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THE BEAUTY BETWEEN

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THE BEAUTY BETWEEN

by

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Abstract

THE BEAUTY BETWEEN

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As a costume designer I am interested in exploring the beauty between commercial representations of beauty and narrative design. As a working professional I struggle between making people feel beautiful or appropriately costumed, and showcasing an genuine cohesive design. Are visible platforms like Broadway stages and blockbuster films our tool of measure for the entertainment industry? If so, I question how much responsibility a costume designer has in presenting authenticity over polish and the weight of their designs contributing to the social consumption and hierarchy of beauty standards. For my thesis I developed a series of portraits based on personal expression through narrative design. My thesis displays the process of painted portraiture based on modern reinterpretations of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. Each of the following portraits developed from design collaborations around power and beauty. This was an effort to reexamine a popular and influential icon of a classical western representation of beauty by exploring personalization in presentation through costume design.

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF COSTUME DESIGN

I remember sitting in the audience during a performance on Broadway where the homeless characters on stage sparkled with gentle smudge of dirt on their polished noses. It was the first time I had a visceral reaction to seeing design that looked like it was struggling to balance commercial sophistication with authentic narrative costume design. In this particular production it appeared as if the homeless characters were neatly curated so they could be argued as tidy or even beautiful. Even the performers had white flawless teeth, energetic eyes and clear complexions. This production displayed a less realistic and contrived portrayal of homelessness due to the limitations of quick changes and design aesthetic of overall production by the costume designer. Viewing this production made me realize two major costume design challenges that contribute to the social consumption and hierarchy of story telling standards in the theatre industry.

The first challenge for a costume designer is the level of manufactured representation within a production as implicated in the description of the performance mentioned above. I experienced this engineered homelessness representation through a western filter of beauty on a commercially produced production. This production was yielded awards for the design and was an expensive event to attend contributing to the capitalist culture of high art. That particular presentation of impoverished people was suggestive design as indicated by the smudge of dirt and tattered asymmetric clothing layers. It gave me enough visual cues to understand the story. However, I did not feel empathy for these characters because I did not see them presented as real homeless

people. As an audience member I did not feel bad for the homeless characters. I experienced their performance within a safe, but distant understanding of their struggle through song and dance. This distance made me question its effect on my real life and my relationship to authentic homeless people this production presented. The production did not make me relate or empathize with real homeless people it romanticized them and diminished their agency.

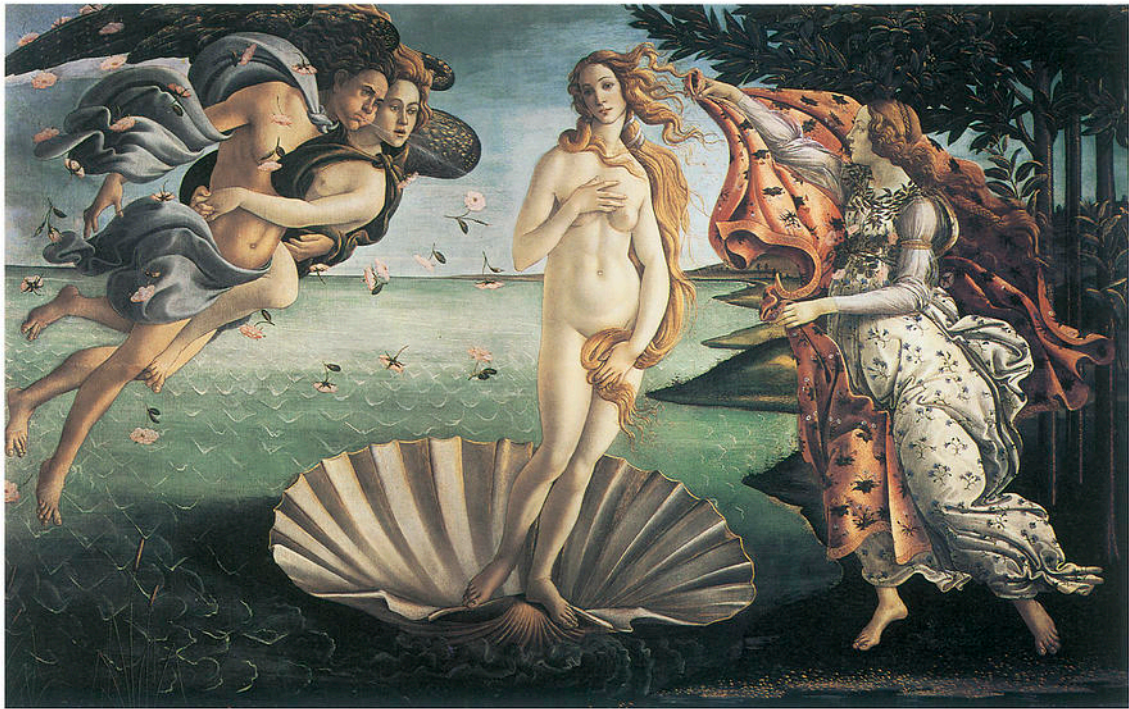
The second challenge is the role of the costume designer as a working artist. The career of a costume designer relied on being hired for their ability to produce attractive or authentic work that supported a narrative or performer. This binary trapped a costume designer to err on the side beautiful because creating authentic work could be risky, messy, or commercially unappealing. A bad aesthetic design decision could reflect poorly on the quality of the designer and lead to a loss of jobs or sustainable income because the work did not reflect a certain level of taste or design. The idea of sustainable success delivered me to the topic of my thesis where I could investigate my relationship as an artist with the topic of beauty and its place in our current American culture.

II. PERFORMING BEAUTY

Growing up in the Midwest with average access to education and a mother who supported us by working in the fashion and beauty industry brought me to my current fascination with the phenomenon of the beauty business.

“You should always dress up – people will give you better service and attention,” was a common saying in my youth. It shaped how I presented myself then and now. As a

former model and pageant winner I monopolized on beauty opportunities. It took years to develop a level of personal presentation that did not feel completely absorbed by the commercial beauty and fashion industries. By grad school I had finally allowed people to see me without makeup and had almost stripped away my trend-dependent fashion identity entirely. As a woman in academia I also took into account the need to dress more conservatively to avoid being written off as young or borderline pretty. Pretty could indicate I wasn't intelligent, or had an advantage. I continued to struggle with what it meant to present myself especially when I questioned *who* I dressed up *for*. Dressing up was a negotiation on how I wanted to be treated and it affected my relationships, grades and opportunities for the next ten years of my life. As I've gotten older my appearance became something I needed to neutralize or erase, which as an artist, has been an incredible block to reexamine. Instead of analyzing a play or stage production for this thesis I chose a broader mold of beauty that felt highly influential to the western representation of beauty standards in design.



Birth of Venus by Alessandro Botticelli 1468

III. VENUS AS THE BEAUTY ICON

While scrolling through Instagram I recognized a repetition in digital imagery to recreate Alessandro Botticelli's iconic artwork "The Birth of Venus" in beauty and lifestyle advertising on social media. The consistent repetition of the 'Venus pose' and iconography of the shell perpetuated a commercialized representation of femininity and beauty in mainstream media. These images repeatedly featured languid naked female bodies, smooth white skin, soft curves, modest poses, floral patterns and polished demure expressions. In Nancy Etcoff's article about the science of beauty she states, "The media channel desire and narrow the bandwidth of our preferences. A crowd-pleasing image becomes a mold, and a beauty is followed by her imitator, and then by the imitator of her imitator. (Etcoff)" As I started this thesis I wondered how much my final images of each woman would contrast or align with Botticelli's original imagery.

Artists have continued to replicate Botticelli's iconic Venus because of the mythic qualities and expressionistic style in his painting (Evans 10). Botticelli's portrait of Venus was the first painting of its time to depict a nude non-religious figure that displayed values of beauty (Evans 14). Due to its fantastical nature in 1488 the *Birth of Venus* was rejected by its commissioner and artistic institutions (Evans 30). This presentation of myth as art instilled value to a non-religious figure and this surrealist presentation captivated and inspired artists to explore their own ideas of beauty (Evans 14). This attraction to a piece of artwork is compelling evidence towards the power of influence of an artist. After 500 years the posture, skin tone, expression and motifs are

still recreated by artists today further perpetuating a classical representation of western beauty.

Americans first experienced Botticelli's representation of Venus through famed surrealist artist Salvador Dali at the New York World's Fair in 1939 with his exhibit 'House of Venus.' His exhibit featured women suspended from the ceiling in hoops with dream like expressions and a painted replica of Botticelli's Venus above the entrance (Evans 124). The Fashion industry first realized the power of aligning itself with a 'high artist' like Botticelli in 1938; Elsa Schiaparelli used Botticelli's Venus portrait for the event programs to support the floral embroidery work on her 'Fall 1938 Collection. (Evans 114)' This alignment with a high artist catapulted Schiaparelli's Fashion House to the top of its industry at the time. Since these two occasions, many artists have monopolized on the association with Botticelli's Venus and have perpetuated beauty, youth, and femininity in their products for mass consumption.

House of Venus – Dali (Evans)



Fall 1938 Collection - Schippareli (Evans)



IV. BEAUTY

According to the Cambridge Dictionary beauty is, “an attractive quality that gives pleasure to those who experience it or think about it, or a person who has this attractive quality.” It is also defined as “A combination of qualities such as shape, colour, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight.” (Oxford). There is an exchange between the ‘object of beauty’ and its audience. An ‘object of beauty’ is then given a value by an audience and is used to create worth. Our American culture has aligned beauty with capitalist qualities and it makes it extremely difficult to present raw beauty in a very filtered commercialized culture (Wolfe). As Naomi Wolf describes, "Beauty is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system." Wolfe also believed our ideas of beauty are based on myth, which is another reason why I chose the iconic mythical representation of beauty, *Venus*, to explore feminine social presentation through modern portraiture. I explored the idea of commercial femininity creating images that represented individual associations to beauty and power through costume design and staged portraiture.

V. THESIS PERFORMANCE

For my thesis presentation I produced and presented painted portraits based on the personalities and style of three performers. By designing and painting these portraits I discovered a great challenge in making non-commercial images to contrast classical Western presentations of beauty while also showcasing the modern expressions of a few young women in America.

VI. THE PERFORMERS

I recognized the performers would ultimately dictate this artistic journey by their personalities. I was drawn to people that presented complex dispositions and a dynamic energy that would translate through the painting. The *Venus* tableau was painted in a thoughtful expressionistic tone and its imaginative composition of scale and movement are emulated in many variations of his work. I wanted to capture this tone in my paintings of each woman in these large-scale portraits.

I sought performers who were open to having their portrait painted and trusted the quality of my work. I was drawn to the confidence of these women who expressed themselves freely. It also felt exciting to know I would be creating a performance with this person that was something they had not yet presented. Due to the pace of this project I considered the strengths of asking people who were naturally performers and wouldn't fear dressing up or performing for the camera. Once I understood the scope of this project I kept myself open to my immediate community. My thesis explored each performer's individuality in relation to the iconic Venus tableau through their association to gender, consumerism and textiles from our modern western culture.

ALISSA

I first met Alissa at a secret Barbra Streisand concert at Lincoln Center five years ago. We were ‘paddle girls’ for a banking event where we passed around a microphone for the investors to speak during an annual financial conference. We were rented for the day to dress up and ‘facilitate’ the event. Alissa made her way to New York and found major success in modeling having features in both GQ and Playboy. (figure 15) What drew me to Alissa was how different her persona on camera was from how she presented herself in person. Alissa was a quiet and quirky personality who wore all black clothing from head to toe. She usually sported a black beanie and - in a way - erased any conversation about her body as she went from casting to casting.

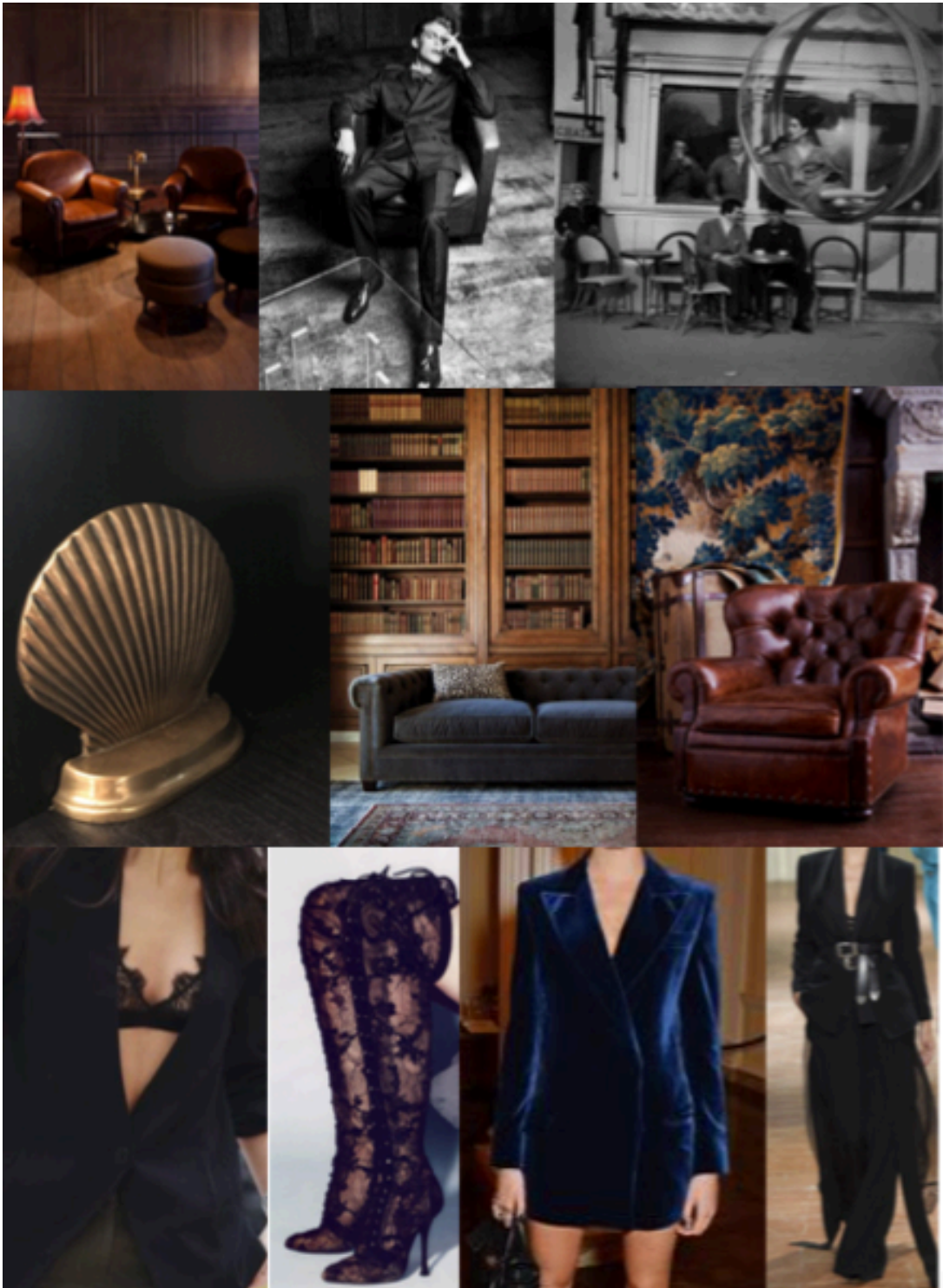
Many girls I met in New York in the modeling industry were selling themselves between every casting and were always staring at their reflection in their smart phones, adjusting their blouse or fixing their lipstick. Alissa was different. She was drawn to a minimal tailored style and was a true juxtaposition to most nude or suggestive editorials in which she was cast.

When I spoke to Alissa about my thesis project her first reaction was delight. In our interviews about powerful or beautiful clothing she answered instinctively with responses around menswear and tailored suiting. She shared how she has “always seen tailored menswear as something so complete and powerful.” I compiled a set of research imagery that reflected her descriptions during our interview process and began sourcing the garments and artifacts.

For Alissa's shoot we captured her in a single breasted men's navy suit with a relaxed slim fit. We surrounded her in a warm commanding environment to contrast the cool tones in her suiting. We also explored the New York Public Library in a feminine cut suit that reflected her impulse towards timelessness and sophistication. For each composition I included elements of Botticelli's original image through staging, props, expression or allusion to Venus within each of the spaces. Part of the exploration was to see how far we could contrast the original Botticelli image and still maintain a connection.

The final image selected for a painted portrait (Alissa #1) was enhanced to keep focus on the tiny relic of a gold shell at her foot and edit out a safety pin that could be seen from rolling up her cuff. We aimed to use as much of the raw image as possible to avoid photoshopping and manipulating an image that would undergo yet another layer of transformation through figure painting.

Alissa Research Board by Caitlin Graham



Alissa #1 As Venus By Caitlin Graham



Alissa #2 As Venus By Caitlin Graham



Alissa #3 As Venus By Caitlin Graham



RAMA

When I started graduate school I was assigned to work in costume stock. Rama and I were assigned to work together and I had seen how talented she was on stage during university together. (figure 21) One day I was restocking men's shirts and she asked me what I was doing for my thesis and I said I was painting massive portraits and she lit up like a neon sign. It was a jarring contrast to the person I had quietly worked along side for the entire year. Rama's enthusiasm and support gave me the confidence to ask if she would be a model for one of my tableaux.

In our conversations around beauty and power she expressed how she was drawn to expensive looking clothing and bold colors that showed off her skin tone. When I asked her what kind of powers she would have as a goddess she said: invisibility and shape shifting. Using abstract ideas to develop a world and personal style that reflected both her sense of groundedness and magnetism was about balancing both what she felt physically comfortable in and how it made her feel emotionally once she put on the garment.



Rama Mood Board by Caitlin Graham

In my experience as a personal stylist we often stop trying on clothing that feels extreme or out of our comfort zone when we don't have someone shopping with us or for us. We enter into this clothing "safe zone" of trend, comfort and assimilation in society. Part of this thesis exploration was about transforming the body to represent an identity through personalized costume design and materials outside of ready to wear clothing. Rama was willing to try all of the styles and we were able to present a truly theatrical version of Rama's personality through mixing a balanced combination of clothing and accessories out of an uncensored and highly curated mix of items.

During the fitting process for Rama we tried on eight looks to create images ranging from extreme refinement to maximalism to explore extremes of "expensive taste" and capture this sense of regal ownership with a relaxed confidence. I was drawn to capturing an element of reflectivity in lighting or textile to highlight her shimmering transformative personality as well as the colors in her skin tone. Despite the initial fear of covering her eyes with refracted lenses; this accessory gave her a sense of invisibility and superiority in the final photo as desired in her initial interview.

I chose the final image to paint because of the sway of her posture and mysterious expression as well as the range of eclectic colors that contrasted her calm demeanor. The winged figure on her left was a nod to Zephyr the wind god in Botticelli's original image and instead of a seashell I gave her pearl earrings. For the reference of water I deferred to the blue cast in the sequins. I used the multicolored fur stole for the compositions loose association to land. Her hands and the direction of her face mirror the general gesture and passivity of Venus.

Rama #1 as Venus by Caitlin Graham



Rama #2 as Venus by Caitlin Graham



Rama #3 as Venus by Caitlin Graham



LILLY

Lilly had a palpable energy that could be felt from across the room. Her bright orange flip-flops had nothing and everything to do with fashion and her topknot hairstyle covered in scrunchies could also be seen from across the room. Her clothing was bold and mixed and it made it easy to ask her if she would wear something wildly different for a photo shoot. I met Lilly in the theatre department at the University of Texas for a production of a play where she performed as the lead female character.

We shared imagery around what she and I thought was powerful and beautiful. Her initial reaction to a material that felt most like her personality was white-flowing fabric and lace. I'll never forget this because I had never seen her wear anything remotely like this before and from there I felt compelled to create this conversation of beauty with her and with this material. Her material choice complimented her personality and supported this ethereal energy about her that was inviting, light and thoughtful.

I developed her research board with sheer and chiffon fabrics as well as lace and raw rhinestone covered details. Since Lilly had moved to the coast we decided to embrace the opportunity to shoot on the beach and lean on Botticelli's imagery with more emphasis since we were already playing in contrast to Lilly's typical presentation of self and persona.

Lilly's Mood Board by Caitlin Graham



When I arrived we fit the gown look and she expressed what felt most like her style at the moment was a Fleetwood Mac t-shirt and orange flip-flops. I knew we had to do another shoot while I was there to capture both expressions. I asked her to try on as many looks from her closet and put all of her favorite items on at one time. She had stories about each garment and once she had them all on we knew had found the right combination. Her ensemble of blazer and overalls with her favorite scrunchies made no sense and therefore made perfect sense to shoot in contrast to the ocean shot. I saw she was excited to be seen as both.

Lilly's shoot was the first of the three shoots. I had not decided if her material I was prepping for the photo shoots was going to be more suggestive draped fabric and abstract or look like a piece of clothing. In the development of her chiffon dress I struggled to allow the fabric to be raw with need to construct it into piece of constructed clothing. This echoed the same compulsive behavior I struggled with in editing all my work on the spectrum between crafted beauty and raw design. I learned from this first shoot that I was allowing real style lines of manufactured clothing to drive the conversation instead of a metaphorical association to a material or texture.

It was fascinating how a few items of white fabric and makeup made beauty the performance instead of showcasing Lilly's authentic beauty and power. Her performance on the beach was a complete juxtaposition to the mix-matched look.

Lilly #1 as Venus by Caitlin Graham



Lilly #2 as Venus by Caitlin Graham



VI. THE PAINTED PORTRAITS

My intention was three fold. I wanted to connect to the Botticelli painting, create scale & drama, and explore my personal technique and craft. The painting process became an enactment of my conversation and experience of beauty.

The final influence was inspired by a rebirth of portrait painting in the fashion and beauty industries between 2016-2018. Vogue and Gucci commissioned painters to launch their most recent collections and anniversary editions as a way to elevate the association of the brand with the craftsmanship of the content. This use and remix of classical portraiture is exactly the same reinvention technique that both Dali and Elsa Shipperalli used in their interpretations of Renaissance portraiture. As an artist I am fascinated by this shift to present figure painting and fantasy that feels deeply embraced by the beauty and fashion industries.

Milene Fernandez studied this resurgence and states “Just by the sheer fact that these artists are creating such highly skilled paintings with such rigor, infusing it with a sanctity and respect for life, says something about our time. No matter how marginalized they [ateliers] may be, what they choose to paint and how they paint it says something about our time. The increasing number of ateliers around the country and abroad, and the increasing number of technical books on drawing, painting, and studio practice being published in recent years says something about our time. (Fernandez)”

A painted portrait also requires skills that a smart phone camera, filter or basic airbrushing technique could not capture. Many of these apps produce altered imagery that aligns and perpetuates blemish free beauty standards.

VII. THE PAINTING PROCESS

When I first started this project I thought about what I wanted to feel as I painted this series of portraits. As an artist I've never approached work from this perspective. It's always been about what others see, need or want. This project allowed me to release many of my personal habits of self-curating and focus on the technique of my artistic direction, collaborations and painting skills. I wanted to explore the medium of portrait painting through my own personal technique and craft. It would have been much easier to print medium scale photos of all the photo shoots and may have been a more complete story telling experience, however, the experience and struggle of painting large scale portraits was both consuming and liberating.

I used acrylic paint with a matte medium to extend the life of the open color while I worked quickly. I was trying to cover a lot of surface and blend at the same time. I would often run out of the right color. For a week I accidentally battled dioxide purple and realized it was the culprit from turning all my peach skin tones grey.

There were several major lessons I learned while I was painting. It only takes one small wrong paint stroke to throw off the entire perception of the image. I had a tendency to over blend my paintings and on some level I wonder if it has to do with the way I saw imagery every day in our digitally perfected culture. I usually saw airbrushed faces and manipulated figures advertising. I found it extremely difficult to paint the planes of the face in fear I would make the person look worse than the photo instead of *better*. This need to please my audience reminded me of my role as a costume designer and making work that erred on the side of pretty over authentic.

Painted Portrait of Rama by Caitlin Graham



Throughout this process my colleagues kept putting faith in me that I would make it look “fabulous” or “gorgeous” and these words made me nervous. I realized painting is a very personal experience and a rebellious one. To look “gorgeous” is an illusion of glamour and based in beauty standards. I tried not to make illusions but I got lost in the space between the real image and my perception “beauty.”

My painting training prior to this exhibition was as a teaching assistant in the scene painting shop where I shadowed Karen Maness the scenic charge of Texas Performing Arts. I learned ways of transferring images from elevations to large-scale landscapes with trompe l’oeil affects. Scenic painting is very different from figure painting. Figure painting is more about the artistic interpretation of the person than copying exactly what is on the page. Figure painting is more about *how* you see it, whereas scenic painting can feel like studying *what* you see. I had printed my photos large enough to copy and was trying to replicate a photograph. I was constantly fighting to make big marks and small marks to follow the movement within each painting.

Despite the size of the paintings it was important I covered every inch of the canvas with paint to make them all ‘complete.’ Each painting had its own style and paint technique. While Lilly’s beach shot was more “painterly” Rama’s final image looked like pop art and Alissa’s features had a graphic finish. I think ultimately I would have liked them all to swing a little more towards Rama’s paint style. I had repainted her face upside down per Karen Maness’s recommendation and it allowed me to focus on what was on the page instead of interpreting a face and layering my subconscious filter to beautify the image. The style I used on Rama looks more natural and relaxed and the blending was

confident. Lilly's scrunchie image was my tiny experiment into painting a mood instead of a 'pretty' painting. It was chaotic and wild. It was painted with a very different attitude than the others. I enjoyed the freedom of painting it looser and was able to lean on my raw painting abilities.

VIII. THE GALLERY EVENT

Last winter I found a photo of a venue online that looked like a secret garden. I made an appointment to view the location and was greeted by a statue of the Birth of Venus at its doors. The space had a forgotten beauty – due to all the old artifacts, furniture and collected décor. The Sekrit Theatre was at once nostalgic and welcoming. It was important in the display of these paintings that they look like found objects. I created antique gold leaf frames that unified the collection and added an extra level of theatrical presentation that was mirrored in other antique gold leafed objects on the property.

The Sekrit theatre location was the best venue to share my work because it put people in the mindset of exploration and curiosity. I was thrilled to introduce my community to the Sekrit Theatre venue and the staging of the portraits in the glass house gave viewers a private space on the property to view the paintings. After moving the paintings from my apartment to the venue we lined them up against a blank wall in my complex. The sight of them lined up next to one another was striking inside the lobby of my building. After seeing my work lined up together in the lobby of my apartment I realized the how different neutral architecture could affect the presentation of my work and shape the overall experience. Unlike my lobby, the Sekrit Theatre location kept people around longer and created a relaxed and open event, where there was more opportunity for the community to linger, wander the property and return to the Glass House to see the paintings again.

During the event I played hostess and performed my monologue about my paintings to nearly 100 people. It was exciting to watch people walk through the exhibit

to absorb and react to the work. I had spent hours with these paintings and felt a giant release to share them. People asked questions about how I chose the images and how I painted them. I was able to tell each model's story to give the viewer context. I was nervous that my painting ability would overshadow the content of the image. I was so self-conscious about this project I have a hard time knowing how it was truly received.

As a theatre person I wanted to talk about the work or explain myself and relate yet, as a figurative painter and artist I didn't want to be present to watch people looking at my paintings. It was a bizarre evening. Thankfully, two of my colleagues took photos of the party and the people who attended the event. This altered my perception of how it was received publicly. In the photos of the event everyone is smiling and appears engaged. The presentation day was an adrenalin rush.

I also built a giant seashell for this event. It looked more like a piñata than a sculpture but I wanted there to be another way to interact with this exhibit where people could engage with the art – by posing as *beauty*. My thesis was about performing beauty and designing for personal beauty. It was important to have a feature that framed others in the same way. The shell allowed participation at the event. I knew my thesis would be limited to the scope of my four paintings and interpretations of people and having the seashell was a way to also create dialogue around taking photos with our phones and performing or sharing ourselves.

Guest at The Beauty Between Reception by Caitlin Graham



IX. CONCLUSION

In a culture flooded with commercial imagery and ideas based around capitalist beauty; I question as an artist how I can contribute authentically to a pool of artistic appreciation without measuring it against the repeated images of beauty we collectively perpetuate and recreate in our current cultural expression.

As an artist this thesis taught me a new way to pursue future work. I can choose to reinforce consumerism through beauty standards or through creation and deep investigation. By using beauty as a tool that measured commercial value in America I can evaluate my relationship to designed imagery with more thoughtfulness and perspective.

I aimed to translate inner beauty into realized costume design through portraiture. However, even the costume design decisions in this thesis were sifted from personal relationships to man made materials, like sheer and chiffon fabrics, that imbue their own relationship to beauty and consumerism. This leads me to ask - Is it even possible to create something that is not measured against this beauty standard?

As Nancy Etcoff reminds us, “Our imitation and exposure to socially constructed beauty” are also part of my costume design lens in which I create as an artist. (Etcoff) The spectrum of beautification has become a unit of measure and I’ve discovered it is my individual responsibility to define how I will use my tools.

As an American woman I see Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* repeated in consumer culture to collect and qualify a style of presentation. As an artist I attempted to create contrast in imagery to develop a dialogue around this topic. Without the support of this thesis text and words my exhibit and installation was merely a contribution to the likeliness of beauty that didn’t so much reject commercial beauty but classified it in reflection to myself as an artist.

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