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Roses & Thorns

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Roses & Thorns

Stephanie Alaniz

Thesis submitted
to the College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in
Printmaking

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School of Art and Design

Morgantown, West Virginia
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Keywords: Drawing, Printmaking, Insecurity, Body Positivity, Empathy
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Abstract

Roses & Thorns

Stephanie Alaniz

This written thesis has been created alongside the thesis exhibition shown in the Laura Mesaros Gallery at West Virginia University (displayed March 18th to March 22nd). The work presented consisted of drawings, bookmaking, and various forms of printmaking and collage. This body of work is meant to create an analysis of insecurities and body positivity we associate with our physical selves. This work is a collective experience that has been a collaboration with over 80 participants. The number of participants help to create a larger overall collective voice. By creating this collective voice, we can experience these feelings together and reflect upon where insecurities and positive associations with our bodies manifest.

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During my time at West Virginia University, my graduate experience has felt so incredibly uplifting and full of immense growth. I would like to take this time to thank the faculty for creating such an incredible experience and offering me the critical and thoughtful attention that I need to further my imagery and content within my work. I would like to thank Joseph Lupo for his sending me so many emails with artists, articles, podcasts, and other thoughtful media to help expand my point of view as well as my content and for the many, many, many, days where I came into his office to unload my many worries. Thank you for listening and offering such crucial advice. I want to thank the rest of my committee, Amy Schissel, Michael Sherwin, and Kofi Opoku for their continued support and feedback throughout my time at WVU. I want to thank Dylan Collins for sharing and teaching me so many sculpture processes. Thank you to Jason Lee who offered such honest and critical advice that was truly appreciated and offered many incredible tips for installation.

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Introduction

“...I’ve been thinking a lot about feeling comfortable in one’s body and what a luxury that must be. Does anyone feel comfortable in their bodies?” -Roxane Gay, *Hunger*¹

“My body, I realized, was an opportunity. It was political. It moved the world just by existing. What a gift.” Lindy West, *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*²

People deal with insecurities multiple times a day. While the specifics of each insecurity are unique to each individual, we also share many worries about ourselves. Uncertainty, lack of confidence, self-doubt, and fear seem to be most common. These thoughts fill our minds with constant worry over things that can feel trivial or foolish and rather than discuss these feelings we hide them. For many, talking about these insecurities is taboo. However, insecurities seem to be a part of what makes us human. Over the years, I have taught myself to reflect and be more open with my fears. Because of this, my work has focused on the collective experience of having insecurities, and the unease, fear, and anxiety that comes with feeling hyper aware. Through this work, I analyze our relationship with insecurities in the hopes of creating a conversation with the intent to not only normalize our collective insecurities but create understanding, solidarity, and comfort with ourselves and each other.

¹ Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (my) Body* (Rearsby, Leicester: WF Howes, 2018). 300.

² Lindy West, *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman* (London: Quercus, 2017). 79.

Gender and Insecurities (or Insecurities and Their Origins)

Insecurities come from a lot of different places and exist in many different facets. They are a normal and natural part of the human condition but have been incredibly stigmatized and invalidated. People tend to hide feelings and ignore their causes. We perceive the thought or instance of feeling insecure as “silly”, while still sharing this collective experience. Insecurities tend to revolve around our bodies, our identities, and the identities that are projected onto people based on our body and how it acts. In an article written by Lakecia Hammond, an author and entrepreneur focusing on women’s issues within society, she discusses insecurities as being an overall human experience with the most common physical insecurities revolving around the face or skin, broken or crooked teeth, body hair, and emotionally an overall feeling of not being worthy, also known as imposter syndrome.³

For those of us living in the United States, these kinds of insecurities are learned behavior through our current capitalist system. Marketing takes advantage of our insecurities, amplifies them, and promises to “fix” them through a number of products and services that one can buy. Marketing makes us afraid of being fat, afraid of feeling like “other”, afraid of not fitting inside our assigned gender roles. Companies make money by reinforcing our insecurities. Advertising teaches us to compare ourselves to an idealized “norm” and to never be satisfied in our own skin. Marketing also plays a role in how we define gender and how we treat each other based on predetermined gender assumptions. Gendered products teach men and women what roles, or objects belong to them. In the article “The Phenomenon of Gendered Products,” in FEM newsmagazine, Sarah Greenwald writes:

³ Lakecia Hammond and Lakecia Hammond, "The Most Common Insecurities People Suffer With Over a Lifetime," Zentist, February 25, 2018, , accessed April 05, 2019, <https://blog.zentist.io/the-most-common-insecurities-people-suffer-through-over-a-lifetime-ffe8258f8903>.

“This marketing of gender phenomenon that permeates society through the strategy of relying on stereotypes enables corporations to sell more. By creating two of each of item, such as weight loss pills, hair products, soap, razors, toys, and more, companies generate profit by having multiple products for the same item and thus more products can be purchased. And nothing is safe from gender. Items you would not even think could be gendered actually exist. For instance, corporations have designed a toothpaste for men and special pens for women. No one would think these products are gendered until society starts to tell us they are.”⁴

The gendering of products creates the illusion that existing within the gender binary looks a certain way and requires different and specific products to accommodate these differences.

Judith Butler elaborates on this idea in her 1988 essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, “Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all.”⁵

Looking at my own experience, I can relate to this phenomenon. My brother and I were raised in the same household. Misogyny and gender expectations impacted how we were raised and how our mother and father treated one another. These experiences obviously had a huge impact on how my brother, and I developed. My younger brother was the favored child, as my parent’s goal was to have a son rather than a daughter. Having a daughter is valued less than having a son in many cultures and throughout history. In the essay *Living in a Man’s World: The Logic of Misogyny*, Kate Manne, Professor of Philosophy at Cornell University, talks about the consistent double standard that exists among parents raising children within the binary and how this perpetuates misogyny and ties into the insecurities many women have. Manne goes on to

⁴ Sarah Greenwald, "The Phenomenon of Gendered Products," FEM Newsmagazine, April 16, 2015, , accessed April 05, 2019, <https://femmagazine.com/the-phenomenon-of-gendered-products/>.

⁵ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): , doi:10.2307/3207893.

talk about the “particularly harsh *enforcement mechanisms* for girls and women (in the relevant class), as compared with boys and men (in this class - that is, male counterparts)”.⁶

Similarly, I was constantly critiqued on my appearance and so much of this held internalized hate that my mother had for her own physical body. She taught me what I should dislike about myself, namely being fat, hairy, and not ‘feminine’ enough. I was also taught to take up less space, speak softly, and apologize frequently just for existing. They even made me fearful of leaving my house with hairy legs, without covering my fat arms, not having long enough hair to hide my fat face. All of this behavior has deep roots that is nurturing our culture with misogyny and self-hate. We are perpetuating notions that our bodies are what determines our worth. Roxane Gay describes her own privacy with her body in her book *Bad Feminist*, “Any time your body represents some kind of difference, your privacy is compromised to some degree. A surfeit of privacy is just one more benefit the privilege class enjoys and often takes for granted.”⁷

The Body and Insecurity

In Roxane Gay’s book *Hunger*, she recounts her experience as a fat black woman and how others have stigmatized her body and presented their concern for her physical self by suggesting her “fatness” as a death sentence. She writes, “This commentary is often couched as *concern*, as people only having your *best interests* at heart. They forget you are a person. You are your body, nothing more, and your body should damn well become less.”⁸ Physical insecurities exist excessively among those who live in a marginalized body. It’s difficult when the most

⁶ Kate Manne, "The Logic of Misogyny," ABC Religion & Ethics, September 20, 2018, accessed April 05, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/life-in-a-mans-world-rethinking-misogyny/10094950>.

⁷ Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist* (HarperCollins USA, 2017), 163.

⁸ Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (my) Body* (Rearsby, Leicester: WF Howes, 2018). 121

insecure parts of your body stand out amongst the rest. Fatness is a trait that is consistently presented to us in a negative way through marketing, books, tv/movies, advertisements, etc. Just down the road from where I live in Morgantown, West Virginia, I am forced to view a giant marque that shows different photos of thin women getting thinner with words like ‘burn away fat’ and ‘cellulite reduction’ (fig 1). These advertising campaigns perpetuate the norm that one should live in a smaller body and that fatness is undesirable, especially for women.

Skin color is another example of a physical trait that has perceived social inequalities. Many people of color (POC) are forced to consume the idea that light white skin is the ideal norm. Gustavo Razzetti, author and psychology writer for *Medium* writes, “*Colorism* is discrimination based on skin color—darker-skinned groups are treated worse than lighter skin ones by whites or *even* members of their own race.”⁹ These norms are established through colorism, perpetuated by media representations, and companies then use these perceived norms to sell beauty products that reinforce the ideal of having lighter skin. Colorism has implications beyond perceptions of beauty. An article written by the “National Conference for Community and Justice” discusses and explains how colorism affects POC’s ability to receive jobs, mistreatment, and experience discrimination. They state, “Skin tone was often the most important factor in applying for work as a person of color in the mid-20th century. Light skin was often reported on a resume ahead of any other information or experience.”¹⁰

Thin white women are the models presented to us throughout advertisements and in television shows and movies. In her book *Hunger*, Gay describes fatness and skin color best through the following statement: “Fat, much like skin color, is something you cannot hide, no

⁹ Gustavo Razzetti and Gustavo Razzetti, "Why Racism Is About the Color of the Mind, Not Your Skin," Medium, April 23, 2018, , accessed April 05, 2019, <https://medium.com/@GusRazzetti/what-the-color-of-the-skin-says-about-your-mind-99159c40ed1f>.

¹⁰ Jvillage Network, "Colorism," NCCJ, January 09, 2019, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://nccj.org/colorism-0>.

matter how dark the clothing you wear, or how diligently you avoid horizontal stripes.”¹¹ She goes on to describe in detail how hard it is existing in a marginalized body, especially as a woman who is not only fat but a POC. These examples highlight the struggles people with marginalized bodies experience. Our bodies and insecurities are on display at all times. Not only are we taught to feel badly about our bodies, but others have been taught to judge our bodies as well.

I. Insecurities in Women/AFAB

As a person assigned female at birth (AFAB), I along with other AFAB women are taught certain social norms at an early age. We are taught that women need to take up less space, need to apologize, need to look down while we walk, should be afraid of men and shouldn't speak out. We are taught that 'feminism' is a bad word, and that feminists are man haters and are bad people. Insecurities placed on women and AFAB have to do with the idea that just being a woman or enjoying activities that are gendered for women are bad. Society reinforces the notion that a woman's worth is completely dictated by her looks and her ability to keep quiet and take up less space. Freelance writer Suzannah Weiss writes in her "Bustle" article entitled, *9 Subtle Ways Women are Taught to View Themselves as Objects*, about the objectification of one's own body and states, "There are multibillion-dollar industries that rely on self-hate to cash in". She goes on to discuss this forced thinking by, "Telling women that they're too fat to go to the beach, too ugly to be on TV, or too old to be in politics teaches them that their looks are about more than just looks and should be viewed as a metric of how many good things they deserve.”¹² While men who are fat, unattractive, or older are rarely critiqued in the same light as women.

¹¹ Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (my) Body* (Rearsby, Leicester: WF Howes, 2018). 120.

¹² Suzannah Weiss, "How Women Are Taught To View Themselves As Objects," *Bustle*, December 17, 2018, accessed April 05, 2019, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/167897-9-subtle-ways-women-are-taught-to-view-themselves-as-objects>.

Many artists have made work about fighting these norms. For example, Cindy Sherman creates scenarios in which she photographs her body as a way to comment on her identity as a woman and challenge the predominance of the male gaze. Western art history is dominated by mostly white men who painted nude women in positions and scenarios that they determined. These paintings, like in Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (fig 2), not only focus on the male gaze but help perpetuate notions of conventionally attractive woman. Amelia Jones in, *Cindy Sherman Retrospective*, describes her work this way, "...Sherman continues to negotiate: 'Your gaze hits the (resistant) flat of my body.' Sherman enacts the gaze's spaces of desire—but in so doing, slows it to a crawl."¹³ Sherman is intentionally pointing at the male gaze, breaking down the fourth wall, and reclaiming her own image. In most ways this breaks the norm of how women are taught to behave. This is a radical idea of how a woman was, and is allowed to be, presented. Sherman is explicit in her intentions to break down these norms by creating lists with words like "strong characters/pose", "looming at camera/viewer", "eye contact—confrontation" provided in *Cindy Sherman Retrospective*.¹⁴ These issues have played a huge role in how females are taught by men to feel that we aren't good enough for men. Roxane Gay describes it through her own experience:

"Shame is a difficult thing. People certainly try to shame me for being fat. When I am walking down the street, men lean out of their car windows and shout vulgar things at me about my body, how they see it, and how it upsets them that I am. Not catering to their gaze and their preferences and desires. I try not to take these men seriously because what they are really saying is, 'I am not attracted to you. I do not want to fuck you, and this confuses my understanding of my masculinity, entitlement, and place in this world.'" It is not my job to please them with my body."¹⁵

¹³ Cindy Sherman et al., *Cindy Sherman, Retrospective* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003). 41.

¹⁴ Cindy Sherman et al., *Cindy Sherman, Retrospective* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003).110.

¹⁵ Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (my) Body* (Rearsby, Leicester: WF Howes, 2018). 188.

Just as with Sherman's work, Gay is making a radical statement about being tired and frustrated with having to fit inside an idealized norm of what a perfect female body is supposed to look like. Gay is trying to remind us that a person is more than just their body.

II. Insecurities in Men/AMAB

Because insecurities are a part of the human condition, there are intersections among all humans regardless of our identities. It seems that a lot of the reason's women experience insecurities are also why men or AMAB (assigned male at birth) people experience insecurities. Surprisingly, male insecurities are still rooted in misogyny, the idea that being a woman or being gay is devalued within our society. For men, not being 'masculine' enough is a problem. During social interactions, men use these social norms as insults. In an episode titled, *The Loneliest Man*, on the National Public Radio produced podcast, "Hidden Brain", host Shankar Vedantam discusses how men are raised to believe that having love for other men and sharing feelings is wrong. Because of this, Vedantam saw that when boys reach their teenage years, they start to become more solitary and remove themselves from friends, often never having a close relationship until marriage. Interviews with men and New York University psychology professor Niobe Way, discuss how previously married men do not know how to engage in public settings and become incredibly lonely, which leads to higher depression, suicide, and early deaths among (typically straight) men.¹⁶ So much of this behavior continues to be influenced by the notion that "feminine" traits are viewed as bad and that feminine is a synonym for "weak". Tara Culp-Ressler, author of article "Forcing Kids to Stick to Gender Roles Can Actually Be Harmful To Their Health" for *ThinkProgress*, writes about observing the differences that are experienced statistically among men and woman. They write:

¹⁶ "The Lonely American Man," interview, *Hidden Brain* (audio blog), March 19, 2018, accessed March 23, 2019.

“Meanwhile, the male participants in the study all faced intense pressure to demonstrate the extent of their manliness, which led to what Pereira calls “everyday low-level violence”: slapping and hitting each other, as well as inflicting pain on other boys’ genitals. They were encouraged to physically fight each other if they were ever mocked or offended. They felt like they had to drink unhealthy amounts of alcohol because that’s what a man would do. And they were under certain mental health strains, too; struggling with anxiety about proving themselves and suppressing their feelings, all while lacking a strong emotional support system.”¹⁷

This explanation describes men’s preformed behavior as needing to avoid “feminine” characteristics such as having a strong emotional support system, taking care of one's body, and not physically hurting others. This behavior is meant to overcompensate for the fear of not being not being masculine enough or being perceived as the slightest bit feminine.

John Coplans is an artist who is known for his series *Self-Portraits*, which consist of photographs of his nude body as a seventy-year-old. What I find interesting about this work is how his photographs are presented in a way that feels very absent of these male insecurities. These photographs contradict the norms men face of how a man's body language ‘should’ be. Some of this comes from the close detail, tight cropping, and odd perspectives in his compositions. Coplans’ photos trick the eye initially and feel like something completely different rather than of the body. Perhaps this is why these photographs feel disconnected from the stereotypical male identity because Coplans wasn’t interested in talking about identity. This work seems to successfully present his body in a vulnerable way because these photographs seem to talk more about form and detail, than any sort of specific statement about his body. He was quoted saying “My photos recall memories of mankind”.¹⁸ The Museum of Modern Art

¹⁷ Tara Culp-Ressler, "Forcing Kids To Stick To Gender Roles Can Actually Be Harmful To Their Health," ThinkProgress, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://thinkprogress.org/forcing-kids-to-stick-to-gender-roles-can-actually-be-harmful-to-their-health-34aef42199f2/>.

¹⁸ "MoMA Learning," MoMA, accessed April 05, 2019, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/john-coplans-self-portrait-1985/.

cited Christopher Lyon's writing describing Coplans' photographs as always excluding his face in order to represent a universal male body rather than a singular specific person.¹⁹

Empathy and Sensitivity

In order to understand others, you have to understand yourself. We are all complicated individuals and from that complexity we have the ability to reflect and understand ourselves. Through this reflection, one can pinpoint why they felt a certain way or what they are doing that was problematic for another person. Personally, self-reflection allows me to understand how I react to situations and creates opportunities to better understand other people. My current body of work relies heavily on other people's experience in order to make work and create a stronger more collective experience. Gillian Wearing is an artist who relies upon the participation of others in order to create work. In her series *Signs That Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say* (fig 3), created in 1992-1993, Wearing asked strangers in a public setting to write on a large piece of paper exactly what they were thinking at that moment. Wearing stated that what the participants wrote challenged her assumptions about them.²⁰ This is why empathy is such an important part of existing, it allows us to be open and sensitive to others' existence.

Fran Krause is another artist whose work is created through the participation of others. Krause is the author of a comics series titled *Deep Dark Fears*. Content is generated through a public call asking people to submit their stories about their fears. These submissions are then illustrated in a simple four panel comic (fig 4). This project creates a relatable and vast archive of

¹⁹ Christopher Lyon. "Seeing from Inside: John Coplans on *A Body of Work*," *Members Quarterly*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (Spring 1988): 3.

²⁰ Catherine Fowler, "Once More with Feeling: Performing the Self in the Work of Gillian Wearing, Kutluğ Ataman and Phil Collins," *MIRAJ, Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (2013): , doi:10.1386/miraj.2.1.10_1.

fears that on the one hand are shared by a single person, but on the other hand potentially act as a collective experience. Samuel Gerard Finnerty's research paper for the Department of Cognitive Science at the University College Dublin entitled, *Stigma and Empathy: An Organizing Principle of the Continuum of Social Understanding*, discusses that experiencing empathy "...has the benefit of being able to span the gamut of social understanding...".²¹ Empathy allows us a chance for social progression. Because we can experience empathy or even just sympathy we can understand or start to understand why different identities experience things differently. Through empathy, listening and understanding we can create a society where fat people aren't treated poorly for just existing, where people of color are heard, and experiences of oppression are believed.

Contemporary animation is another inspiration to my work and research. In the cartoon *Steven Universe*, Rebecca Sugar creates a variety of characters that deal with vulnerability and insecurity. The titular character struggles with meeting the expectations of his mother, whose position as leader of the Crystal Gems (an organization of rebels from an intergalactic planet) was passed down to him. He also feels like he can't do the things other gems can do. Steven is worried he isn't meeting the idea of what it means to be a Crystal Gem. I think this is a great illustration of how we perform social and gender roles. This is reflected in Judith Butler's theory on gender:

"It's one thing to say that gender is performed and that is a little different from saying gender is performative. When we say gender is performed, we usually mean that we've taken on a role or we're acting in some way and that our acting or our role-playing is crucial to the gender that we are and the gender that we present to the world. To say that gender is performative is a little different because for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways

²¹ Samuel Gerard Finnerty, "Stigma and Empathy: An Organizing Principle of the Continuum of Social Understanding," 2016, accessed April 5, 2019, http://ceur-ws.org/Vol-1751/AICS_2016_paper_53.pdf. 10.

that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman.”²²

Rebecca Sugar has created a show that directly references our struggles with living up to what we are taught to perform. A big part of our insecurities stem from not meeting the norms that are present in our specific gendered identities, or the gender we are assigned at birth. This is present throughout Steven’s struggle to be a leader of a matriarch, as well as his own physical development as a half-human and half-gem.

I am trying to create empathy through my current body of work by focusing on other people’s insecurities. Finnerty’s previously mentioned paper talks about how little research there is on the power of empathy. Their research states that a reliance on stereotypes, or generalizations of a person or group of people, disassociates one from experiencing empathy.²³ One also needs a certain amount of sensitivity to experience empathy, and in contemporary society sensitivity is often viewed as a negative trait and talked about in a derogatory way. Too often people’s feelings are discounted by others who say, “Your being too sensitive”. In *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*, author Lindy West discusses a moment when she asked her boss to be more considerate with the language he used and to stop demonizing and shaming fat people. She also talks about her experiences with the stand-up comedy scene and how she had to stand up against male comedians actively making jokes about raping women. West had to explain how incredibly wrong it is to make rape jokes, because it invalidates victims as well as normalizes rape and sexual harassment. Unfortunately, the response to these concerns was met with the question, “Why are you being so sensitive?”. West then poses the question “Why is being sensitive perceived as a bad thing?”. One should not be ashamed of being sensitive. Being

²² Big Think, YouTube, June 06, 2011, accessed April 05, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc>.

²³ Samuel Gerard Finnerty, "Stigma and Empathy: An Organizing Principle of the Continuum of Social Understanding," 2016, accessed April 5, 2019, http://ceur-ws.org/Vol-1751/AICS_2016_paper_53.pdf. 3.

sensitive shows a willingness to understand others, grow as a person, and try to help create a more inclusive society. Shame, on the other hand, perpetuates cruelty and fuels hate. As West puts it, “Shame is a tool of oppression, not change.”²⁴

Empathy is also a tool that allows marginalized people to connect with one another. Finnerty’s research found that it was easy for most people to generalize or stereotype others. Because of this, Finnerty found that people typically could only empathize with people in similar communities.²⁵ Those existing in a marginalized identity, or struggling inside of one’s own body, can begin to understand themselves as well as others better. By having an experience that not all people have, we can understand what motivates people to disregard those who exist outside of their own experiences, such as being a POC, being fat, a woman, a member of LGBTQIA+, living with a disability, and so many more. Gay states, “...I had a greater sensitivity that could only be brought about by the realities of my body. It was a moment when I understood that all of us have to be more considerate of the realities of the bodies of others.”²⁶ My body and the experience of moving through the world in this body has informed my feminism in unexpected ways. Living in my body has expanded my empathy for other people and the truths of their bodies. Certainly, it has shown me the importance of inclusivity and acceptance (not merely tolerance) for diverse body types.”²⁷

²⁴ Lindy West, *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman* (London: Quercus, 2017). 100.

²⁵ Samuel Gerard Finnerty, "Stigma and Empathy: An Organizing Principle of the Continuum of Social Understanding," 2016, accessed April 5, 2019, http://ceur-ws.org/Vol-1751/AICS_2016_paper_53.pdf. 6.

²⁶ Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (my) Body* (Rearsby, Leicester: WF Howes, 2018). 299.

²⁷ Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (my) Body* (Rearsby, Leicester: WF Howes, 2018). 297.

Collective Collaboration

I am interested in exploring our personal and collective insecurities. My current work investigates people's feelings about themselves and their appearance. I am interested in presenting both the positive and negative feelings one may have about themselves. I am also interested in exploring how these feelings motivate us to feel certain ways about our appearances, and how we can better understand where these feelings come from. Naturally, I am drawn to artists working with these ideas.

Marina Abramović explores our relationships with our own bodies as well as how people respond to others' bodies. In much of her work, the public is allowed to directly interact with her body. This vulnerability both scares and intrigues me. In her 1974 six-hour performance piece *Rhythm 0* (fig 5), Abramović allowed individuals to interact with her and seventy-two objects displayed on a table. She invited the viewer to do anything they wanted to her and she accepted all responsibility of the potential actions. Viewer, participant, and artist all existed in the same space as a way to make it clear that the participants were part of the art piece. Her intentions were to see how far the public would go when given this kind of opportunity. It was troubling as many sexually assaulted and attacked her physical person.²⁸ While this piece influenced my desire to call upon others to collaborate in order to make art, I think that her intentions for this work are not the same motivators as mine. I am more interested in bringing a collective together rather than critiquing the overall goodness or badness of people.

Wearing, previously mentioned, is another artist who calls upon the public to help create art. In her 1992 series of photographs titled *Signs That Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say*, Wearing gave strangers a large piece of

²⁸ Marina Abramović and Velimir Abramovic, *Marina Abramovic: Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998* (Milano: Charta, 1998).

paper and asked them to write down exactly what they were thinking at that moment. When talking about this project, Wearing stated it challenged her initial perceptions or assumptions about the people she approached.²⁹ I found this to be incredibly relatable with my own work. I never know exactly what a part of their appearance a participant will comment on or how a portrait will come out until I am drawing it. The images are completely dictated by the list provided by each participant and challenged my own understanding of how we experience insecurities and positivity in vastly different and similar ways.

My previous work dealing with insecurities focused solely on myself. I created collage work that utilized monotypes, lithographs, cut paper, and drawings (fig 6). These images focused on my past, current, and fluxing insecurities, which were installed together to help inform one another (fig 7). Next, I created the lithograph *Strength and Weakness* (fig 8), which is a profile of my face rendered. For me, the profile is one of the most unflattering ways to experience myself. This belief stems from having a fatter face which is informed by having fatphobia. My lithograph *Constant* (fig 9) followed, which again is a drawing of my face with “zooms” of the areas of fixation or obsession. These are areas of my face with facial hair, acne, receding hairline, etc. For me, experiencing insecurities becomes an obsession of hoping that no one is aware of this thing that I am hyper aware of. Like many, I obsess over my physical features that aren’t seen as feminine or even as desirable. Making this work has helped me find comfort in my own skin, although body positivity is a fluid experience with some days better than others. I have also come to understand the feelings that I have about my physical self, manifest from taught behaviors of what it means to “be a woman”, “be normal”, or “be attractive”. Behaviors and beliefs that are constructed and learned from the society we exist in.

²⁹ Catherine Fowler, "Once More with Feeling: Performing the Self in the Work of Gillian Wearing, Kutluğ Ataman and Phil Collins," *MIRAJ, Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (2013): doi:10.1386/miraj.2.1.10_1.

As I began to think about a new body of work, I knew that I wanted my next project to focus on others' insecurities and include a variety of people. Initially, my biggest concern about collaborating with others was to be respectful and honest about the intentions of this project as a whole. The intention is always to create solidarity, understanding, and an opportunity to reflect on where these insecurities stem from, not to exploit these deeply personal feelings others have for my own professional gain.

From these ideas, my long-term project titled *The Insecurity Drawings* began. First, I needed to find participants. I posted a message on social media with instructions for willing participants to send me a photograph of their face and a list of perceived positive and negative traits they associate with it. There were few simple guidelines for how the photograph should look, frontal or three-quarter view of the face, the face should not be idealized with a specific camera angle or by making an expression (fig 10). My goal was to collect as much visual and emotional information as possible. Currently 88 participants have responded. I am still accepting submissions, as a larger more diverse participant pool will continue to make this project stronger. The kinds of responses I receive are also diverse. Some participants included an in-depth analysis of why they feel a certain way about their face, some included a simple list, while others combined these two strategies. Obviously, the responses were unique to each individual's identity, but the critical mass of repeated likes and dislikes throughout the collective participants offer an insight into our collective experience.

The information and photograph provided by each participant was then used to determine how each drawing was rendered. Using colored pencils, insecurities were rendered in black and positives traits were rendered in a range of color. Areas that were not specifically mentioned in a participant's list are considered indifferent and left open. Aesthetic choices like the coloring of

the hair, eyebrows, jewelry, pupils, and how to render the figure as a simple outline were all decisions made to help inform the viewer of each individual's face.

As the project continued, I realized the text provided by each participant was an engaging piece of information that needed to exist within the exhibition. The *Insecurity Sculpture* and *Enclosures* grew out of this concern. In the end, I believe the visual face alongside the written word helps to inform one another and allow the viewer to understand and hopefully relate to these unique but also collective experiences.

Exhibition *Roses & Thorns*

Roses & Thorns consists of three major components, the *Insecurity Drawings*, the *Insecurity Sculpture* and the *Enclosures*. My biggest concern when envisioning these pieces together in the gallery was that each part of this exhibition might distract from one another. The intention was always to create a body of work that has the potential to successfully exist on its own, but that informed one another when installed in an exhibition together. I also had to consider how the viewer would not only experience each piece individually, but the exhibition as a whole. In the end, the work existing within the unique Laura Mesaros Gallery helped guide the viewer to have a better experience of this work. Since the gallery exists essentially as a circle, it is much more natural for a viewer to walk around the room in its entirety (fig 11).

I designed the outside of the gallery to draw the viewer in (fig 12). The granite that surrounds the windows and entrance were covered with a screenprinted wallpaper that included participants' insecure and positive text in variations of black, blue, magenta, and yellow. On this wallpaper, all participants words were screenprinted as a way to discuss the collective and normal experience of struggling and obsessing over one's own insecurities, but also celebrating

and acknowledging the things we feel most positive about ourselves. It is important to feel solidarity and comfort in knowing that this is something that all people experience regardless of our many intersectional identities. The wallpaper was attached over the granite and was mirrored inside the vestibule of the gallery. The large windows of the Mesaros Gallery also allowed for a visual repetition to exist from the outside wallpaper, the wallpapered vestibule, and the *Insecurity Sculpture* hanging inside the gallery.

Inside the gallery, the vestibule center and right walls had the same screenprinted wallpaper installed (fig 13). Over the wallpaper I placed rectangle of gray vinyl with show title and information. The title of the exhibition *Roses & Thorns*, references the idea that as individuals we have things, we feel most positive about ourselves, attributes that we see as seemingly beautiful and positive, like a rose. The “thorns” are our insecurities, the negative or the undesirable parts we see in ourselves.

Past the ramp on the back wall of the bend I included an explanation of what the viewer should keep in mind as they experience the exhibition. The wall text explains the project and the formal decisions behind the work. For example, throughout the exhibition all rendered information in black is referencing the physical insecurities provided by the participant and all the rendered information in color references the positive attributes.

Insecurity Drawings

On the right- and left-hand side of the gallery exists thirty-five portrait drawings separated between each wall (fig 14). These drawings are not only a major component of the exhibition but inform the viewer that these individuals are the basis for the other two pieces in the show. Each portrait is drawn from a photograph provided by the individual. From the

“positive and negative” list provided I take meticulous care to render each physical attribute mentioned. Although I feel an intense anxiety and fear of perpetuating insecurities further during the creation of these drawings, in the end my experience feels more like a way of connecting to the struggle that each person feels. Empathy is a huge motivator in my work and the experience of feeling these emotions and connections while creating these images is truly phenomenal. Making each of these portraits takes a long time. The habitual and laborious practice of creating each drawing mirrors the experience of habitually reflecting on the things one likes and dislikes about themselves. It takes time to absorb the truth about why or how an individual feel about themselves. While creating these drawings, there are many unknowns about how the final drawing of each person will look. I remain uncertain even as I am sitting with the information they provided. Only as I read these lists and begin to draw their attributes do I realize how much of the face will be rendered in color or black.

In the gallery, all portraits were hung at eye level in order to force the viewer to be face to face with each individual portrait and look at these vulnerabilities and possibly be faced with their own as a way to better understand themselves as well as the collective. Each drawing is eleven inches by fifteen inches and each face is drawn to feel relatively true to life. Also, because the portraits are hung on opposite walls, they look in on the middle of the gallery. Walking in the space the viewer can feel the group looking at them as they interact with each piece and create potential discomfort and awareness.

I was inspired by several artists while creating these portraits. Jenny Saville is a contemporary painter who also explores the body and contemporary beauty norms. She paints strange and bizarre perspectives and has been known to paint people with deformities as well as bodies undergoing plastic surgeries (fig 15). While I think that some of these images may seem

exploitive, she is using her platform as a well-known artist to present bodies that exist outside the norm.³⁰

Samantha Wall is an artist whose formal and figurative decision making was interesting and felt relevant to my own art making. To create her work, Wall brings in models that have multi-cultural identities. She then makes formal decisions as she draws their portraits several times, in some cases rendering some areas heavily while using simple line to inform other areas such as the hair (fig 16). This process strongly relates to my drawing process, although many of my formal decisions are provided by the person providing the photograph through their lists (which I will get to later in this thesis). The few purely aesthetic choices I make are the outlines on non-rendered areas of the drawing to help inform the viewer of the participants entire physical self, or filling in certain areas with solid black such as hair, eyebrows, jewelry, and nostrils as a way to help the rendered information read better.

Enclosures

Upon receiving each participants' text, I was surprised at how powerful and unique each person's way of describing their own insecurities and positive attributes were. Immediately, I felt these words needed to be present within the exhibition. My initial idea was to create hand-made enclosures that would house the text in some way. I ended up making 35 enclosures, measuring five inches by five inches by three inches. All enclosures have the same external appearance, while the internal contents and design are unique to the individual's words (fig 17). This is meant as a metaphor for the assumptions we place on bodies. What is happening inside someone's mind is almost always different from what we see physically. The enclosures are placed in the back of

³⁰ Jenny Saville and Cheryl A. Brutvan, *Jenny Saville* (West Palm Beach, FL: Norton Museum of Art, 2011).

a gallery on a solid row of shelves. On the wall is vinyl text that invites the viewer to open and explore the contents of each of the boxes. My intention was to create a situation for the viewer to walk down the line and offer an opportunity to take time to closely investigate each box and the text inside (fig 18). The row is placed in sequential order of how each portrait is hung, starting at the front of the gallery. Each enclosure has a label on its lid with the participant's first name. The names have been included as a way to give further humanity to each person but also allow some sense of anonymity. It is important for me that the viewer knows this visual information is not fabricated or randomly generated. This entire exhibition comes from real people who were brave enough to share their vulnerabilities with me and subsequently, the viewer. The choices made for the interiors of each box required more thought and decision making than when creating the other work in the exhibition. Each internal structure was created by looking at the words provided and deciding the best way to visually represent them. The materials and processes used to create the interiors of the enclosure's ranges from digital prints, screenprints, book board, lights, and cut paper. As an example of how the interior of the enclosure represented the text provided, *Insecurity Enclosure: Kristina* (fig 19), used laser cut book board that was covered in screenprinted paper with a light placed underneath. The laser cut pattern reflected this participant's struggle with their acne and so larger and small circles were laser cut from the book board allowing the light to shine through the holes and emphasize this internal struggle. Many viewers expressed how invested they were in each enclosure and the surprise of not knowing what each contained. My intention was to create an experience for the viewer and evoke curiosity that would allow the viewer to immerse themselves into these enclosures, ultimately with the hope of creating an opportunity to understand oneself and others.

Insecurity Sculpture

This piece continues to consider the significance of the words provided and the drive to create another visual manifestation of them. The sculpture in its entirety consists of 36 screenprinted rolls of paper hung from the ceiling of the gallery, one roll of paper for each drawn portrait. Each roll is 25 feet long by 15 inches wide and is screenprinted with the text provided by each participant. Less information was printed at the top. Less information was printed at the top and as the text continues down, becomes denser until it is practically illegible towards the bottom of the paper (fig 20). The rolls were printed with positive-color sides facing outwards and the black-insecure sides facing inward (fig 21). Each roll was hung at approximately eight feet from the floor, with the intention of having a good amount of overflow piled on the floor. This overflowed material was unrolled, crumpled, and bunched up on the inside of the sculpture (fig 22-23). This was done to create a faux room that felt both monumental and cramped (fig 24).

Each roll is lined up next to one another to make a rounded rectangle. The individual rolls hang from the ceiling to the floor next to each other. This form has one entrance and one exit and with a path around the entire sculpture so that all the rolls are viewable from both sides. As the viewer walks in, they are surrounded by the printed rolls and hopefully feel cramped by the amount of words present on each roll as well as the mass of paper crumpled, unrolled, and just all over the outer rim of the space. The intention of this piece was to create another experience, one that engulfed the viewer with a claustrophobic feeling of being overwhelmed with insecurities.

As I made this piece, I was considering the struggles and fears associated with having insecurities. Personally, I struggled with the worry of someone noticing something I was hyper aware of on my own body. Typically, this would be acne, facial hair, or fat. I didn't even want to

ask or see if anyone noticed it because if they hadn't, my asking would be pointing it out. So, it was easier to keep these insecurities and fears inside and allow them to fester rather than bring attention to them. However, after making the previously mentioned lithographs and creating my own portrait in this series I felt liberated and free to know that I put it all out there and that these features are my truth rather than my secret.

Conclusion

Roses & Thorns was created in an attempt to foster understanding, solidarity, and an opportunity to reflect and understand one's own struggles with insecurities. It also exists to celebrate and potentially love, or accept, one's previously hated features. I hope this work explores our understanding of where our insecurities come from and that many of our insecurities are learned behavior. Through this exhibition, my hope is that each individual viewer, or participant, can understand that they are not alone in this struggle and can begin to have normal conversations with each other to help us grow and appreciate ourselves and one another. I have collaborated with a lot of different people which has helped me to understand and showcase all the intersectional identities we each have and the universality of experiencing insecurities as well as confidence in one's physical self. My hope is that this work will continue to grow and reach more people. I hope that as the number of participants grows and I am able to continue showing this work, both on the internet and in person, it will reach more people and allow for greater understanding and acceptance of the shared experience of our insecurities, both physical and internal.

Illustrations

Figure 1

Photographs of fatphobic signs near my Morgantown house

Figure 2

Sandro Botticelli

Birth of Venus

1484-86

Painting

Figure 3

Gillian Wearing

*Signs That Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants
You to Say*

1992-1993

Photographs

Figure 4

DEEP DARK FEARS

I USED TO THINK

EVERYONE HAD
SUPER POWERS,

BUT THEY KEPT THEIR
ABILITIES HIDDEN,

SO I WOULDN'T FEEL BAD
FOR NOT HAVING ANY.

Fran Krause
Deep Dark Fears
2019
Digital

Figure 5

Marina Abramović
Rhythm 0
1974
Performance (Still)

Figure 6

Stephanie Alaniz

I am so infuriated. I had taken so much care and this is the result, swollen, and dense.

2017

Lithograph, Color Pencil, Thread, Black Paper

Figure 7

An Exploration with Insecurities

Stephanie Alaniz

2017

Color Pencil, Graphite, Monotype, Lithograph, Thread, Cut Paper

Figure 8

Stephanie Alaniz
Strength and Weakness
2018
Lithograph & Screenprint

Figure 9

Stephanie Alaniz

Constant

2018

Lithograph, Screenprint, & Color Pencil

Figure 10

Insecurity Portraits

An Exploration in Insecurities, Solidarity, and Understanding

Notice! Please feel no obligation to participate, even after expressing your interest, if after you read this you feel uncomfortable with doing so. It is important that you feel safe and comfortable. Do not do something you don't want to do. I will completely understand.

Description of Project

Insecurities are a shared experience. Regardless of gender, identity, age, race, nationality, etc, we all experience them. They exist in a varieties of ways about oneself, not only physical but in many different facets. Dealing with these vulnerabilities is difficult and is a conversation we are not having often enough. Insecurities are normal, they are nothing to feel shame for.

My mission with this project is to help to create a conversation. The more people involved, from all different walks of life, the stronger the message will be heard. We collectively experience insecurities together. In some ways they are about the same things and others only the owner of these feelings recognizes.

I intend to create a large collection of portraits, illustrating the insecurities as well as the positivity associated with the face. They will be presented together in a large group. By doing this, the work will allow the viewer to have a realization or understanding that insecurities are a shared experience and will evoke empathy and solidarity.

DETAILS:

- Each participant will provide a photo of your face (It **MUST** be your face and no one else's)
- A list of insecurities that are associated with your face (as few or as many as you'd like to provide)**
- A list of positivity associated with your face (if any, as few or as many as you'd like, don't feel bad if this list is long or short!)**

**this information will dictate how you're rendered!

Taking the Photo:

The photo can be taken any way (Does not have to be with expensive camera, can be done with your phone!)

Do your best to try to take either a straight-on photo either of your frontal face or three-quarter view of your face. Try not to take a photo with the camera raised above you, (it is important that we avoid idealizing ourselves for this project.)

Make-up and hair being done is completely fine! Take your photo when you are at your most comfortable. When taking the photo please try not to smile or show expression, have your face as it looks when it is at rest.

If there's any questions about this please let me know! I can also tell you if a photo will work or not.

Please email all photos and lists (or questions) to insecure.portrait@gmail.com

Stephanie Alaniz
The call to participate
2018-2019

Figure 11

Stephanie Alaniz
Rose & Thorns (Exhibition Shot)
2019

Figure 12

Stephanie Alaniz

Roses & Thorns (Gallery External Overview)

2019

Figure 13

Stephanie Alaniz

Rose & Thorns (Exhibition Vestibule)

2019

Figure 14

Stephanie Alaniz

Roses & Thorns: Insecurity Portraits (left and right walls)

2019

Color Pencil

Figure 15

Jenny Saville

Propped

1992

Oil

Figure 16

Samantha wall
Sigourney
2013
Graphite on Paper

Figure 17

Stephanie Alaniz
Roses & Thorns: Enclosures (closed)
Bookmaking
2018

Figure 18

Stephanie Alaniz

Insecurity Enclosure: Ben

2019

Bookmaking

Stephanie Alaniz

Insecurity Enclosure: Tiera (detail)

2019

Bookmaking

Figure 19

Stephanie Alaniz

Insecurity Enclosure: Kristina (opened)

2019

Bookmaking

Figure 20

Stephanie Alaniz
Insecurity & Positive Collective
2019
Screenprint on Rice Paper

Figure 21

Stephanie Alaniz

Insecurity & Positive Collective (External Positive Detail)

2019

Screenprint on Rice Paper

Figure 22

Stephanie Alaniz

Insecurity & Positive Collective (Internal Insecurity Detail)

2019

Screenprint on Rice Paper

Figure 23

Stephanie Alaniz

Insecurity & Positive Collective (Internal Insecurity Detail)

2019

Screenprint on Rice Paper

Figure 24

Stephanie Alaniz

Insecurity & Positive Collective (Entrance/Exit Detail)

2019

Screenprint on Rice Paper

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Appendix

The following list is a list of all participants at this moment involved in the *Insecurity Portraits* project. I want to thank them for their participation and their ability to share their vulnerabilities to allow for the success of this project. Without them this would not have been possible. For anonymity all last names have been removed.

1. Candace	42. Trishelle
2. Olivia	43. Cancan
3. Sarah	44. Rebecca
4. Kacey	45. Ron
5. Zeinab	46. Becci
6. Luca	47. Feliks
7. Ana	48. Whitney
8. Allyssa	49. Julie
9. Sarah	50. Mikayla
10. Stephanie	51. Judy
11. Steven	52. Lou
12. Lindsay	53. Julianne
13. Barbara	54. Julie
14. Sarah	55. Anna
15. Christina	56. Benjamin
16. Eric	57. Madison
17. Ksenia	58. Marqusha
18. Elizabeth	59. Sharon
19. Sam	60. Aunna
20. Tiera	61. Ellie
21. Hannah	62. Sarah
22. Amber	63. Maria
23. Muriel	64. Michelle
24. Jessica	65. Fridasson
25. Kristina	66. Shannon
26. Marco	67. Jessica
27. Raven	68. Zoe
28. Cameron	69. Sarah
29. Clarissa	70. Javier
30. Tessa	71. Ursula
31. Grace	72. Hailey
32. Samantha	73. Tania
33. Heather	74. Clare
34. Nicole	75. Kathryn
35. Ross	76. Violeta
36. Ashley	77. Caroline
37. Laura	78. Carla
38. Ann	79. Shelley
39. Erika	80. Finn
40. Alejandra	81. Emma
41. Luis	