

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Addressing you & I
Addressing *we*

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Introduction

My work acts like the proud quilted banners pinned to the walls of a Southern Baptist church that read "King of Kings" and "Lord of Lords." I begin by investigating the role of material and the psychological undertones that follow, as objects like these are situated in specific socio-political contexts. Similar to the iconic chrome decal of a sexualized woman that has been stuck to the back of a pick-up truck, I find these religious textual devices to allude to a particular type of identity, one that is commonly seen in the South where sexist oppression of women is an active reality. My sculptural work manifests similar physical properties to the items above, yet negates the original intention, often times speaking directly to the viewer and their conditioned gender constructs. My aim here is to challenge this form of conditioning, especially between text and iconography. It is within this critical way of manipulating recognizable objects that I ask my work to be active and vocal while reaching an empathetic conclusion.

A Memoir – January 21, 2017

Dad called me wanting to talk; he said it was important. We hadn't spoken for months. The last thing he had said to me was the day of the Women's March. I was so proud that day, not only for the women around the world marching in solidarity with one another, but for myself as I had led a solo march in Wellsville NY, a rural village with the population of 4,484 people.

I woke up that day with the intent to march, I didn't know where or with who, but I knew I wanted to. I went to the studio and painted black words on a scrap piece of quarter inch plywood. Unlike my sculptural work, I wanted my sign to be quick and raw, so I did exactly that. Five minutes later I had a wooden poster that read, "my body my choice."

This phrase stood amongst many that day, and like most signs people carried, it stood for something that hit close to home. Yes, I've been taken advantage of by a man. Yes, a man has contested my body. And yes, a man has claimed ownership of my body. So, with this protest, I wanted to use specific language that was immediate and heavy. I wanted every person in Wellsville to see my sign. I wanted them to witness my confidence as I proudly marched up and down Main Street. This was something that I believed in, and unlike a populated city with crowds of people, I wanted individuals in a rural community to see activism first hand.

After walking up and down Main, I received nothing but support. I was shocked; this was the town where, after Trump was elected, a swastika appeared painted on a local dugout with the sentence that read, "Make America White Again." How did I receive this much support?

I spent the rest of the day reflecting on the march, *my* march to be more exact. I thought about the looks I had received, the smiles, the head nods, the thumbs-up from men in the local diner and the honks and waves from drivers.

I had a friend document the experience for me. I didn't intend on using the photos for my work, but really wanted documentation to remind myself of the bravery that went into marching alone. I shared the image with a feminist collective back home in Nashville, Tennessee. They quickly asked if they could share it on different social media accounts and it was in that moment that I knew this image would make an impact on others. For this reason alone, I shared it with my family, friends, and colleagues. Some overwhelming amounts of love and support later, I received a response from my father.

"Good thing I talked your mom out of getting an abortion. So much for having a choice, huh?"

I was speechless. Still am.

After my father said what he said I felt anger, and if I'm going to be completely honest, I felt defeated. This was why I marched, for men like this. For women who are surrounded by men with similar oppressive behaviors. Most importantly, I marched for myself.



Desire – Objectification of the Body

Desire plays a role in my work in two ways: first is the temptation to touch and to objectify a woman's body, and second is the desire to maintain a sense of power and control. These aspects of possessing someone, or something, are important to my practice as they have both left a mark on my experiences and are actively a part of my conditioning. In this way, my studio acts as an outlet where I can articulate these topics in a constructive way. I reflect on sexist encounters that I have experienced and recall the trauma felt during sexual assault. Because I refuse to be silent towards these pressing matters, I begin challenging these experiences by fighting the systematic oppression that I, and many women, fall victim to. It is these lived moments that become the key motivations within my work.

Most of my work begins by relocating the figure (myself) as she (I) is caught inside a system of representation. Similar to Anna Kérchy's critical analysis of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* 1977-1980, Kérchy writes:

"She echoes patriarchal ideologies by neither negating or subverting gender roles, but, however, reveals the artificial constructed-ness of gender. By revealing this, Sherman helps viewers recognize their misrecognition. The photographs re-enact B-grade films where the figure, Sherman herself, mocks the original frame, in a way to record a sense of reality." ¹

In newer work, I am examining one's desire to obtain power and control, more specifically as it relates to the reality of toxic masculinity and male dominance centered around my upbringing. As I work in the studio, both through material investigations and writing, I continue to ask the

¹ Kérchy, Anna. "THE WOMAN 69 TIMES: CINDY SHERMAN'S "UNTITLED FILM STILLS"

same question: where exactly does *my* sexist oppression stem from? My conclusion has been to look further at patriarchal ideals situated in the context of my childhood church and home. That is, in the domain of the family, similar to the Southern Baptist beliefs, the man (i.e. the father and/or husband) holds an authoritative role over the wife and the children, resulting in a hierarchy constructed around gender. The Southern Baptist Convention expands on this belief by stating:

"A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation... Children, from the moment of conception, are a blessing and heritage from the Lord. Parents are to demonstrate to their children God's pattern for marriage."²

Here we have two roles at play: a husband and wife, or rather, a man and a woman. The two are listed to have responsibilities to one another, but the jobs they are asked to perform exist in an unfair state. The man is uplifted and given a social status that is glorified like Christ, while the woman is asked to "serve" and "submit" herself as though this is her biological duty. While this belief is written in the vein that both man and woman (husband and wife) are created equal, the use of specific terms contradicts this notion. Words like "protect" and "to lead" (within the context of being the head of the household) begin to proclaim that the man is to fall into a constructed form of masculinity, one that's dominant, competitive, and strong. To say that the wife must "graciously submit" also paints her to be overtly feminine; in she should not

² "Southern Baptist Convention." Southern Baptist Convention > Basic Beliefs.

undermine the power of the man, but should softly accept his commands. These roles are then taught and demonstrated to the children, furthering the conditioning of gender constructs and expectations.

The Role of Empathy

While patriarchy is still very much a part of a woman's reality, it has also led to the systematic mistreatment of men. In the same way that Sherman highlights her ideas on femininity being a myth, men too remain in a constructed form of masculinity. As a result, my research has moved from an interrogation of the issue, to understanding the issue. That is not to say that men will not be held accountable for their actions, but it is to say that stereotypes are built and constructed, leading to the further conditioning of gender roles and the stereotypical behaviors that follow.

For this purpose, I advocate for empathy and understanding. Psychotherapist, M.J.

Pullen agrees by saying:

"Empathy has something in common with both sympathy and relating. But its power lies in threading the uncomfortable human experience between them—connecting with another human through their experience of the world, rather than ours. Simply put, empathy is the ability to understand the experience of another person as though it were our own."³

Often times, if violence is fought with violence, nothing will change. In fact, to create an aggressive installation with images or phrases that are not traumatizing for one, may be traumatizing for the other. In its worst case, an artist could further introduce a particular trauma to a victim who has suppressed a violent experience. This has grown to be an imperative part of my practice, a personal guideline. That is, to make work about oppression, your work cannot be oppressive.

³ Pullen, M.J., "Writing With Empathy." Deep South Magazine.

The willingness to understand another's position within a gendered discourse will not only open up a particular type of conversation, but will proceed to create change. For this reason, I introduce a specific visual language, one that is embedded in both material and object identity and use this as a catalyst to open a dialogue between myself, the object, and the viewer.

Addressing You and I; Addressing we

In *Addressing You and I; Addressing we*, there are sixteen letters posted to the left gallery wall. In front of the letters stands a section of a white picket fence. Located on the back wall of the gallery is a response to the letters. It is hand written and ordered, like lines on an elementary chalkboard. Adjacent to this is a quilted bridal veil that stands empty. Along the gallery floor lies an incomplete wall of velvet sandbags; some are stacked while others remain independent throughout the space. They are skin toned with bleached text on their backs. An old quilt rests on the floor; it is indigo and has the word "baptized" stitched in its side. Above the quilt, suspended by braided rope, hangs three dried palm fronds that have been spray painted gold.

Similar to the ideals preached in Sunday sermons, and later repeated at home, this installation is about the relationship between my father and I. It is about the beginning until now. Showcased is a conversation that takes place; two people with two perspectives creating a dialogue that is facilitated through the language of a contemporary art practice.

The work is a critical organization of the objects and environments I have experienced. I designed a veil that is tailored to my body but is absent of it. I built a fence so that I could understand the pride that goes into that type of labor. I spray painted dried palm fronds to give them the same iconographic value witnessed during Palm Sunday. Whether these items are interior or exterior to the home, I present manipulated renditions of the original thing. Each of them acts as a character on a stage with its own history and applied narrative. They have a purpose and a function, one that resides deep in my mental recognition of things. In *The Object Stares Back*, James Elkins states:

"If I'm just looking around while thinking of something else, every object that comes into focus will remind me of my life: the calendar reminds me I haven't changed it this week; the old file folders remind me of work not yet done; the black architect's lamp reminds me I don't like architect's lamps; the coffee cup reminds me that I am thirsty. Even when I am not thinking of the use of the objects, they remind me of their use. And there is a curious thing here that easily passes unnoticed: I do not focus on anything that is not connected in some way with my own desires and actions." ⁴

Similar to Elkin's view, I project my personal experiences onto the objects I fabricate. For example, when I see a white picket fence, I think of the American Dream, an idea that has been engrained in the American's psyche as the utopian lifestyle we should all live and work towards. It also makes me think of suburban neighborhoods where everything is manicured and masked. There is something delusional about this. It is picture-perfect and meant to be seen as something with no dilemma. A perfect family has their perfect house, all falling into their learned and constructed roles.

It starts in the home is a white picket fence located in the back-left corner of the Fosdick Nelson. The fence is separate from the rest of its perimeter, like a section that has been pulled out of a suburban neighborhood and placed in the gallery. At an obtuse angle, the viewer can walk the line of pickets on either side. The fence is multi layered and two-sided. One side is white, the other natural wood to charred embers. Its strength and structural complexity reminds me of my father. Walls have been built, layered and torched similar to the hurtful words thrown during a fight. Painted, painted again, and again, the surface drips and blisters showing the desperate nature of two people trying to mend a problem. It is strong and fragile

⁴ Elkins, James. *The Object Stares Back: On The Nature Of Seeing*.

at the same time. The furthest picket fades to a natural wood grain. Absent of paint and fire it is clean and untouched. In this lives a speaker; the sound is of a woman's voice. My voice. I ask:

"Dad, if I set you a letter, would you re-write it? Would you re-write it over and over?"

"I opened the package with my father's letters and began pulling them out one by one; I hadn't seen his handwriting in what felt like, years. As I sifted through each paper I began to feel so close to him. I read each letter as if every page had something new to say. There were smudges and erased marks and it revealed my father's vulnerability and perhaps hesitancy as he wrote my words over and over. I truly believe that it was through this exchange of letters that we began to have a conversation and my father began to understand my perspective."



It starts in the home: wood, paint, fire, speaker

Behind the fence, and pinned to the wall, are sixteen handwritten letters that read:

Father

"Say yes sir, do you understand me? You say yes sir when you're talking to me."

quick

flushed

Control is lost, and the power that follows it, like fumes forever stuck in a dead muffler.

He is spiteful

So am I.

This was a letter I addressed to my Father, and after deep consideration I asked him to re-write it. Similar to the regeneration that takes place during baptism, I see this textual exchange to be the re-birth of our relationship. While Stephen Willats speaks about the transformation of objects, his theory mirrors the transformation made during this exchange.

"Transformation may be viewed as a fundamental creative act, basic expression and survival; transformation here being viewed simply as the taking of an object and altering of its function, meaning, and character, effectively making it into another object. As a consequence of transformation the cultural system of references that surrounds the object is also changed into another system, related to its new meaning and function. The Transformer who makes these changes recognizes the psychological as well as physical possibilities inherent in an object; the resulting development in the object's existence being a product of the Transformer's imagination." ⁵

⁵ Hudek, Antony. *The Object*. 77

To truly understand someone and something, I believe you must try to understand their position. Whether this manifests itself into a physical embodiment of a thing, or a conversation, it is an integral move for a relationship to evolve. On November 26th 2017, I asked my Father to re-write my letter sixteen times.

FATHER

"SAY YES SIR, DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

YOU SAY YES SIR WHEN YOU'RE TALKING TO ME."

QUICK

FLUSHED

CONTROL IS LOST, AND THE POWER THAT FOLLOWS IT.

LIKE FUMES FOREVER STUCK IN A DEAD MUFFLER.

HE IS SPITEFUL

SO AM I

Located on the back wall of the gallery, in my handwriting, is the response I received from my father as he reflected on the experience.

"When I began writing it made me think of my Father,

I needed the leadership and discipline.

The further along and the more I wrote,

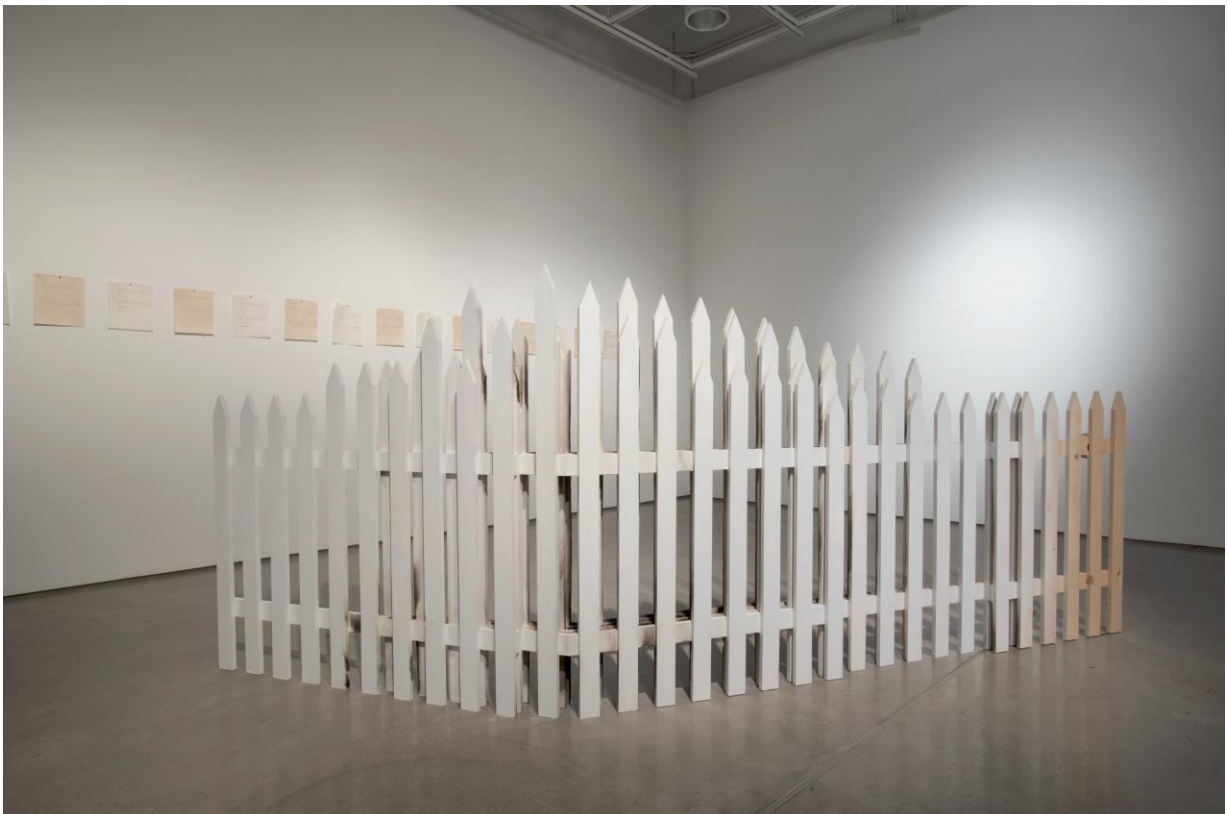
I realized how I had negatively affected you, even hurt you...

certainly not meaning to.

It was a harsh way to bring up a tender little girl.

I felt the regret of what I did."

-December 5, 2017



When I began writing it made me think of my father
I needed that leadership and discipline.
But the further along and the more I wrote I realized
how I had negatively affected you
even hurt you
certainly not meaning to.
It was a harsh way to bring up a
tender little girl
Yes, I felt the regret of what I did.

-Dad December 5 2017

It starts in the home: graphite on wall

Positioned towards the handwritten response is a quilted bridal veil. The veil is stiff and hollow as though it holds the shape of an invisible figure. The cotton, velvet, and linen patchwork carries the language and history of traditional quilt making yet negates the domestic qualities with exposed seams and torn edges. The title *If dad could pick my veil* holds reference to the projected innocence that was cast on me as soon as I first bled.

I remember that day like it was yesterday. My dad and I sat down at the kitchen table and he told me that I was a woman now. He explained that my body was pure and innocent and that I needed to continue this modesty until marriage. He gifted me with a diamond ring and explained that this was a symbol of my virginity and that it represented my promise to him, as well as the Lord.

Referencing the figure, but absent of the body, my veil protests this idea of ownership. It is about me deciding not to wear it. By revealing the emptiness, the veil gives the viewer an opportunity to imagine this scenario for themselves.



If dad could pick my veil: linen, cotton, silk, vintage lace, steel armature

To the right of the gallery, at the side of the veil's train, are three dried palm fronds suspended by braided rope. Their spines are curled and folded as their leaves fan towards the gallery floor. They are natural in color and fade into a golden patina. The fronds are attached at the top and are wrapped in patterned quilt fabric. The cord is attached to the gallery wall where it is noticeable that the palms are being hoisted about the ground. They exist as a flag raised in victory.

I often think about the palm leaves that decorate the church sanctuary in remembrance of Jesus marching into Jerusalem. I also think of them being used within the context of fanning members of royalty. Coupling the two images, I come to see them as symbols of triumph and victory. A victory gained, or a victory anticipated. The victory is shared.



A personal victory: palm fronds, spray paint, quilted rope, deer antler

Across from the palms, situated on the gallery floor, are stacked velvet sandbags. They are soft, heavy, and figurative as they are scattered amongst the floor. In every skin tone, the bags represent individual people. They are soft and scarred with words that penetrate their skin. They carry the truth and the burden of the text that's been bleached on their backs. Like the women who protest in marches, they are strong and unforgettable.



Soldiers: velvet, sand, bleach

When I see the sandbags, I see myself as one of them. I live amongst the women they represent. I have a history and a story and choose to communicate this within the context of sculpture. Like the charged iconography seen in *Addressing you & I*; *Addressing we*, the work

holds significant cultural and historical weight as well as complex social implications. The ego and control of the chauvinist is lost as patriarchal ideals are quieted and barely seen.

By undermining this learned authority, the work begins to take back the ownership and control that is being threatened. My voice, along with the physical work, all contain marks of a self-involved experiences; however, through the material manipulations that happen in the studio, they begin to take on different hypothetical scenarios.

As I abandon these traditional modes of viewing and interacting with things, like a picket fence, or a wedding veil, I find that their social implications lead to less ramifications for myself and my gender. They begin to depend largely on my personal experiences as a person and as a woman. In manipulating gendered and domestic forms that I decrease their perceived strengths allowing them to become agents of social change.



Studio Iconography & Materials

Transitional

Plywood: blue-collar, basement, concrete, systematic, gentrified, layered, unfinished

Cinder block: construction, dense, weight, stacked, wall, constitution, conventional, industrial, oppressive

Two by fours: incomplete, domestic, wallpaper, attic, house, fast, hardhat

Moving Blanket: quilt, wrapped, truck, shield, soft, protector

Sandbag: walls, flood, active, agent, ground, war, protest, protector

Domestic

Quilt: low-country, memory, mother, woman, home, baby, story, stitched, tradition, comfort

Picket Fence: decorative, rural, home, American Dream, safe, middle-class, family, delusion, private, pictorial, barrier

Exhaust System: loud, roar, diesel, fire, threatening, performance, man, father

Velvet: gentle, seductive, soft, lingerie, body, folds, touch, lush, sheen

Palm Frond: Palm Sunday, triumph, victory, celebrated, royal, Jesus

Florescent Bulbs: basement, garage, surgery, institutional, corporate

Carpet: home, conscious, plush, feet, invitation

Deer Antler: hunted, trophy, violent, principle, attacked, caution

Gestural:

Bridal Veil: virgin, pure, woman, body, ownership, objectified

Visual Motifs

Chrome: metallic, truck-stop, decal, silk, reflective, passion

Neon: shout, bar, strip, sex

Diamond Plate: sexy, dangerous, durable, manufactured, toolbox, playboy, Harley Davidson

Black: sunless, psyche, unafraid

Bleach: baptized, washed, rebirth, true

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