

Copyright

by

Ann Benjamin Miller

2016

The Report Committee for Ann Benjamin Miller
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

Perceptions of an Erotic Maker

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Co-Supervisor:

Ann Reynolds

Co-Supervisor:

Teresa Hubbard

Perceptions of an Erotic Maker

by

Ann Benjamin Miller, BFA

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2016

Dedication

This report is dedicated to Elroy, Shaun, the Porch Couple, and our night walks. Without our walks I would not be the erotic maker/spectator that I am.

Abstract

Perceptions of an Erotic Maker

Ann Benjamin Miller, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Co-Supervisors: Ann Reynolds and Teresa Hubbard

This report is a summary of my work and research during my three years at University of Texas at Austin. The first section of the report begins with the presentation of a mode of perception that comes from Parker Tyler's essay "The Erotic Spectator: an Essay on the Eye of the Libido". The second part of the report is a narrative that puts into practice the tools presented by Tyler- a set of tools that I use to allow boundaries of life and studio to fluidly shift and coalesce into paintings and back into life experiences.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	vii
Connoisseurs of Sight	1
The Porch Couple	11
References	20

List of Figures

Figure 1:	<i>Peer, Smear</i> , Oil and oilstick on canvas, 68 x 48 in, 2016.	7
Figure 2:	<i>Piggy Back</i> , Oil and oilstick on canvas, 96 x 72 in, 2016.....	7
Figure 3:	<i>Fiddle</i> , Oil and oilstick on canvas, 13 x 8 in, 2016.	8
Figure 4:	<i>Fisted</i> , Oil and oilstick on canvas, 60 x 48 in, 2016.....	8
Figure 5:	<i>Thigh Gap</i> , Charcoal on bristol, 12 x 9 in, 2015.....	9
Figure 6:	<i>Porch Couple</i> , Oil and oilstick on canvas, 96 x 72 in, 2016.....	9
Figure 7:	<i>Leg Lick</i> , Oil and oilstick on canvas, 60 x 48 in, 2016.....	10
Figure 8:	<i>Pony</i> , Oil and oilstick on canvas, 93 x 68 in, 2016.....	10
Figure 9:	Iphone photo taken on walk, Austin, TX, 2016.....	11
Figure 10:	<i>Dog Dude</i> , Oil on canvas, 12 x 9 in, 2016.....	17
Figure 11:	<i>Fountain</i> , Oil and oilstick on canvas, 96 x 63 in, 2016.	17
Figure 12:	<i>Shadow Pen</i> , Charcoal on bristol, 9 x 12 in, 2015.....	18
Figure 13:	<i>Bird</i> , Oil on canvas, 12 x 9 in, 2016.	18
Figure 14:	<i>Scissor</i> , Oil and oilstick on canvas, 88 x 68 in, 2016.	19

Connoisseurs of Sight:

A conversation between Orlando/Woolf and Parker Tyler

I have set up an imaginary scenario in which the authors of two influential texts participate in a conversation about my paintings. In this fantastical scenario, I imagine my two muses, Parker Tyler's "The Erotic Spectator: an Essay on the Eye of the Libido" and a character I call Orlando/Woolf, who is a hybrid of the character Orlando and the voice of the narrator from Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography*. (Both texts deal with perceptive fluidity— Boundaries are permeable and offer an alternative way of maneuvering through the world as a maker and a consumer of information.) As boundaries blur, sensory information is turned on and senses start to misregister. In "The Erotic Spectator", Tyler allows associations to grow and shift fluidly over time and across hierarchical boundaries. For Tyler, the accumulation of everyday experiences builds a sophisticated perceptual skill set that he offers to his audience as an alternate (and empowering) mode of perception. In *Orlando*, the main character Orlando moves fluidly through various times, genders, and locations without warning or justification. As readers we are made aware that Woolf is the architect of Orlando's every move and, like Tyler, she never feels the need to rationalize a decision to violate an artificial boundary. In my imaginary scenario, I envision Tyler and Orlando/Woolf standing in a room filled with my paintings and participating in a collaborative effort to enter the work as connoisseurs of perception.

In "The Erotic Spectator" Tyler describes a process of experience, primarily through sight that connects to what and how I make, the narrative within my paintings, and the experience of looking at my work. Tyler describes being "a spectator of life as if

life were a work of art” (Tyler 75). As an erotic spectator, Tyler describes how life experiences fluidly coalesce into works of art and art de-coalesces into reality (Tyler 76). Making a painting is an attempt to hold and make static ever-shifting, quotidian experiences. On the surface these moments seem mundane and repetitive, but are, in fact, the origin of the awe inspiring or the climactic. I attempt to demarcate the slippery moments of life in an equally slippery and volatile medium before it slides off of the surface of the canvas back into a pool of pigment, or the immediacy of the moment I am trying to translate onto a surface has shifted. Rather than try to use painting as a way of illustrating pictorially the complexity of everyday lived experiences, I allow the surface of the painting to be a site for lived experiences to coalesce in a much more temporal way.

Tyler advocates for a type of perception-- “eyeless sight involves vision by means of other organs than the eyes, even by the pores of the skin” (Tyler 75). Tyler describes moving fluidly through the world, allowing his senses to guide him. As an erotic spectator he lets formal connections between objects lead to new conceptual connections. He makes these new connections between the ubiquitous objects he comes in contact with through a broad range of lived experiences. Overtime he imbues everyday objects with a range of social, historical, and cultural meaning. He allows cultural hierarchies to melt away, trusting the perceptual connections that he makes. Tyler claims that “imagination may be called the abstract, all knowing organ of vision...and that most people see with the eye of the dictionary rather than the physical eye” (Tyler 76). “The Erotic Spectator” serves as a how-to guide to become one’s own erotic spectator, and in turn, an erotic creator-- it grants the reader power as a participatory agent and consumer of perceptual information, suggesting a collaborative relationship between maker, object, and audience.

The second participant in my imagined conversation is Orlando/Woolf. Virginia Woolf, as writer and narrator of Orlando, is an erotic maker. She gives herself the freedom to transition Orlando through time, place, gender, and orientation, not feeling the need to presuppose a decision with a clearly stated logic or reason. Throughout the novel Orlando plops, or is plopped, down in different times and spaces because, to the narrator, these things are malleable and lack fixed boundaries. As readers, we believe that Orlando exists simultaneously at all of these points in time. Without warning, a new storyline begins and rather than believing that the previous version of Orlando ceases to exist, I imagine each iteration of Orlando to continue in parallel existence. Woolf inserts known historical characters into the novel that serve as points of reference, blurring boundaries between reality and fiction. As readers, we are reminded throughout the story that although Orlando is the focus of action, his/her desires are never fully realized and the narrator (Woolf) is ultimately the one with agency.

The way that Woolf interacts with and relates to Orlando is similar to the way that I engage with the characters in my paintings. As their creator, it is important for me to consider the agency of the figures that I paint, particularly the agency of the women. In earlier paintings, the figures were all depicted with their backs facing the viewer. Over time, the figures have turned forward, confronting the viewer. They are strong and confident. The female forms used to be radially symmetrical and were so stylized that they became clichéd vessel-like forms. The current figures, while still reduced, have an observed specificity of form, making them read less as universal stand-ins for a body and more as unique and specific bodies. The figures engage in consensual, pleasurable behavior and are not hiding from the viewer, but, ultimately, I am the one in control of their fate. I have ultimate agency. I am the one that experiences release and sensory pleasure in making and viewing a painting.

During the course of my imaginary conversation that took place between Orlando/Woolf and Parker Tyler they came up with a long list of terms to describe my work. From this list, I extrapolated a few fundamental themes that run through my paintings: desire and sensation, misregistration, and the everyday.

Rather than the paintings describing the climactic fulfillment of desire and touch, they point to the inability to fully realize desire. This unfulfilled desire operates in several modes within the paintings. The couples in the paintings are never shown during a moment of contact and instead in the moments leading up to, or just after consensual contact are depicted. The presence of a third figure, a dog, who is witness to the couple's private action is another carrier of unfulfilled desire in the narrative of the paintings. This dog lingers just outside of the picture plane, but its shadow projects into the private space of the couple. It feels a level of interaction in the intimate moment between the couple but, as a shadow figure; full participation is a fantasy, leaving the third presence with unfulfilled desires as well. The interaction of the third figure then implicates the viewer as complicit in witnessing the action between the couple and points to the viewer's inability to fully participate. Lastly, my own desires as a maker are frequently undermined in my seemingly futile attempts to try and make something fleeting into a static object.

My paintings deal with misregistration of senses and desires, shapes and forms, and point of view. In viewing a painting sight is heightened while touch can be diminished, leading to a synesthetic desire to confirm a tactile experience through vision. Shapes, forms, and colors misregister, rubbing up against each other in ways that are slightly off and create a sense of visual tension or vibration. One form appears static but then begins to slide off of the surface or transforms from body to landscape to abstraction and back again. The paintings give the viewer a feeling of misunderstanding or a sense of

confusion of point of view. The viewer asks questions of who is doing what to whom and from what angle. A painting may at first appear to have a static point of view, but time spent with the painting reveals a multiplicity of interpretations. Embedded forms that play hide and seek start to reveal themselves and spaces flip between interior/ exterior.

The people, objects and situations that stimulate my senses and my imagination are ordinary. Rather than anticipating the results of a painting with a theoretical framework, I allow embodied experience to guide me -- I allow inclinations that excite and embarrass me to be a guiding force in the work. I spent the majority of my time in graduate school trying to avoid developing language to describe intuition, instead relying on “the eye of the dictionary”. Defining the ineffable in words takes a level of sophistication and intelligence that is developed obliquely overtime, requiring a synthesis of embodied experience and knowledge into a clear and direct vocabulary. In my struggles to avoid developing the language of the intuitive I either tried to make work that illustrated a particular theoretical framework, or I tried to justify intuitive work by talking about it in terms of some text that I had just read that had nothing to do with what the work was actually doing. I came to a place where I had to reconsider the hierarchy of intellect that I had constructed in which illustrating knowledge through a highly theoretical use of written, spoken, and visual language was somehow more valuable than a display of embodied knowledge. I reached a moment of renegotiation with myself-- a type of “failure of objectification” of the self.

From this renegotiation, I made a decision to listen to my erotic spectator. I trust that the many thousands of pages of text I have consumed over the past few years and the endless images I actively and passively consume, coalesce into paintings. I, like Tyler, found that this wealth of embodied intelligence had been built over time. I listen closely to what the work is saying and allow the boundaries that separate life and studio, real and

fantasy, to blur, sometimes turning into an indiscernible mess that I later have to sort through or scrap altogether. The most honest and the most feminist position I can take is to allow myself to move through life as an erotic spectator and an erotic maker.

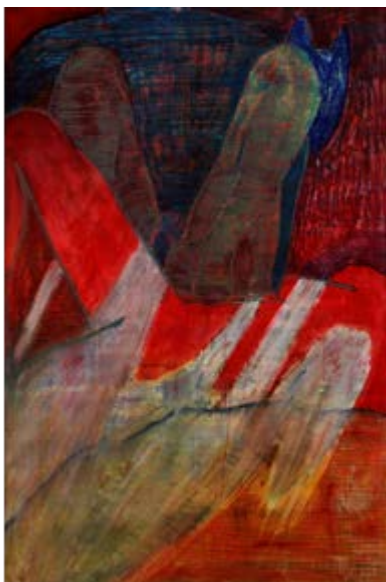


Figure 1: *Peer, Smear*, Oil and oilstick on canvas, 68 x 48 in, 2016.



Figure 2: *Piggy Back*, Oil and oilstick on canvas, 96 x 72 in, 2016.

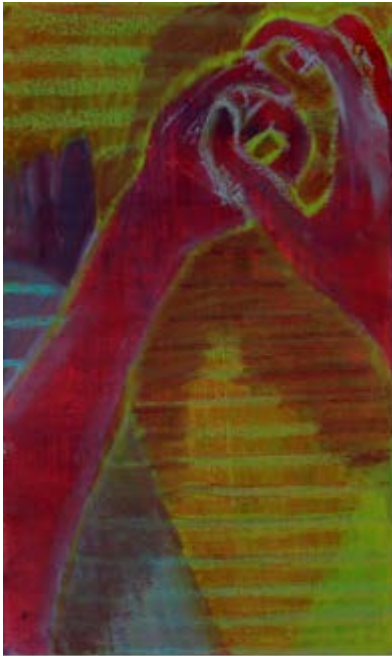


Figure 3: *Fiddle*, Oil and oilstick on canvas, 13 x 8 in, 2016.



Figure 4: *Fisted*, Oil and oilstick on canvas, 60 x 48 in, 2016.

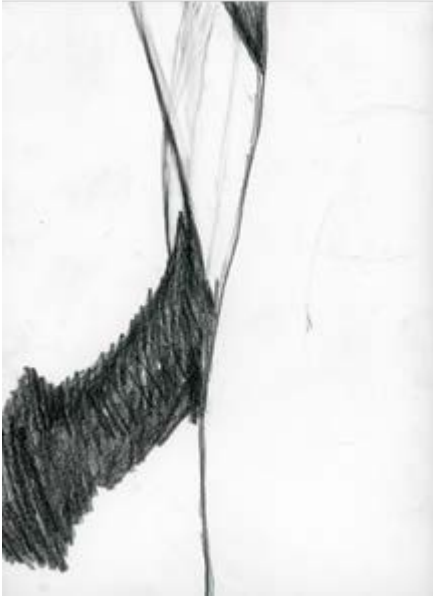


Figure 5: *Thigh Gap*, Charcoal on bristol, 12 x 9 in, 2015.



Figure 6: *Porch Couple*, Oil and oilstick on canvas, 96 x 72 in, 2016.



Figure 7: *Leg Lick*, Oil and oilstick on canvas, 60 x 48 in, 2016.



Figure 8: *Pony*, Oil and oilstick on canvas, 93 x 68 in, 2016.

The Porch Couple



Figure 9: iPhone photo taken on walk, Austin, TX, 2016.

Louis could not sleep. He turned over in his bed to lie on his stomach and burying his face in the pillow, moved against the hot sheets as if he were lying over the woman. But when the friction increased the fever in his body, he stopped himself.

He got out of bed and looked at his watch. It was two o'clock. What could he do to appease his fever? He left his studio. The moon was shining and he could see the roads clearly. The place, a beach town in Normandy, was full of little cottages, which people could rent for a night or a week. Louis wandered aimlessly.

- Anaïs Nin, "Woman on The Dunes"

I walk into the studio and open a book "Encyclopedia Erotica". One image in particular captures my interest and I use my phone to crop and recontextualize the ancient erotic print. In the foreground of the image there is a woman crawling on the ground. Above and behind the crawling woman, there is another figure splayed out on a bed. In this image I witness the moment leading up to, or just after, sexual contact. From the photo I have taken on my phone, I make small drawings and edit out extraneous

compositional information. *A dog appears.* He's looking at me. I shut the door to keep him out but he reaches his paws in the crack where the door and the floor meet. His shadow projects into my space. Excited and slightly embarrassed, I trust the impulse and collage the shape of the dog's shadow into the frame of the drawing. His four legs become stylized architectural pillars that are reflected over the crawling woman and the splayed reclining figure-- obscuring, deleting, and confusing the information in its path. The dog's shadow flips between positive and negative, reality and illusion. Using this drawing as an outline, I make a lap-sized painting and move through choices for surface and palette. *Glowing pink light.* It is getting late. I need to walk the dog.

The next morning I return to the studio and embed thin layers of transparent red pigment into the brilliant white gessoed ground of a large canvas. From this ground I push and rub other transparent paint into the surface of the painting, building luminosity into the surface of the painting. The transparent red ground fills my studio with pink light. On top of this ground I lay down a chromatic gray that stacks on top of the red, the combination makes the gray read as a vibrating muted green. While yesterday's preparatory work for this large painting was thoughtful and deliberate, this stage of the painting is direct and urgent. At this early stage of the painting I can usually tell if it will hold up as both an image and as a painting, or if it has lost the freshness and immediacy of the initial drawings and needs to be abandoned. This painting stands a chance; It breathes, is open and receptive. I make a series of intuitive decisions-- trusting myself as a maker. I stroke, rub, and caress the surface, sometimes losing myself in repetitious, vibratory touch-- allowing the exchange of pleasure to take place between several forms and layers of the painting.

The hours pass without me realizing. Paintings are transcendent. They are simultaneously real physical objects and illusionistic fantasies full of sensual experiences

of making and viewing. Structures and surfaces that are touched and manipulated in the “real” physical world are covered with rarified pigments that are collected from the earth and, through an alchemical process, this muck is transformed into luminescent, chromatic goop (oil paint). As the hours pass, I continue applying this chromatic goop to the surface of the painting. In my hands the goop is layered, slathered, and manipulated into a chromatically intense, pictorially believable image. If I mishandle or overwork the painting it transforms back into muck. Making a painting is a slippery process of handling pigments in an attempt to get the right amount of mud and chromatic intensity to exist together before the mud overtakes the intensity leaving me with a greenish gray pool of goop. I wince at the painting turned around in the timeout corner of my studio. It got away from me; within a couple of minutes I came to, standing in a pool of mineral spirits and muddy paint, having wiped away a week’s worth of work. In a lecture at the Whitney Museum, Amy Sillman talks about the materiality of color and the frustration and joy of trying to make sense of this goop:

Color is even harder to negotiate. You embrace the vicissitudes of this toxic, expensive, and unpredictable substance, while trying to keep it looking “fresh”, maintaining the illusion that it is effortless. When they talk about color as decorative, I just don't know what the FUCK they are talking about! Try mixing oil paint. Ninety-five percent of the time it is just hideous. Those shimmering colors from the paint store turn immediately into pasty slop buckets of sickening green or hemorrhage brown. This is where the fetishism goes horribly wrong. (Sillman “Color as Material”)

Before I leave the studio for the day I sit down in front of a painting I finished a few days ago, viewing it as a spectator. The pigments covering the surface are transformed again through the process of vision-- light interacting with the atmosphere and reflecting and refracting off of the brilliant gessoed support of the painting onto the

permeable surface of the retina. *An image enters.* It is reflected onto my retina in reverse and transforms again-- the information that comprises the image moves through a pathway of neurons. My brain reconfigures this information and makes sense of the upside down muck and the goop. All of these mediated processes of material: translations, transformations, reflections, refractions, touching, sanding, slathering, smelling, looking, lead me, the viewer, to the fantastical sensory experience of believing a flat surface to be an immersive illusionistic fantasy. In experiencing the painting, sense of sight is heightened and, while sense of touch is immediately denied, intense looking leads to a synesthetic experience of feeling through sight. The tactility of the surface and complementary color relationships create a vibratory visual sensation that leads me to a desire to touch the surface of the painting in order to confirm an understanding of the merging of visual and tactile. But it's getting dark. I need to walk the dog. I leave for the day, allowing my eyes time away from the work so that I can come back refreshed tomorrow.

When I get home it is dark. I grab the leash and we head out for a walk. At night there is a specific way that I perceive sensory information; sense of sight is lessened or dulled, making the others senses stand in for sight in a heightened way. As I walk, I feel changes in the atmosphere that have a particular taste. I hear noises coming from my neighbor's houses that, as I acclimate to the lack of light, I begin to see more clearly. As we walk I am mesmerized by the way that our transparent shadows become luminous forms. A car approaches us from behind and projects our shadows forward in space and time. We occupy multiple places at once and move with a fluidity that is not possible during the day. We time travel into our neighbor's house-- the porch couple. Do they have jobs? They never seem to leave that porch. Why is he standing there on the phone in his underwear? Our projected shadows merge into one and we become a mythical

creature-- six legs morphing into rays of sunshine that fill the neighbor's dimly lit porch. We continue walking. Our shadows linger behind with the porch people and my mind wanders, creating fantasies about who they are and how they fill their days.

As we walk, senses and the boundaries of real and fantasy, physical form and shadowed transparency become turned on and slippery in a similar way that they do in Anais Nin's short story "Woman on The Dunes". As the story progresses the main character, Louis, walks and becomes intrigued as he peers into a house that he passes: "And his eyes met with the most amazing sight; a very wide bed, profusely covered with pillows and rumpled blankets, as if it already had been the scene of a great battle. . . He began to feel that in every cottage something was taking place that he would like to be sharing. He walked faster, haunted by the image of the man and the woman, the round firm belly of the woman as she arched herself over the man" (Nin 12-13). In my paintings the voyeuristic presence is a dog. He wanders around at night peering into the windows of surrounding houses-- his shadow projecting into private interior spaces. Like Louis, the dog is a witness. He feels a level of participation in the couple's interaction but cannot fully realize his own desires; he is a voyeur that implicates the viewer as complicit in the act of watching.

The inclusion of a third presence (the dog) complicates the action of the couple in the paintings and indicates a boundary in sex where power structures are malleable. Formal devices such as spatial confusion, figure ground reversal, and vibratory color relationships suggests that these boundaries that are often times experienced as static, are in fact permeable, pointing to a threshold when consensual objectification fails. In the essay "The Effect of Intimacy; Tracy Emin's Bad Sex Aesthetics", literary critic Jennifer Doyle describes this failure of objectification and by using ". . . the term bad sex to drive a wedge into the discourse on women and sexual history in which negative, disabling,

unpleasurable, humiliating, abjecting sexual experiences might be projected into a space defined by something more complex than a contractual, consent/ non consent model of sexual encounters” (Doyle 99). The paintings depict this liminal space between being lost in the moment with another person and the moment you face your own banality— The lights come on, your body makes some strange noise, or your partner wants something of you that you are not looking to give them. This is the space where a more complicated model of needs and desires can be renegotiated. The presence of the third figure jostles both the couple, and the viewer out of the experience of being lost in the moment and into a space of renegotiation of power.

The bodies in the paintings are in flux; boundaries of a body dissolve into shadows, positive space is a window into a world that exists parallel to or simultaneously to the world that the figures occupy. One body emerges from or dissolves into another, conflating touch, sex, life, and death. Sex is fluid and bodies either take form, dissolve, or merge into one another. The paintings depict the liminal space of sensuality and desire; the longing to touch, to penetrate, to hold and make contact and the inherent disappointment or displacement of this longing.



Figure 10: *Dog Dude*, Oil on canvas, 12 x 9 in, 2016.



Figure 11: *Fountain*, Oil and oilstick on canvas, 96 x 63 in, 2016.

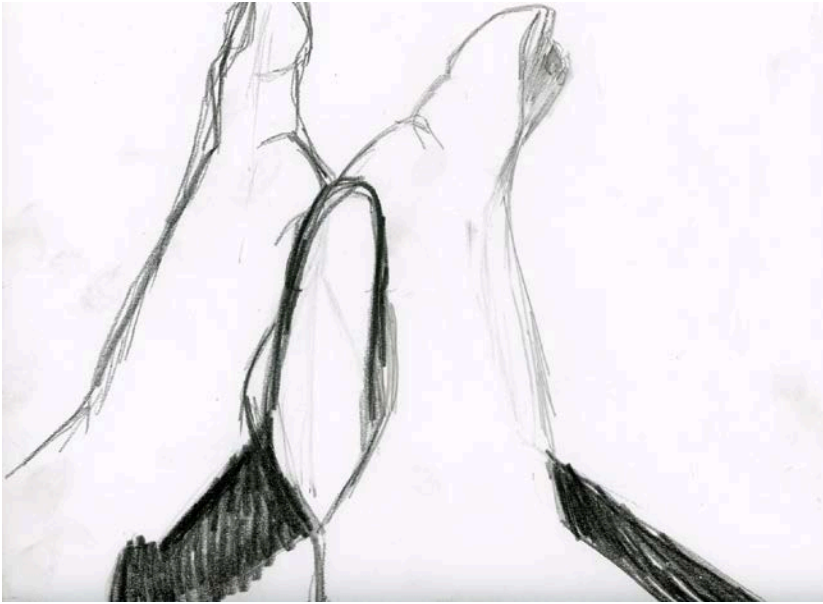


Figure 12: *Shadow Pen*, Charcoal on bristol, 9 x 12 in, 2015.



Figure 13: *Bird*, Oil on canvas, 12 x 9 in, 2016.



Figure 14: *Scissor*, Oil and oilstick on canvas, 88 x 68 in, 2016.

References

- Nin, Anaïs. "The Woman on the Dunes." *Little Birds: Erotica*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979. 11-19. Print.
- Sillman, Amy. "Color as Material." *Seminars with Artists*. Whitney Museum, New York. 2014. Vimeo. Web. 17 Nov. 2015.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando; a Biography*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973. Print.
- Parker Tyler, "The Erotic Spectator," *View IV*, no. 3 (October 1944): 74-77, 83.