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Nude Subjectivity: Making Meaning of Participation in a Nude Feminist Photographic Practice

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Nude Subjectivity:
Making Meaning of Participation in a Nude Feminist Photographic Practice

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Images withheld to respect research participants privacy, please contact author to view thesis in its entirety.
INTRODUCTION

Women have long been one of the most fascinating subjects of portraiture, and represent the overwhelming majority of subjects in nude images. Throughout history images of women have been predominately produced by and for men, and reflect male interests, and that legacy is still readily apparent in nude photography of women today. This thesis examines participants of my own feminist nude photographic practice and their motivations to engage in a process which traditionally objectifies women. In doing so it questions the existence of a truly feminist photographic product of such a process.

John Berger’s seminal work *Ways of Seeing* relies on this history of nude imagery to illustrate the ways in which modern day images convey women’s objectification, invite objectification, and showcase the ways in which women objectify themselves. The framework proposed by Berger is foundational to my ethnography because my photography and artistic process aim to subvert female objectification and celebrate female agency. Analyzing my ethnographic research through this lens offers a means to simultaneously understand participant experiences and the significance of the final images.

The origins of nude portraiture are found in European oil paintings of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, in which they’ve become aware of their own nudity and express shame of their exposure in front of viewers. Berger argues that these images feature women as objects of speculation who acknowledge that an audience is viewing them, which is echoed in subsequent nude portraiture up to the modern day. This point is made salient in *Ways of Seeing* through an examination of paintings commissioned by Kings of their nude mistresses, in which the mistresses’ nakedness “is a sign of her submission to the owner’s feelings or demands. (The
owner of both woman and painting.”¹ This phenomena mirrors the lived experiences of women, beginning in “earliest childhood” when a girl is “taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.”² Because of this, women internally house both “the surveyor and the surveyed,” “the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”³ A woman experiences this split of “self-being” by constantly considering how she appears to others, especially men, and by conflating their opinions of her with her own self-worth.⁴ Images reflect this experiential reality, while simultaneously reinforcing it as well. As a photographer, my images reflect the experience of the woman posing, but they also have the potential to alter and be reflected in the experiences of their audiences. I continue to draw on Berger throughout my thesis to evaluate my process and the narratives contained in my images.

My own photographic practice was inspired by my education in the Women and Gender Studies Department at the University of the Colorado and has been deeply informed by my feminist education and convictions. I have also seen a steadily increasing feminist politicization among my friendships concurrent with our active participation in the private production of nude art. A subject of my photographs once even told me that they consider an artistic understanding of and positive reaction to her participation in nude photography to be a litmus test for her friendship comparable to asking someone if they considered themselves to be a feminist or not. My ethnographic research demonstrated that subjects of my photography considered posing nude

¹ Berger, 52
² Berger, 46
³ Berger, 46-47
⁴ Berger, 46
to be an explicitly feminist act done with a feminist consciousness, and further made meaning of their participation by emphasizing sexual and bodily agency and empowerment.

**SUBJECTS and METHODOLOGIES**

My subject pool was comprised of four individuals who were raised and continue to identify as female, and who had posed nude for me on multiple occasions. They have also all consented to having their photos circulated online through my Instagram and Tumblr social media platforms, often explicitly linked with their names or social media accounts. Three participants in particular have been featured as the main subjects of my photographic work, and have been present since my first forays into the world of nude photography. We have known each other since I started high school, and we have been close since graduation. Meg is in college to be an accountant, Sam is studying environmental science, and Lilah is a supervisor at a juice and coffee bar, as well as my longtime roommate. Though our lives have taken distinctly separate paths, we have found common ground in nude photography and feminism. They were the subjects of the first nude photographs I took, as well as a majority since, and were instrumental to my journey as a feminist scholar, feminist photographer/artist, and (now) feminist researcher. In fact, before we had ever taken photographs together, Lilah asked if she could photograph me nude with her new film camera during my first semester as a Women and Gender Studies major at the University of Colorado Boulder, where I would meet my fourth research participant and recent graduate, Regina. Though that specific photoshoot never came to fruition, it was the inception of a hobby that has become a personal and political endeavor. In my interviews with Lilah I questioned her original motivations to take nude photographs of me.
Lilah: *I had this vision of taking pictures of you on my newly acquired 35 mm film camera, in black and white. And I wanted to take nude pictures of somebody, and I wanted it to be somebody I knew, and I thought that you had the most interesting looking body of any of my friends that I knew...Because, all of my other girlfriends at least, I don’t know, I thought it was really interesting because you at the time didn’t have shaven armpits, or shaven anything. And I thought that that would’ve been the most interesting to look at in a picture...And I proposed that to you, and I think that you were really interested in that idea, and that idea never happened, but it (started a) whole world of possibility.*

*I guess I kind of had somewhat of a bias, against like the traditional nude portraiture of like skinny girls who were like hairless or whatever. Obviously I wanted to choose you because you didn’t fit that in every sense.*

This quote hints at the deeply held convictions of each of my research participants surrounding their participation in nude photography as art, including distinctly feminist rhetoric present since the beginning of our collaborations. By the time I started photographing Regina a little over a year later, feminism was an articulated and fundamental piece of our art production, and we were taking a Senior Colloquium in Women and Gender Studies (WGST), as well as the WGST practicum together.

All of my research participants were given the chance to select a pseudonym to appear under in this thesis. I chose this strategy, rather than labeling each of them with a number or letter, to protect their privacy. Despite drawing similarities between their answers, opinions, thoughts, and feelings, I hope to highlight each of them as complex, multifaceted individuals in their own right. While noting the intersections between opinions as significant and implicative, I
was consistently surprised at the variations in answers and responses which guided each interview to markedly different places. Though I previously felt like I mostly understood each participant’s motivations, feelings, and political and theoretical convictions, this research offered me the opportunity to learn more about my close friends.

I have chosen to include the direct quotations of the participants (sometimes at length) to give them equal voice in this presentation of my research, in an effort to be as collaborative as possible. As in my photographic practice, I conducted my research with the intent to collaborate as much as possible to avoid common pitfalls in research which amplify and exacerbate power hierarchies between researcher and researched, including in the post field work phase. This was especially important to me because I firmly feel that the majority of participants and I ventured into this artistic pursuit together, and in tandem.

For my research I utilized loosely structured, intimate interviews with each “subject.” In addition to these individual interviews, I conducted informal conversational interviews with multiple subjects at once. I originally aspired to facilitate a focus group featuring all my of my research participants, but it quickly became apparent that the lengthy and illustrious relationships between Lilah, Sam, Meg and myself provided a complex context for our photographic collaborations which would feel exclusive to my one research participant from outside these relationships, Regina. I instead opted for informal conversations with groups of subjects in twos or threes. Discussion between research participants flowed naturally and required very little prompting. I proposed multiple broad topics, and the participants also proposed many of their own based on the individual interviews we had already had. I enjoyed watching them ask each other questions about their differing opinions and experiences, essentially interviewing each other.
Approaching ethnographic research, I aimed to use an explicitly feminist methodology, and to orient myself from a feminist standpoint. Key to utilizing feminist methodologies in fieldwork is the representation the researcher presents of themselves, and the approach they take to acknowledging the subjectivity of their position and that representation. They can also take steps within their field work to try to diminish the uneven hierarchies of power between themselves and their subjects through the confrontation of exploitation, acknowledgement of privilege, cultivation of egalitarian relationships, upholding the principle of reciprocity, and utilizing empowering and participatory research techniques which are more “compelling and unobtrusive” to subjects.

Through my positions as photographer and researcher I have control over the images of my subjects, and I attempt to mediate power dynamics between us through transparency and acknowledgement of this subject position, and by encouraging subjects to set the tone, pace, and focus of our interviews. I intended to make subjects feel empowered and comfortable while being interviewed by staging them informally at their homes and encouraging casual conversation between them.

BODILY AUTONOMY, AGENCY, and SEXUAL EXPRESSION

All of my research participants made connections between feminism and our creation of nude images reflecting their sexuality. They felt that they were presenting authentic and genuine sexuality rather than images which presented them simply as objects of heterosexual male desire. In their essay, “Sex Objects and Sexy Subjects: A Feminist Reclamation of Sexiness”

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5 Wolf, 11-12
6 Wolf, 25
7 For the purposes of this thesis, “authentic and genuine” sexuality is that which sincerely reflects the participant’s honest self and embodied experiences.
Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin “propose a revisionist notion of sexiness that treats people not merely as sex objects, but as sexual subjects.” It is within “this spirit of articulating an authentic notion of sexual pleasure and a holistic conception of autonomous sexual agency” that Meg, Sam, Lilah, and Regina pose nude for photographs which showcase their identities as sexual, erotic beings. Lintott and Irvin also argue for an expanded definition of sexiness which doesn’t exclude pregnant women, the elderly, and disabled people, for example. Regina recognized posing nude for my photography as one of the only accessible means of positively expressing her sexuality and considered that to be one of her main motivations to participate.

Regina: *I was really excited about it actually. I think it was really the most available way for me to be...kind of sexual. I don’t know, I just thought it would be really fun.*

Meg, who has always been interested in human form and sexuality, described bodily autonomy and, by extension, sexual agency and expression as one of the “most important” parts of her participation. She stated that ultimately judgement of her participation motivated rather than deterred her, because it was a declaration of ownership of her own body. By articulating that it was her decision to pose in ways that conveyed her sexuality, as well as for her own enjoyment, she recognizes herself as a “sexy subject” with agency. This recognition subverts objectification and demands “respectful notions of sexiness.” “Respecting sexiness involves seeing others not (only) as sex objects but necessarily as sexual subjects: human beings who are in charge of their sexual agency.” Lilah also emphasized agency and that she choose to display herself sexually despite doing it “the wrong way, because we’re not doing it for a man.” In this

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8 Lintott and Irvin, 469
9 Lintott and Irvine, 469
10 Lintott and Irvine, 468
11 Lintott and Irvine, 477
12 Lintott and Irvine, 477
statement Lilah acknowledges the reality that nude art and photography are primarily constructed to appeal to male audiences, and images that aren’t are less accepted by mainstream culture. She recognizes our own art as outside of this tradition because it is intended for private enjoyment or circulation with likeminded artists and feminists. The circulation of the images is not in any way limited to these communities, but Lilah emphasizes the importance of valuing and considering intended audiences besides heterosexual males.

Audre Lorde’s famous essay “The Uses of the Erotic” similarly dispels myths that modern portrayals of female sexuality cannot avoid the pitfalls of objectification and encourages women to embrace themselves as sexual and erotic beings. She writes that women have been both oppressed by notions of “superficial” sexuality while simultaneously suppressed and erased as authentically erotic subjects.13 “The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information.”14 By refusing to allow societal and cultural currents to suppress and disconnect them from their own sexuality, and by defiantly displaying their ownership of their sexuality and bodies, they embrace their own erotic power. By constructing themselves as subjects through expressions of their authentic sexuality, my research participants subvert self-objectification. This complicates the narratives historically embodied by nude art tradition which Berger simplifies as “men act, women appear.”15

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13 Lorde, 53
14 Lorde, 54
15 Berger, 47
EMPOWERMENT

All of my research participants explicitly stated during their interviews that the process of posing for nude photographs was “empowering.” Though I was interested to see if issues of empowerment came up, I intentionally did my best of not leading the participants to conclude that they were empowered by the process, and I waited for them to individually raise the subject in conversation. In order to understand their thoughts more and to unpack the term “empowerment,” I asked them to expand on their personal definitions and attachments to the word.

Lilah: By empowerment I mean, someone being enabled and inspired by a collective mentality or act that makes them feel more confident and able to accomplish things or experience feelings otherwise unattainable—kind of like a group mentality or strength in numbers.

Meg: To me, empowerment is being able to own your own body, and not allowing anyone else to lay claim through acceptance of the space you fill and even being able to take up more space than that.

Regina: I would define “empowerment” as a conscious act of unapologetically honoring what feels authentic to you. To elaborate a little, I feel empowered when I resist the feeling that I have to suppress some aspect of myself in order to come off as “likable”, or “normal”, or "non-threatening”—whatever it is. Instead of constantly having to shut yourself down and pretend like something (feelings, social injustices, sexuality, bodily imperfections ...) doesn’t exist, you get to just own it and that makes me feel invincible against anyone who doesn’t agree.
Sam: I feel that being empowered means you possess the necessary emotional and intellectual tools to make decisions that are right for you and the ability to act upon them. Being empowered is liberation from societal and personal constraints, to live the way you want and speak without fear.

Their definitions and conceptions of empowerment were further supplemented by discussions of the elements of the process of taking and looking at nude photographs which they felt empowered or disempowered by, and it became apparent that the participants interpreted their experiences differently and were not always empowered in the same ways by the same things.

Lilah’s feelings of empowerment were partially related to gaining body acceptance and appreciation for herself, and partially related to her experience of others seeing the photos of her. She came to like her own appearance more by putting herself into the uncomfortable, new experience of spending extended periods of time nude around her friends, and from accepting herself as she appeared in the photos of herself. I asked her to reflect on the first time I photographed her nude, which was for a school project for the Women and Gender Studies course Women, Gender, and War. My project intended to embody and subvert gendered war propaganda and perceptions of women in wartime during WW1 and WW2, featured Lilah and Meg, and marks the first time I shot nude portraiture. Below, she is specifically referencing our first set of photos shot for the project, where she was portrayed partially nude in a white sheet representing ‘Lady Justice.’

Lilah: I definitely wanted to try [nude photography], because I wanted to try something new, and I was definitely OK with it because I wanted to take pictures of you, but seeing myself that way after you took the first pictures for your school project, it was
really weird and I was definitely really self-conscious because I didn’t look how everyone else I’ve seen nude pictures of [looks] …Like I did not look like that.

She described feeling very exposed in the bright light and open snowy field we used as our set, and feeling reliant on the white sheet she was draped in. I followed up by asking if her self-consciousness during our nude photo shoots has lessened or transformed, and how she reflects on nude portraits of herself now. She answered that she has grown more comfortable with herself and her own body image over time from exposure to her own nudity and image, and has felt empowered through freeing herself of self-consciousness.

Lilah: *I’m definitely more willing to do things, either not thinking about how I look while I’m doing them, or not caring, which is really freeing and empowering I think. And, now opposed to before, I feel like I’m curious to see what the pictures look like, but it’s not a need to see what the picture’s like. I don’t need to make sure no one else sees me looking badly. I don’t have as much of a fear, and I do feel that way sometimes, but it’s definitely getting easier and easier to accept the way I look. And, it’s just that weird thing, nobody knows what they look like until someone’s taking a bunch of pictures of you from all angles. I think the more you do that the more you learn to accept it.*

Using Berger’s framework of viewer vs. viewed, I interpret her newfound willingness “to do things without thinking about how [she’s] looking while [she’s] doing them, or not caring” as an experience of the self as subject. By using her agency to pose for the photographs, she becomes more than Berger’s object of vision experiencing herself through her appearance to others.
Though images of her were exposed to anonymous online audiences through Tumblr, she was primarily concerned with the reactions of her friends and family. She experienced others seeing photos of her partially with discomfort, fearful that she would be sexualized by unforgiving audiences, harshly judged for not meeting heavily prevalent cultural beauty standards, or looked down upon in professional, academic, or social circles because of her participation. She talked at length, though, about coming to find the experience empowering because she was forcing audiences to digest a potentially sexual and artistic photo of unedited, untouched, and realistic womanhood which may not register immediately as in line with dominant societal conceptions of attractiveness, beauty, or sexiness.

Meg echoed this sentiment, stating that she would like to make audiences uncomfortable to create open-mindedness. Lilah experienced empowerment through self-representation, very similar to “participating in selfie culture as a form of self-love and empowerment” as described by Ben Valentine in his article ‘Year of the Selfie: Why Owning Our Self-Representation Matters.’ He goes on to explain that selfies offer self-representation to groups marginalized in dominant media and imagery. Lilah, as well as many of my photographic subjects, feel that they do not recognize representations of their own real bodies in the media, and that by taking nude photographs and allowing others to see them she defiantly contributes her own image to representation of untouched, real women who do not meet unrealistic standards of beauty.

Lilah: *We’re not portraying the norm of beauty, so it’s nice to feel that I’m forcing people to digest an image of a real woman’s body. It’s empowering for me to be responsible for putting that image out there.*

16 Valentine
Similar to Lilah’s process of self-acceptance and appreciation through exposure to nude images of herself, Regina also expressed that she came to enjoy or accept qualities of her appearance by viewing the images of herself and becoming more comfortable with her own body and nudity in general. Meg described this feeling in herself as having access to an additional lens where you can see a “physical representation of yourself beyond a mirror, and see yourself in a new light.” These discussions with my research participants led me to believe that seeing themselves in the photos we had taken together with an explicitly feminist consciousness allowed them to see themselves beyond the male, objectifying gaze which reduces them to objects to be seen by others as described by Berger.

Regina: *I feel like I have a very good body image to begin with. I’ve always been super uncomfortable about my nipples, I just think they’re like boring, but once I saw them on film I was like, ‘I think I look pretty good, I don’t have to worry about that stuff.’ I think it kind of contributed to opinions I have about nudity. If I was now to see another person with their top off I’m not going to judge them or think twice about it.*

Conversely, though, she also felt the process of taking nude photographs was a means to celebrate rather than cultivate her own body positivity and healthy self-esteem. She stated that she had already struggled and come to terms with appreciating and accepting her own body image and appearance, and that she used the photographic process to honor confidence, lack of self-consciousness, and self-love. It was empowering for her to participate in the process as an act of self-love because it meant privileging her own thoughts and feelings over those from whom she could potentially face backlash. She felt her open-minded but conservative parents would completely disapprove, and she expressed worry that others seeing the photographs would judge or criticize her for being too confident in her appearance.
Regina: I really like taking pictures, I think it’s really fun, but I also have this worry that people will think I’m too confident, think “Why is she so comfortable, she must be really into herself or something. It’s very important to me to still be modest while being confident. I don’t know, it’s so hard sometimes; you have to walk a fine line.

This fear is not unwarranted, and Berger recognizes a long history of portraying women as vain. He critiques this trope of labeling “the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure” vain, and further illustrates age old themes of judgement by citing ‘The Judgement of Paris’ by Rubens which depicts a “beauty contest.” Indeed, the subjectivity established by women representing themselves by taking selfies is often labeled “problematic,” and inextricably linked to accusations of narcissism. The gendering of selfies and the prevalent assumption that they act as proof of narcissism limit how women’s personal photography is socially valued.” Meg stated in her interview that she thinks people misunderstand or fail to recognize the pleasure one can garner from posing nude and feeling good about yourself, or over emphasize wanting to “show off your body” as a motive for posing nude.

Meg and Sam both felt significantly more empowered explicitly from the process of taking photographs than from looking at or having the images of themselves. The process is an act of empowerment and self-love for Meg because she considers posing for nude photographs a means of validating and embodying her own identity, an act of consciously taking up space for herself, and a means of demonstrating agency over her own body and decisions.

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17 Berger, 52
18 Burns, 1723
19 Burns, 1734
Meg: *I think that’s* (referencing her own aforementioned definition of empowerment) *seen when we do photoshoots because it not only allows me to own the space, but to create more space. It allows for being able to feel whole and to question yourself without degrading yourself.*

Sam’s sense of empowerment surrounding the process echoes sentiments of Meg’s and Regina’s, and she interprets the process as an act of self-care because she is honoring decisions and actions right for her, and which bring her joy and positive feelings.

*Sam: I feel so empowered afterwards! Totally empowered and like I made the right decision and I did something that made me feel good, and chose to take part in the nude photoshoot. It was elation, like “That was so awesome, we looked so beautiful and we totally killed it with whatever we were trying to do that day.”*

Sam stated multiple times that the process, rather than looking at the photos of herself or becoming comfortable with her own image through them, made her feel “sexy.” Interestingly, she mentioned that she both considered the photos of herself to be more flattering and the experience to be more rewarding when posing naturally and candidly, as opposed to when she tries to emulate poses she practiced in the mirror beforehand. She makes an explicit correlation between the utilization of expected and culturally prevalent postures in our photography and moments during a photoshoot when the subject of a photo lacks confidence. Rather than framing it in terms of “taking up space,” like Meg, she favors Regina’s perception that posing nude for photographs is an act of empowerment because she is using her agency to engage in something she finds personally, politically, and artistically rewarding and satisfying regardless of societal expectations or criticisms.
Issues of Identity in Empowerment

Empowerment as a term, experience, and concept must be unpacked because it is entirely contextual and individual, and because access or lack of access to societally dominant definitions and experiences of empowerment is inextricably bound to identity. The same conceptions of empowerment are not universally available or relevant, and prevalent cultural understandings of empowerment can be exclusive to those outside dominant and privileged identity groups. Additionally, individual empowerment is not always conducive to collective empowerment. For example, though subjects were individually empowered by their participations, problematic narratives upheld by my photographs can potentially undermine collective empowerment or even disempower female and feminist audiences.

In many ways the process of posing nude and appearing as the subject of nude portraiture is deeply impacted by aspects of identity, including gender, race, sexual orientation, gender expression and identity, ethnicity, class, and so on. In particular, that all of my subjects are white has intense implications on their experiences and empowerment surrounding their participation in my photographic process. Historically black women have been extremely sexually objectified and dehumanized by representations in iconography and visual culture. With origins deeply embedded in the abject degradation and depersonalization of the “Hottentot Venus”, black female sexuality and nudity has been dominantly portrayed as animalistic, unrestrained and lascivious, deviant, and primitive. Throughout history black female personhood has been implicitly or explicitly reduced to a focus on the body, specifically the genitals and buttocks. Sara Baartman’s colonial enslavement and subsequent display in freak show attractions

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20 Gilman, 167-169
21 Gilman, 170-173
pathologized the anatomy of Khoikhoi women and contributed to this legacy of devaluing and emphasizing black women’s sexual anatomy. Black women and other women of color are positioned at the bottom of a hierarchy of physical and sexual value, and opposite from white women on binaries of Madonna and whore, purity and impurity, civilized and primitive, either entirely erased as sexual beings or fetishized for their supposed ‘deviant’ sexuality.22

A vast majority of the women I photograph are white, largely because I have met them almost exclusively through schools in the predominantly white Boulder County School System. This is incredibly significant for me because it contributes to the ways my images reflect prevalent, dominant, and predicable cultural tropes and images. I was interested in how my subjects reflected on their own whiteness during the photographic process, and as subjects appearing in the photographs. I asked them how they felt different aspects of their identity were impacted by the photographic process, and/or how the process was impacted by the aspects of their identity. Initially, only Lilah brought up her white identity during these reflections. Though acknowledging the possible judgement and backlash to any woman appearing in a nude photograph, she felt that as a white, cis woman her art was considerably more accepted and recognized as art than the nude photographs of women of color and transwomen, for example.

Lilah: *I mean, we already struggle, as women, to have it be seen as art, but more so anyone with a marginalized identity would have to struggle for this to be seen as an art form. I think we’re lucky in that sense to be….I don’t know if lucky is the right word to use, but lucky to be more accepted because we are white females. Most of us are skinny to average size, weight wise, which is another factor that makes this more acceptable.*

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22 Pacteau, 89, 91, 95, 97
At other points in the interview Lilah and my other research participants showed an acute awareness of their identities as white, cis women as they repeatedly expressed that, despite their own insecurities and feelings that they didn’t look like the women they see in media and advertisements or live up to strict cultural standards of beauty, they recognized themselves as largely fitting in with ideals of conventional attractiveness in terms of race and Eurocentric features, gender expression, weight and body type, and overall appearance. We see this in the above quote with Lilah, who also stated that, as the heaviest member of her close friend group, she thought she was ‘fat’ before engaging in a feminist photographic practice and also being exposed to other female photographers working around body acceptance and self-love. The participants understood that fitting into the aforementioned ideals made it more likely that the photographs of them would be considered artistic, respectable, attractive, tasteful rather than erotic, and more appealing to mass audiences. This is important to note about my photographic practice, because it signifies that while the women interviewed for this thesis had empowering experiences, mine is still a problematic, flawed, and contextually specific process which must continually grow and change to subvert hierarchies of oppression.

Interestingly, though all of my female research participants consider themselves to be bisexual or bicurious, or to have fluid sexuality, their sexual orientations didn’t come up when I asked them about aspects of their identity. I posit that this is due to bi-erasure leading to a hesitancy to claim a queer identity, and because my subjects feel that their femme presentations don’t visually communicate a queer identity. Because so many of my subjects, especially those outside of this research, identify as queer, it is important to me to present queer aesthetics in my images moving forward.
**VISUAL ANALYSIS**

Visual analysis, analysis of a work’s meanings and how it communicates those meanings, of my own photography is a critical piece of this project.\(^{23}\) It reveals the ways in which my work itself perpetuates or subverts problematic tropes and themes that analysis of the photographic process in and of itself cannot. I may feel that our photographic practices offer women subjects agency or subjecthood, but the photos I design and produce in conjunction with the women modeling may still construct women as objects. Sut Jhally urges us to act as ‘visual anthropologists’ to deconstruct images that seem commonplace to us.

Work on the visual analysis of how gender is displayed in advertisements is particularly relevant to my research because they offer a readily available platform of exaggerated and deeply entrenched gender expectations and stereotypes. Identifying those gendered narratives allows me to spot and potentially avoid or subvert them in my own work. Advertisements are a rich source of gender tropes/coding for many reasons. Young men are the most desirable target for advertisers, “the most precious commodity,” so much of the imagery featuring women in advertisements is specifically designed to appeal to men.\(^{24}\) The imagery is also designed to convey “commercial realism,” so that the advertisements resonate with viewers’ own experiences and feel believable.\(^{25}\) They are the ultimate reflection of popular culture; indeed “there is barely any line left between advertising and the rest of the culture.”\(^{26}\) As privately producing artists and amateur models, our art emerges from the latter, though we have deeply ingrained ideals surrounding marketability and mass appeal which stem from the consumer and capitalist spheres driving advertisements.

\(^{23}\) Purdue OWL: Analyzing Visual Documents.
\(^{24}\) Kilbourne, 34
\(^{25}\) Goffman
\(^{26}\) Kilbourne, 59
Within the world of advertisements, men and women are given very strict boundaries of acceptable and appropriately gendered behaviors and appearances. They represent quintessential stereotypes prevalent within mainstream culture in their most poignant and exaggerated forms. Though there are now many works analyzing advertisements and gender performance in advertising and media, my analysis relies particularly on the works of scholars and authors Erving Goffman, Jean Kilbourne, and Sut Jhally. They emphasize the way the images of women in advertisements generally convey a sense of inaction and helplessness, which is strongly contrasted with images of men looking capable, proactive, and independent. Goffman specifically highlights the way in which advertisements infantilize women by portraying and “treating” them as children. Despite this, portrayals of women are highly sexualized, regarding them as little more than sex objects or embodiments of male pornographic fantasy. Advertisements communicate these stereotyped conceptions of gender through the posing/physicality of the models in the images, the selection of models, subject matter, location, etc., and the technical construction of the shot (focus, angle, lighting, composition etc.).

The pose of a model suggests a lot about the model as they appear in the photo, and the poses most frequently demonstrated in the commercial advertisement and popular media spheres are radically different for men and women: “Indeed, if we looked only at advertising images, this would be a bleak world for females.” Jhally describes women’s poses as being largely disengaged with the environments around them, implying that the women are objects being manipulated by the space rather than subjects manipulating the space around them. While

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27 Goffman
28 Jhally, Dream Worlds 3
29 Jhally
30 Kilbourne, 131
women’s poses express inaction and passivity, men’s poses demonstrate action and a command and control of the world around them.

One of the most obvious expressions of this contrast between passivity and action is the way hands are posed and portrayed. Advertisements show women’s hands holding objects with lightly grasped fingers, caressing them gently, or simply allowing them to rest freely in their hands as if of their own accord. Women’s hands are rarely given the opportunities to grasp firmly, hold on securely, or manipulate the objects and settings around them which are afforded to men’s hands in advertisements. Jhally and Goffman posit that the tentative grasp displayed by females in ads versus the utilitarian and bold grasps of their male counterparts subtly suggests an entirely different relationship to the worlds around them, and that these relationships do a direct disservice to women’s agency implying that femininity is weak and incapable. Goffman also utilizes the phrase “self-touch,” to describe when women touch their own bodies with their hands in these gestures, or hold themselves protectively or defensively, insinuating that they are using their delicate, caressing touch on something equally fragile and weak. The self-touch makes frequent appearances throughout my body of work. In Figures 1.1 and 1.2 Meg lightly wraps her arms around herself, barely resting her hands on her shoulder and side as though she is made of glass. I’ve always felt that the gesture of touching oneself displayed the vulnerability and defenselessness of my models, but I’ve never considered how many photos I have featuring women touching themselves versus photos of my male subjects touching themselves. Indeed, Meg looks young, frightened, hesitant, and fragile in the photo as she stares wide-eyed into the camera while hugging her body, and I have no equivalent photographs of straight male subjects. This gendered split in my own work is problematic, as it inadvertently reinforces larger cultural
narratives that there is something inherently feminine about fragility or the inability to defend yourself.

Jhally makes the argument overall, that women are portrayed as unrealistically unprepared to cope with or manage the world at all. They are shown lying down or in reclined postures far more often than men, even looking as though they are unconscious or deceased with eyes closed or slack bodies, seemingly completely powerless and vulnerable. Goffman recognizes these reclined postures as distinctly communicating passivity and submission. He also recognizes the way that they have become distinctly sexual, and the ways in which they link women’s sexuality to powerlessness and submission. Men, on the other hand, are very rarely posed in a way that suggests or conveys vulnerability or submission. My photos feature this posture perhaps more than any other outlined by Jhally and Goffman. In Figure 2.1 Lilah’s legs stick out limply from tall field grass, seeming to imply that she is unconscious or even dead. Figure 2.2 illustrates this posture of defenselessness more subtly, as Meg reclines in bed sleepily, passively, and potentially submissively. My models and I have always utilized this posture because we find it visually pleasing, and because it conveys a sense of dreamy sleepiness and emotional rawness. This analysis has highlighted that it is important to balance out these postures with representations of women that showcase their strength and control.

When women in ads are shown upright or standing, it is in unrealistic and off-kilter poses which convey little strength or balance. Jhally and Goffman specifically call out the classic head-tilt and the “bashful knee-bend” tropes as unrealistic, unconventional, and non-utilitarian postures which women are almost exclusively shown in. These are examples of what Goffman refers to as canting postures: positions where women are off-balance, with a knee or hip askew and a foot off the ground, in which women are unprepared to react in their own self-interest
realistically in the world. Goffman emphasizes the contrast between male and female postures by emphasizing the many advertisements where women snuggle into men like children, or lean on men for balance or support. Though my photos haven’t showcased women literally hanging on men or incapable of supporting themselves, it does showcase women in contorted postures, with their arms dramatically raised above their head, or with their torsos turned away while they look back toward the camera (seemingly acknowledging a viewer) like Meg in Figure 3, which can achieve the same ends.\footnote{Jhally, Codes of Gender} My models often appear with their necks completely exposed and their chins tilted upward, which Jhally considers to be perhaps the most universal sign of defenselessness and vulnerability, even in the animal kingdom.

In addition to conveying physical helplessness and vulnerability, women’s postures and facial expressions imply the same about the female model’s mental and emotional states. Aside from appearing to be literally unconscious, models’ vacant facial expressions and unfocused stares serve to make women appear mentally checked out and disconnected from reality, as though drugged or daydreaming. Female model’s apparent confusion and lack of alertness contributes directly to Goffman’s perception of women in advertisements as infantilized, and as reliant on the protection of others.

This is something I am particularly and knowingly guilty of in my work, and I have specifically directed my models to adopt these expressions (for example, “dead eyes”) and shot photographs with the intent of capturing this look. In Figures 4.1 and 4.2 Regina and Lilah both adopt facial expressions that communicate an apparent lack of sobriety and attention, and their postures are slack and slouched. Though I’ve always appreciated this aesthetic because of its relationship to themes of daydreaming, dissatisfaction with reality, and apathetic youth, I’ve
never before considered the ways this contributes to stereotypes about women as psychologically not capable of taking care of themselves. When women are allowed to show emotion, they are often over-zealous and out of control, ecstatically laughing, childishly unable to control or contain their feelings.32 “When they are not withdrawn, they seem to be over-engaged—with the same result: a loss of emotional control and restraint.33 I am less guilty of this trope, but some of my models cite these as their favorite photos of themselves, for their apparent candidness.

Above all, women are sexualized in advertisements and popular media. Because of this, all of the aforementioned ritually subordinate postures are dangerously conflated with female sexuality: reclining postures, weak and defenselessness as femininity, a lack of psychological control, etc. In Figure 5 Regina embodies these conflations, as she reclines passively and simultaneously appears sexually inviting. In addition to over-sexualized postures, camera angles and photo composition play a large role in the sexualization of photographic subjects. For example, placing the camera angle between a woman’s legs is an especially sexualizing angle. Filming a woman in disjointed body parts (for example, her breasts, her hips, etc.) or cutting out her face/head from the shot as demonstrated in Figure 6 literally disregards her humanity and treats her as a sexual object. Jhally recognizes one of the most drastic means of sexualizing women in popular media as the use of a replacement male or phallus object that a woman sucks, chews, or places in her mouth. For example, in Figure 7 Lilah coyly sucks on a strawberry while the overall composition of my photograph sexualizes her by focusing on her breasts. It is because of an effort to create works of art that highlight real women’s sexuality that my photographs are full of classic sexualized and submissive postures. This raises questions of how authentically my models and I are emulating healthy sexualities rather than the superficial sexuality addressed by

32 Jhally, Codes of Gender
33 Jhally, Codes of Gender
Lorde. Additionally, upon analysis, my photographs feature many themes and images from popular media’s male pornographic fantasy, especially from adolescent sexual fantasy. Figure 8.1 features Lilah partially nude in a room of pinball machines, a setting associated with youthful boyishness, while the dim lighting conveys a sense of erotic fantasy. Likewise, Figure 8.2 showcases scantily clad Meg and Sam pantomiming car troubles and enacting a well-known sexual narrative seemingly straight out of a car calendar or a men’s magazine.

As the photographer, I am ultimately responsible for the problematic tropes and stereotypes upheld in my work. The location and theme of photographs are usually from my inspiration, and I usually contribute to the body positioning and facial expressions of the model. After placing a subject in a setting and adjusting my camera, I rapidly photograph them as they begin to shift into positions and postures that they’re creating themselves, or as they naturally interact with me. If I think a posture comes across particularly well in a photograph, I may ask them to revisit it so I can photograph it from a better angle or with clearer focus. I may slightly adjust the posture, or ask them to hold it. I almost always individually choose the camera angle and what the focus and final composition of the photo is. Despite deep creative collaboration bridging the gap between photographer and subject, I will always be closing that gap from the “protected position of the photographer” (Queer Faces, Jack Halberstam). This unequal relationship of power became incredibly evident to me once noticing how frequently women modeling for me ask me to pose or position them, or ask me to tell them “what to do” to help alleviate discomfort or awkwardness in front of a camera. In the past, I have suggested postures that I have seen make models appear more relaxed and confident. I now recognize that most of these postures are those that Jhally and Goffman identify as submissive, sexualized, and largely

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34 Jhally, Dream Worlds 3
35 Halberstam, 96
reserved for female models (i.e. lying down, looking back toward the camera with torso twisted away, and the self-touch). I believe that both my suggestion of these postures and the model’s apparent confidence while performing the postures showcases how deeply naturalized sexual and passive postures are as attractive and flattering for women. This phenomena also demonstrates the irreconcilable power hierarchy between my photographic subjects and I, and that I must be ever aware of it because I ultimately control the images and cultural narratives the women modeling for me are placed into. Like my subjects, everything I do is informed by culture. In this way, my photographic practice and I act as a conduit through which cultural narratives and tropes flow to my audiences, potentially damagingly.

Sometimes, though, women modeling for me seem to have their own arsenal of poses, and their own distinct ideas of how they would like to appear in photos. Regina and Meg are good examples of this, and they always appear very confident while posing. Interestingly, their photos embody a significant amount of these classic postures. Upon being asked what her inspiration for poses was, Regina stated that she likes to pose unconsciously, shifting postures and readjusting frequently to experiment with the most possibilities for the photo: “I always try and keep moving, just let it be super natural, you do your job and take whatever you think looks good”. Similarly, Sam felt that her best photos were the “candid” ones where she hadn’t posed at all. She even recalled standing in front of her bedroom mirror and picking her best poses for looking “sexy,” and finding that they always made for the worst photos in her opinion.

Regardless of which one of us is manipulating the posing featured in the final photograph, it will reflect some of the images from dominant popular culture. This is because these images infiltrate our lives in every sphere. My subjects may feel that they are posing unconsciously, but they are deeply impacted by and embedded in a culture which informs all they do. “As Sut Jhally says,
“To not be influenced by advertising would be to live outside culture. No human being lives outside culture.” 36

My initial reaction to the realization my work embodies problematic stereotypes, tropes, stigmas, and imagery prevalent throughout popular media was defensive attachment to my conviction that the best photographs highlight honest vulnerability and the defenselessness of their subjects. Ultimately though, it is most important to me to honor the beautiful and brave women who let me photograph them, and to discuss to what extent these realizations were problematic for them in regards to their photographic experiences and products. They expressed a variety of opinions on what the appearance of these culturally prevalent tropes and postures in their photographs meant to them, and how it shifted their conceptualization of their experiences.

Lilah strongly maintains that our photos differ from those in the mainstream because ours feature untouched bodies that do not meet the standards set by commercial and entertainment media. She feels that it would be a disservice to both male and female models to emphasize traditionally masculine and strong postures because they are “uninteresting and boring” because they don’t as easily allow multiple readings or communicate ethereal or creative themes. She continues to prefer canting postures, and reiterated multiple times that to exclusively pose in ways that invert traditional, submissive images of women would be too “artistically limiting”. I agree that excluding postures that have been used to objectify women would burden the process of our art creation, as well as the quality of the art we produce. Realistically, excluding these postures leaves almost no remaining postures to work with. Meg and Regina also echoed Lilah’s opinion that eliminating poses and themes problematically gendered feminine left them with a stifling few ways of appearing in photographs. Regina related this back to her

36 Kilbourne, 64
understandings of feminism and the stigmatization of the feminine. She complicates the assumption that women have to completely disassociate from and subvert female stereotypes to challenge them, or to be considered a feminist.

Regina: *I feel like sometimes I have to look very serious or almost angry, because that is kind of what I feel like I’ve learned to….how do I say this. Think of all the stuff we’ve done, like protests, which are very serious, so it’s sometimes hard to imagine feminism as very light and happy. But I think the best pictures we’ve taken are super filled with personality.*

One of the biggest ah-ha moments I had with feminism in Women and Gender Studies, was that the feminism I thought I knew was women trying to be more masculine, trying to get to the level of men, instead of men trying to adopt more feminine qualities and raising the value of femininity, so why not put feminine postures in, I think that’s such a good point.

Meg also emphasized a high personal value placed on qualities which have been negatively conflated with femininity, like vulnerability.

Meg: *It’s really scary having a camera in front of you when you’re nude, it’s a very vulnerable state. I don’t think a lot of people appreciate that. They think you just want to show off your body, but it’s about exploring and showcasing your own vulnerability.*

In this example, the process is powerful for Meg because she can appear vulnerable and aware of her own defenselessness.
Conversely, Sam was obviously troubled that the photos we create may be indistinguishable from those that Kilbourne, Goffman, and Jhally critique. For her, the process itself was weakened if the product disappointingly reflected the mainstream values we proclaim to critique. Ultimately though, she feels that our images are distinguishable and “look like they don’t belong” in comparison to mainstream images. She cites her own and other’s imperfect and untouched appearances, but more so emphasized “personal attachments,” “personality,” and “candidness” as elements of our photographs which set us apart from entertainment media, commercial images, and professional pornography.

I was surprised to find that all of my research participants felt that the nude images I’d photographed of them were more subversive than I found them to be in light of analysis. They were all able to identify elements of the photographs or postures displayed in them that they considered “masculine,” “brave,” “strong,” or “powerful.” For example, Regina stated that “not smiling is really powerful for me,” and notes her lack of smiling expressions in most photos. Lilah referenced the prevalence of “strong eye contact” in our photos as distinctly masculine and a pose which makes her feel and communicate strength. Meg conceptualized a willingness to appear vulnerable as an implication greater strength and power, and Sam and Regina similarly reinterpreted smiling, laughing, and showing zealous emotion as a subversion of self-objectification and a lack of self-consciousness and self-surveillance. My research participants unanimously concluded that they were not concerned with possible misinterpretation of their images from outside audiences. To them, the photographs represent their personal processes and victories, and stand as a celebration of their own beauty, strength, vulnerability, self-love, and feminist identities. I applaud their refusal to burden their naked bodies with flawlessly subverting
stereotypical portrayals of femininity and dismantling cultural assumptions around gender performance, female submissiveness, and the reclamation of agency.

**REFLECTIONS and CONCLUSIONS**

Interviewing subjects of my photography offered valuable feedback on my process and on me as a photographer. It is incredibly important to me that the women I photograph feel comfortable, respected, and positive about their participation and about the images of them I produce. The power dynamics between my subjects and I is irreconcilable and vastly unequal, and they render themselves especially vulnerable by posing nude and allowing me to control nude images of them. Much of the feedback I received affirmed and flattered me, and instilled in me a sense of confidence as a photographer of vulnerable subjects which I had lacked before. In particular, all of my research participants told me I made them feel especially comfortable without their clothes and comfortable having their photos taken. They cited the positive atmosphere of our photoshoots as a reason for this, which I also credit to everyone present at any given shoot. Multiple research participants mentioned that they enjoyed the group energy and dynamics of our photoshoots, in which the women I photograph continually encourage, support, and relax each other.

They also particularly emphasized my extremely vocal and enthusiastic positive feedback of their postures and appearance in photographs (i.e. telling them that they look beautiful, that the photographs I’m taking are turning out well, and that they’re body postures or facial expressions are flattering, visually interesting, or inventive). Indeed, I am almost constantly exclaiming something along these lines to the person posing in front of me.
Regina: *When you take my pictures sometimes I don’t even think about you being there, I never worry you’re going to think I look gross or something.*

Meg: *The encouraging atmosphere that you create when you take pictures I think is super important, and I think a lot of people fail to do that. I think that the idea of encouraging people is really helpful and that’s where I felt most comfortable. We got more comfortable with each other, even in our last photoshoot you were like, “you’re doing great, love it, love it, keep doing that and I think the way you talk is great. I think that’s so important, especially when you’re nude, to have someone say “you look great, keep doing that.”*

Though all of the research participants referred to me as having “creative control” they each felt that my methods were collaborative, and that each photoshoot represented a collaboration between us. They cited our active exchange of ideas and my enthusiasm at photographing them wherever and however they felt most comfortable. They felt free to pose any way they would like, and to ask to have photographs taken from certain angles. This research, however, exposed me to the extent that I control the images. Particularly, I became aware of how much they both request direction and enjoy when I give them direction. This places a huge responsibility on me because I’m choosing the narratives and tropes conveyed with the images of my subjects, and they place a lot of trust in me when they ask for my direction or choose to follow my “creative vision.” To better mediate this delicate situation in the future, I plan on actively discussing the emotions and themes my subjects would like to portray with their images and their general participation. While Goffman and Jhally maintain that there’s nothing inherently wrong with the poses gendered feminine, I want to explore my subject’s understandings and personal relationships to the cultural narratives embedded in those postures.
Continuing the open dialogue sparked by this research about my photographic subjects’ perceptions of what different postures convey and how they make them feel will allow me to further ensure that they enjoy and feel empowered by the experience and the photographs I take of them. By placing their experiences, identities, and feminist ideologies at the forefront of my photographic practice, I hope to further establish a process which highlights and strengthens their agency and allows them to act rather than appear. I also hope, partially by acknowledging the problematic gender narratives upheld in my work, to establish a balance between individual agency and collective feminist responsibility. My subjects and I share an ethical obligation to recognize our own privilege, to act with responsible agency, and to ultimately forward a feminist consciousness, and I believe a nude photographic practice has the potential to facilitate fulfilling those obligations.
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