THESIS

FRAGMENTING THE GAZE

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

FRAGMENTING THE GAZE

In my figurative paintings, I utilize narrative fragmentation and compositional simultaneity to explore cultural constructs of gender roles, femininity, vanity, and consumerism in contemporary life. My work often highlights the absurdities of human behavior, playfully critiquing these patterns while simultaneously acknowledging the grace of the human condition. Engaging with elements of art history, I employ narrative fragmentation as a tool to reflect contemporary societal structures while also recognizing historical patterns.

In the following sections, I will begin by defining narrative fragmentation, first in literary terms and then in relation to fine art. I will discuss how narrative fragmentation has become a popular tool in artmaking over the last century, serving as a commentary on society, and I will highlight specific artists who embrace this approach. I will analyze the compositional strategies in the works of these artists in conjunction with my own, identifying both similarities and differences in content and themes.

By adopting a feminist approach to painting, I aim to challenge the male gaze and the tropes that male artists have employed throughout art history. To strengthen my investigation, I will highlight contemporary female artists who share this goal. Together with these artists, I advocate for dismantling gender norms and reclaiming the female figure.

I argue that while female nudity is a prominent feature in my paintings, it does not adhere to the objectification typically linked to the male gaze. Although the male gaze may never be entirely eradicated, it can be effectively challenged. By referencing influential feminist art critics

and artists, I emphasize the importance of acknowledging the female experience, with my paintings serving as representations of these experiences.

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PART I: INTRODUCTION TO NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION

The word "fragment" comes from the latin word *fragmentum*, which derives from *frangere*, meaning "to break, to shatter, to crash." Therefore, a fragment can be interpreted as a ruptured piece of a whole.

In literary terms, a fragmentary piece of writing is made up of disjointed segments and lacks order in terms of chronology, tone, and meaning. Fragmented narratives can appear in the forms of poetry, prose, short stories and vignettes, and novels written nonchronologically. In the introduction of *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction,* Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drąg describe fragmentary literary works as denying "completeness, linearity and coherence in favor of incompletion, disruption and gaps" and "a writer's response to the societal upheaval in which they found themselves at the turn of the 20th century."[1] They go on to describe this upheaval when they state that "At the beginning of the twentieth century, chaos, confusion and a sense of crisis prevailed in the context of technological, social and economic modernization, scientific breakthroughs such as Einstein's theory of relativity, the decline of philosophical, religious and moral certainties and the catastrophe of the First World War."[2] Elizabeth Wanning Harries, in her book *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century*, writes that "We tend to think of fragmentary forms as radically discontinuous, reflecting a discontinuous, unstable, uncentered universe. The world is in chaos, and we represent that chaos in fragments."[3]

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[1] Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drąg, "Introduction: the art of the fragment," in *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction,* ed. Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drąg (Vernon Press, 2019), xi.
[2] Guignery and Drąg, xiv.
[3] Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century* (The University Press of Virginia, 1994), 34.

It becomes blatant that these various sources outlining the rise of narrative fragmentation attribute it to societal pandemonium. Today we are faced with the unique cultural and political turmoil of our time, and this disorder is reflected in literature as well as film and the visual arts. With a resurgence in the 21st century, narrative fragmentation is "a way for contemporary writers to reflect today's accelerated culture of social media and overcommunication within which long-form fiction seems increasingly anachronistic."[4]

Contemporary American writer Maggie Nelson is known to defy genre classification, working with the literary forms and themes of poetry and prose, art criticism, memoir, feminism and queerness. Considering this, she is a paramount example of a writer using narrative fragmentation.

The Red Parts: A Memoir is premised on the 1969 slaying of Nelson's Aunt Jane but is categorized by Nelson as a memoir.[5] The year before the publication of *The Red Parts,* Nelson published *Jane: A Murder,* a book alternating between Jane's diary entries and Nelson's own poetry surrounding themes of girlhood and the understanding of violence.[6] The framework consists of fragmentary elements that disrupt the traditional chronological narrative. *The Red Parts* is in a way a continuation of *Jane,* written when new DNA evidence had been established in the killing of Nelson's aunt the year of *Jane's* publication. This memoir takes the reader on Nelson's physical and emotional journey attending the 2005 trials as well as recollections of her own experiences as a young woman. She goes into detail about unrequited love and sexual exploration, as well as the death of her father as a child and the relationships she maintains with her existing family. The book therefore does not hold the true crime element as its main theme.

[4] Guignery and Drąg, xi.
[5] Maggie Nelson, *The Red Parts: A Memoir* (Free Press, 2007).
[6] Maggie Nelson, *Jane: A Murder* (Soft Skull Press, 2005).

Rather, it's about love, family, sex and isolation. These themes have been of importance since the beginning of mankind but have taken on a new context in the twenty-first century. For example, families move away from one another, and sex can be expressed more freely, not confined to man and woman or upon the union of marriage. Isolation can, perhaps, be a result of the former two points, and the fact that we live in a time and place where the value of community and companionship has arguably been reduced. This selection of themes rings true to Guignery's insight that fragmentariness can commonly be associated with "loss, lack and vulnerability."[7]

Nelson's book *Bluets* can be said to revolve around the theme of blue, and Nelson's lifelong connection with the various shades and emotions that the color generates. However, the 240 short fragments, in no chronological order, explore further themes involving sex, death, and human connection. In 48., Nelson writes:

> Imagine, for example, someone who fucks like a whore. Someone who seems good at it, professional. Someone you can still see fucking you, in the mirror, always in the mirror, crazy fucking about three feet away, in an apartment lit by blue light, never lit by daylight, this person always fucking you from behind in blue light and you both always seem good at it, dedicated and lost unto it, as if there is no other activity on God's given earth your bodies know how to do except fuck and be fucked like this, in this dim blue light, in this mirror. What do you call someone who fucks this way?[8]

Nelson snuck the mention of blue in there, but this excerpt goes far beyond the color and into brazen personal territory. Blue, like sex, is something we all have a connection to in vastly different ways. Directly following, 49. consists of one line: "There is a color inside of the fucking, but it is not blue."[9] The topic of sex appears in much of her writing, but not always with

[7] Guignery and Drąg, xii.
[8] Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Wave Books, 2009), 19.
[9] Nelson, *Bluets,* 19.

the same tone. Human connection is of the greatest importance to Nelson, but she hits the nail on the head with her descriptions of solitude, longing, and loss.

Nelson writes with undeniable courage and honesty, transforming the way women write and the subjects they address. Her approach to exploring the feminine experience parallels that of contemporary painters who investigate the female gaze. In my own practice, I notice thematic similarities related to honest expressions of sexuality, as well as feelings of isolation and longing. By presenting realistic aspects of the feminine experience, I often highlight female sexuality, which has frequently been ignored or erased in historical accounts of art. Acknowledging that no experience is ideal, I also create works that reflect the vulnerability women continue to face.

In my painted diptych, *The Geese Fly South for the Winter* (Fig. 1), I depict a mingling of men and women at a formal event, perhaps a party. The men wear identical suits, while the women don identical dresses, suggesting a pervasive desire to conform. The imagery on the left side of the diptych contrasts sharply with the right side, where I portray a large group of sheep. By juxtaposing these two images, I am not simply commenting on sheep or parties; rather, I am addressing the societal patterns that compel individuals to adhere to societal expectations of men and women. But what happens if we free ourselves from these tethers of society?

PART II: NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION IN FINE ART

Revisiting Guignery and Drąg's introduction in *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction,* they attribute the birth of narrative fragmentation in literature to the dramatic economic and cultural shifts in society at the turn of the twentieth century. The same can be said of the use of narrative fragmentation in the visual arts. Kirk Varnedoe, in his 1990 book *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern,* writes that "in the late nineteenth century, the forms of paintings and sculptures become independently assertive, and content – in the traditional sense of recognizable things and figures composed in ordered scenes or legible stories – seems to become secondary."[10] He goes on to state that "what you see in the forms of modern art is neither a route to higher truths nor a lesson in cognitive austerity but an index of the material conditions of modern society. All these aspects of modern art are closely tied together: its capacity to present a truth about the world, its self-consciousness about its structure as a language, and its connections to a social context."[11] Geoff Bateson, in his article "Art, fragments and wholes," writes that it was around the end of the nineteenth century that "so many scientific and industrial inventions were infusing society that artists sought new ways of responding through aesthetic processes of flux, of fracture and of fragmentation instead of the traditional focus on unity and wholeness."[12]

Varnedoe makes a comparison between the sculpture of Auguste Rodin in the late 1800's to the work of Andy Warhol in the 1960's, seventy years later, in the ways that Rodin's work

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[10] Kirk Varnedoe, *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern* (Henry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1990), 103.
[11] Varnedoe, 104.
[12] Geoff Bateson, "Art, fragments and wholes," *The Word's The Thing,* May 21, 2021, https://thewordsthething.org.uk/?p=920.

"foretold the loss of uniqueness in a world of mechanized reproduction, and the leveling monotony of a culture of commodities."[13] In between the time of these two artists existed various periods in which fragmentation did not exist. "We need to understand not just why fragmentation and repetition reappeared in the twentieth century, but also why they disappeared – why this pairing sometimes did *not* seem to belong in modern art. To do that, we have to rethink some of the issues of science, of communication, and of social order raised by their initial appearances."[14] In the earlier part of the twentieth century, artists began to align their work with the new "rationalized society," and with the introduction of modern machines, artists and thinkers began to take influence from the "essential laws that determined mechanistic efficiency."[15] Sculpture took a more simplified approach, mimicking the sleek machines prominent at the time. Minimalist forms were still being made well into the 1960's, and it wasn't until then that a break was made from these modern conventions, as they were no longer representative of the world.

In his book *Horizons of Assent: Modern, Postmodern and the Ironic Imagination*, Alan Wilde wrote that "Postmodernism tries in any number of ways to refute – or simply rejects – the very bases of modern beliefs."[16] In the same vein, David Jager writes that "Associated with French post structuralists – Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Lacan – postmodernism billed itself as antipolemical, stressing ambiguity, complexity, and multiple readings, probing and "problematizing" the foundations of Western thought with dense thickets of abstruse theory."[17]

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[13] Varnedoe, 108.
[14] Varnedoe, 145.
[15] Varnedoe, 154.
[16] Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 43.
[17] David Jager, "The Painter of No Context," *Tablet*, September 27, 2024, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/painter-of-no-context.

Associated extensively with the postmodern, David Salle not only is a prime example of an artist working with narrative fragmentation in the postmodern, but also whose work resembles my own in process, materials, and at times, content. During Salle's time at CalArts as an undergraduate student in the 1970s, he was heavily influenced by his professor John Baldessari, whose own work consisted of photo narratives and juxtapositions, as well as references to pop art and surrealism. Additionally, Baldessari sparked in Salle his interest in bringing cinematic constructs to the canvas such as split screen, montage, and commercial works. Linda Liebman writes that "often in Salle's paintings images clash overtly, unprettily, and – this is perhaps most surprising – accusingly at us."[18]

In the 1990s, Salle began painting what is known as his "early product paintings," which contained juxtaposed imagery of a variety of advertisements mostly from the 1950s and 60s. In his 1993 painting *Exit Laughing* (Fig. 2), Salle includes what appears to be derived from vintage advertisements for Marlboro cigarettes, Gilbey's Gin, saucepans, and a wedding cake. In his 2024 article and interview "The Painter of No Context," David Jager states that:

> Salle's paintings placed pop cultural, commercial, and art historical elements onto the same liminal plane, onto a space that seemed to have been opened for the first time. Critics dubbed that space postmodern. For Salle, it was a space that broadcast something both exquisitely polished and very dark about America...There is an aspect to Salle's painting that speaks directly to a feeling tone, to a sensibility that very much pervades contemporary culture of the last 40 years.[19]

[18] Lisa Liebman, "Introduction, in *David Salle*, ed. David Whitney (Rizzoli International Publications, 1994), 33.

[19] Jager, "The Painter of No Context."

Within *Exit Laughing*, Salle uses the technique of piecing together the various fragments of American life to create a cacophonous narrative that makes the viewer question what we value culturally as a whole. Consumerism, addiction, and societal conventions such as marriage emerge in this painting. The scene provides us with imagery of polished commodities and objects insinuating temporary and lasting joy, but all we feel when we look at this painting is an unsurmountable sense of anxiety and isolation. Therefore, Salle demonstrates what Bateson would describe as "the anxious fragmentation that is a key part of the contemporary experience."[20]

Although the forementioned painting is thirty-three years old, Salle's painting methods and imagery remain ultimately the same today, as well as the sense of anxiety within American culture that his paintings exude. His 2024 paintings *New Pastoral Yellow Shorts* (Fig. 3) and *New Pastoral, Double Breasted* (Fig. 4) both include myriads of headless human figures floating in front of ambiguous backgrounds. Jager elaborates by saying that "Salle's figures often float in space because the shared collective cultural space that anchors them had gone missing. He was painting them this way because he had already discovered, intuitively, that there is no genuine center to contemporary American life."[21]

Another example of a contemporary painter exploring narrative fragmentation, Bo Bartlett places imagery from various sources together to create scenes representative of Americana, specifically of the Southern male archetype. Laden with firearms, men in suits, athletes, and pickup trucks, his work embodies not only the South but, perhaps, the current face

[20] Bateson, "Art, fragments and wholes."
[21] Jager, "The Painter of No Context."

of America as a whole. Many of Bartlett's scenes also use juxtaposed imagery to create distinctions about ideas of gender and masculinity. This is demonstrated in his painting *Young Life* (Fig. 5), which depicts a grown man and a boy and wouldn't be complete without a gun and a pickup truck by his side. The presumed father holds his weapon and displays his kill, a dead deer, pridefully atop his pickup truck while he embraces an attractive young woman, presumably his wife. This scene is representative of the American dream for, from what I can assume, many American men. A young boy, presumably the hunter's son, wields a long stick to mimic his father's gun. This detail highlights the patterns and cyclical nature of American culture and gender roles.

Hervé Lancelin, in his article "Bo Bartlett: America in the Distorted Mirror," says that what's fascinating about Bartlett "is his way of playing with the codes of American realism while subtly subverting them. He takes the legacy of Edward Hopper, Andrew Wyeth, and Thomas Eakins but derails it slightly, creating what Gilles Deleuze would call 'crystal-images'-images where real and virtual, actual and possible, constantly overlap and exchange places."[22]

In 1985, Gilles Deleuze coined the term the "crystal-image" in relation to modern cinematic techniques in his book, *Cinema 2.* The "crystal-image" is a departure from conventional narrative within film, and instead, takes a fragmentary approach in which linear time is transcended, and the past and present are coalesced. In his own words, "the indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual, is definitely not produced in the head or the mind, it is the objective characteristic of

[22] Hervé Lancelin, "Bo Bartlett: America in the Distorted Mirror," *Art Critic*, December 29, 2024, https://www.artcritic.com/en/bo-bartlett-america-in-the-distorted-mirror/.

certain existing images which are by nature double."[23] This technique compares different periods of time and contrasts cultural ideals to reveal and challenge the complexities of human existence. Cultural ideas evolve over time, often more rapidly today than in the past. By combining imagery from various moments, we are prompted to question the validity of these ideas and the ways in which we live our lives.

I explore similar combinations in my own practice. The photographic source material for *On the Road* (Fig. 6) was taken nearly 60 years apart, yet they now coexist within the same picture plane. By combining photographic imagery from the 1950s with contemporary images, I create an example of the "crystal image," blending the past and present to draw comparisons between these two periods and to evoke meaning. In the 1950s and 60s, mass media and advertising became popular, along with more television and films. The way Americans are shown in the media has helped shape gender roles in American culture. When appearing next to contemporary images, the audience wonders how much has changed (and not changed) in the past century politically, sexually, culturally, etc. Similarly, my work takes on a certain representation of the American West. Like Bartlett and his representation of the American South and its relationship to masculinity, my paintings hint at the idea of the glorified American cowboy and its encapsulation of idealized masculinity.

This idea of recontextualizing gender roles and the American West can be directly applied to the 2023-4 "Cowboy" exhibition at the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art. Bringing together work from artists with varying identities, this exhibition deconstructed the prescriptive American idea of the cowboy in popular culture. The portrayal of the cowboy in pop

[23] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (Athlone Press, 1989), 82.

culture as the epitome of masculinity since the mid-nineteenth century is romanticized and fails to reflect the struggles and real experiences of actual cowboys. This vision has depicted the cowboy primarily as a white man, overlooking other identities and the diverse histories of cowboys in the American West. According to the museum website, the exhibition asks "How does the myth of the cowboy exist today? How has the cowboy as an archetype of masculinity shaped how we think about gender now? What assumptions do we have about cowboys' relationship to the land and how does this relate to the real, lived experiences of contemporary cowboys?"[24]

In my painting *On the Road* (Fig. 6), both men and women are depicted in unexpected scenarios. The two women in the foreground, seemingly in alliance, wear clothing and accessories typically associated with cowboys in a Western landscape. In contrast, the man in the middle ground wears a cowboy hat and nothing else. Vulnerable, he's been stripped of his clothing and metaphorically of his power and rank within the narrative. Here, I use images that are symbolic of different aspects of American culture and juxtapose them to create an unexpected narrative. In addition to the figurative elements of the painting, the screen-printed cacti are symbolic of the American West. Seen in some of my other recent work such as *Follow Suit* and *Horse's Ass,* the cacti can be seen as phallic and masculine, and contrarily, the flowers can be associated with the feminine. The use of multiple images collaged as one is very much in line with the work of David Salle and Bo Bartlett. However, there has been a reversal in quite literally who is wearing the pants.

[24] "Cowboy," MCA Denver, accessed February 17, 2024, https://mcadenver.org/exhibitions/cowboy.

PART III: REFORMING THROUGH THE FEMININE:

INTERTEXTUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

Despite his success, David Salle has received plenty of backlash throughout his career, being accused of objectifying women's bodies in his paintings. Lisa Liebmann writes in the book *David Salle* that "Salle's seductively vacant female figures at times evoke the now stereotypical fantasies of the intellectual midcentury male." In her 1988 article "David Salle: Impersonal Effects, Eleanor Heartney writes of his paintings that "They seem more like artificially preserved specimens than active participants in the flow of life. If they are vessels of anything, it may be only their own emptiness."[25] We can determine that Salle's paintings follow the pattern of the male gaze within the canon of art history.

It seems ironic that I'm taking notes from prominent white men, artists, and philosophers from the nineteenth century; a time when the spotlight was taken from women partaking in similar discourse. This is certainly not intentional; undoubtedly women were doing similar work, but theirs was not recognized and acknowledged in the ways that it should have been. Perhaps the irony in this is part of the message in my paintings. I am reinventing a vision and style from the perspective of a woman in an age where female-identifying artists have become more present in the art world yet continue to lack an equal playing field with men. The imagery in my work, like Salle's, certainly alludes to Americana, sexuality, and consumer culture, but weighs more heavily on gender and the female gaze.

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[25] Eleanor Heartney, "David Salle: Impersonal Effects," *Art in America* 76, no. 6 (1988): 122.

Intertextuality refers to the connections between different texts and art forms. Many texts and artworks use intertextuality by making references to past works. Contemporary artist Jenna Gribbon has a similar approach in her paintings as she references the male gaze in the work of Old Masters. In a 2018 interview for *White Hot Magazine*, Gribbon explains the concept behind her painting *Chrissy, Taking Reference Photos For Her Paintings* (Fig. 7). In this piece inspired by Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Fig. 8), the viewer is confronted with female figures in the nude, much like the original painting. However, Gribbon's rendition denies interaction with the viewer, and instead, the figures portrayed in the work are only interested in the company and comfort of the other women. She says of this painting:

> I love the Manet painting, but the fully-dressed men, picnicking with the undressed women, are a little disconcerting. I wanted to reclaim the painting and make a version that reflects my own--possibly also unrealistic--ideal, that we can admire in a less conflicted way. Something that comes up a lot with these paintings is the beauty and romanticism of them, which for a lot of people can be troubling. I don't feel the need to deproblematize beauty, and I actually want the work to exist in a slightly sticky and uncomfortable place. Sensuality, beauty, and romanticism are all aspects of my reality in my interactions with women and with the medium of paint, and that gets reflected in the work.[26]

Emerging New York-based artist Lizzy Lunday's large-scale figurative paintings seem to be modeled around classical paintings by men but featuring women. For instance, her 2024 painting *Clamshell* (Fig. 9) is reminiscent of Botticelli's noteworthy painting *Venus* (Fig. 10), but instead of modestly covering up her objectified naked body, the female figure in Lunday's version stands confidently in what appears to be a modern sports bra and mermaid-esque skirt.

[26] Jenna Gribbon, "A Dialogue with Painter Jenna Gribbon," interview by Barry N. Neuman, *White Hot Magazine*, January 2018, https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/dialogue-with-jenna-gribbon/3880.

Lunday's process also fits the format of the fragmented narrative. In an interview with BOMB Magazine, Lunday explains, "I'm constantly gathering images, whether while I'm watching TV, scrolling on Instagram, or googling paparazzi photos. I keep these in an archive of photos on my phone, which I always refer to. Then, I piece together photos in Photoshop into a composition I find appealing."[27] Aside from a juxtaposed composition, Lunday plays with the contrast of virtual vs. reality, an example of Deleuze's "crystal image":

> The constant streams of media we're exposed to on a daily basis permeate our physical lives, whether we're conscious of it or not. I try to explore this slippage. In the paintings, more realistic, tightly rendered figures merge with looser, abstract passages. Objects fade into the background. People and architecture slide into one another. There's movement and blending between the two realities, and it creates a new one altogether.[28]

In the examples provided, both Gribbon and Lunday reference paintings by Old Masters, but they challenge the male gaze by incorporating strong female figures that present contexts different from those previously depicted. I also dismantle the male gaze in my paintings, but in a slightly different way. In many of my paintings, I reverse conventional gender roles among my figures. In *In Front the Headlights Shine* (Fig. 11), instead of the objectification of females typically seen through the male gaze, I depict a line of five men in vulnerable positions. The men are naked, and their situation is unclear, with expressions of uncertainty and discomfort on their faces. Instead of women's naked bodies being ogled in the context of art history, the male figure is now the focal point of the painting.

[27] Lizzy Lunday, "Painting the Slip Between Real and Artificial," interview by Alex Leav, *BOMB Magazine*, June 19, 2024, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2024/06/19/lizzy-lunday-by-alex-leav/.
[28] Lunday, interview.

The addition of painted details and silk screen-printed patterns contributes to the de-masculinization of the painting. The painted flowers add a feminine element to the painting; however, along with the printed bee pattern, they also suggest pollination and draw comparisons to human sexuality. The silkscreen pattern can be seen as an additional decorative element representative of the domestic and the feminine. However, it also evokes Andy Warhol's screen prints, which symbolize industrialization and mass production. This notion of mass production can be compared to the pollination and the inert sexual nature typically associated with men.

PART IV: CHALLENING THE MALE GAZE: DE-OBJECTIFYING OR RE-OBJECTIFYING?

Likewise, I depict female figures in dominantly male situations. From the chaps down to the horse (or is it a pony?) by her side, the figure in my 40 x 50 inch painting on paper *Horse's Ass* (Fig. 12) is the quintessential image of the American cowboy, except that she isn't a man. She's a woman and she is in control. Breasts bared and in a position associated with a particular sexual act (typically performed by men), there is an undeniable overtone of sexuality present in the work. But the female figure isn't meant to be objectified; rather, she stands triumphantly, confidently, and with a gaze that appears entirely detached from the viewer. The use of silkscreen prints throughout the composition creates further tension within the image, as the printed cacti appear to be phallic and spiky in contrast with the softness of the feminine figure.

In depicting the nude female form, there appears a sexual charge in my work, as well as the work of other contemporary and past female painters, but that does not mean that the figures are being sexualized in an objectified way. In *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* by Rozsica Parker and Griselda Parker, it's stated that:

> Some feminists are tempted to discount the possibility of any distinctive feature resulting from their gender in women's art at all…However any argument that proposes 'art has no sex' ignores the difference of men's and women's experience of the social structures of class and the sexual divisions within our society, and its historically varied effects on the art men and women produce.[29]

Later in the book, they go on to affirm that:

[29] Rozsica Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (Pantheon Books, 1981), 48.

> It has been important to validate women's domestic labour, private and taboo areas of female sexuality and the craft traditions. These areas are important for women's sense of themselves and their past. Work within them is nevertheless open to misinterpretation and can run the risk of appearing merely to reconfirm traditional associations of women with the body, the home and the needle.[30]

This book may be over 40 years old, but the points that it makes are still entirely relevant today. We as artists cannot shy away from acknowledging female sexuality in fear of repeating conventions of the "male gaze" throughout the art historical canon. Instead, we must be representative of the full female experience in order to reclaim the female body. To restate the opinions expressed by Parker and Pollock in 1981 in a more contemporary context, Linda Nochlin says in a 2015 interview with Maura Reilly: "'One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one,' declared Simone de Beauvoir, still the mother of us all, theoretically speaking. The socially constructed entity, woman, if she is an artist, faces a different world of experience and challenge than a male artist does. Difference, if always different and changing, exists."[31]

Let us reexamine the writing of the previously mentioned author and feminist Maggie Nelson. Much of her writing is undoubtedly sexually explicit, and directly from a female perspective. Should we discount her experiences in her writing because they contribute to the idea of female sexuality and perhaps then to sexual gratification of the reader? What Nelson is doing is bold, and instead of writing for a male audience, perhaps she is writing to a female audience who can connect to and feel empowered by her own experiences. We cannot simply ignore the history of female objectification in art, nor can we deny the beauty and power of the female body and the possibility of its depiction being in conversation with feminist theory and activism today.

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[30] Parker and Pollock, 158.

[31] Linda Nochlin, "A Dialogue with Linda Nochlin, The Maverick She," interview by Maura Reilly, *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, ed. Maura Reilly (Thames & Hudson, 2015), 36.

PART V: COMPOSITIONAL SPONTANEITY

Like Lunday, I have physical and digital folders that contain a myriad of source imagery, including magazine pages, screenshots from social media, film stills, and personal photographs. I begin my compositions with a general juxtaposition of two or three of these images that I find ironic or create tension with one another. When beginning a painting, I start with this general idea of a composition, with the expectation of alterations later on. I hardly have a specific finished product in mind, and when I do, it fails once on the canvas. I often paint two versions of the same image simultaneously to test out different color palettes and techniques with the hope that one of the two will turn out satisfactory. I then find myself adding symbolic or aesthetic components to the composition in order to create a more dynamic conversation among the existing elements of the painting. Similarly, Salle says of his own process that:

> In a way, the paintings are being constantly revised until they're done, fixed …It's only additive, additive play. Sometimes the impetus is a kind of "what if" question: What if I put this thing there? … Everything mediates everything else. It's not so much a strategy, it's improvisational … Think of it like a drama —what happens if I introduce this new character?[32]

In my painting on paper *Follow Suit* (Fig. 13), I decided well into the execution to insert playing cards into the hands of the six men who are nude and frontally facing, making eye contact with the viewer. In the original photograph that I painted from, the men hold something in their hands, but it's not possible, nor is it important, to see what. I originally was going to keep their hands bare, but the idea of inserting the playing cards made sense to me when the thought arose, though I didn't know entirely why at first. The 84 x 52 inch painting allows the figures to

[32] David Salle, "The Painter of No Context," interview by David Jager, *Tablet*, September 27, 2024, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/painter-of-no-context

be painted at human scale, fostering a more intimate exchange with the viewer. These men are in a vulnerable state, defying the power dynamic between men and women. The cards can be perceived as symbols of hierarchy, as the Kings and Aces have more power in a Poker or other card game (typically associated with men) than Jacks and Queens. Additionally, the exposure of their cards can be mirrored to the exposure of their genitals, furthering their vulnerable states. The cacti, screen-printed with acrylic ink, are symbolic of the American West, which goes hand in hand with archetypical masculinity. However, in contrast, the blossoming flowers are more commonly associated with femininity, again combatting the more masculine features of the painting.

The method of compositional spontaneity adds to the unexpected, enigmatic draw to a painting and furthers the fragmented parts of the narrative. Additionally, the screen-printed elements contribute to the fragmented narrative as well - both the combination of different mediums and styles and what they conceptually represent, as the screen print brings both different design and art historical elements to the forefront. There is no hierarchy among the materials I use, as they all communicate with one another equally and are all necessary in the overall composition. In a painting like *In Front the Headlights Shine* (Fig. 11), even the small details, such as the two or three quick strokes of electric blue chalk pastel at the bottom of the composition, play a crucial role in the finished product of a painting. I often use chalk pastels at the end of working on a painting to achieve a balance in color, composition, and energy. When I make these additions, it injects vitality and conversation into other elements of the painting that previously felt static. This technique helps to bring those components to life, and into communication with one another.

Contemporary painter Cecily Brown has been described as an “impulsive painter,” a term which I can attribute to myself. Having multiple canvases set up at once in her studio, Brown goes from one to the next, sometimes adding just a few strokes at a time. Dore Ashton writes that “by moving from canvas to canvas over a period of time, Brown picks up motifs and translates them into new images in a constant activity of free association.”[33]

To embrace the unexpected is a vital part of my artistic practice. This mentality allows me to paint without expectations and ultimately improves the outcome of the paintings. This approach to painting reflects the realities of life, particularly in today's sociopolitical climate, where our identities are being scrutinized, our opportunities and rights are in a state of uncertainty, and the unexpected has become the norm.

[33] Dore Ashton, Cecily Brown (Rizzoli International Publications, 2008), 22.

CONCLUSION

Linda Nochlin stated, "Often, in [her] opinion, the most interesting feminist practice is not consciously or intentionally 'political' but speaks out, subtly, humorously, originally, sardonically, of critical gender issues from different frames of reference."[34]

I find that my paintings demonstrate this idea of being subtle in my approach to challenging gender issues in the way that the compositions can be ambiguous yet suggestive. Some of my decisions may appear arbitrary, but a coherent message ultimately emerges that speaks to the social dynamics and gender issues prevalent in today's society. By injecting humor and playfulness at times, my work is not a harsh critique on the cultural climate, but a mere hint at the absurdities that it contains. The use of narrative fragmentation and the inclusion of various cultural symbols helps to create new narratives that hint at these social and cultural issues.

I don't wish to eradicate the history of the male gaze within the scope of art history. Rather, I want my paintings to challenge these conventions, and to introduce new ways of both employing the female voice through painting and by the viewing process as well. It is a commonly known fact that when the past is ignored, history repeats itself. Paintings are specific to their place and time, and important in understanding societal changes throughout history.

My use of the female nude introduces a paradox within my work, as it seeks to dismantle the male gaze while simultaneously empowering the female form. Similarly, I often depict men in a state of vulnerability, which diverges from traditional representations of masculinity throughout art history and popular culture. By placing contrasting images within the same picture

[34] Nochlin, 35.

plane, I create something entirely new—an amalgamation of time and cultural beliefs that prompts viewers to question both the past and the present, allowing a new reality to emerge amid contradictions and uncertainty.

FIGURES

Figure 1: Claudia Bokulich, *The Geese Fly South in Winter,* oil on canvas, 56 x 84 in

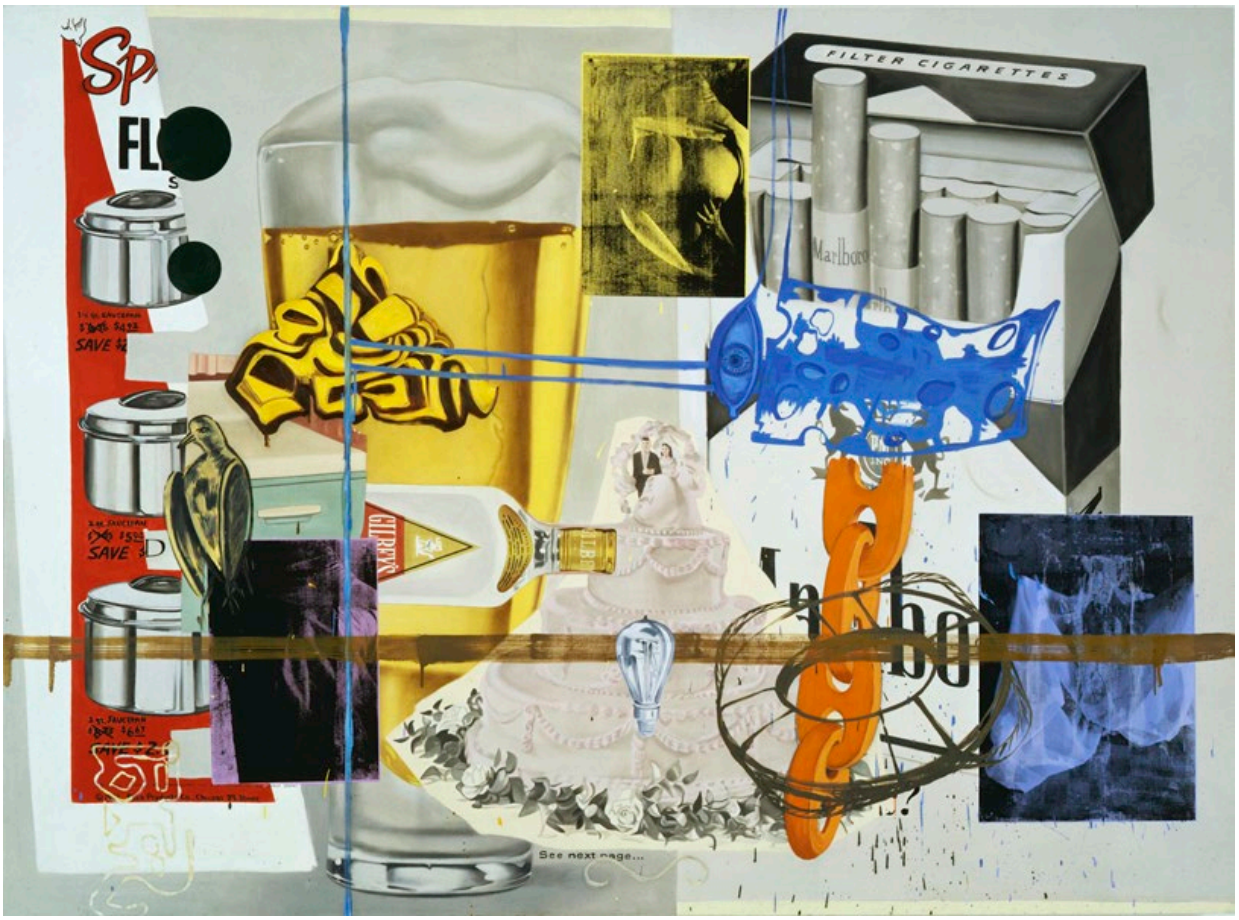

Figure 2: David Salle, *Exit Laughing*, 1993, oil on canvas, 84 x 114 inches

Figure 3: David Salle, *New Pastoral Shorts*, 2024, Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen, 78 x 120 inches

Figure 4: David Salle, *New Pastoral, Double Breasted*, 2024, Oil, acrylic, flashe and charcoal on archival UV print on linen, 60 x 92 inches

Figure 5: Bo Bartlett, *Young Life*, 1994, oil on linen, 78 x 108 inches

Figure 6: Claudia Bokulich, *On the Road*, 2025, oil and acrylic ink on canvas, 58 x 72 in

Figure 7: Jenna Gribbon, *Chrissy, Taking Reference Photos For Her Paintings*, 2017, Oil on canvas, 18 x 14 inches

Figure 8: Édouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, oil on canvas, 207 x 265 centimeters

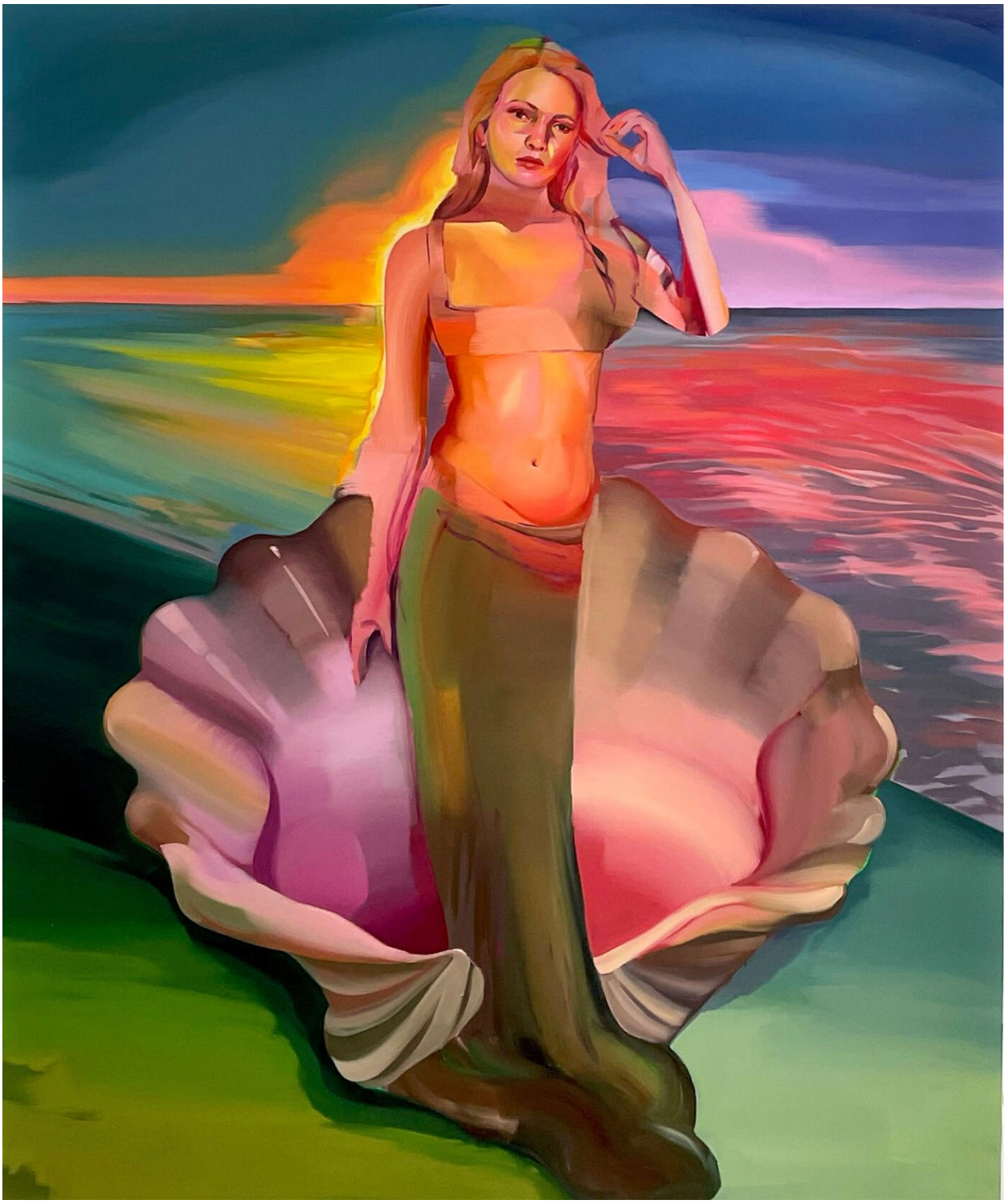

Figure 9: Lizzy Lunday, *Clamshell*, 2024, oil and acrylic on linen, 60 × 50 inches

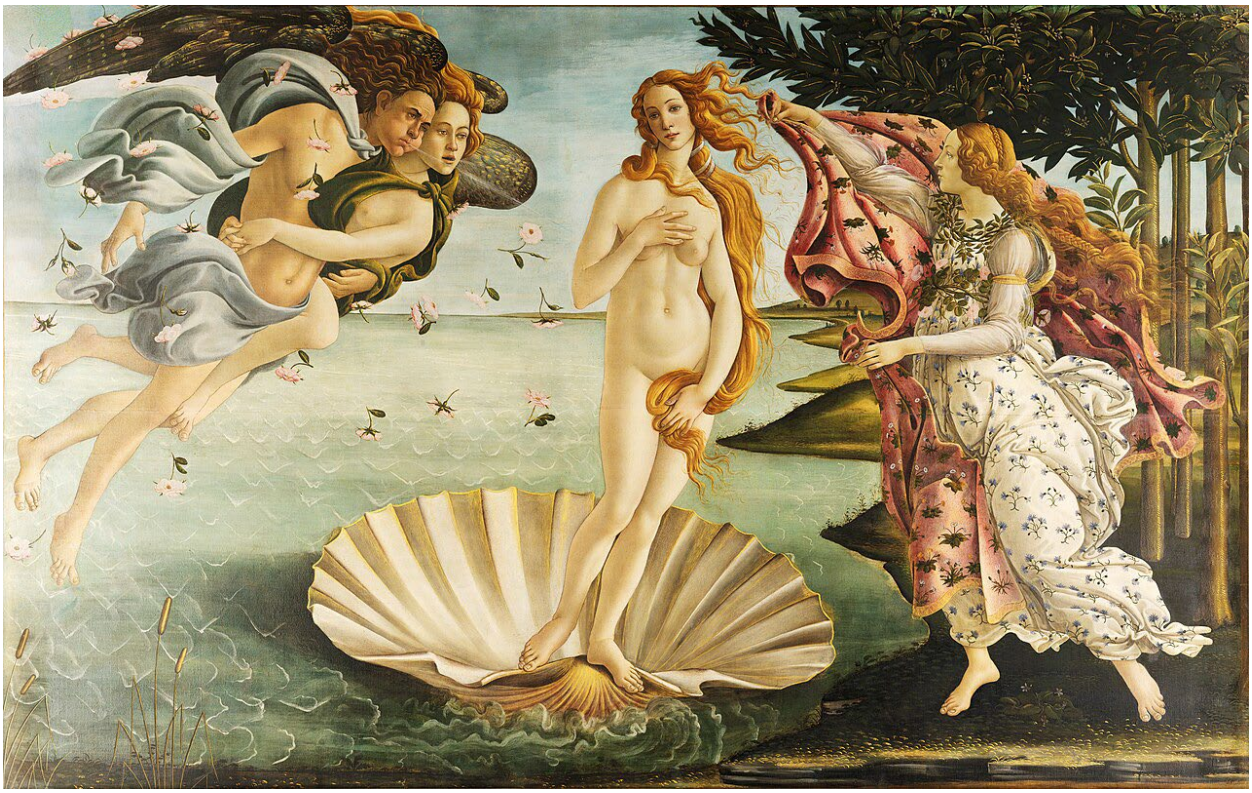

Figure 10: Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus,* 1484-6, Tempera on canvas, 172.5 x 278.9 centimeters

Figure 11: Claudia Bokulich, *In Front the Headlights Shine,* 2024, oil, acrylic ink, charcoal and pastel on paper, 40 x 50 inches

Figure 12: Claudia Bokulich, *Horse's Ass,* 2024, oil, acrylic ink and pastel on paper, 40 x 50 inches

Figure 13: Claudia Bokulich, *Follow Suit,* 2025, oil, acrylic ink, charcoal and pastel on paper, 48 x 72 inches

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