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My pleasure (forever yours)

Marina Ross
University of Iowa

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MY PLEASURE (FOREVER YOURS)

by

Marina Ross

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2018

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Susan Chrysler White

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2018

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Marina Ross

has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree
in Art at the May 2018 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

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Ronald Rozencohn

Tameka Norris

Andrew Casto

To Henry

“At the moment, my art is situated between the pornographic tendency to reveal everything and the erotic inclination to hide what it’s all about.”

Marlene Dumas

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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

My practice consists of painting, ceramic sculptures, and performance to consider the construction of self-identity and the role of agency and labor in this construction. Mining my life experiences as a point of departure, I question how visual images, sculptural abstractions, and physical movement create a multi-dimensional representation of the self and how the body is a vehicle for the expression and formation of the self. I source images from family photos and film stills to question how I have embodied qualities from the women in these images. I will discuss my thesis exhibition *My Pleasure (Forever Yours)* to unpack particular decisions made within the works and how they relate to the larger narrative that I construct.

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EXHIBITION STATEMENT

My Pleasure (Forever Yours) explores how the body acts as a conduit for communication and serves as an entryway for desire, fantasy and transformation. The exhibition features two paintings facing each other on opposite walls and eight ceramic sculptures sitting on sculptural pedestals. I compare the act of making objects to meditation where I am seeking to create new experiences through the transformation of physical objects. In this installation, I explore how the body itself has the potential to become transformed through internal and external modes of labor.

Source images used for the paintings are inspired by film stills from the 1990 romantic comedy *Pretty Woman*. This movie symbolizes memories from my childhood and my family's immigration to the US from the Soviet Union. For many years, it was the only movie that my aunt owned and we watched it together every time I slept over at her home. My aunt Rita, who died from breast cancer several years ago, was a major force in my life who introduced me to painting. While she used the film as an English-learning aid, I embraced themes from the movie about love and money and how the female body functions as a site of transformation. The *Makeover* has become its own genre in cinema, perpetuating an ideology that the female body requires alteration, often from external sources. As a child, I accepted these themes as truth and reproduced this ideology throughout my life. While I now have a sharper eye for discerning the artifice in the film, I am still searching for how bodily transformation may occur, albeit in more complicated terms.

By carefully selecting and painting the film stills, the resulting image is representative of a simplified understanding of the language and specific narrative details that I experienced originally watching this film. As a child, I was primarily driven by the emotional impact of the

fairy tale love story, told through glamorous costume design and a romantic soundtrack.

Makeover, a large and monumental painting depicts the scene where the main character, Vivian played by Julia Roberts, goes on a shopping spree and embarks on her transformation from sex worker into the appearance of elegant woman. The painting on the opposite wall, *Ice Cream*, depicts a server's hand, dressed in a suit jacket and dress shirt, gently placing a robin egg-colored scoop of ice cream in a martini glass down on a metal serving tray. Both images refer to the service industry, where shopping and fine dining restaurants are synonymous with wealth, success, and class. In these worlds, the body is meant to feel comfortable and enjoy a sense of physical freedom. Painting these images reinforces the construction of illusion and importance of image in this world. What is significant about Vivian's transformation is that it is predominantly physical—her clothing is changed and she is taught by the hotel manager Barney how to behave in a restaurant. Through Vivian's wardrobe change and the lessons that she receives on proper table manners, we see that her transformation is largely illusory, based on physical and mechanical alterations.

The glazed ceramic sculptures and pedestals, on the other hand, are more akin to the real things of physical substance, suggestive of bodily transience. They speak to a perspective of the body in which it is accessed from the inside rather than transformed from the outside. The ceramic sculptures, which sit on the pedestals, echo the luxury goods presented on the table in *Makeover*. Functioning as objects of desire, they have no recognizable utility. Conflating objects of desire such as consumer goods with body parts or objects that have been pulled out of the body suggests our relationship to the physical and how the body or perception of the physical world alters our relationship to ourselves. Considering how the body is an object of desire in

itself, the glazed sculptures may become symbols of female sexuality. The sculptures are open containers or vessels which make reference to the female reproductive system as a partially open network with the potential and vulnerability for physical change, such as pregnancy. The *Telephone* pieces are symbolic of this system where an opening at the top provides a channel that moves down into a large, bulbous shape, referencing an enlarged uterus. *Colposcope*, a large open ceramic sculpture allows the viewer to look directly into what appears to be a set of legs, alluding to an invasive medical procedure, rendering the body fully open and exposed. The ceramic sculptures reference the physical, at times abject, mechanics of the body that have the potential to suggest forces entering the body.

The installation of the paintings and sculptures in one space further explores various entry points into the body. Ideas about inside and outside are addressed in the two forms to suggest a distinct separation as to how the two modes function together, calling into question how we navigate the body as both a physical and nonphysical space. Each pedestal is slightly different, serving the function of a support system while suggesting an alternative path toward the inside of the body. Standing up on their own, each sculptural body is heavy, but also fragile and often unstable. The space of the exhibition becomes a landscape where illusions of bodily fantasy are portrayed side-by-side with the reality of the body as an environment subject to fragmented moments of communication. Literal references to physical transformation and visceral bodily appendages call into question how the physical informs the nonphysical and how nonphysical transformation begins on the surface of the body.



Figure 1. Installation view of *My Pleasure (Forever Yours)*, 2018.



Figure 2. Installation view of *My Pleasure (Forever Yours)*, 2018.



Figure 3. Installation view of *My Pleasure (Forever Yours)*, 2018.



Figure 4. Installation view of *My Pleasure (Forever Yours)*, 2018. (top) *Ice Cream*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas. 16 x 24 inches. (bottom) *Chalices*, 2018. Glazed ceramic, tea kettle, plaster, wood, and spray paint. 49 x 12 x 12 inches.



Figure 5. Installation view of *My Pleasure (Forever Yours)*, 2018.



Figure 6. *Makeover*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas. 67 x 120 inches.



Figure 7. Installation view of *My Pleasure (Forever Yours)*, 2018. (front) *Telephone*, 2018. Glazed ceramic, wood, bucket, plaster, and spray paint. 56 x 12 x 12 inches.



Figure 8. *Colposcope*, 2018. Glazed ceramic, fabric, plaster, and metal shop stool. 39 x 20 x 17 inches.



Figure 9. *Telephone*, 2018. Glazed ceramic and cinder blocks. 54 x 7.5 x 7.5 inches.



Figure 10. *Crowning*, 2018. Glazed ceramic, bucket, wood, plaster, and fabric. 53" x 12 x 10 inches.



Figure 11. *Telephone*, 2018. Glazed ceramic, bucket, wood, and plaster. 46 x 12 x 12 inches.



Figure 12. *Chalices*, 2018. Glazed ceramic, tea kettle, wood, plaster, and spray paint. 49 x 12 x 12 inches.



Figure 13. *Telephone*, 2018. Glazed ceramic, styrofoam, plaster, and casters. 62 x 16 x 16 inches.



Figure 14. *Top/Bottom*, 2018. Glazed ceramic, cinder block, acrylic on wood, and plaster. 56 x 24 x 12 inches.