

A Thesis Presented to  
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Abstracting Femininity

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### Abstract

My project reflects on my experiences that relate to movement, the body, and being a girl/woman in a world that favors the power of men. I describe pivotal moments and highly influential environments in my life, as well as my experience in learning and applying newfound knowledge of feminist theory, art history, and movement studies. Beginning by defining what feminism, bodies, and dance means to me, I outline these terms and ideas from my own perspective. I then reflect on these propositions through my more conscious lens onto past moments throughout my life that exemplify certain societal values based on bodies and gender. From there, I present how these narratives apply through theory on the body, and how these elements inspire and influence my artistic practice as I in a sense, abstract femininity.

### Who I Am

My experiences as a dancer and boxer shape my work. In my paintings, I present women's bodies in a deconstructed, dynamic, and expressive manner. I find release, control, and connection to myself through movement. I paint to express the force of my body through line, the suppressed loudness of women's voices through bold color, and the unique qualities women have outside of the male gaze through my unconventional pigment combinations. Bodies are universal vehicles of expression, yet are infinitely unique in the ways each inner self projects through the bodily structures, acting as vessels for our true selves. The figures in my paintings exemplify the rejection of historical conventions, and proclaim directiveness, confidence, and strength through gesture.

Power is an intangible energy that Western society seems to have rules as to how it is presented and accepted. Women historically materialize in media not as themselves, but through the lens of men as caricatures of who they should be. As a little girl, I observed my ‘predestined’ role of being a dainty, pretty, and passive feminine individual laid out in front of me; there wasn’t room for power or strength in these presented rules. I paint to challenge these limiting directives and create new possibilities for myself.

These paintings are inspired by cubists and abstract expressionists. I select paint applications to create the sense of dynamic, abstracted figures existing in a color field of a space. These paintings challenge the bravado, male dominated work made at that time. Abstract painters from that time showed off their masculinity and power in their work. I work from their techniques to present a fresh, opposition through my own narrative as a woman. The vibrant imagery sits on heavy, large, and sturdy panels, acting just as the bodies painted on them do in the act of not being afraid of taking up their space. The women in my work act to defy their traditionally submissive, one-dimensional roles by expressing roaring, bold energy through their bodies.

### Feminism Defined by Me

Feminism has become a contentious buzz word in our fast-paced, infographic-centered, highly-politicized, Western culture. With this term’s consistent usage, the word becomes a blanket term whose nuances get ignored. Feminism easily means something different to each person, as personal experiences, cultural awareness, and education of the topic vary. As someone who went to a small, conservative high school, the term “feminist” was a weaponized term used by boys who wore confederate flags on their belts to describe anyone who called out any sort of

abrasive male behavior. I was naive in high school, especially when it came to politics. I did not understand the differences of the two main American parties. I just knew that I wanted equality for everyone. I knew my favorite actress as a girl, Emma Watson, was outspoken about feminism and women's rights and I knew I agreed with what she said. I was aware I felt underestimated in my male-dominated AP US History class, I didn't think it was fair my mom did all the housework, and that I wasn't happy with how I saw women treated on the street. Despite my naiveté, even at that time I was able to recognize that there was an inequality between genders, and that I wanted to fight to talk about it.

In college, I began learning more about the diverse socioeconomic and cultural spheres that exists all around the world. I remember in my freshman year, asking my two best male friends who are intensely into old, avant-garde music and classic rock why they don't listen to women. I didn't understand feminist theory yet nor had I taken classes on it, I was just beginning to form questions about what I noticed around me. I took courses in women's and gender studies my junior year when I participated in the Women's Leadership Academy. Those classes taught me to understand the history and baggage that accompanies the word "feminist" including the many waves of feminism that each carry different connotations with the word. I began to understand the complexity of labels, and the reason why some women who are educated in feminist topics may not identify as a feminist. The exclusion began in the first wave of feminism (1848-1920) where white women chose to disregard Black women from their cause, fueling into the blatant racism at the time. We see this white-tailored feminism in the second wave (1963-1980s) as well, with the focus on women being more than housewives gaining popularity in the middle class, white women demographic. Black women already *had* to work to support themselves and their families, creating more distance between their realities and the realities of

privileged women. This was also the era where Black women coined the term ‘womanism’ to step away from feminism because of its exclusivity. The historical exclusionist attitudes to women of color and trans women leaves elitist residue behind. By placing the term “intersectional” into our modern feminist wave vocabulary is not enough to solve these inequalities. I am appreciative that our current culture works to rid itself of an exclusionist perspective and various conversations are being had about the complexities within what it truly means to be intersectional, including how to best support all women.

I define as a feminist. Even though there are present flaws within the movement, and the term means something different to many individuals, I identify with the idea of equality, and when I say “feminist”, people understand broadly what I mean. I do believe however, while women need to be perceived as equal to men, the thought of women actually being equals to men in every environment is not beneficial to me. Men often are harmed too by the oppression of women by the toxic weapon masculinity can act as. An example of this harm is the value of male strength. ‘Strength’ in this sense is often presented and reinforced by not showing emotions, and using physical force to show off their power. There easily becomes a value placed in a lack of empathy, not only for others, but also for one’s self through this destructive, masculinist perspective. With the idea of women being equal to men in a literal context, women would have to act like men in order to gain their respect because of the dominant cultural value placed on men. The result of society’s dominant, aggression-based, male-run power, women are seen as subordinate, creating the need for Women’s Liberation in the first place. Therefore, I believe the value of women and the societal view of femininity should be equally taught and valued as masculinity is.

Valuing the characteristics of femininity and deconstructing the notion that men were ever actually “better” in the first place is what I dream of equality meaning. Wanting what men currently have in a social, academic, work, and political setting, and to only learn and apply masculine-based characteristics is not equality. The idea of a “Girl Boss” or a bad-ass female superhero written by men is not the equality I mean when I say feminist. I imagine where little boys don’t get taunted if they want to play with dolls. I imagine a woman or man wearing feminine clothing and makeup not being looked at as trivial or lesser. I imagine equality looking like representation in all sectors, where power positions are shared across all demographics, sexual harassment is not a debated topic, and there is no need to fight for equal pay. I believe in true reconciliation with the harmful values ingrained in both men/boys and women/girls and to work toward true women’s liberation that will in turn, liberate men as well.

### A Discussion of Bodies

Bodies are a highly complex topic. While all human beings have a body, the biological state of our bodies often isn’t accepted based on a variety of categories such as race, natural body type/composition, athletic ability, amount of body hair, individuals’ gender expression, etc. Bodies are judged through perception on a surface, skin-deep level. While bodies are living vessels through which we express ourselves, we often don’t value the body just as it naturally presents itself. We value a body that looks effortlessly natural, yet conforms to Western beauty standards, but do not accept the most natural parts of the body. Below the surface, bodies are smart, intuitive, organic beings that keep us alive by telling us when we need something, and when something doesn’t feel right. Like many others, I discarded the felt voice of my own body’s needs and listened to the many opposing, loud voices in our current anti-fat, restrictive

culture. My body transformed from what should've been a safe home for myself into a distant entity I felt as though I couldn't escape. Connected self-loathing behaviors, warped perception of my body, and through the pursuit of satisfying cultural standards and expectations for a young, feminine body, I neglected my body's needs and health.

Through movement, I find solace within my body. When I would feel mentally overwhelmed or frustrated, I would intuitively dance and focus my angry or sad energy into movement. I found that even when I was stifling my body's voice in its need for more food and rest, I would let my body speak through dance. While movement also became a vehicle of more destructive, controlling behaviors inflicted on my body by harsh, intense workout regimens, dance was always a release. Dance is an art form, and a training program. Dance has been revolutionary throughout history, just as the cutting edge, visual art movements were to express a rejection or break with the past. My experience learning about dance and movement history throughout college assisted me in continuing to find an appreciation for dance as a movement form that honored internal cues, as well as external ones.

Dance is present in my artist practice. When I paint, I think about the figures I'm painting, as well as the body's actions as I move the brush across the surface. My paintings reflect my emotions and energies felt through various movement forms. I also pull from my experiences in a culture prioritizing masculinity and men in positions of power. I think of memories, environments, harsh sounding words, and how I felt at various points in my life when I came into contact with high standards of thinness, perfectionism, and agreeability women are encouraged obtain. I am able to reflect with clarity at the environments in my childhood and how similar themes followed me to the present, constructing paintings from these various instances and how I'd like to defy the ideals that created them.

### Where I Started

The numbers show that 40-60% of elementary school girls are concerned with their weight (now.org). While an incredibly sad truth to swallow, I can't say I am surprised. I remember the first moment I felt a deep insecurity in my body as I watched other very thin girls on the playground; I was in second grade. In my young, seven-year-old brain, I thought I could just "suck in" for the rest of my life and that would "fix" it. Fix what, I'm not sure. Perhaps the idealization for other bodies that can never be yours. I was a small girl, so I can only wonder what specifically prompted me to think I was too big in my small, child body. I participated in dance growing up, starting at the age of two when all it was about was wearing tutus and singing on stage. Dance is different than other traditional sports like basketball and soccer and is more in alignment with athletics such as gymnastics and equestrian. There is an element of scrutiny while watching these performative sports compared to the traditional team sports. When watching a team sport such as soccer, the viewer observes the team in general with certain highlights or missteps awarded to specific individuals. In a performative sport like dance, while dancing together, you always want to dance the best. There is a pressure to stand out compared to the others around you while also moving in a way that makes the body look desirable. In a sport like football, the movement is to successfully complete a task. In dance, it's about how effortless, perfect, and incredible each movement looks on the body. The costumes (not uniforms) and movements are all to please or impress a viewing audience, combined with a large emphasis on how the body and the person in that body looks rather than what they do on a field. Instead of the ability to judge a team based on concrete points like in soccer, there is the critical eye of the watcher, searching for who the best dancer is in the group. You are judged individually in these performative sports, compared to being seen collectively as a team. Dance for me taught what

being watched in your body felt like, and the positive self-esteem felt when affirmed your body was “correct”, and the detrimental shame when existing and performing incorrectly.

As I grew older in my dance studio, costume season became the most exciting and dreadful time of the year. Each spring, I hoped I stayed the size I was from the previous year. The teacher just looked at your body, and proclaimed out loud before writing down in the book if she thought you were a small, medium, or large. That is how we were separated. When we would get fitted for costumes, there was a nonchalant attitude from the teacher while she took our measurements one at a time as the rest of us practiced. Despite this effort, the yearly, vulnerable routine was clearly of larger importance to us young dancers. As a dancer was called to get measured, there were always eyes watching, and normally included some girls crowded around the book laying on the floor with all the numbers defining each girl’s body. Each girl wanted to know where they stood in relation to everyone else’s body. Who has the smallest measurements? Who has the largest bust and butt? Did your measurements go up or down in the “right places” this year? I was not only fairly small, but I was short. Because of my body proportions, I felt that being placed in the front for dance numbers was the reward for my body as well as my execution of movement. Logically, I know that being the point of the triangle was mostly due to the fact that I was fairly good and easily picked up movement, and yet the lesser stated notion of “smaller is better” was reinforced by the positioning reward I received through the years. We were already looking for answers and affirmations on who we were as defined by our bodies. While dance was what allowed my body feel most complete, welcome, and natural, the dance world I grew up in also provided me with the taught ideas that the better your body is, (based on the Western standards), the more praise and recognition you get, meaning, the better you are.

### Advertised Beauty

The rules and constraints I impressed upon my body had mostly symbolized empowerment and control, but was also connected with success and recognition. The confidence I had previously gained from how I treated my body has started to shift as I encounter more perspectives and experiences. In Fatema Mernissi's essay, "Size 6: The Western Women's Harem" she argues that American women have the idea of freedom, but the standards of beauty keeping women as small as a teen body is the most damaging and constraining restraint; much worse than the Eastern women's harem is the Western women's diet-focused one. In America, there are many rules regarding women's bodies on how they act, position themselves, how the shapes of the body should look, and the pigments that the body reflects. When Mernissi, a woman who is Muslim from Morocco, walks into an American department store to find a skirt and is told she is "too big", she exclaims in confusion " 'I am too big compared to what?' I asked, looking at her intently, because I realized I was facing a critical cultural gap here" (Mernissi, 71). I think this response is impactful because it highlights the fact that these outlandish rules are not only engrained in us, but so wide out in the open up for our questioning that doesn't often come. The beauty standards in America are to be perfectly effortless, as there is an outcry when women "try too hard" with their looks and yet, society shames the natural woman who ages. Mernissi explains she felt her larger hips, a sign in her culture of maturity, was now being seen as a "deformity" as if staying the same size as you were when young and not yet in womanhood is incredibly normal and necessary. Mernissi goes on to explain the constraints women face in both the East and West and how they compare: "Unlike the Muslim man, who uses space to establish male domination by excluding women from the public arena, the Western man manipulates time and light...By putting the spotlight on the female child and framing her as

the ideal of beauty, he condemns the mature woman to invisibility” (Mernissi, 73). This quote exemplifies the clever deceptiveness that controls women’s values towards themselves and how they act on these constructed insecurities. In my own family, I think of my aunts and grandmother, who are all so scared to age. They shop in the junior’s section and have been borrowing my cousin’s clothes since I was little. It seems a rule that women must dye their hair as soon as grays start to appear. A common first question to a post-partum mom is when she is going to get her body “back” as if it’s gone.

As someone who thinks of herself as independent and able to think for herself, Mernissi asks the obvious question, ‘why do we accept it?’ I believe this answer is multi-faceted and can be summarized by the effects of the cultural value placed on masculine dominance. I’d like to reference Mernissi’s ideas on this subject, as she brings French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu into the conversation. Bourdieu explains the idea of symbolic violence, stating it’s “...a form of power which is hammered directly onto the body, and as if by magic, without any apparent physical constraint. But this magic operates only because it activates the codes pounded into the deepest layers of the body” (Mernissi, 75). The text explains that a mature body is on top of the sexual hierarchy, and because in a patriarchy, women “spontaneously accept the subservient position.” When thinking about my own experiences trying to constrain and therefore deliberately weaken my body in efforts to control the small size, I don’t remember thinking about why I was doing it. Really why, not because “I am unhappy with how I look”, but why as in “Why are you unhappy anyway?” Who decided my maturing body was not acceptable? Restriction and rules we do not see or acknowledge are a dangerous American norm applied to women’s bodies, especially when the rules are so generously accepted and reinforced that the source of the rules is hidden in such a way he cannot be identified.

### A New Teaching

When I was in Kindergarten, I was a shy student, so much so that during the Fall Open House, my teacher told my parents that she hadn't heard me speak yet. Somehow, this prompted my parents to sign me up for Tae Kwon Do with neither our family or friends having any previous experience or ties to this Martial Arts practice at all before. I remember walking into the dojo for the first time, utterly terrified. I grew up the only child in the house and other kids (and people in general) were pretty scary to me. Before a student is admitted into class, they meet with a Master where he trains the new student in the basics, and lets them know what class is all about. When undergoing this introduction, I felt pretty comfortable in the small, safe room, until the Master said "You want to try punching?!" I instantly pictured those scary, bloody boxers on TV who my uncles liked to watch. I was surprised by the fact that there were these things called pads that we would hit. Throughout the five years I was there, I gained confidence and friends within the dojo. There were summer camps, Halloween parties, annual belt ceremonies, and large pool parties thrown at various houses. I eventually received my black belt at age ten and over the years, my parents joined and obtained theirs as well. I eventually stopped my years in Martial Arts to focus more on dance. However, I had no idea I'd return to the world of martial arts in college while taking an honors course titled "Bodies: Trained, Perceived, Performed". I did not realize the act of returning to this defensive-style movement would great me with familiarity into the empowering, communal, and loved world of martial arts, but also be another transformative process in my life.



### Power in the Body

The effects on embodied power through martial arts is a clearly evident, useful tool with lasting effects on women's mindset in relation to themselves. McCaughey states in her essay "The Fighting Spirit: Women's Self-Defense Training and the Discourse of Sexed Embodiment": "The body in feminist discourse is often construed as the object of patriarchal violence (actual or symbolic), and violence has been constructed as something that is variously oppressive, diminishing, inappropriate, and masculinist" (McCaughy, 1). When I began boxing in my sophomore year, I relearned the intense power and satisfaction within my own body I experience through aggressive, violent, and assertive movements. "The Fighting Spirit" explains that this kind of confident, aggressive body language and assertiveness is something that requires

itself to be “inscribed” into women’s bodies. Societally and culturally, femininity and gender is a taught, and generally consistent practiced set of rules that reveal themselves through mental and physical assumptions. Women do not grow up believing they can hit a piñata as hard as their boy cousins at a birthday party, as they are told they “hit like a girl”. Women are conditioned to step aside and let the men at their workplace pick up any object that looks remotely heavy because “women don’t do that”. Women are led to believe they are not capable of being as strong as men and do not see their bodies as their own to fully explore and truly embody because male dominance, as McCaughey states, “is inscribed in the bodies of women and men, and thus imposes itself as self-evident and natural” (281). When I began positioning my body in fighting stance and threw my first few punches for the first time since I was eleven, a wave of empowerment and excitement rushed over me. I decided that boxing needed to be in my life, and the next semester, I founded the club with the help of some other students interested and two faculty members who are both certified in boxing.

Boxing Club easily became a pivotal experience in all sectors of my life. I not only found a group of inspiring people who helped me learn a new skill, but I also found a stronger sense of self-love and an assertiveness I had too long neglected. I began teaching weekly classes after understanding and training myself on the basics. Walking out to greet the male dominated group of new members for the week, and seeing their uncertain and surprised faces when they realized I was taking the lead only invigorated me more to take control within the power of my body. I figured out how to read the room on comfort and ability level to know how to run class and where to push. When I would run classes for just the advanced students (all male) I know I had to push down any feelings of self-doubt so they wouldn’t feel uncertain about me leading their class. I pushed them hard, while still having a fun, fulfilling session. However, despite the great

highs and confidence boosts the club gave me, it definitely included some hardships regarding power relations and fighting for my voice in the male-dominated boxing world.

After a year of the club's founding, I was told (not asked) that my presidency would now be shared by my male cohort, and that classes would focus more on sparing for advanced individuals rather than continuing to foster an inclusive environment. The officers in my club met without me to box and spar consistently. I don't think they were being purposefully exclusionary, instead I believe they carried and acted on gender biases that would exclude me from that space they were creating.

### Misogyny

To explore how a patriarchy is harmfully enforced, due to gender biases, we need to discuss the term misogyny. Feminist philosopher Kate Manne explaining misogyny states: "...it functions to *police* and *enforce* a patriarchal social order without necessarily going via the intermediary of people's assumptions, beliefs, theories, values, and so on...Misogyny will typically differentiate between good women and *bad* ones, and punishing the latter" (Down Girl, 79-80). While I don't think of my fellow classmate as a misogynist and have no intention in arguing that, I can reflect on the situation of the inclusive club I created being slowly taken away from me and turned into an exclusionary space held for athletic men, and attribute the patriarchal social norms for the way things went. In McCaughey's essay, she interviews various different self-defense instructors and women students. These anecdotes all highlight the agreed upon notion that women feel the ability to act violent or respond to physically defend themselves was not part of their abilities; there wasn't an allowed and accepted space for it. McCaughey explains, "[a]ggression and femininity are not complementary. Femininity, as it is socially

defined, is precisely what women must overcome when learning to fight” (281). These gendering rules live subconsciously in both men and women’s minds, until they are challenged. Despite my leadership in boxing club being an empowering challenge to these rules each week, my fellow club members may have not thought their extra weekly meetings just inherently weren’t for me. It was “guy time” to hit each other and fully embrace the rules of masculinity, and soon I felt out of place in my own club.

My experience with Boxing Club taught me two things: 1) I loved exploring the power within my body and the joint connection felt when I helped others discover that sense of empowerment through movement as well. 2) Misogyny is possible everywhere in a patriarchal society, even in spaces with friends, or spaces that already act to defy gender norms. While my fellow classmates and I began as equal peers starting the club and looking up to our faculty, it wasn’t long until that the instinctual need for power dynamics came into play, inviting the dominant male club member to the top. This assumed dominance wasn’t from more experience in martial arts or seniority, but from the embedded masculinist perception placed on this aggressive sport.

### Disconnected Expertise

When discussing bodies, there is an interesting paradox. First is the fact that each person in the world has a body, but after childhood, many lose their original connection to their bodies through expression, as the expressive mannerisms change throughout one’s life. We are trained in school to use our bodies to sit still in rows, to walk in straight lines, and to raise our hands to be called on. Media in each culture simultaneously then shouts at each person how their bodies should look, implementing a new understanding of the body that it is all about the surface, and

not how you explore the world through it. We are therefore left with this incredibly smart and complex vessel to carry ourselves around in and we have no connection to it. Michelson argues in the essay “Re-membering: the return of the body to experiential learning” that “ ‘experiential learning’ has an ambivalent relationship to the rejection of the body as a site of knowledge” (218). She argues that academia teaches students to detach of one’s body and the mind, as logic is thought to take place in one’s head and is valued more than the emotional responses through one’s body. She states, “Both of these notions code learning as an entirely cognitive function, with the body as a gathering tool deployed by the mind and the senses the passive transmitters of information, as if observation were not also a form of activity and as if bodily and emotional responses were not a form of learning in themselves” (224). Michelson argues that our education-valued culture, rejects mind/body dualism and that the two do not exist in learning environments, as learning is logical and emotionless. Bodies are instinctive and often know what we feel and understand before our minds catch up. Bodies react to our situations because they experience the environments. Environments we are placed into are not just received through our eyes and don’t solely rely on our thoughts to make sense of what we experience. I remember being in school and when I had to present my writing in front of the class, my stomach would turn in knots and I would shift constantly in my chair. I did not realize I was doing it, but when I did, I could not stop. When I listen to a lecture I care greatly about, I instinctively sit at the edge of my chair, I have straight posture, and my eyes are wide open. This alertness is also my body’s way of inviting the information in. When placed in an uncomfortable environment, the body can sense something is off. When I was in high school and knew I was around mean girls who may have just been talking about me, I felt vulnerable. I stood in a different way, with my arms placed close to my body, my spine was not as straight, and I did not look at those people directly.

My brain did not understand the uncomfortable social situation yet, but I could feel that although these girls seemed nice to my face, this environment felt very different compared to the ones with my actual friends. I didn't catch their condescending remarks in the moment, but my body already knew to be protective. "Bodies speak" as Michelson explains, stating "Bodily decorations, exercise regimens, corporal punishments, health-care practices, dieting, and eating disorders all write on the surface of the body deeply felt technologies of social control" (223). Each body, just as each individual carries stories, experiences, and a sense of identity. The training approached (broadly defined), are embedded and worn by each body as well. There becomes a paradox within these dueling ideals, as we are taught to reject the connection and to discredit the sensory experiences felt within the body, when these sensations are a commonality of the human experience.

The second paradox extends from the societal disconnect from the body, as well as the value of education. Our American culture rejects the body's knowledge and values the logic falsely associated with the mind, yet there is an observable entitlement in America that many people feel they are experts in health simply because of their observations of other's bodies. The fitness industry (and in hand, the diet industry), runs through American's minds who fear being unhealthy, with the belief that thinness and health are synonymous. We are taught that the absence of illness is health, and the way to achieve this goal, is to participate in a rigid, never ending exercise structure with the contrasting effort to never feel satisfied. While the World Health Organization argues that health should be more broadly viewed "as a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing" (Markula, 64), the fitness industry argues that health is in the complete control to the individual, and is only reflected through the perceived amount of muscle mass and body fat on an individual, as well as the perceived amount of effort put in to

achieve these standards. Richard Crawford explains “that assigning illness prevention purely as an individual’s responsibility can lead to victim blaming and moral judgements, because by falling ill we fail to make that required commitment to health” (Markula, 66). These harmfully broad accusations about individuals entice them to feel as though they are burdened with laziness or a weakness, while in reality, there are many facets including the environment, politics, genetics, and societal privilege that vary across individuals that directly impact one’s health. The effects of the limited view of health are detrimental to many of those most vulnerable in society and makes many who aren’t at the state of an advertised, “shredded” physic to feel inadequate, and as though they’ve failed, while also perpetuating to those invested in fitness culture that they can never be shredded enough. Judging body composition is a harmfully shallow and surface level way to examine health and only allows for nonprofessionals to prescribe a judgement and treatment to others. As I previously argued, bodies are sensory, emotional, instinctive, and unique to each individual. Therefore, viewing bodies as one-dimensional is not only harmful, but limiting and reductionistic. It is interesting that in a culture that rejects the body’s needs and its experiences, we also have an entitlement when it comes to knowing what’s “best” for our bodies based on wishful, physical desires and not a true, full picture of health.

Why do we do this? What causes both the rejection of bodies and the false expert complex when it comes to the health of the body? Let’s examine what is being rejected here. The validity of our bodies’ knowledge and experience, and the emotional responses expressed by our bodies. In “Re-membering: the return of the body to experiential learning” Michelson mentions the term “abstract masculinity” as “a long standing Western contempt for the body” arguing “[t]he key characteristic of abstract masculinity is detachment from whatever ties the knower to a contextualized human life: emotions, loyalties, interests, memories, responsibilities to others”

(218). This idea connects to the patriarchal ideals embedded into our connection with ourselves in a way that rejects emotion and human connection. The term “toxic masculinity” is often brought up when discussing feminist issues and I’d argue that Michelson’s term “abstract masculinity” is related in the sense of “masculine” characteristics (assumed positive traits) being acted on in an extreme, harmful manner resulting in a rejection of the instinctual, human emotions. To further this discussion, Michelson also points out that we often gender certain practices or habits in regards to bodies. She argues, “[t]hose activities most associated with the maintenance of bodily life-preparing food, cleaning, caring for the young and old, tending to the sick, etc.- are performed by women and by lower-class men who carry out these tasks figuratively and often literally outside the view of elite males” (220). This quote exemplifies that the act of taking care of one’s self and one’s body is looked at as “feminine” and because of misogyny, these acts of care also are perceived as lesser than. Instead of nurturing our bodies, fitness culture pressures us to overwork our bodies to their fullest extent, continuously striving for a higher performance capability. The phrases “no days off” and “get in the best shape of your life” in the fitness world are examples of the mindset of the hyper-masculine, aggressive force over bodies in these spaces. Because the unnecessary expectation to be in the gym everyday working your body to defeat is unattainable for most, (understandably so), this false effort to promote “health” becomes counterproductive and results in absolutes because of the exclusionary, blame-enticing environment. Markula explains many American adults either remain inactive, or become excessive and compulsive when it comes to exercise. The author states, “[s]uch failures to conform with the bodily discipline hint to a practice that acts as a tool of dominance by imposing an unnecessary bodily based discipline based on a rather narrow definition of health” (66). The discipline discussed around bodies is present not only in spaces of

activity, but also in daily tasks such as sitting, walking, standing, or eating. Physical expression is scrutinized and gendered, body routines and eating habits are often dictated by time, or influenced by the hopeful body physique one hopes to achieve. To examine the gendered nature of body regimens, we need to understand why the extreme nature of training one's body is expected, and the never ending need to diet occurs. Markula says: "In this popular consciousness, the boundaries between health (how to beat stress), beauty (better butt) and fitness (an exercise program consisting of 3 moves a day) are blurred" (67) bringing in the argument that the perception of one's health based on how one looks, is one of the three contributing factors in using exercise to be "healthy" or "fit"; one also wants to be "beautiful." With the body image standard for women constantly changing for each decade, it isn't surprising that the latest "best exercise" also shifts with the trend. The problem with the fitness industry is that it's now plagued by a paradoxical detachment of the body (not listening to what your body actually wants to do, and working out a certain way because you "have to"), as well as a pressure from the patriarchal rules of abstract masculinity, causing women to be in a constant state of wanting to lose weight. As stated by Markula, "Because a beautiful woman has to possess a thin, toned, and young body, the majority of exercises designed to improve a woman's 'body fitness' focus on fulfilling these three requirements. It is not surprising, then, that women exercise to lose weight and our exercise practices have transformed to maximize weight loss" (67). As to why women specifically are expected to be small, have no body fat in the "wrong" places, enough body fat in the "right" places, and an appearance of muscle, but not too much can all be attributed to the standards set by men, as a method of subordinating women's status by comparing their role to submissive caretakers. Referring back to Mernissi's essay "Size 6: The Western Women's Harem", she ends her argument with the "symbolic violence" idea of women

accepting these oppressive rules about their bodies because of a deeper embedded message into women's bodies that they are subservient. Mernissi ends with, "How can you stage a credible political demonstration and shout in the streets that your human rights have been violated when you cannot find the right skirt?" exemplifying how the obsession in clothes and body size forced onto women keeps them distracted from realizing how trapped they are.

### An Introduction to My Work

The ideas about the larger structures and businesses around fitness, beauty, and body composition that interrupt women's lives aided in both my time of masked, normalized, self-loathing while also the environments that propelled me onto a journey of evaluation and compassion towards myself; driving me to fight these embedded codes that keep women down. After reflecting on the body-conscious, competitive dance world I grew up in, the behaviors of my friends and family relating to their bodies, and the prevalence in media and daily life of the assumption that femininity is lesser, all contributed to my inspiration with my art practice. I didn't paint with oils until my sophomore year of college, where I instantly felt a connection to the medium, even while painting still lifes. I fell in love with what paint could do, how the colors sitting on a surface are able to communicate with the viewer. Throughout my years at Alfred University's School of Art and Design, I created work about various topics relating to humanity, such as spaces or actions of connection, consumerism, and the commonalities humans share. I have always painted figuratively and found a connection to vibrant colors, even in my earliest assignments. My junior year is when I began making works about movement and the body. It wasn't until I was highly involved with Boxing Club that I made a painting titled "Fighting Stance" that I felt a breakthrough in subject matter of what I was both deeply passionate and

personally connected to making art about. This painting felt like such a step forward because I began to speak specifically from my experiences, not humanity at large. I painted the figure in an intuitive, experimental manner, allowing me to begin to understand the endless perspectives a figure can be presented through.

The body of work I created as a senior focuses on large topics of the body, movement, and feminism as the figurative paintings reference my body, while conceptually referencing my own memories and theories around topics of gender and body studies. My studio is a colorful, meditative space where time gets lost, as I mix pigments, move the paint gesturally across the surface, and embed concepts into an image. It is therapeutic and releasing to convey an idea, question, critique, or proclamation in the form of a painting. At the same time of finding release, my painting practice can feel incredibly heavy in times when I find myself in a stuck place of not being able to articulate what I'm thinking about onto the surface. When I have a good day in the studio, where my ideas seem to be easily translated easily out of my head and into the surface, I feel as though everything in my life is on track. It's as if as there is a rose-colored filter over my day, and I feel inspired in everything, even beyond the studio. Contrastingly, when I find myself stuck with my work, there are infinite ways doubt and annoyance creep into my thoughts. Making art is just as much a release as it is working through ideas through an artistic visual language. I find that just as my identity of being a woman can be incredibly empowering, there is also the need to constantly fight for women's liberation (especially those of marginalized groups) to feel seen and heard. The back and forth nature of pleasure and pressure can be found in painting practice, my experience with movement and exercise, and identifying as a woman in a culture that is set up to stifle them.

## My Process

When I arrive in my studio, I often take a moment to absorb the colors and movement created in my previous paintings. I allow the energy put into the past patterns and colors to be engaged into my body, as I get into the headspace for creating. I start a painting by focusing on specific parameters, usually one conceptual idea, and one formal painting challenge to work with in order to develop my ideas in a new method of presentation. For example, if I aim to make a painting about what power means in women, I reflect on: Why it is important for me to talk about it?; How would power would be reflected through color?: How I can put a powerful energy into my brushstrokes?; What gestures are powerful?; and What body language represents someone of a powerful position? As I begin by putting down a wash of a color, or loose sketches of figures, I build the pigmentation and react to each move, trying to counterbalance what I just did with a new, surprising countering action. I work to develop the figures from their more representational, bodily state to an abstracted mass of organic shapes, creating a suggestion of a body. Not only does abstracting the forms provide a way for me to talk about women's bodies without presenting an explicitly clear female form with the potential of being sexualized by the viewer, but also allows for more emotion to be described through the forms. I paint with a greater expressive quality after the initial sketch of the figures are down, allowing for the gestural, emotional intentions to become present in the work. I try to provide surprise throughout the painting through color and morphing, overlapping figuration that entices the viewer to search through the painting for. I strive to have contrast all throughout the piece, whether that be through paint transparencies, vibrating colors placed side-by-side, or a figure disappearing into other forms as you search for the body.

### The Male Gaze

The contrast I aim for is connected to my goal of representing women in an unexpected way through the female gaze. Women are presented in media consistently through the male gaze, as defined by Laura Mulvey, “[t]he determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly...their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact...” meaning, for the male fantasy (Mulvey, 62). These presented caricatures of women are expected, diluted, and exaggerated in various ways that feed into the illusionary and reproduced idea of what women are. Women encompass all body types, ethnic backgrounds, economic backgrounds and have endless combinations of interests and hobbies. However, when women’s stories are constantly told through the male gaze, and their primary purpose is to assist the more valued male characters, because *the men* are the main characters, and therefore the developed ones we as the audience are trained to care about. Due to this constant, narrow presentation, the idea that women are dull, one dimensional, and sexual objects for consumable pleasure is visually and socially reinforced. With this in mind, I paint with an emphasis on the unexpected and the concealed in order to exemplify the diversity and range of complexities human beings identifying as women hold.

### Abstracting Femininity

Earlier we discussed the term abstract masculinity, as the idea of placing value on the detachment of human emotions and empathy. Our culture emphasizes cognitive masculinity which becomes an intangible, yet highly present set of behavioral norms that reject nurturing and awareness of others. In my painting practice, I work to abstract femininity by deconstructing the female figure and representing these bodily forms through suggestive, gestural shapes. I am tired

of conventionally beautiful women presented by men through a desirable, sexualized gaze. As I abstract the women in my work, I take away the viewer's expected instinct of viewing a pleasing presentation of women as a method to satisfy their sexualized consumption of the image.

Similarly how abstract masculinity speaks to what is present beyond the physical body, my abstracted femininity is speaking to the mind as well, using the suggestion of the body as an indicator of subject. The women in my paintings express anger, joy, loneliness, celebration, solitude, and impatience. The *focus* on emotion in my paintings counters abstract masculinity's *rejection* of emotion. The cerebral expressions I portray exemplify the humanness within women, who are often portrayed as exclusively exterior beings, only captured for their appearance. While the seemingly obvious proclamations like "women are humans too" have been around since the first wave of feminism, there is shamefully still a need to obtain an understanding of women's humanity.



### Bold, Loud Color

I have always been drawn to color. My room was painted everything from a soft pink, to a warm yellow, glowing lime green, and cool gray throughout my life. When I began painting, I made vibrantly colored images from the start. At the time, my inclination for doing so was motivated by a visual attraction and what looked satisfying to me. Now, I explore the voice, speed, and mood of each color I paint with. I realize a peppermint green and fuchsia vibrate off each other, calling the viewer's attention. A lime green over muddy browns and blues reference warm sunlight shining over the dreary hues. The color in my work acts as an extension of the painted women's voices and emphasizes or contrasts the gestures. In a painting about power, I want the colors to be strong and loud to explain who these women are. A painting about loneliness and sadness explores subdued, reserved pigments that underlay the bright neon colors, allowing for a sickly depth. A pastel blue with a muddy, olive brown create confusion, and the contrast allows each color to have a different voice.

### Line and Gesture

As I construct the women in my paintings, I begin with generating their movements and body language through 2-dimensional line. Keeping a looseness in movement, I apply the expressive line fluidly, quickly, and without thinking too intently about getting the form perfect. I find the less focus I have in constructing my initial drawings, the more lively and expressive the painting's foundation becomes. Power is a common expression I work with. As power is historically expressed through the bodies and voices of men, I think about how to reimage this expression through women's bodies. I imagine a women standing with her arms crossed, chin up, legs shoulder width apart, standing in defiance. I remember the power I feel while boxing, and

throw a looped, harsh line of paint extending from a shoulder down to emulate a punch. I think about the power in the body necessary to run: pounding your feet into the ground, pumping your arms as fast as you can to make your legs speed up, and how hard it is to breathe. I paint a run, not an exhausting, run-for-your-life type of sprint, but a run that embraces the freedom of the body moving liberally through space.

I think about loneliness through gesture, and how that empty, sad, tight-in-the-chest feeling is expressed. I construct this emotion through long, hanging heads, a closed off, curled up body, a heavy, passive weight experienced while laying down. There is a bond between women friends/family who comfort each other. I paint these women in a time of reflective solitude, thinking about times I comforted those close to me, while also imagining how I'd comfort myself.



### Materiality

I became drawn to a sturdy surface to work on in my senior year. Canvas absorbed so much of the paint I put down, and had a good amount of give that I found hard to work with. Now, I paint on large, heavy wood or Masonite panels, allowing me a smooth, hard surface to bring the paint across on. Thinking back to a few years ago when all I wanted was to be smaller and lighter, I work to challenge these notions from a societal pressure through creating heavy paintings that don't care to take up space. My work is an extension of myself, therefore I use the paintings to act out my liberation of my body, allowing for bold attention.

With the sturdy, smooth surfaces I built, I allow the paint a freedom as I experiment with transparencies. I construct the atmosphere through soft transparencies of color, with moments of overlap that result in a surprising new hue. To create a sense of space as well as moments of emphasis, I build up the paint on my brush and execute a thick, bold line or shape. The contrast of thickness between the bold, thick strokes and transparent washes creates a 3-dimensional space to view.

### A letter from my past self

Why does my body feel like a trap? I can't stop moving to try and escape; it's like I can't stop trying to run. I protest the natural self, meaning the self my body is trying desperately to cling onto. The only way my body feels successful is when it's inadequate: shaky, sweaty, and starving hungry. I can't think of what else I can do better at, and yet I'm still not perfect.

I can never be satisfied, until I realize I was what's stopping me from that satisfaction.

### A letter to my past self

Choices are a greatly influential mental game. Who are you choosing for? For yourself? For the eyes you imagine on yourself? For the critical voice you hear? For the reason ‘it’s just the way it is’? Why does one choose to be self-loathing?

I now choose acceptance. I choose to move free of constraints, to eat to nourish and satisfy, to act on interests that benefit *me*. A trap is something you’re tricked by. Our bodies aren’t a trap. The real trap are the societal structures that create a normalized, national dissatisfaction and self-hate culture that convinces you that your natural state isn’t enough. Bodies are home, vessels, comfort, and vehicles. They enable us. It’s our choices that hold us back.

I used to run often, envisioning all that I was mad about. I used to run, in an attempt to fix ‘problems’ I chose to care about. I’m not saying that mental health struggles around food and bodies are an easy choice to have or not to have. Instead, I find the structures that centralize a rejection of the intuitive body, a high emphasis on youth for women, and a culture dominated by the idea of femininity through the male fantasy makes these clouded choices often times inevitable. I remember doing a P90X workout when I was young. In the intro, the infamous Tony Horton stated, “Today’s workout is an MMX intense battle between you, and that fat covering your abs.” I haven’t ran in almost a year. Instead, I dance to release my stress, as well as sadness or happiness. I don’t punch in boxing now envisioning my stomach holding my organs and protecting them. I punch with the mindset of fighting *with* my body, not against it. I focus on fulfilling the movement, hitting the target, and keeping my form.

I did not used to think I was self-deprecating, as I coded these behaviors in the name of ‘health’. I realize now that I was using my body’s mobility as a vehicle to drive it to its deterioration. My body was mentally consuming, and a self-incentivized trap instead of a partner.

### Conclusion

There is a lot I’ve reflected on in order to conduct this project. Throughout this process, I was brought back to my first Tae Kwon Do lesson, the uncomfortable moments throughout my years in dance, and to my lowest points in my relationship to my body and to myself. I am now understanding how my harmful actions were influenced by the appearance-structured cultures I grew up in, and who writes the instruction manual for these structures in the first place. Youth is so highly praised for women in our Western cultures, that the submissive standard intersects with body size, clothing, the beauty industry, and power dynamics. Many young women fear losing their high-school-teen body in their twenties (i.e. “the freshman fifteen”). Maybe the constant portrayal of thin, very young women in advertising, tv shows, films, etc. influences our perception of what women should be. Maybe, the oppressive nature of what women should be impacts women’s decisions. This ruthlessly evident and incorrect portrayal of women could be why older women like my aunts shop in the juniors section with their teen daughters. This idea could also be applied in explaining why so many women exercise to burn fat or to get their pre-baby body “back.” I find the cruel and controlling efforts of keeping women subordinate so blatant in our culture, and yet, their paired structures that favor men keep these degrading efforts normalized. When explaining misogyny’s efforts of enforcement, Kate Manne states, that “misogynistic social forces will: Often target girls and women (in the relevant class) for actual, perceived, or representative challenges to or violations of applicable patriarchal norms and

expectations” (Down Girl, 63). Manne explains that in a patriarchal world, the rules championing men are law, and are enforced by the clever, certain forces of misogyny.

My work acknowledges the power structures in place and the rules for how women ought to be by blatantly acting on the opposite. I paint with beautiful, vibrant colors with dynamism, energy, and emotion to present femininity through my own perspective. I allow the paint freedom to drip down the smooth structure, just as I think bodies should have their own liberty. The paintings themselves are deliberately large to catch your attention, without revealing everything right away. Women are not just the beautiful object in the room, and should not solely be praised when they take on the mannerisms and interests of men. I work to create an image that suggests women, but that reveals itself slowly and requires the viewer to examine closer.



Throughout my time reflecting for this body of work, I have realized that bodies are in constant conflict with the rules and expectations outlined by the culture they are placed in, and what needs and wants the body possesses. The pressures of society often force a neglect of our own control, as we are slowly conditioned to abide by the parameters of a given culture. I once found exterior elements dictating how I move and present myself through my body, until I neglected my own power and happiness. Now, I understand women’s power is conditioned to be suppressed and the full physical capabilities of our bodies are not encouraged to be explored. I

now control my body consciously for myself, allowing for the path to liberation to be initiated, as freeing my body once again is essential in realizing my all-encompassing self.

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