

FETISHES AND FANATICS

By

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## ABSTRACT

My paintings target contemporary social issues, especially the relationship between fetishization and fanaticism in global capitalistic societies like the United States. In the Oxford English Dictionary, fetishism is defined as a form of sexual behavior in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree to a particular object, activity, or part of the body. Sub-definitions point to excessive and irrational devotion or commitment to a particular thing and/or the worship of an inanimate object for its supposed magical or spiritual powers. Fanaticism, then, is the quality of being filled with an excessive and single-minded zeal for something or being obsessively concerned with something. Either behaviors or tendencies give the individual a somewhat “unnatural” gratification that fuels continued dedication to the activity or idea.

My paintings are made to reflect the concepts of both fetishization and fanaticism and their power over us. They present somewhat explicit sexualized actions without digressing into pornography; they show my models in a state of intense pleasure and even ecstasy, as if possessed by magical or spiritual powers stemming from their experiences. At the same time, however, my works aim to encourage self-critique among my viewers. Even while observing my models in pleasure, the viewer is kept out of the “secret” held within the depicted experience. He or she is not entirely included in the action, but is drawn in and simultaneously held back, allowing that level of distance that allows self-

reflection. Should I want that pleasure or is it bad for me? This exact question is what we must ask ourselves all the time in a society that runs on immediate gratification and continuous desire to sell products and maintain a thriving economy.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Over the course of three years I have seen myself evolve into a matured, innovative and disciplined artist. I have been driven not only by my passion for creativity but also by the ambition to use that passion as a stimulant for change. For this, I am very grateful to my professor and advisor, Mr. Jon Revett. His support, advice, patience and guidance fostered my self-improvement. Sharing his experience as a professional artist with me helped cultivate the discipline and persistence I needed in creating a body of work that I am not only proud of but that adequately showed the intention behind my thesis.

Creating my work had to be backed by a well-written, coherent thesis. This is why I am grateful to Dr. Amy Von Lintel. I appreciate that out of her terribly busy schedule she was able to lend her expertise in helping me construct a thesis that adequately backed up my body of work. Her patience on my pace of writing, advice and corrections on my grammar and how to properly convey my intent – without drowning my voice - as well as her genuine interest in my maturity as a student helped me execute a well written thesis.

In addition, for an artist to evolve he or she must be willing to face criticism; internal and external criticism are necessary catalysts for the maturation of any artist. Criticism, especially in art, is very important because it contributes to the maintenance of high standards. Therefore, I want to show my gratitude for the unbiased analysis of Mr.



Scott Frish. This encouraged my self-criticism and pushed my zeal to become a better artist.

It was an honor to have such accomplished individuals as part of my committee. Their interests in my success made my achievement possible. I am eternally grateful.

This thesis is dedicated to my younger brother for whom I always want to be a better version of myself. To be an inspiration to him is a driving force for me. I want him to know you can achieve anything you set your heart to through perseverance and dedication.

APPROVED

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Jon Revett, Thesis Chair

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

An article written on “Fetishism Psychology” in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, explains that the term was borrowed from anthropological writings in which “fetish” referred to a charm thought to contain magical or spiritual powers. To be sure, Sigmund Freud compared the sexual object to “the fetish in which the savage sees the embodiment of his god.”<sup>1</sup> The fetish, therefore, is understood to attach to primitive notions of human instinct outside of rational control. Fetishizing an object or idea, is then both, simultaneously, the sexualization and the spiritualization of the thing. My work explores this process of fetishization for humans, especially in today’s overly stimulating contemporary world. We are constantly bombarded with stimulations that are visual, emotional, intellectual, and sexual; we are in a sense trapped inside of a fetish-rich matrix. I am interested in how that matrix fills a person or a group of people with a dangerous obsession, or an excessive and single-minded zeal that blinds them to the danger and effect of their behaviors. This outcome of fetishization I will refer to as fanaticism.

I have long been fascinated by the way gratification is derived from when people get inadvertently trapped inside of a fetish loop, when they become obsessed with certain

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<sup>1</sup> Freud, S. (1910). *Three contributions to the theory of sex*. New York: The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 18.

ideas and convictions, or “ideologies.” These ideas can be sexual but they can also be religious, spiritual, or political. The more I dove into this research, the more I realized how these obsessions make people more self-absorbed and less sympathetic to others, how empathy beyond one’s own immediate needs is subsumed by the dedication to the fetish idea. I have watched as people around me have been consumed by the satisfaction derived from their commitment to their own ideas and how the inconveniences for or even cruelty to others become immaterial. I am concerned that we fail to see the impact of this phenomenon on our immediate society.

My paintings aim to bring the dangers of fetishism and fanaticism back into the public eye. If my audience begins to become more aware of the social harm that comes from these behaviors, perhaps they will find inspiration toward more sympathy for those beyond themselves, different from themselves, outside of their fetish matrix. My work asks, almost forces, my audience to address the distress that comes with pleasure, the pain caused for others when we only focus on our own fetishes and fanaticism. Hopefully, it will start a dialogue where people can begin to have a self-evaluation and can weigh the merits and the consequences of their actions beyond a simple self-satisfaction.

For me, fetishism is not a mental instability or disorder beyond the individual’s control. Even though it stems from the irrational levels of consciousness, a fetish can be brought out into the open and addressed by an individual, and by society more broadly. According to Ellen Roy:

Classificatory end-products to which the word fetish has been applied cannot be simply understood simply as a special kind of object (or in our case, idea), or

defined in terms of their general functional attributes. Neither do they reflect a particular mental condition. Rather, they reveal a variable combination of [the] underlying features of categorization and representation characteristic of all thought.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the act of fetishizing something is a normal mental process of humans. And yet, its normality does not mean that it does not have consequences for human society. Facing those consequences is what my thesis project is about.

Just like the transference of power in a sexual fetish relationship, where the object has been granted power by the “fetishizer” to enhance and therefore be in control of his/her pleasure, an idea is rather useless by itself until it has been given that power by an individual or a group of individuals. Humans don’t passively fall into the traps of fetishes, they more actively allow or embrace the pleasure such fetish objects or ideas can provide. Here is where the hope lies, and where my work tries to intervene. My motive is simple: to start conversations, especially conversations people usually shy away from because they are uncomfortable. Because of this, at times, my works have been seen as offensive or as unnecessarily instigating debate. However, I believe we must be willing to risk being offensive in others in order to evolve our thinking, to move beyond ourselves and our own immediate, personal desires, and to have conversations that bear a fruitful result.

There is a Nigerian proverb that says, “If two people, after a long conversation in a room, come out laughing and holding hands, they have just finished lying to each other. However, if those two people come out after said conversation with a stern face, it means

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen, R. (1988). Fetishism. *Man*, 23(2), new series, 213-235. doi:10.2307/2802803

they have been frank and truthful with each other.” In other words, to progress as people, as humans, we must be frank and truthful with each other, amicably, of course, but pointedly. Most people are very content with the way of life to which they are familiar, and anything that makes them question this familiarity is met with fear and anger, and they switch to a defensive mode. They believe someone is attacking (or trying to taint) something that gives them tremendous comfort and pleasure. But that very thing might be trapping them within a fetish matrix, making them into a dangerous fanatic. My paintings try to meet this fear and anger head on but in a still amiable manner. I don’t try to scream at others through my paintings, I just try to make them think and question their own normality. The issues I address, the content I provide, is not only brutal but also subtle, and therefore hopefully engaging rather than repulsive.

One fetish idea that I examine in my work is religion. The idea of religion has always been a very sensitive topic in our society. Importantly, however, it is a topic that must be discussed. In most cases, from the conversations I have had with religious individuals and from my own personal experience within religious sects, an individual of a particular religion can often become so consumed by the ideologies of a religion that he or she is blinded to logic and reason, as well as to social empathy for those not bound by the same principles. One premise of religious belief is certainty of the truth of one’s faith. However, I have observed highly religious people getting to the level of what I see as a kind of auto-erotic asphyxiation, a kind of pleasurable choke-hold on their humanity and human empathy. The pleasure, even ecstasy, gained by the certainty of one’s faith can be compared to sexual ecstasy or even drug-induced ecstasy. Nowhere is this clearer than in Bernini’s *St. Teresa of Avila*, (**Figure 1**) where an angel repeatedly pierces the female



saint's limp body with an arrow while the saint displays utter ecstasy on her face (**Figure 2**). The sexual overtones of this spiritual image cannot be missed. Teresa is consumed by her belief; her belief thrusts itself into her body over and over again. This pain is felt as pleasure. She can have no contact with another figure beyond herself. She is obsessed with the fetish of her religion, and becomes the ultimate fanatic. So should we admire Teresa or be forewarned by her behavior? She has denied herself the basic pleasure of the human companionship, but does this devotion make her a better person? Or is she trapped in an endless pleasure loop for herself only? Her belief gives her such immense pleasure that she seems to be drowning or suffocating in it; again, as with autoerotic asphyxiation, pain and pleasure, deprivation and satisfaction are intertwined.

I am not arguing that all religion is dangerous, or, like Karl Marx, that it is the opium of the masses. I am simply raising the question of how a fetishized belief in religion can push a human towards an unhealthy self-obsession and toward being a fanatic rather than an engaged social being. In his book *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety*, Alan Watts, a philosopher who popularized Eastern philosophy in the west, says:

We must here make a clear distinction between belief and faith... Belief, as I use the word here, is the insistence that the truth is what one would “lief” or wish it to be. The believer will open his mind to the truth on the condition that it fits in with his preconceived ideas and wishes. Faith, on the other hand, is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions; it is a plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Watts, A. (2012). *Wisdom Of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety*. London: Ebury Digital, 24

The control that leads to fetishism seems to align with “belief” in Watts’ terms, while “faith” seems to be more cautious, less fanatical, and therefore more socially healthy.

With religion, my work also explores the ideology of nationalism and its relationship to patriotism. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines nationalism as the identification with one's own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations. It is an idea based on the notion of superiority over the individuals of other nations, and on narrow and strict definitions of what constitutes one's “nation.” the enemy within and the enemy without. The nationalist derives pleasure from the commitment to and inclusion within a self-defined nation, but again, like fanatical religion, this operates to the detriment of others beyond themselves. George Orwell, in his essay “Notes on Nationalism,” stated that the abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, not just for himself but also for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, the individual gives up power to the idea and that satisfies him, but in the end, this giving of power to the nation is really all about a person's self-definition.

I have watched when people, especially Americans, talk about “their nation,” that they become intensely consumed with emotion; pride flares up, aggression increases. These responses are initially subconscious perhaps but they are not beyond an individual's control. One response can be patriotism, where one is devoted to and in vigorous support of one's own country, without asserting an aggressive superiority over others. There is nothing wrong with being patriotic; it is important to have a level of pride in and loyalty to one's country. Rather than succumbing to the in-focused pleasure of

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<sup>4</sup> Orwell, G. (1953). *England Your England and Other Essays: Notes on Nationalism*. London, GB: Secker and Warburg.

fanatical nationalism, much like Teresa of Avila's in-focused pleasure in her sexualized religious belief, a person can hold back that tendency and can seek a more socially empathetic patriotism. This is the balance my works try to strike. I put the symbols of nationalism in the context of sexual fetishism to highlight this choice, and it is a choice. I believe that nationalism is the pervasion, the fetishization of patriotism with the outcome being national fanaticism.

These ideologies—religion and nationalism—are two important topics I tackle in my paintings. Others include our obsession with technology and the Internet, with money, or with weapons. I play upon the irony that in a society that sexualizes everything, the idea of sex remains entirely taboo. It makes people uncomfortable. My imagery includes the use of items from bondage/domination/Sado-masochism sex practices or BDSM. I use these items to draw the connections between sexualization, fetishism, and fanaticism. At first, my viewers may seem uncomfortable, but I hope they will also be drawn in with the vibrant color palette and the naturalism of the painting, especially the natural and realistic depiction of the subjects in the paintings along with the exuberant colors and use of texture are deliberate. I want to attract the viewers, who are then met with the heavy content of the work.

I believe technique is very important and mine plays a big role. I make sure that the paintings are technically sound in the way they are executed; I use models to act out each composition based on the issues I want to address, producing an image that is then edited using Photoshop. Afterwards, the image is projected unto a canvas. Then, I carefully select a color palette that I deem suitable for the issue being addressed. I apply and blend the color on the canvas using a technique similar to that of Rembrandt called

impasto. This is the application of thick layers of paint so that they stand out from the surface of canvas. That, along with the strategic treatment of light and shadow also known as tenebrism, gives my painting the material and aesthetic appeal I desire. Luckily, the medium I use (acrylic paint) also helps with that because of its versatility. Though already thick, I add more gel medium to the paint to give it the extra thickness I need in order to achieve the textural level desired.

My paintings rely heavily on the use of symbolism, employing imagery, objects and metaphors to project ideas that drawing on the emotion and state of mind on the audience to create a dialogue. I draw upon the art of Gustav Klimt, who was known for his symbolist works with erotic and allegorical content that address important societal issues such as anxiety, doubt, sexuality, love and death. My work, also, confronts divisive issues that plague our society. People avoid having conversations about these issues, so I try to use the imagery and composition in my work to inspire my audience to confront these issues and I try to nudge them towards talking about it with the hope that it will inspire constructive self-criticism and social empathy that can foster a solution to these problems.



**Figure 1.** Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. 1647-52. Santa Maria Della Vittoria, Rome. Marble.



**Figure 2.** Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. 1647-52. Santa Maria Della Vittoria, Rome. Marble.

## CHAPTER II

### HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

In his *Dialectical Materialism*, A. Spirkin writes, “No scientifically, let alone artistically, thinking person can remain deaf to the wise voice of true philosophy, can fail to study it as a vitally necessary sphere of culture, as the source of world-view and method . . . The person who is indifferent to these spheres deliberately condemns himself to a depressing narrowness of outlook.”<sup>5</sup> This statement summarizes my belief in blending artistic and philosophical influences as the basis of my own creativity. My artworks are satirical in nature; I use this mode of expression to comment on and respond to the absurdities of ideas by creating an exaggerated scene with the intent of ridicule. However, my intentions are solely for the improvement of the human condition and for the creation of a progressive dialogue. I draw heavily on the satirical writings of the French philosopher Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet) who used this mode to ridicule the French Catholic Church and the French government during the Enlightenment era for the purposes of promoting the freedom of speech among the French people. Although Voltaire was religious himself, it did not deter him from being critical of the Christian faith (especially French Catholicism) and point out the absurdity and hypocrisy within it;

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<sup>5</sup> Spirkin, A. (1983). *Dialectical materialism: Philosophy as a world view and a methodology*. Moscow: Progress.

his main target was religious bigotry and fanaticism. In his *Philosophical Dictionary* of 1764, he pointed out the following absurdities:

Why then do the very men who embrace kindness, beneficence and justice in private denounce these virtues in public with so much fury? Why? Because their self-interest is their god, because they sacrifice everything to the monster they worship. I possess a dignity and power founded on ignorance and credulity; I tread on the heads of men prostrate at my feet: if they stand up and look me in the face, I am lost: therefore I must keep them bound to the ground with chains of iron. Thus argue the men whom centuries of fanaticism have made powerful.<sup>6</sup>

The voice of Voltaire in this passage had a profound effect on the conception of my work. I share a similar view on how many religions, rather than uplifting their subjects, have perverted and restricted them to submission.

Like the issues Voltaire tackled in his era, I see similar issues that we as a contemporary society need to tackle at this time. Unfortunately, a lot of people shy away from having conversations about these issues especially when it comes to the topic of race. Kara Walker is an artist who shocks her audience by creating works that specifically target racial issues that we face as a society. Kara Walker is known for her silhouette and collage works that invoke themes of African American racial identity but that is not the only form of art she engages in; she is a sculptor as well. With her silhouettes, at first, the audience is fooled by the simplicity of the design until they get closer and start to notice the horrifying content; her work features content from scenes of slavery, violence, and folklore dating back to pre-Civil War America. And it draws attention to these earlier

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<sup>6</sup> Voltaire, F. (1754). *Philosophical Dictionary*. London, GB: Penguin Classics; Revised ed. edition (March 6, 1984)



cultural periods and how the racial issues from back then are still very relevant in today's society. I appreciate how brutally honest her works are; she uses obvious stereotypes that are still employed in our society, and challenges her audience to confront these issues. My work similarly aims to confront my audience with uncomfortable if familiar ideas, and to deal with them head on rather than to bury them.

One of Walker's works from late spring of 2014 was a site-specific installation at the former Domino sugar compound on the edge of the East River in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York. The sculpture was monumental; an enormous sugarcoated woman designed like an Egyptian sphinx. The sculpture responds to the building like it was meant to be there. It uses the very material produced in the factory to make the work, a material product that was deeply involved in slavery and the African diaspora. The racialized black features on the sphinx cannot be denied; the figure has exaggerated big lips and the huge protruding buttocks and is only wearing an "Aunt Jemima" or "Mammie" handkerchief around her head, and large earrings. Walker uses shock tactics and size to disallow the viewer to ignore these issues; no one who sees this work can look away or forget it.

Appropriately, Walker gave this work a title that is both poetic and descriptive: *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (**Figure. 3**). The work carries multiple meanings and there is a definite satirical tone to it. The exaggerated body parts of the woman-sphinx ridicules the popular stereotypes about black people, specifically black women. The deteriorating factory itself with its dark and rustic walls is a form of reference to the overworked and underpaid laborers of the cane fields who refined the taste palate of the New World with their forced work. However, it does not stop there.

Roberta Smith of *The New York Times* in her article “Sugar, Sure, but Salted With Meaning,” points out the self-ridicule and layers of harm embedded within sugar as a product, for the excessive consumption of sugar is linked to diseases like diabetes which is seen stereotypically as a “black people disease.”<sup>7</sup> I also exploit self-ridicule in my work where I used myself as a model for one of my paintings titled *Oral Fixation: Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is* (**Figure. 4**). My image depicts a figure stuffing money, hungrily, into his mouth. It points out a certain level of hypocrisy that I have as an artist critiquing society, when I am part of that same society. Art is supposed to be this altruistic service to cleanse the world, to uplift people like a religion, while at the same time it is a commodity with tremendous monetary potential.

The satirical tone in my work is aided by the stylistic influences of Gustav Klimt, an early twentieth century symbolist painter. Symbolism began in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century and is a style that foregrounded the subjective inner world of the mind over the objective exterior world of the senses. Klimt’s paintings are rich with erotic and allegorical content. Like him, I enjoy using imagery, objects and metaphors to project ideas, rather than merely representing forms realistically. My intent is to employ emotion to inspire my audience and create a dialogue. Klimt also addressed important societal issues such as anxiety, doubt, sexuality, love and death. In his painting *Death and Life*, Klimt features an allegorical figure of “death” with a skeletal head and emaciated body gazing, grinning maliciously, at “life” represented by a collective of humans beneath a warm-toned flower-patterned blanket (**Figure. 5**). The “life” in his painting comprises all generations and all races; from a newborn baby to an aged woman, and from light skinned to dark.

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, R. (2014, May 11). *Sugar? Sure, but Salted With Meaning: 'A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby' at the Domino Plant*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12>

Klimt uses cool, dreary colors to illustrate death while using bright pastel-colors to decorate life. He renders all of this to symbolically represent the beauty of living and humanity and also the cyclical nature of life itself; from when we are a newborn to when we grow old and inevitably fall into the hands of death. Both Klimt's contrasted palette and dualistic content represent dichotomies that also appear in my work

Although Klimt's works are highly appreciated and admired now, recognition for his approach was neglected for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His works, some of which gave full expression to his own sexual appetite, were deemed too provocative, especially for public spaces, and Klimt faced charges of obscenity due to their erotic content. An example is his *Hope I*, which showed a nude pregnant woman staring unashamed out of the canvas, as if embracing her nudity directly before her audience with confidence (**Figure. 6**). According to Stephanie Hergaty of the BBC World Service, in her 2012 article "Gustav Klimt: What's the secret of his Mass appeal?" Klimt's *Hope I* was removed from the first retrospective of the Vienna Secession because it was seen to have gone far beyond the boundaries of what was considered appropriate.<sup>8</sup> *Hope I*, like many of his paintings, shows a woman embracing her body and her sexuality in an evocative and erotic position and she confronts the audience with her direct stare. Here Klimt pushed the envelope of what was considered traditional painting and this type of radicalism is what drew me to him as someone I can identify with. According to Hergaty, "To reduce Klimt's work to its decorative appeal is to ignore its radicalism. He was the leader of the secession movement, a group of Viennese artists who challenged the rigidity

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<sup>8</sup> Hergaty, S. (2012, April 24). Gustav Klimt: What's the secret to his mass appeal? Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17689920>

of traditional Austrian painting.”<sup>9</sup> Also, it was not just about the overtones of sexuality that made his work so symbolic. Klaus Pokorny of the Leopold Museum in Vienna states, “Nobody was able to synthesize feelings like love, passion or desire but also despair and anxiety like Klimt.”<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, my works are very heavy on sexual content, which may or may not be in reference to my own sexual interests or appetite, as I believe some of these desires are beyond our own consciousness or rational control. Again, I want to self-critique as an artist in order to show how my own biases and desires are present, rather than denying that they exist. However, more than personal desire, my sexual subject matter serves a larger social purpose. I explore how ideas are overtly sexualized which creates a distraction in contemporary society. There are two parts to that idea as well. Individuals sexualize ideas, which in turn makes them intensely devoted to these ideas, a way to get their “fix.” Also, a lot of important issues are smothered with sexual content by our capitalist global society in order to distract people from the importance of thinking too deeply about issues. One could compare Karl Marx’s concern that religion was the “opium of the masses” to sex now playing the same role.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, I see my audience as including a large number of people who face sexual repression. In the Texas Panhandle, where I was not born but have lived for several years, I have seen that embracing one’s sexuality or sexual appetites is still deemed taboo.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Marx, K. (1844). *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Retrieved October 27, 2018, from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/index.htm> Translated Ed. (1970)

Another artist who outwardly embraces his sexuality and foregrounds sexual content in his work is the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Much of his work has inspired controversy because of his use of nude bodies and frank depiction of S&M sexual practices, especially among gay men. His images that test social boundaries have also influenced my works. I believe that Mapplethorpe's work was misunderstood by the audience as an outpouring of sexual perversion instead of the redefinition of societal idea of perfection and beauty, or the expansion of sexual boundaries. Kevin Moore, in his article "Whipping up a Storm: How Robert Mapplethorpe Shocked America," points out how, even though Mapplethorpe was deeply spiritual, he dove into the deep end of the dark side of religion.<sup>12</sup> According to Moore, Mapplethorpe courted something of a "Catholic inversion" which is characterized by an attraction to the demonic, the violent and the abject, all while striving towards a vision of redemption, the conversion of suffering into grace through beauty, balance and stasis. Although he may or may not have intended it, Mapplethorpe's work instigated a political eruption and reformation on how artists should be given freedom to create and launched a conversation on the "obscenity" of an artist's work. There were voices both supporting and opposing his work. Moore recorded that on the April 7, 1990, protests were staged on either sides where "the local media added a third ring to the circus, relaying not only events and public opinion but also educating viewers on the fine points of Ohio obscenity law, the first amendment, the nature of art, homosexuality, the Aids crisis and sex acts most viewers never dreamed

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<sup>12</sup> Moore, K. (2015, November 17). Whipping up a storm: How Robert Mapplethorpe shocked America. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/17/robert-mapplethorpe-the-perfect-moment-25-years-later>

existed.”<sup>13</sup> Hence, Mapplethorpe’s boundary-pushing, and conversation-creating art helped inspire me to execute my conceptions. Like Mapplethorpe, I use sexual overtones to address social and political issues that plague our society.

Although I may have a target issue in mind while coming up with the content of my paintings, I still want every part of them to attract a multitude of meanings, and those various parts to sum up the whole. In 1999, in an interview for the *New York Times*, Chris Ofili talked about the symbolic use of elephant dung in his work *The Holy Virgin Mary* (**Figure. 7**). He stated, “There’s something incredibly simple but incredibly basic about it. It attracts a multitude of meanings and interpretations.”<sup>14</sup> Ofili’s radical depiction of the Virgin Mary was, like Mapplethorpe’s work, very controversial. The eight-foot-tall beautifully composed painting combined rippling dots of paint adorned with gold glitter with collaged images of women’s buttocks and genitalia that resembles butterflies (or cherubs). The work also included elephant dung delicately placed around the image of a majestic and imperial Madonna. This work was so controversial in fact that the former mayor of New York, and current attorney on the legal team of the President of the United States, Rudolph Giuliani, spoke against it describing it as being “sick.” He was so repulsed by the painting that he threatened to evict the Brooklyn Museum, which hosted the debut of the painting as part of an exhibition of Charles Saatchi’s collection in 1999. Also, he froze funding to the museum as well which in turn made the museum sue the city of New York for violating its First Amendment right. However, according to Tyler

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Vogel, C. (1999, September 28). Chris Ofili: British Artist Holds Fast to His Inspiration. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/arts/092899ofili-brooklyn-museum.html>

Foggatt of *The New Yorker*, Giuliani never even saw the painting.<sup>15</sup> He based his reaction off of hearing about the painting alone and the proof is that Giuliani never addressed the more graphic parts of the picture (the cherubs made from buttocks).

The dichotomies in Ofili's paintings are what drew me to the artist. His works are both painterly and cultural, implementing ideas from his Nigerian background as well as drawing on traditional European modes of putting paint to canvas. He also incorporates religious elements into his paintings and at the same time contrasts these with irreverent aspects. There are personal touches in his works even while they are also politically charged, targeting issues that global society has long been dealing with. Similarly, these elements are what you will find in my paintings. Like Ofili, I have combined aspects of my own Nigerian background, such as my vibrant palette and my application of paints to canvas with brushes in a non-aggressive continuous dabbing fashion that is reminiscent of West Nigerian styles of applying paint. I also use polarity to attract the viewer's attention to the paintings with the intent of creating both internal and external dialogue. My audience is perhaps first drawn in by the controversial and sexual subject matter, but then discovers in my work beauty of the paint itself and the ideas behind it.

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<sup>15</sup> Foggatt, T. (2018, May 19). Giuliani vs. the Virgin. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/28/giuliani-vs-the-virgin>



**Figure 3.** Kara Walker, *A Subtlety, or a Marvelous Sugar Baby*. 2014. Sugar, Polystyrene, plastic and molasses. Domino Sugar Factory, Brooklyn, New York.



**Figure 4.** O. Akinwale, *Put Your Money Where Money Where Your Mouth Is*. Acrylic on Canvas. 30" x 40."

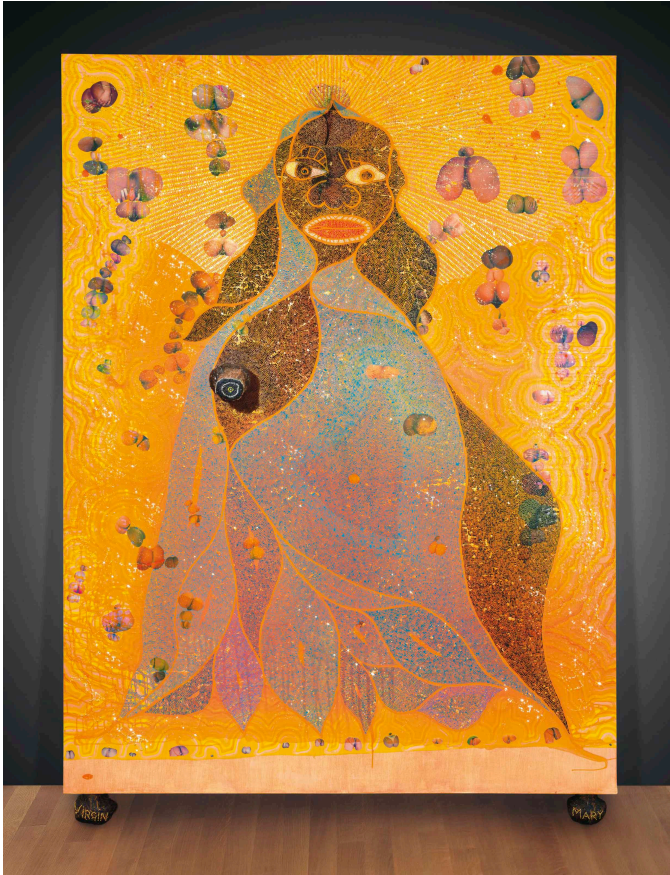




**Figure 5.** Gustav Klimt, *Death and Life*. 1910. Oil on Canvas. Leopold Museum, Austria.



**Figure 6.** Gustav Klimt, *Hope I*. 1903. Oil on Canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada.



**Figure 7.** Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary*. 1996. Acrylic, Oil, Resin, Paper Collage, Glitter, Map pins and Elephant dungs on Canvas. MoMA, Manhattan, New York.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **MATERIALS, PROCESS & TECHNIQUE**

This chapter deals with the materials used and the process of creating my paintings. My process is a collection of diverse techniques I have mastered throughout my education. For instance, my understanding of color theory has matured because of my appreciation for traditional methods of paintings—such as my use of paint applied by brushes to a canvas. I have also developed an evolution of creating imagery. I combine the old and the new to create the works in my thesis. What I mean by this is representational rendering of figures but with subjects that are both current and controversial. Moreover, I employ digital technologies to design my compositions. I use a digital camera to photograph the image from life and Photoshop to edit the image to create the reference material for the painting. Also, I use a projector to transfer the image from Photoshop to the canvas. I believe that my combination of traditional and current methods makes my paintings more reverential because my final compositions can command the deep respect from the audience when they come face to face with them. Viewers are struck by my hyper-realistic representations of figures composed in paint on canvas. They seem to take on an age value because of this.

My process requires the use of stiff synthetic brushes to apply paint on canvas. I have experimented with various surfaces include canvas, paper, and wood panel. For my

thesis work, I used canvas because I enjoy the way it accepts the paint when I apply it. The rough surface of the canvas combined with the bristle brush enhances my painting technique. The bristle paintbrush I use is made from artificial hair; it is thick and stiff, which makes it suitable for applying thick paint. It is also durable because my technique eats away the hair of the brush, which deteriorates it quicker than normal. Moreover, the synthetic bristle brush does not go limp unlike natural bristle brushes made from the hair of hogs or badgers. The natural bristle brush absorbs water in the paint and softens which makes it very unsuitable for my painting process.

My painting technique is also a combination of pointillism and impasto. Pointillism is a technique that includes applying small dots of color to a surface to create an image. Impasto is a process that includes laying on thick paint on a surface so that it stands out from that surface and the brush strokes are visible. However, the results are neither distinct dots nor visible brush strokes in my paintings as I have managed to combine those two processes to create my own style that produces a semi-rough texture instead. In order to achieve this process, I have found that round, synthetic, bristle brushes are the most suitable as my work involves a lot of rapid dabbing and constant cleaning and wiping. The direct mixing technique of applying paint aids my technique because it allows my palette to blend together on the canvas to achieve new colors in addition to pre-mixed colors I make for each painting.

Acrylic paint, which is a more recent invention than traditional oil paints, has proven to be the best type of paint to use because I can manipulate its drying time to fit my process. Acrylic paint is made by suspending pigment in acrylic polymer emulsion, which makes it higher in viscosity than oil paints and watercolor. It is water-soluble; it

can be mixed with water to reduce the thickness or extend drying time and it is water-resistant upon drying. Acrylic is more viscous and thicker than watercolor paint and oil paint, which is important in my painting because it helps to give me the preferred texture and level of roughness. Usually, acrylic paints have a thick heavy body with a buttery consistency or a thinner body. I choose to use Nova Color brand acrylic because it has a unique quality of being neither too thick nor too thin but somewhat in the middle. However, if I desire a thicker consistency, I add Nova Gel acrylic gloss medium to the paint. Also, to extend the drying time for the purpose of direct mixing during painting, I add Nova acrylic retarder to the paint.

As I have stated, acrylic paint dries faster than oil, and as someone that has a lot of layers and texture in my paintings, it is important that the type of paint I use has a specific drying time that is not too short of a drying time because of the direct mixing method of blending my pallet. Therefore, in order to considerably slow down the drying rate of the paint, I add acrylic retarder medium to the paint. The retarder slows down the drying rate of the paint, making it workable for a longer period as I meticulously blend the paint on the canvas.

Another quality of acrylic paint that appeals to me is that it is crack-resistant. This thermoplastic property is flexible in warm and cold temperatures, which makes the painting storage easier. Also, it is very durable and its toughness after it dries gives it a sturdy quality. Its lightfast quality protects it from fading with time as well. Due to these features, an acrylic painting can be kept unframed, wrapped and stored (or transported) right after the painting is complete. Acrylic paint is also very durable, a trait that is

important to creating my paintings because it can withstand repetitive mark making without diminishing the integrity of the paint.

While acrylic paint gives my paintings their rich, vibrant color, I choose to enhance this with the addition of natural earth pigments during the process of mixing color. This unique and important element gives my paint a rich, earthy vibrancy. It also ties my work back to more traditional modes of painting, returning to the theme of blending the old and the new in my work. Earth pigments are mainly iron oxides; these are minerals that are naturally occurring. People have used them as paint for thousands of years, by mixing them into water or other solvents, because of their natural color.

These natural pigments can be found in rocks and soils all over the world, where the distinct vibrant colors created are as a result of the different combination of minerals found in that region. In my case, I use pigments from the Ochre quarry in the Provence region of France, basically because I like the effects of this regional pigment the best. On occasion, some of the earth pigments are roasted with the intent of intensifying their color. The Earth pigments I mix with my colors include Havana ochre, natural Sienna, natural Umber, slates, ancient green, Rose Earth, Cyprus green and natural yellow.

Again, the idea of mixing old with the new is what motivates me to introduce natural pigments into my process. I am interested in how natural pigments have been used even since the prehistoric times; human beings have left their imprint in paint on their environment, which not only beautified their world but expressed their thoughts, emotions and the current state of living. The first paintings were created when prehistoric humans discovered natural pigments and mixed them with a medium such as water or saliva. They used the earth to express themselves, and just as they did, I wanted the

essence of the earth to be in my paintings to enhance their aesthetic, reverence, and age value for my viewers. Duality plays a big role in my painting—for instance, the old versus the new. I have chosen my materials not only because of their visual features but because I have created a symbolic and symbiotic relationship between them. The brushes, paints, and paint medium, work together harmoniously to make my rigorous process of painting successful.

My painting process starts with the conception of an idea. My ideas are a result of my research into the BDSM community; especially my curiosity of fetish behavior combined with the current state of our society. It is interesting to see the similarities in character between the people in the “fetish world” and the people who are not. I came to realize that there are similarities between the way people derive gratification from their obsession with certain ideologies and how others derive gratification from the object of their fetish. Each painting, therefore, is my portrayal of how an idea has been fetishized. In order to create that idea, I employ the assistance of models. For my models, I select people who must be able to follow instructions; they also have to be patient (because they will have to hold one or more poses for a long duration of time), bold (the content of the idea can be very uncomfortable) and as unbiased as possible towards my subject because they help me create a tangible manifestation of my concept. I bring my models into my studio where I have set up an area for photo shoots. I direct them on how and where to pose and then I take multiple shots of the positions. This process can take up to an hour. Using modern tools like a digital camera and Photoshop also play a vital role in my process.

With the aid of my camera of choice, the Nikon D3400, I am able to take sharp, quality images that are life-like. These photographs make it easy for color editing later on Photoshop. More importantly, all of my photo-shoots are done in low light and this camera shoots extremely well in these conditions. Shooting in low light can be very challenging but the results are quite rewarding because Nikon cameras are known to have some of the best autofocus systems available. Its autofocus system quickly acquires the subjects and provides precise focus especially shooting in low-light situations.

The reason I shoot in a low-light situation is for chiaroscuro of the model(s). Chiaroscuro, or the dramatic contrasts between highlights and shadows, increases the form of the models and the use of tenebrism enhances the dramatic qualities of my source images. The photographs are shot in RAW settings with a reduced shutter speed. The RAW setting offers more when it comes to editing because it captures all the information of the image without compressing the data thereby producing a higher quality image. It also provides a smoother level of transition between the tones in my images, which helps during editing as I can manipulate and adjust the contrast and dark/light settings without losing the quality of my image. The decreased shutter speed works great during low-light shooting because it allows me to control the amount of light I let into the camera. During the shoot, the light source in the room is shone directly on the models with the intent of increasing the intensity of the image produced. Plus, the flash of the camera also helps in providing a sharp quality required in the image.

The Nikon D3400 is compact and lightweight and has a comfortable grip, which enables precise handling. This is a useful feature because I have to take multiple shots at different (or the same) positions without the use of a tripod with different zoom lengths.



Also, the camera lens has a vibration reduction feature which helps in the stabilization of the images. As I move around during the shooting process, the Vibration Reduction technology helps me to minimize blur caused by camera shake, which is important to create a sharp picture before editing. Precision and attention to details are very important to the process of my paintings.

After the photography stage, I make some preliminary drawings. These drawings are usually gesture or contour drawings with little to no details with the intention of resolving composition issues. Drawing in part on traditional ways of making extensive drawings for each work, I also balance this with the employment of a modern and more immediate process of meticulous photography. The shooting situation like the camera setting, lighting effect and shooting from different angles with different zoom lengths (along with the use of Photoshop for editing) shape the result of my source image used to execute the painting. Occasionally, I make more detailed drawings especially when I need to add some elements to the images that were not in the initial stage of photographing. Most of the time, however, the sketches are done to help me compose the space of my canvas effectively. After these sketches are done, the best composition is picked and becomes a guideline for the next phase of painting preparation: color selection.

I generally use three colors to execute my paintings. Some of my color schemes are familiar like triadic colors and split complementary, but most are experimental and based on personal choices that convey the content of the painting better. I use Adobe Photoshop, which allows me to preview color interactions in my subject matter. This integrates a more modern and immediate method than the traditional method of mixing

and testing several hues. With Photoshop, I can experiment with different colors to see which ones match what I have visualized it in my mind. In order to use Photoshop to do a color test on the image, I must also use it for the value study of the content.

After the picture for the painting is taken into Photoshop, the first step is to convert the photograph into grayscale, which discards the natural color information leaving room for me to manipulate the photograph with my chosen colors. Next, I convert the file into duotone mode, which is where I input the colors I have chosen on to the photographs. Duotone allows me to take the tonal range of my image, from lightest tones to darkest, and allocate a different color to a specific part of the tonal range. In that mode, you have options to choose from a variety of tonal settings. In the Duotone process menu, I choose tritone because my color selections are divided into three parts; the highlight, the mid-tones and the dark, all of which are modified during the painting process. The tritone provides me with three box options for three inks: ink 1, ink 2 and ink 3. Ink one is filled with the color for the darkest parts of the image, ink 2 is filled with the mid-tone color and ink 3 is filled with the light tone. I alter the colors to fit the respective parts of the image are chosen, then I adjust and blend the colors properly by using the curve tool on each side of the ink boxes. This tool allows me to adjust the area covered by the respective colors and also allows me to blend each color with the other to create a unified image.

After the color selection is done, the next phase is to mix my palette. The dark tone, mid-tone, and light tone are mixed and tested on a small canvas because the colors created on the screen in Photoshop are additive, and do not necessarily compare with the subtractive color mixing in paint. Also, these tests allow me to see how harmonious the

colors are to each other. Acrylic paint dries darker than it appears when wet and the "blend test" canvas is left to sit out for a few hours or overnight to see what it looks like when fully dried. At any point, if the original selections do not work, then I adjust and tweak my color mixtures until that match my vision for the painting.

After the color selection is finalized, I apply gesso to the surface of the canvas to prep the canvas. Gesso dries hard, making the surface stiffer; it primes the surface of the canvas for painting. Also, it makes the surface slightly textured and ready to accept acrylic paint. After the gesso has dried, the mid-tone paint is applied to the blank canvas. This tone-ground serves as the under painting, which is an initial layer of paint applied to the canvas that serves as a base for subsequent layers of paint. The tone ground additionally serves as a unifying tone for both the darker and lighter colors during painting and I choose to make the toned ground with the mid-tone because it is easier to work up to the lighter color and down to the darker color from that point. The mid-tone is applied to the canvas twice to create the ground color and set to fully dry overnight. Afterward, the image is drawn on the canvas.

My paintings rely on an accurate proportion of the images, as there are vital parts of the images that I want to make very clear and obvious to the viewer and hyper-realistic portrayal of the images, which along with the vibrancy of my palette, serves as a way to lure the viewer in before they are met with social issues the painting addresses. Therefore, it is important that every part of the image is rendered as proportionately as possible especially since the images are usually in an open composition. To ensure this accuracy, I choose to project my source imagery on to the canvas, which is then outlined

with pastel chalk in tonal ranges. I allocate different colors in the drawing to the different tones of the painting, resulting in a contour drawing of the image to be painted.

After the image is drawn on the canvas, painting ensues. I paint from dark to light, starting with the darker part of the form and work my way up the value scale, across the form, toward the lighter part. I tackle the larger areas of the forms first and work my way towards the smaller areas but no area. The big areas are treated as importantly as the small because it is important that the painting shows an even level of consistency. Like every artist, I have my own “rituals”. For every painting session, I section out a portion of the painting I will be working on that day and I work on it for three straight hours at a time. After which I take a break and come back to a different portion of the painting to repeat for three hours. Most times, I section out the day into three-hour parts per session with at least an hour break to every three hours. This “ritual” has a practical application. The rapid and continuous motion of my hand during painting is how I blend my colors and create texture, but this is a meticulous process. I use up a lot of energy and in order not to get burnt out too quickly; the three-hour increments keep me from exhaustion.

In order to attain my texture, the paint is applied to the surface of the canvas in a continuous, dabbing manner with a round bristle brush. This purpose of the dabbing process is to blend the paints on the surface of the canvas and create the textured surface. This dabbing technique for applying paint not only serves as a means for the painting process but also serves as a homage to my Ile-Ife (West Nigerian) Heritage. The Ile-Ife people revere texture; they have a genuine appreciation for the interaction between your hand and what you touch. Therefore, a lot of the artifacts that came from that part of the world tend to be textural. Texture was not only restricted to arts that were created but

could be found in their surroundings, including the houses they build, the household utensils they use and even in the fabrics they wear in their clothing. Although they did not use a round bristle brush, I employ the dabbing technique to create the texture on the surfaces of their objects. Nigerian textures are usually heavy and very obvious. However, this inspired me to use this historical regional style to create a new form of mark making that produced a subtler texture in my paintings.

Although my painting process is meticulous, each step of the process and each material used play an important role in the creation of my paintings. The paintings are serious and intense and they tackle issues that a lot of people would rather not address. It is important for me to create a body of work that not only draws people's attention to the technical execution of the paintings but also holds attention and keeps them fascinated through the art itself, through my color choices, my painting techniques, and my subtle textures. As I have mentioned, this tactic lures the viewer in and creates a starting point to an important conversation that I feel is necessary today, and likewise inspires questions born out of self-reflection that ought always to be asked.

## CHAPTER IV

### PAINTINGS



*Sado-Masochism: For Love of the Net*

This painting shows the obsessive nature most of us have developed with and through the Internet, whether we discovered the web later in our lives or if it has been a part of our lives since our birth. In the painting, a figure with a mask with the

“@” sign is seen in a domineering position with one hand wrapped around the other figure’s neck. This gesture implies the contrast between the dominant position of the person represented by the “@” sign of the Internet and the submissive position of the other figure. The dominant figure’s other hand also holds tightly to a rope that has bound the subjective figure. This image depicts a power structure that is known in BDSM relationship as the master/slave relationship, where everything the slave does is solely at the behest of his/her master. To impress the master results in the slave being “rewarded” or in some cases, punished. Similarly, I see our human relationship with the Internet operating this way. Everything we do is to acquire rewards in “likes” and “shares” and there seems to be little to no limit to what a lot of people will do to get that reward. I have watched people retake the same photographs in the same pose for over 20 minutes trying to get the “right” angle before they post it on all of their social media, as if their identity and worth depended upon their feedback through the web. Other people have put their lives in danger just to be rewarded by the net. Not only do they painstakingly create the posts, they obsessively check these posts almost every minute just to see who has viewed it and liked it, how many likes they have acquired and how many times it has been shared. Moments that were deemed intimate are no longer so, not between friends, lovers or parents and children. Almost, if not everything people do is for the purpose of putting it online, presenting it to please the Internet public. And like the BDSM master/slave relationship, the Internet rewards or punishes. It rewards with being admired for a short period of time, with trending number one on their

respective social media, or with punishment for posting the wrong “statement” and becoming a presumed social pariah.





*Menage a Trois: We Need Each Other to Get Off*

The purpose of this painting is for the viewer to have a self-reflection on how their respective cause affects society and how powerful words or statements don't always result in effective social change. In the painting, there are three figures shown participating in a sexual threesome. The figures are used to represent some of the most popular movements in our society: Neo-Nazism/Fascism, Feminism, and Black Power. These three figures are shown in a state of mutual asphyxiation; they are all choking each other for the purpose of shared ecstasy. This painting neither entirely dismisses nor entertains the social movements but rather criticizes the unhealthy obsession people have with those ideas. It would seem that, in most cases, a lot of people are beginning to forget the original intent behind the movements that were created. Instead, they are more interested in playing the antagonist; they are

dependent upon mutually exclusive hatred for their existence and continued power. Radical ideas based on social inclusion and betterment, such as Black Power or Feminism, are created for reform and to enact change in our society. However, it is apparent that sometimes the followers of these supposedly positive ideas have lost touch with that intent. Their rigidity becomes closer to exclusionary movements such as Fascism. Movements are constantly opposing each other even when they are striving towards the same general goals. But because they are focused on different issues, they do not want to see the other's point of view. Sometimes, they even attack those who support their ideas because they can no longer discern between seeking resolution and retribution. My painting shows how they are constantly at each other's throats, while depending upon figuring each other as enemies to keep their movement going, while the problems they hope to address remains unsolved.



*Auto-Erotic Asphyxiation: For Love of Piety*



I believe the concept of most religions, at their core, is meant to be good. It is supposed to give people a safe haven to unburden themselves and offer hope especially during turbulent times. However, over the years, we have seen how a lot of people tend to have an excessive commitment to and even dangerous obsession with their religions. People have become constricted by their respective religions; they are asphyxiated by religious ideals and unable to see how their obsession is detrimental, not only to the people around them but also to themselves. The dogma of most religious sects plays a huge role in the road to obsession. Therefore in this painting, I show a figure in a state of autoerotic asphyxiation with a plaque with the word "piety" on it. This is used to represent both the cathartic deprivation and self-satisfaction religious fanatics get from their fixed dedication to religious beliefs. The image is painted in a state of immense pleasure even though she seems to be suffocating. This was chosen to show how a lot of religions or sects not only profess themselves as being the religion with the right and true god but also emphasize the importance of belief itself, the importance of piety, self-sacrifice, and giving over to the communal institution. In a lot of cases, this results in one religion seeing another as an enemy even while it enslaves its followers.



*Menage a Trois: For Love of Guns*

In this painting, there are three figures in a threesome with one figure holding a gun like a phallus towards another with the gun in his mouth while the third figure plays with a gun on his own. The fetish objects in this painting are the firearms and the person holding the fetish object is the center is shown in a towering, dominant position while the other figures are in a submissive state. This painting is not meant to support or oppose the ownership of guns but instead to show and satirize the obsession gun lovers have with their guns. The issue of guns is one that has plagued our society for a long time. But no matter how much damage has been done with guns, often, gun lovers or “gun nuts” (also known as ammosexuals) do not see a problem with guns and surely do not see a need to control them. Their rhetoric, usually, is that it is not the guns that are causing the damage but people instead. As

true as that may seem, it is also people who not only have easy access to these guns that cause the problems but also how many of these people fetishize their guns, reminding of us the psychological disorders related to the stockpiling of weapons, the fear and paranoia that drive it, and the obsession with ownership of weapons that signify power or control. It is not unlike a dominant/submissive relationship in BDSM culture. And without an adequate form of control, this easy access to guns can become dangerous, like sexual self-harm. To love an object or an idea is not bad in and of itself, but to love so much that one puts blinders on to the adverse social and human effects of this object is when fetishism becomes a social problem. To show this gun-related social problem is the point in my painting.

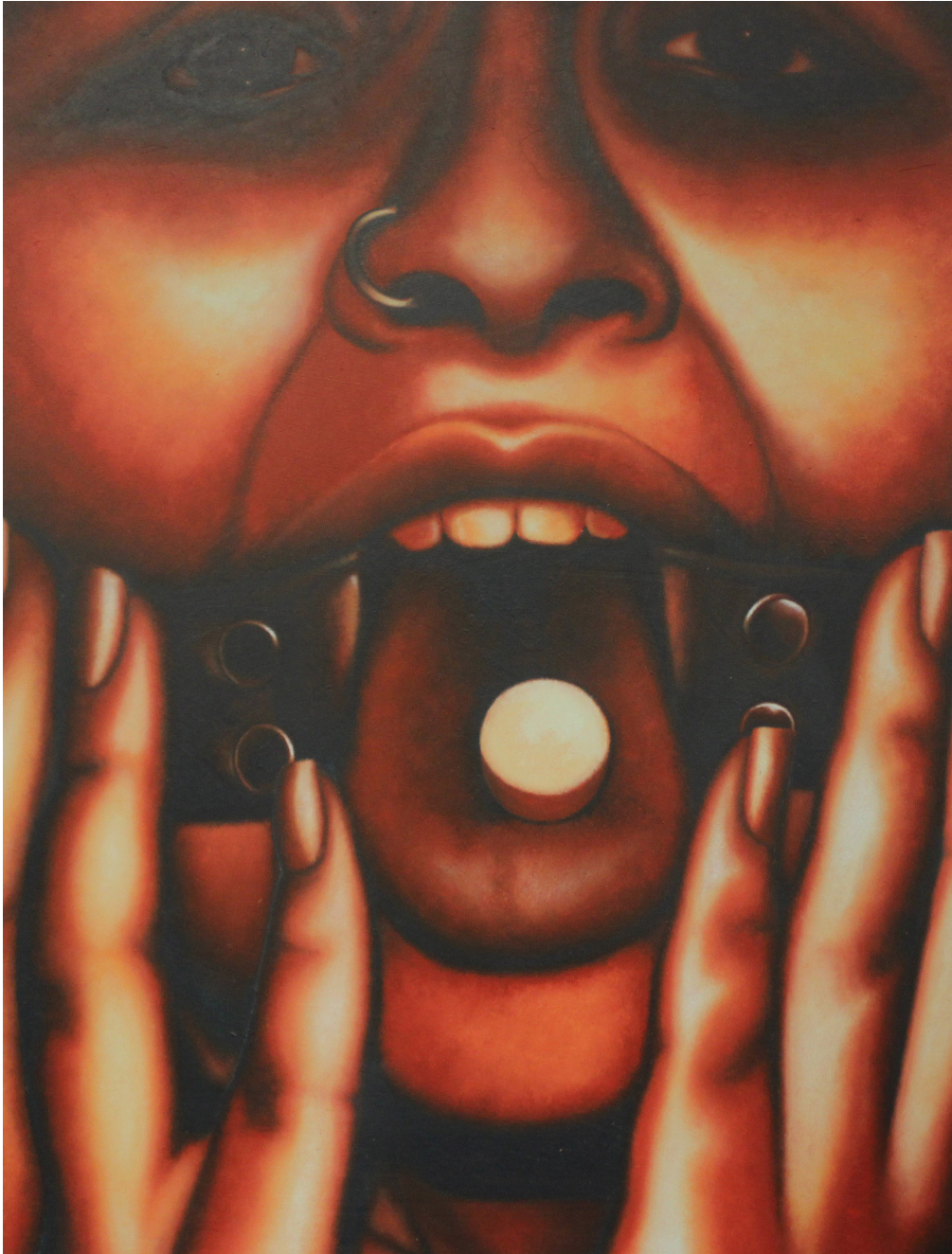


*Sado-masochism: For Love of Country*

In my opinion, nationalism is patriotism that has been corrupted, an idea that I address in this painting. Unlike patriotism, which can promote the love and loyalty to country while still advocating for the progress of the world as a whole, true nationalism only promotes blind loyalty to country with no regard for the rest of the world. Patriotism can still include self-criticism and the desire to make one's country better, welcoming both internal and external criticism with a desire for progress, growth, and change that betters the whole population. Nationalists, on the other hand, have an unhealthy commitment and blind loyalty to the country based on exclusive views and populations; it only wishes to promote the country's

interests without regard to others beyond the nation, and also without regard to some people who claim citizenship within the nation. Criticism of the government is out of the question with pure nationalism; indeed, it is a vile crime. This ideal of detrimental and exclusionary love and loyalty is what this painting addresses. There are two figures in the painting; the hand of a hidden figure (used to represent the hand of the country or nation) is seen strangling the other figure (the nationalist) who appears to be enjoying it. This dynamic is similar to that of the Sado-masochist (sadist and masochist) relationship in the BDSM community. The sadist in this content is the hand of the imaginary figure, the dominating idea of nationalism, while the masochist is the figure being asphyxiated, the person devoted to unhealthy and dangerous nationalism. The devoted nationalist derives pleasure from their commitment to and inclusion within a self-defined nation to the detriment of others beyond themselves. In this painting, I show how the nationalist has given up power to the idea that satisfies him or her, and only him or her. The isolation of this figure shows their lack of concern beyond themselves. However, this submission of power to the nation is not really about a beneficial love of country but rather about the nationalist's self-gratification.





*Oral Fixation: I Love My Pills*

There is no question that our society suffers from the problem of opium addiction in recent years. The epidemic has caused countless loss of lives and damage to families and communities. And still there are not enough conversations about this issue. For me, this issue is deeply tied into the other issues, the desire for self-gratification and

freedom from pain or fear, as with gun fetishes or religious zealotry. Here, opioids offer relief from pain and reality. They are readily available on the pharmaceutical market, easy to obtain for public use, not unlike the Internet and its ever presence in our society. The phrase “it is not their fault... it is a disease” is used when it comes to people who suffer addiction without enough critique of both the system that encourages drug use and the individual who succumbs to drugs. While BDSM sexual practices are still seen as deviant, the use of drugs remains somewhat socially acceptable or at least excusable. My painting asks the individual to look inward to see if they truly want to succumb to fetishization, escape, and masochistic self-damage, or if they are willing to take some personal responsibilities for their ailment. To be sure, BDSM communities seem to know their limits far better than your average drug addict. Knowing “when to stop” is the key. That is why the figure in the painting is wearing an open-mouth gag to pry open her mouth that has a pill (opioid) on her tongue. The gag is used to represent the voluntary succumbing to both the pleasure that comes with the temporary euphoria of the opiate and the pain of the aftereffects. The viewer can see a mix of agony and pleasure on the figure’s face. To be sure, the open-mouth gag is uncomfortable; it is usually worn on the submissive partner by their dominants as a form of punishment or on a masochist who enjoys or gains pleasure from pain. Although the submissive wears this gag, he/she is usually free to take it off as it gets continuously uncomfortable, which means they are responsible for their own freedom. Similarly, in this painting, we see that the figure’s hands are free to rid herself of the things causing her pain but she does not because of the pleasure of the pill.

Many understand that these opiates temporarily alter the user's consciousness putting them in a temporary euphoric state; they serve as a shortcut to instant happiness or to a heightened state of pleasure that most do not experience in their everyday life. Therefore, in order to experience that state, they become entangled in the web of drugs, which in the end only results in pain and loss. The pleasure is not sustainable. Also, the fact that these drugs are highly romanticized in our society does not help; most of the people we look up to (especially the creative people; in music, art, movies) suffer from this ailment. Because we look up to these people and compare our lives to theirs, we think it okay to live how they live. It is like the way that the Internet presents only one side of people, only masks of reality not truth. And yet, we fall into the trap of believing what the Internet (or religion for that matter) shows us. So, it is understandable that in the current state of our society, some people will continue to look towards nefarious means to find happiness but is that society's fault or the fault of the individual? My works show that it is both—a system that fetishizes instant self-gratification and weak-minded people who can't see the dangers of the system. I am hoping that my painting helps viewers to self-critique how they are falling into these traps, and how as individuals together they can build a better society and can undermine these problems. This painting, or any of my paintings, is not meant to place total blame on the individual for their afflictions but to create a conversation that weighs the individual responsibilities with that of our society.



*Oral Fixation: Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is*

In this painting, I tackle the issue of materialistic obsession that has plagued our global society for so long, especially our obsession with immediate gratification through the continuous desire to sell and own products and maintain a thriving capitalist economy. The appreciation for human input in the labor of creating

products has been alienated and we are more concerned with mass production in order to make as much money as we can regardless of how it affects our society. Often, this money stays within the hands of a few, while the majority of humans remain impoverished, indebted, and without plentiful resources. The humane factor of money and economy has been removed and money has become the end game rather than a means to an end. We have lost touch with the value and importance of human labor and human life, and we value money and material things over ourselves as humans. That's why in this painting I chose to have the figure greedily shoving money in his or her mouth in a state of aggressive ecstasy. The figure is wearing a bondage head hood mask not only to make the individual identity hidden (as the figure represents all of us) but this mask is used as a metaphor for our submission to what has been fetishized: the money. Fetishization is the over-valuing of something, beyond efficacy. Money in and of itself is just paper, just buying power. It is not true contentment, peace, or self-worth. This painting was created to help us question our relationship with the commodities we consume and ask ourselves the important questions. Have we become so lost in consumption that we have forgotten what is really valuable? And how do we begin to find our way to where we value the human labor and human life over the materials and the money we make from them?





*Bondage: For Love of God*

In this painting, I show a figure in a state of prayer, with her hands bound by both an object of restraint around her wrists and a prayer bead wrapped around her hand. The bondage is self-inflicted as the image is alone in the frame. She has bound herself to her god, from whom (and only whom) she expects answers, gratification

and pleasure. This painting is not meant to debate or dismiss the existence (or non-existence) of god but rather to encourage the self-reflection and critique of those who believe in god or a god. Personally, I think the idea of god gives people hope, especially against the turbulence of existence and our inevitable demise. However, an obsessive fixation of that idea also enslaves the mind and the body, usually, unbeknownst to those who consider themselves “godly.” Religious individuals tend to set a lot of restrictions on their lives based on their assumption of what their god wants. These assumptions restrict them from doing things that in some cases could be beneficial to them. Likewise, it sometimes compels them to do things that are detrimental to them and those around them. Mostly, they are consumed by the euphoria of transcendence, superiority as the chosen one, absolution from inevitable mistakes and shortcomings, and immortality and freedom from the fear of death, all of which are promised by their god. The pleasure and even ecstasy that comes from their beliefs and its promises keeps them subjugated in every aspect of their lives; not unlike BDSM culture and practices, it keeps them in a state of self-inflicted servitude. And yet, BDSM still retains a level of choice and self-awareness of limits; I fear that sometimes commitments to religious zealotry do not. It succumbs to pure and long-term, even eternal, submission.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

My paintings are made as a response to issues in our contemporary moment. They target social issues, especially the relationship between fetishization and the fanaticism of ideas—such as political divisions, religion and spirituality, or gun ownership—and how those ideas have consumed us and subjugated us. These issues are not new but they seem to be at a heightened state especially since the dawn of the Internet, a change that I also address. My work aims to encourage self-reflection rather than being judgmental or pejorative; I hope that viewers, after being initially shocked at my content, will begin to self-critique regarding patterns that we are all guilty of.

To fully convey my ideas, I invoke the world of BDSM, or Bondage (Bondage and Discipline), Domination (Dominance and submission), Sadism and Masochism. The practices and culture of BDSM allow me to depict images of how we are enslaved by the ideas that we obsess over, relinquishing control voluntarily to rather than being forced into them. At the same time, my images remind viewers of how blind we can often be to the self-destructive nature of our behaviors, and how detrimental they are to us and to those around us. One of the common misconceptions of the power dynamic between the “dominant” role and the “submissive” role in BDSM is that the dominant is in complete control of the submissive with the submissive has no control at all. That is not entirely



true. The submissive gives the dominant power by voluntarily giving up control. Without the submissive giving up control, the dominant is powerless and the submissive has the power to take back what they have given if they so choose. Therefore, my intent is to let my viewers understand that although we may have submitted to these ideas, we have the power to remove ourselves from under their control. The relationship of power is not permanent.

My paintings are all purposefully rendered in an explicit manner and can be quite aggressive. For me, it was important to catch and keep the viewers' attention. At the same time, however, my paint methods are traditional and attempt to convey beauty in the forms and techniques I use, again with the goal of attracting the viewers' eyes. I used soft brushwork, hyper realistic rendering of the models and vibrant colors to disarm the viewers prejudice so as to have a full experience of the paintings. Whether shocked by the content, or impressed by the fine painting—or, more likely, both—viewers are meant to have trouble looking away from my works. This strategy encourages my audience to take time to ponder the issues targeted at them not just by my paintings, but by the contemporary society in which they live. These experiences promote the asking of important questions. Do we truly want to succumb to fetishization, escape, and masochistic self-damage or are we willing to take some personal responsibilities for our ailment?

My paintings are not intended to blame any one individual but rather to create a conversation that weighs the individual responsibilities with that of our society, with the hope of promoting self-criticism. My work aims to show viewers how they can free

themselves of an unrecognized bondage in which they live day to day, and how together, we can build a better, more aware society.

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