the meanings embedded within the technical execution.

To begin, I must first discuss what lead me to pursue feminist issues and theory within my work. As I started my research for this project nearly two years ago, I began undergoing a rather large change in my social and political awareness. In part based on the rise of the 'me too.'TM and TIME'S UPTM movements developing through 2017, as well as the Women's March on Washington in January of that same year, I and many women of the country were encouraged to take a closer look at the inequalities and injustices spread throughout the entirety of society. I personally began to study one particular facet of my life that had always bothered me, but in this new light seemed to have deeper societal roots; my relationship with my body.

Growing up, it seemed like I was always hyper-aware of my body — how it looked, what was wrong with it, whether it looked odd sitting a certain way — to the point it was often paralyzing. While vaguely aware that everyone was self-conscious about their bodies, it always felt like an isolating and individual problem, something I had

to work to overcome. It wasn't until I started developing stronger relationships with female friends and had deeper conversations with them that I realized that mine was far from an outlying experience. Family and friends alike expressed similar thoughts and intense awareness of their physical selves. Even those I thought had what were considered "good" bodies, or at least were widely regarded as beautiful, all found some issue with their looks. And while many men also expressed some variation of these same feelings, it seemed far more all-encompassing, and at times debilitating for women. I became interested in understanding the reason this trend seemed so prevalent among women, concerned for the effects on the self-esteem of the individual as well as the general female presence within the world. As I began reading, three writings in particular would form the foundation from which my work is built.

Literary Research

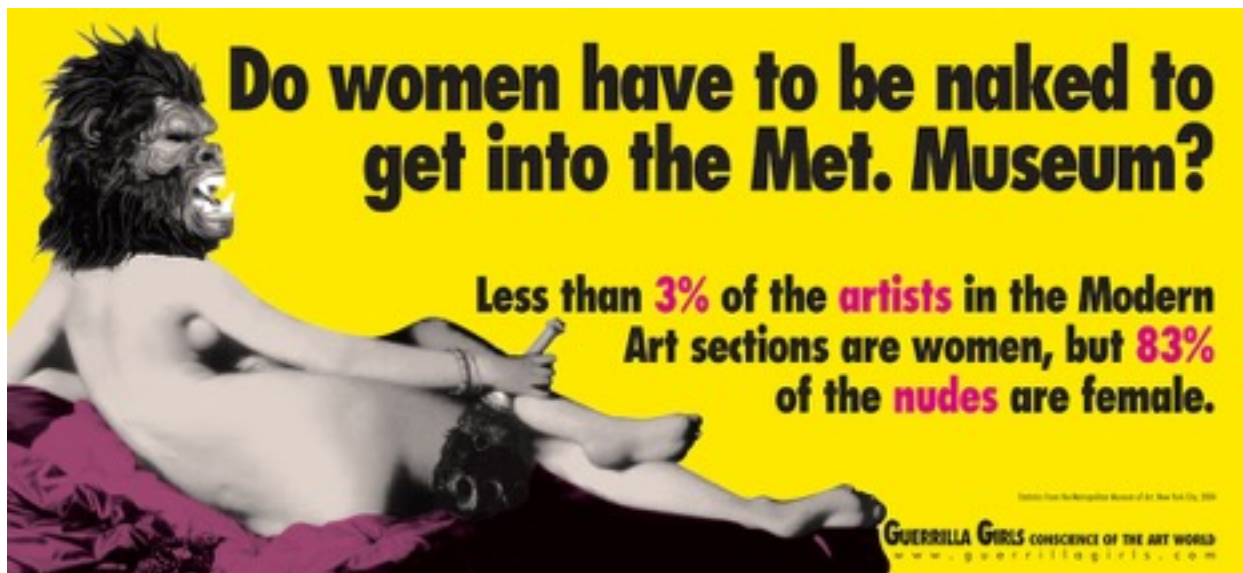
The first source is *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf, who argues that one societal myth has inevitably slow the progression toward female equality. What she refers to as the beauty myth is the idea that a universal beauty exists in our world and is achievable merely through enough hard work. This places the burden of looking "beautiful" entirely within the woman's capacity, something she should desire to achieve. It places the male gaze and society as a whole as a passive observer of the female form, the final judges on whether or not she has reached an acceptable level of beauty. Even in some cases where she does seemingly achieve this mythical status of "beautiful," it suddenly brings a new host of issues — for example, the argument that "she was asking for it" or "look at what she was wearing" in cases of sexual assault — which are once again entirely her responsibility. Wolf argues that this leaves women in a situation where they must constantly monitor themselves, spending valuable time, effort, and money on maintaining this professional level of beauty, but also tenuously trying not to appeal too heavily to the male gaze.

My second source of inspiration came from bell hooks' book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. In it, hooks describes the intersectionality necessary within

feminism for it to properly address all issues within society. To her, oppression anywhere must be the main target for feminists to tackle. She expounds particularly on the plight of the black woman in America, often forced to choose between fighting for racial equality or gender equality. The unique situation of women of color places them at the receiving end of two different forms of oppression that neither white women nor black men could ever fully understand, even if they share at least one of these forms of oppression. As a white woman it became important for me to understand the faults or shortcomings of my own perspective. I will never truly know the struggles of other women, but that does not mean there is not an opportunity for understanding and acceptance to occur. In order to move forward as feminists in particular, hooks argues that we must listen to all forms of female oppression, keeping an open mind to the differences in experiences and using that diversity as an advantage as we build a better society from margin to center. For my work, this means keeping my mind open to the words of others, listening deeply to their experiences to better understand the gravity and totality of these issues from a multitude of perspectives.

The final source of inspiration I gained from my research came in the form of a philosophical paper written and presented by Iris Marion Young titled “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality.” Within the paper, Young seeks to understand why women often comport themselves differently, and often less intuitively through space, especially in direct motions such as throwing. She argues that societal objectification and the othering of the feminine self is to blame. When women grow up with the silently understood expectation that male is the norm and the female is merely a deviation of the male, it separates her from her self, from her physical body, and makes it almost a foreign object. Compounded with the obsession of beauty in the female form as an observable object, she becomes hyper-aware of her position in space at all times, unconsciously moving only in certain ways in to appear smaller, less physically powerful, hesitant to display any type of physical strength, all apparent assets to the female form. Thus the expectations and fully engrained ideals of society can affect the very physical presence and performance of women.

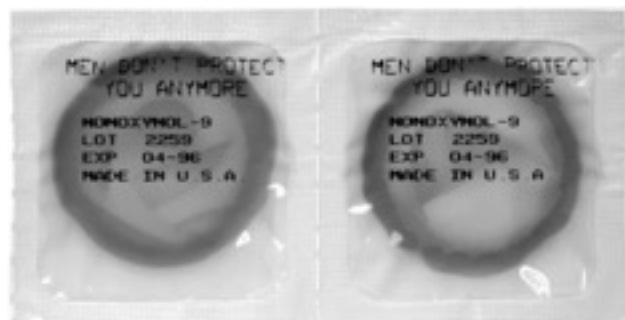
Visual Research



Do Women Have to be Naked to get into the Met. Museum? Guerrilla Girls. 2005.



Holzer, Jenny. *Untitled (Austrian Parliament, Vienna)*. 2006. Projection.



Holzer, Jenny. *Untitled (Men Don't Protect You Anymore)*. 1983-85. Packaged latex condoms with printed text.

Now that my theoretical concept had been enriched by these literary muses, I turned my attention to the visual. In order to begin conceptualizing these theories and ideas into a visually appealing and understandable form, I first went to other artists for inspiration. By seeing how others have successfully created works that speak to their purpose, I could gain better insight on how to do so myself. Regarding artists who use their work for social activism, the Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Holzer, and Barbra Kruger served as the greatest inspiration to me. All three work with large scale,

installation pieces that rely heavily on text, meant to bring in as wide an audience as possible. While I do not work in this way, using more figural, intimate images to grab my audience's attention, it is these women's ambition and calls for change that attract me. The Guerrilla Girls use billboards and large posters to point out inequalities within the elite art world. Jenny Holzer creates what she calls "truisms," or small phrases that hint toward the nature of humanity that she prints on objects, hangs on old marquee signs, or even projects onto monuments and buildings. Barbra Kruger uses very graphic images, usually in black, white and red with bars of text to convey simple, yet elegant critiques of society. All of these women have taught me the potential and power within art to address massive socio-political issues, using a multitude of ways to reach their audiences.



Kruger, Barbara. *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*. 1981. Photograph and type on paperboard.



Swoon. Helena, New Orleans. 2005.

As far as contemporary printmakers go, there are two in particular that are equally important to my work. The first is Swoon, whose massive retrospective at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati Ohio, was an astounding experience. Not only is her technical skill beautiful, but she, like the

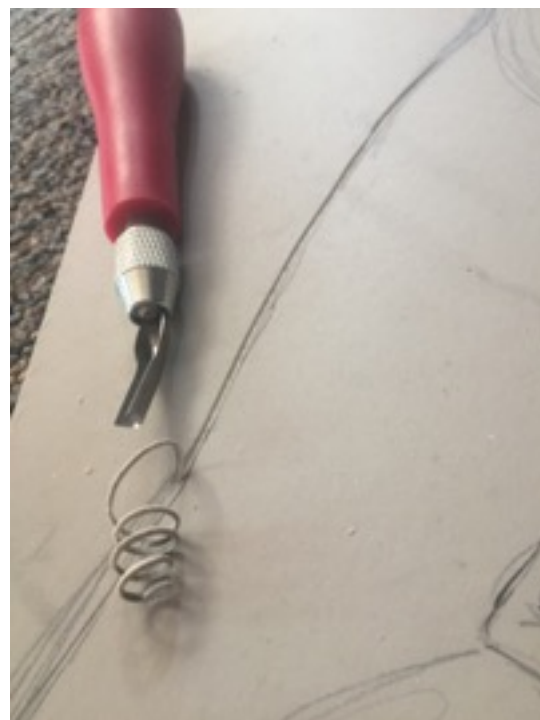
artists mentioned previously, is working to reach an audience beyond the galleries. She installs her larger-than-life relief prints in site-specific locations, creating work that is made for and representative of the community it becomes part of. She celebrates themes of strong women, pregnancy, community and local engagement, all while bringing art to people who may not often get a chance to engage with such purposeful, powerful works. The second, but equally important printmaker that I have learned from, is Erin Holscher Almazan. Her technical skill in rendering the figure can easily be seen in her work, bringing a sense of grace and elegance to the highly graphic process of relief printing. I knew that if I wished to pursue figurative forms within my work, she would be an invaluable example of the possibilities within relief printing and the human figure.

The Work

The more I reflected on my research and conceptual inspirations, the more fitting relief print seemed to be as my chosen medium. As I had read, the effects of low self-esteem and a broken connection between the physical self and the mental landscape creates a treacherous self-deprecating frame of reference for young women as they enter society. Relief printing then becomes a reflection of these concerns. A relief print is made by taking a



Holscher-Almazan, Erin. Hold Tight. Lino cut. 2018.



Process photo: carving linoleum



Where do we put our flesh? 8 x 10", lino cut.
Variation 1



Process photo: carved design



Process photo: inked block on the
printing press

level surface (such as a block of wood or sheet of linoleum), and using sharp tools to cut into the material to create the desired design. Whatever is left of the original level surface is inked and run through a printing press, the image being transferred to a piece of paper (as can be seen in the process images provided). Cutting into the surface of the block, creating deep, irremovable marks along the surface, mirrors my own and other women's experiences with trying to conform our bodies to society's ideals. Just like my tools into the surface, the words and images that saturate our daily lives dig into our minds and leave imprints, forever changing us and our physical and physiological selves. Both are indirect processes, creating a surface-level product that does not reveal the depth of the marks below.



Where do we put our flesh? 8 x 10", lino cut.
Variation 3

Taking note from bell hooks however, I had to remember that this issue is bigger than myself. If I wanted to better understand the effects of society on women, I alone was not a large enough sample size. So while I did create a few self-portraits, I wished to expand beyond that to create portraits of other women as well. Turning to friends and family, I asked some women if they would model for me. The sessions remained calm and conversational, the model and I working together to discuss my project, their own experiences, and the multitude of ways they look at their bodies. As we talked, I would ask them to pose themselves, observing their bodies and the parts of them they feel they look at the most on their own. This conversation served two roles during these sessions; first, I wanted to keep their minds off of their poses. If they are partially distracted by



Where do we put our flesh? 8 x 10", lino cut.
Variation 2

talking with me, the poses they choose would hopefully be more natural to them and therefore a better reflection of their habits. Second, it helped me better understand their perspective, what they have gone through or are going through, and how I can best represent that within their portraits, making each highly specific to the individual portrayed, while still maintaining the commonality of self-objectification.

The largest and most obvious issue I quickly came into contact with, is the lack of diversity currently present in my models. After reading bell hooks and theories by other feminists of color, I knew the limitations of my own perspective and the perspective of a white woman, and that if I wished to broaden my own and others' understanding of women in our society, I had to expand the



Where do we put our flesh? 8 x 10", lino cut.
Variation 4

perspectives shown in my work. This is when the University of Dayton community and my own small social group suddenly appeared more jarringly white than I had previously seen it to be. Thus, the next major step in my work and for the development of this project, is to grow past this issue, finding more models of as many backgrounds and diversities as I can to better fill in the holes so apparent within my current images.



Variation 17

After I finished carving a few blocks and started the printing process, I decided to push some of these ideas further by creating multi-block prints. This is achieved by printing two linoleum blocks onto the same piece of paper — either the same block or a different one — thus creating a layering of the ink on the surface. As the figures began to build on top of one another, I began to see other related concepts come into play within the pieces. In some I had three of the same figure laid over each other, resulting in a



Variation 9

other caused an interesting distortion that I found fascinating. For example, in variation 9, the figure in black becomes difficult to see as the figure in red lays so densely across it. The figures start morphing into each other, making distinguishing between them a challenge that the viewer must either take time with to detangle or see as a singular form, distorted and more object-like than human. For example, when they were shown variation 11, a friend recounted to me that they initially did not see two bodies. Instead they saw a knot in a rope.

slightly jarring image, bouncing the eye between the three figures, as can be seen in variation 17. To me, it represented the ritual-like quality of looking at oneself every day, aiding in the objectification of the self. The more you look at your body, the more you analyze it, the more foreign and strange it feels.

In other images, the bodies laying over each



Variation 11

Just as we do to ourselves, these images are transforming the body into foreign objects, forcing us to question the use of the physical self as a tool, or something to be manipulated.

Layering different figures over each other brought another idea to the front — the idea of “the other” and their gaze. This idea is explained best by Charles Horton Cooley in his concept of The Looking Glass Self. To Cooley, our judgement of ourselves resides entirely on what we think

other people think of us.

Like a mirror, we can never see ourselves purely for who we are, always basing our actions and beliefs on what we want others to see and feel about us.

This also ties into the dramaturgical model of society proposed by Erving Goffman who theorized that life is like a play. We all have specific roles to play within society, choosing to act the way we do



Variation 7

depending on the expectations of the audience, supporting actors, or society itself. With my prints, the other figures hovering in the background as is seen in variation 7, watching over the main figure or helping warp the body by confusing the eye, is representational of the other, what their gaze and believed expectations do to our psyche, and affect how we then view ourselves. Several feminist writers also wrote about this phenomenon, arguing

that our viewing of other women, objectifying them as well as ourselves, and the expectation to compare ourselves with them, is detrimental both to the individual and the feminist movement as a whole, dividing women against each other.

Titles have also come to be an important part of my work and communicating my ideas. As I learned from some of my artistic influences, words have a very real and impactful presence within an art piece, and while I did not incorporate words within the art itself as those women do, I found that the titles were where I could experiment. For my first edition of prints, I decided to title them *Where do we put our flesh?* with individual pieces specified by a variation number (thus, since I had 30 prints, they would be titled *Where do we put our flesh?* variations 1 - 30). This title is meant to reflect the idea of turning the body into an object to be moved, manipulated, and discarded at will, as easily as one might ask “where should I put my shoes?” In addition, by posing it as a question, it turns the viewer into a participant in the discussion, asking them what is to be done. Where do you think we should put our flesh? How do you think we should we change our bodies? What is your answer in this dialogue?

One of my less expected discoveries occurred when I layered blocks of myself over ones of my mother, such as variation 8. Initially done only for aesthetic reasons, I began to see another concept emerging.

When I looked at this image, seeing my mother’s ghostly figure behind myself, seemingly looking both at me and her



Variation 8

own reflection, I had to take a moment to pause and analyze what I felt. To me, these pieces now suddenly spoke to the idea of transferring methods of looking between generations. What are we unconsciously teaching our young girls, solely through our own actions? For instance, if a daughter sees or hears her mother complain about the size of her stomach or the shape of her legs, would that then teach her to look at those areas with concern as well? Though my mother has always been the most encouraging, supportive figure I could ask for, it made me wonder what I may have unconsciously picked up from her throughout my childhood. I made another series of prints featuring just the two of us to further explore this idea visually, featuring just the two of us layered with more blocks of us on top, as can be seen in variations 20 and 21. This edition, along with new conversations that opened between me and my mother brought an entirely new dimension to our relationship as mother and daughter, something I believe has brought us even closer together.



Variation 21



Variation 20

I was also very mindful of the colors I wanted to use. I began with black, a traditional print color, to best see the lines I had made and the quality of the cuts themselves. It also provides an excellent, graphic quality to the images with the sharp contrast against the paper. I then quickly began to explore a variety of colors that would both accentuate the line quality while adding further meaning to the work. I used pink to represent femininity as it is portrayed in society. Whites and grays were excellent secondary colors, creating a ghost-like effect in conjunction with the multiple figures, further referencing the idea of how penetrating the gaze of the “other” can be in our daily lives. Red referenced blood and the physicality of our bodies. Purple was a chromatic representation of shadows and darkness, the idea of wanting to hide or conceal parts of ourselves. Every color I used was carefully considered to further aid my message.

Explorations of color brought me to a related, but slightly divergent path. I loved seeing how the colors interacted within the paper, but I was reaching limitations with

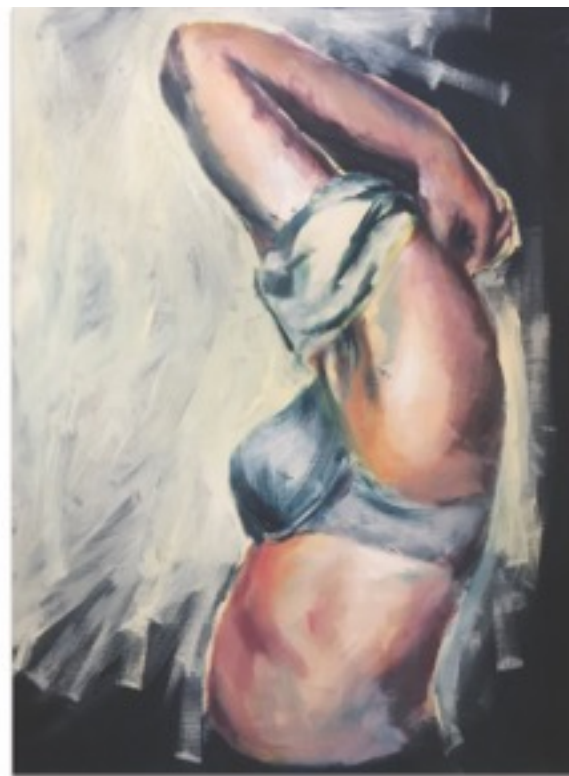


Our Bodies, 24 x 18", oil on panel

regard to color mixing. Because of the printmaking process, it is difficult to use multiple colors within an image, particularly within relief printing. I decided here that these explorations could easily spill into other media as well, such as oil painting, which I pursued eagerly. It was fascinating to see that when using the same compositions and models, the feeling of these images changed drastically with the different media. For example, the blending of the oils on the panel allowed for a degree of subtlety that is not possible in my prints, making them feel softer, more introspective perhaps



Where do we put our flesh? 8 x 10", lino cut.
Variation 1



My Blood, 24 x 18", oil on panel

than the bold lines of my prints. To make a direct comparison, variation 1 of my prints and the painting *My Blood*, both used the same reference image, yet have entirely different feelings. The print is graphically bold and strong, cutting, very direct in its interpretation. The painting is strong in a softer way, exploring subtle moments within the torso and arms through color and shading. Other paintings, all sized at 18 x 24 inches, have similar moments within them, creating a small group of work related to, yet entirely different from the prints.

This work eventually lead me to the culmination of my prints, three large scale blocks measuring 24 x 36 inches, each addressing a different way of viewing my body — one with my friends and peers, one with my mother, and another on my own. Until I started these images, my prints were 8 x 10 inches, small and intimate. Now I had more room to experiment with my marks, how it could twist and turn on itself, or mold into others, in a way that was not possible on the previously smaller scale. One unfortunate consequence of moving to a larger format was the inability to create multi-block prints.



We are your mirrors, 24 x 36", lino cut.

Laying the paper across the print can be challenging on the first layer, and nearly impossible to line up properly for the second. Instead I incorporated the idea of layering in the carving process instead. As can be seen in the print *We are your mirrors*, especially in the detail images provided, I let the lines of the figures glide through each other,



We are your mirrors, details

alternating between positive and negative lines, twisting the three figures together into one. The title references this idea of the Looking Glass Self, implying that those around you influence and directly change the way you view yourself.

The second image, *Through the Looking Glass*, is a self portrait meant to analyze how I view my stomach. The lines twist and curve unnaturally within me, distorting my body that is not photographically realistic, but represent my own distorted thoughts, and how I end up seeing myself. The flowers in the bra are lotuses, Buddhist representations of enlightenment as the flower grows through the murk of a pond to blossom beautifully above the surface. Here however, they are decorative filler, unable to draw attention from the strangeness in the stomach. This is meant to



Through the Looking Glass, 36 x 24", Lino cut

represent the idea that knowledge and understanding or even acceptance of our other

more beautiful traits or talents are sometimes not enough to distract us from the obsession of objectifying our forms.

The third image, as yet unfinished, will be titled *I reflect you*, and features my mother and I in parallel poses. Through some of our more recent discussions, I found that one unexpected spot that both my mother and I over-analyze on our bodies is our backs. I decided then to create an image based on this odd connection, while further exploring the ideas of intergenerational influences. The poses were chosen to best imitate this idea of reflection, as I have grown to unconsciously reflect the concerns of my mother toward her body in myself.

Thus my body of work uses multiple tactics to try and represent the harm done to the psyche and physicality of women in our modern society. I do not expect the average observer to recognize even half of the decisions I made throughout the process or connect it back to any of the literature I referenced at the beginning. That is not the purpose of my work. Instead, I am more concerned with starting conversation, opening people up to new ideas, or taking the visual aid I have given them to apply their own experiences and thoughts. As people begin to talk and hopefully listen to one another, bell hooks' vision of equality from margin to center may finally begin to come to fruition.

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