

CULT OF BEAUTY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Laguna College of Art & Design

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

MAY, 2013

Laguna College of Art and Design
Master of Fine Arts Thesis Approval
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Cult of Beauty

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ABSTRACT

As syntheses of my background in fine art, fashion and religion, *The Cult of Beauty* is a series of realistic figurative oil paintings portraying a social-philosophical narrative. Based on the concept that the human spirit longs for love and approval, these paintings examine how a delicate self-worth can be undermined in a society where standards of idealized beauty seem hallowed and venerated. An isolated female figure is depicted in religious-like rituals, offering herself to appease her god of beauty. Both Biblical and Occult references are made in order to enhance the idea of worship and broach the topic of choice with regards to this paradox of freewill and servitude. Vintage fashion industry props and flesh-toned foundational garments set the time and help stage the raw environment of these paintings which promote a voyeuristic observation of human nature's vulnerability when caught in the universal struggle for acceptance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to acknowledge all those that have encouraged me through the process of obtaining my Master of Fine Arts degree; you have all made this endeavor so much easier by your continual support and care. Special thanks to Patty Tacklind who helped me format my thoughts and ideas regarding the principles underlying my narrative subject, who also gave wise council and feedback on the emotional impact of the visual images; thank you for your prayers. Special thanks to Pamela Wilson who functioned as a mentor or advisor for all five semesters, who taught me how to see more acutely than before. Through her guidance I've developed a love for props, for the nuances of light and the importance of even the smallest gesture. She taught me how to explore and discover, how to dig and not settle for anything other than my best. Thank you for driving all the way from Santa Barbara to my studio in Orange for 2 1/2 years. I appreciate your gracious spirit in sharing your hard earned wisdom, professional expertise and valuable skills-set with me; I'm so glad to know you. Thanks to Susan Secoy - the owner of the building that houses my studio; -I love our camaraderie regarding all things aesthetic, how you challenge me to work hard and do my best by the high standards you follow in your own practice as an architect. I would also like to tell Perin Mahler how much I appreciate all his guidance and direction with my work. I'm grateful for his willingness to keep asking the questions until I give him the answers I had to discover for myself. Thanks also must be given to friends and encouragers: Betty Shelton, Jeff Tacklind, Gary and Toni Smith, Mary Ferguson, all the Book Babes, my artist friends and MFA students, all at Little Church by the Sea. I thank my family who patiently waited while I took the time to get this degree and lastly - thank you God for entrusting me with this gift of art.

DEDICATION

It is my sincere privilege to dedicate my thesis, the work of my hands, to my tender husband Terry. Together we forged through five years of undergrad, seven years of paintings for public exhibitions followed by two-and-a-half years of graduate school. I'm so humbled by your constant love for me displayed by your willingness to be a servant throughout this time, your generosity, not only with finances, but with your strong emotional support and your unwavering belief in my talents. Thank you for this opportunity - my Captain, oh Captain.

EPIGRAPH

"The book or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things - the beauty, the memory of our own past - are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers."

C.S. Lewis

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DESCRIPTION

Introduction

The Cult of Beauty is a series of eight representational narrative oil paintings employing symbolism from the worlds of religion, the occult and fashion to develop an allegorical series which pictures a religious-like devotion to the idol-god of beauty. The images inform this dramatic commentary on the human need to be considered worthy, acknowledged, loved and accepted while surrounded by a society that places so much value on appearances. The symbolic gauge of whether the figure considers herself acceptable or not, worthy or not, is a large yellow circle on the floor. The symbol of the circle is a reference to the circles of hell in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri's- Inferno*: an allegory representing the journey of the soul towards God. The circle in the *The Cult of Beauty*, however, helps define the present struggle of the vulnerable figure but also hints at a destiny which could result from choices based on the desire to be loved for temporal beauty alone. A stark and dimly lit environment helps transport the narrative out of the physical and into an internal place. Historically this place has been called by many names: the spirit, the well of the soul, the heart, the bowels, even the closet. What these names attempt to convey is a deeply personal place where human nature forms opinion, where love grows, fear lurks, worship rises, dreams evolve and choices are made. This is the setting for both the figure and the viewer of *The Cult of Beauty*. However, the veneer of beauty has been stripped away to intensify the sense of vulnerability, exposing an isolated female who is contrasted by and constrained within an environment which attempts to depict her inner turmoil. This narrative is staged to allow the viewer an emotional but empathetic look at the discontented female who is shown engaged in an empty struggle with her personal vice - idealized beauty.

Evolution

Having received my BFA in 2003 from LCAD, I spent the next 7 years building my confidence painting, concentrating on large scale character portraits with textured backgrounds, some as large as 84” x 60.” Before entering LCAD’s MFA program I had been working on several series, one of which was called, “Brattitudes.” Though I didn’t realize it until recently, the current subject matter in my MFA thesis work evolved from this theme which was a humorous depiction of the attitudes of entitlement that seemed to pervade the wealthy beach community where I was living.

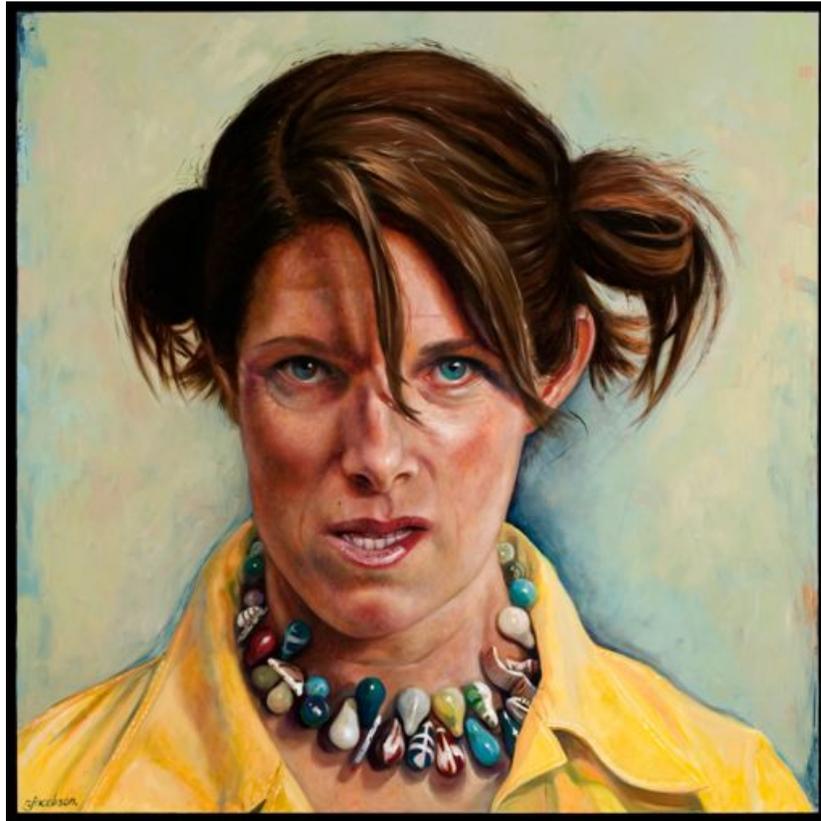


fig. 1. Jacobson, Regina. *Great Big Brat*, 2007. Oil on linen, Mr. & Mrs. Leason F. Pomeroy III!

These paintings were large scale closely cropped images of young women. One of the paintings, “Great Big Brat,” seen above, shows a woman glaring at the viewer with an attitude of disgust; if she could talk, she might say, “Eeeww.” As long as I produced the

large scale heads the paintings seemed to work. But when I included the full figure, in order to incorporate the more narrative aspects of the clothes, I found that the paintings seemed to feel incomplete. I had always loved the power of metaphors and allegorical stories to relay important truths and one day I realized I was never going to feel fulfilled as an artist if I did not grow beyond painting portraits. This desire to achieve a body of work with a strong narrative message was the impetus for enrolling in the Master's program.

After my initial introduction into the MFA program at LCAD, I was encouraged by my mentor and advisor to set the *Brattitudes* aside and spend some time journaling to find my story, one particular to me that I could communicate in a narrative. I began by writing about my personal history from childhood to the present day reflecting on family relationships, friends, previous career as a fashion designer, religious beliefs and what I found to be true and important. I was seeking a symbol that would allow my work to speak on physical, emotional and spiritual levels. Besides journaling, I read books, watched movies, looked at art and sketched. I took a step back and tried to take in my whole life.

The Garment

Through this process I found myself focusing on the ideal of the garment as a compelling symbol which, along with the tools and devices used for making clothes, I felt would work allegorically to explore moral, social, spiritual and psychological issues. The practice of making clothes carries deep meaning for me, reaching as far back as my Grandmother who lovingly made all my clothes while I was growing up. It includes my admiration for my mother's beauty and her dashing wardrobe that I use to pilfer as a teenager, speaks of time spent designing and sewing my own clothes and making dresses for my daughter, takes into account an early introduction into retail clothing at sixteen and my

adult vocation as a clothing designer and manufacturer - a career in the fashion industry that spans more than thirty years. The concept of the garment was a thread that ran through my entire life as a symbol representing ideas of covering, family, adornment, strength, character, expression, beauty, power and grace. I knew I had found a clear symbol that I totally understood.

The influences of this symbol bridge five generations of women in my family, covering the entire twentieth century. As I was born in 1951, I chose to depict a new series in the mid-twentieth century using era specific vintage clothing and fashion industry devices that would speak from a place of my earliest memories. As current fashion designers constantly reach to the past for their inspirations, I felt that the setting of my thesis would be right in step with the trends and our current admiration in Western society for all things vintage or retro.

With all this personal history in mind, I started a new series, and though the subject matter moved more toward moral and social issues than in *Brattitudes*, it still dealt humorously with the pursuit of idealized beauty and its trappings. I introduced glamour with beautiful vintage dresses like Grace Kelly might have worn. The idea of a trap or prison was addressed with two props: a wire bird cage and a 1940s dress form which also has a cage-like structure on the lower half. The bird cage, which imprisons the freedom of flight, would connect with the cage of the dress form informing the viewer on the theme of human entrapment. However, in the painting below, *Clipped Wings*, I chose to communicate the same idea by trapping the seemingly unsuspecting female figure, who is seen inspecting a caged pokadot bird inside an even larger cage - a cage within a cage.

I worked in this series for several months, starting four paintings and completing only one.



fig. 2. Jacobson, Regina. *Clipped Wings*, 2011. Oil on canvas, 36" x 36", Collection of the artist



fig. 3. Bruegel, Pieter the Elder 1568. *The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind*, Tempera on canvas, 2;9" x 5'1" Museo di Capodimonte.

Another painting in this series with the same trapped theme was inspired by a Protestant Reformation artist, Pieter Bruegel the Elder and his painting, *The Parable of The Blind Leading the Blind* (pictured above) which is a depiction on a biblical parable in Luke 6:39: “A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit?” (NASB Bible).

Following the humor of Bruegel’s painting, I connected his concept with mine - the blind pursuit of beauty. I created a painting which showed three identical women whose upper halves were human but their lower bodies had transformed into the cages of the dress forms and they rolled around on casters. One led the other down a path - a rendition of *The Blind Leading the Blind*. Though the images were fun, I became frustrated with the work. Something was missing in the message that made me feel uncomfortable - like inappropriate laughter. Seeking to fix the narrative I made change after change to incorporate many of the criticisms of my peers and advisors. In the end though, I discovered that my painting was made up of little bits of everyone else's suggestions - no longer my ideas. This realization caused me to discover what I did *not* what to say; though a lesson in reverse, this was a major step of self-discovery for me. While it was painful to lose the painting, it was the first step in transforming the way I approached this narrative.

The second step occurred during the semester’s mid-term critique with my mentor, Pamela Wilson and advisor, Perin Mahler. When they asked how I felt about my work I had to confess the frustration at the whimsical approach to the theme. I explained that my career experiences in the garment industry were not humorous, and in fact were far more emotionally packed than these painting depicted. The response was, “So why don’t you take

the gloves off and hit it in the gut?” OK - but hitting it in the gut meant that I was going to stop smiling at this subject and speak honestly.

I feel it is important to explain at this point that many of my experiences and impressions of the manufacturing side of the clothing industry were very dark. Unscrupulous characters worked in dark, unkept, cavernous buildings with barred doors and windows which were located on filthy streets or accessed by mud alleyways where crippled dogs seemed to be a regular occurrence. I found most of the back story of the industry to be run like the mob; often, illegal means were used to make marginal profits and meet impossible deadlines.

In my humorous series I had poked fun at the quest for idealization, using sarcasm to criticize the glamour industries and their propaganda which promotes the idea that perfection is attainable. However, taking a serious approach to the same subject caused me to reconsider the implications of my symbols. Wanting to follow this new direction I replaced the glamorous dresses with underclothes which dramatically changed the attitude of the narrative, allowing me to symbolically venture from the physical story the outer adornments seemed to address, to a deeper, more spiritual and philosophically charged discussion of human frailty, the vulnerability of our sense of worth based on appearances, our need for love and the quest for approval by others. I realized that as long as I adorned the models in glamorous dresses I was not allowing the subject to step outside of the whimsical; after all, a half woman - half dress form figure wearing a pokadot dress *is* pretty funny. But, by omitting the humor and sarcasm, empathy was able to step in and take its place.

Symbolism and Signifiers

The topic of sacrificial obeisance to the idol of beauty is explored through the use of the props and imagery which work to direct the narrative in my MFA thesis, *The Cult of Beauty*. Some signifiers support the theme of ritualism in the series while others were chosen to underscore the concept of measurement, and still others represent the struggles of the flesh.

So, I started again. I stripped away the beautiful dresses and replaced them with skinned-toned vintage undergarments and accessories.. Each piece was chosen to support the theme of the struggles with the flesh. The slip was flimsy and by itself left the body exposed - implying vulnerability. The silk dressing robe, while beautiful, displayed a peacock motif - a well established symbol of vanity. The flower on a veiled hat was chosen to adorn the head of the preteen girl on the edge of womanhood who seems frustrated with playing dress-up in “Inherent Bloom.”

In addition to the undergarments I included the dress form from the previous series and added the measuring tape and a large yellow circle, which along with the corset, would work well together to reinforce the idea of comparative measurement.

The Corset

The Latin word for corset is “corpus” meaning: body. The purpose of the corset is to conform the body to fashion, worn to reform and then hold the body into a desired shape for aesthetic purposes. The Corset, which binds and constrains the body, became a powerful symbol in my work with its ability to speak about the distortion of truth while alluding to the lack of satisfaction with ourselves and broaching the subject of self manipulation through cosmetic surgery. I also liked the message of the corset strings and their ability to be pulled,

undone or tangled by the wearer or by others, reinforcing the idea of self criticism and the intimidation many of us feel when compared to the concept of perfection.

The Dress Form.

The personality of the dress form changed when I began the *Cult of Beauty*. It had been a funny inanimate object in the trapped series, a squeaky wheeled comic relief that made me smile - sort of like the little PIXAR's computer-animated robot character, Wall-E. But in this new series - with the gloves off - its disguise of innocence was flung aside and the villain exposed. As the work developed it became a cruel figure, the enforcer of unattainable standards that Western culture holds in such high esteem. The dress form, now no longer comical seemed at home in his sinister role, dominating the capitulating female and functioning as an authoritative figure, a dictator, an idol, the god.



fig. 4. Jacobson, Regina. *Capitulation*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 36" x 48". Property of the artist.

The Circle/Ring

The circle was used throughout the series as a gauge of measurement because of its multiple layers of meaning referencing social issues while functioning as a symbol for both the light and the dark side, the good and the evil, the religious and the occult. At first glance the large yellow circle on the floor may conjure up the use of enchantments and spells in ceremonial witchcraft and Satanic worship that we have seen in B rated movies. Dante's *Inferno* explored the ring as a symbol for the layers of hell, each ring representing different vices that entangled souls into sin. In the trilogy of *The Lord of The Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkein used the notion of the Great Ring of Power as an expression of man's greed to rule over others as well as the willingness to be ruled by his own lusts. On the other hand, the circle (or ring) is also a multicultural emblem of fidelity in marriage and a representation of the idea of eternal commitment. C.S. Lewis also wrote about this simple geometric shape in a chapter, "The Inner Ring" in his book, *The Weight of Glory*, referring to the circle as a universal measurement of human judgment regarding the concepts of inclusion or exclusion, acceptance or rejection.

Psychological and Emotional Affects

The triptych of *The Cult of Beauty*, which is a combination, of *I Dreamed a Dream*, *My god-My god*, and *My Precious*, works together to form an altarpiece, functioning the same way as the visual props within the paintings - in full support of the religious and ritualistic theme of the thesis. I believe the viewer will be faced with another layer of consideration when standing in front of this object that historically has garnered devotion from those that believe. The altarpiece is not part of the painting, but a concept outside of the oil paint on the canvas - one that confronts the viewer and asks or requires reverence. My intent was that the viewer might be engaged in a more sincere form of personal scrutiny as

the implications of the altarpiece could intensify the meaning of the work for some viewers; those who have been raised in a ritualistic religious environment might be more affected than for those who have not.

The circle on the floor also invites the viewer to ask whether he/she desires to be inside the circle or happy to be outside. Some of the paintings include the viewer inside the circle, making it impossible to step out; in *Make Believe*, the young girl is outside but makes eye contact with the viewer who is placed dead center in the ring.

So, as the philosophical and emotional theme developed and my props came together I found that these vintage devices were more and more valuable in establishing the era of the paintings and the theme of ritualistic servitude in the series; they directed the narrative's focus to measurement and helped articulate the individual struggle to fit into a set of physical standards. The series has grown into a collection of eight paintings which represents the body of my MFA Thesis work, bringing together my personal history, beliefs, art historical references, my research and seven and a half years of art education to express, what I hope, is a serious but important contemporary message.

Important Sources

Fashion

At sixteen years old I began working in the garment industry selling men's and women's readymade retail clothing. The larger and higher end stores all had basements (alias, "the dungeon") where the mannequins were stored. These places would have been perfect settings for the old black and white horror films so popular during the 50's & 60's, like *Pit and the Pendulum*. I hated going down the long dark stairs to grab a partial body part - one right arm or a couple of heads that the window dresser needed. A sad looking family of

mannequins would be grouped together in the corner which always felt reminiscent of W.W.II concentration camps - the assembled mannequins holding the extra arms and legs as if memorializing the relics of their dearly departed. A tortured looking lower torso would be left standing upside-down with toes pointed straight in the air, (a method of torture reserved for the punishment of heretics in *Inferno*), while a shelf full of mannequin's heads was reminiscent of Igor's cellar laboratory. I can definitely see the mixed influences of the 50's and 60's on this series

As an adult I became a clothing designer/manufacturer, learning to drape and design on a dress form which was even more disturbing than the mannequins. In my design studio at night I would often turn the forms so that their heads - which they did not have - couldn't see me with eyes - that did not see. I realize now that I have always thought of the dress form as a sinister looking silhouette - decapitated, amputated and empty. While mannequins seemed to have the qualities of victims, the dress form embodied the essence of the evil oppressor who carted around a cage on its lower half, threatening the idea of imprisonment. Obviously I am having fun with the metaphor, though I still find it curious that these devices that seem so ugly to me, were the standard great fashion was built on.

Religion

As a Christian I view life through the lens of my beliefs. Though my work tends to the darker side of the emotional spectrum, my Christian beliefs seem to saturate my work, dealing with eternal and moral themes; i.e., this body of work presented for my thesis reflects the transcendent quest that began when Eve reached for the apple.

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

(*NASB Bible*, Genesis 3:6).

The discontented figures in my paintings typify Eve - seeking fulfillment by obtaining something other than what they possess.

Social Issues

Media Propaganda

Thousands of years after Eve, women still struggle to feel comfortable with their physical identity. Living in a wealthy southern California beach community for 30 years I've been able to witness first hand the choices wealthy women make with regards to *corrective* surgery - as if what they have is wrong. I have seen the fervent desire for approval and acceptance drive already beautiful young women to the surgeon's table.

Seeking approval and validation, women come through the pilgrimage of dieting and exercise to present our bodies as living sacrifices to the idol of beauty, only to be informed that the standard is set a little higher and we are not enough. We are not enough; we are not pretty enough, not thin enough, not blond enough. We are too fat; we are too old; our hair is too straight or too curly; our skin is too brown, our lips too thin. Fashion and beauty industry magazines promise happiness if we fix what is wrong and repair what is damaged. We are urged to allow a surgeon to improve the shape of our nose so we can be more desirable, or enlarge our breasts with implanted bags of silicone in order to fit the current media description of beauty. Though most are remodeled and reshaped by plastic surgeons and

airbrushed by photographers, movie stars and supermodels are held up for comparative evaluation.

In the National Bestseller, *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf - though she pontificates heavily to the feminist side of the subject - shared her profound research regarding the social expectation of women and mass cultural ideals of beauty, liberally supplied through the mass media of television, magazines, movies and advertisements.

During the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical specialty. During the past five years, consumer spending doubled, pornography became the main media category, ahead of legitimate films and records combined, and thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal. More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves *physically*, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers. Recent research consistently shows that inside the majority of the West's controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret "underlife" poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control. (Wolf. pg 10)

Sex

I am well aware that my chosen signifiers - like the scantily clad cruciform female figure hanging from what might appear to be a meat hook - could evoke ideas of sex slavery for viewers. I found that as the series developed it was going to be difficult to avoid the topic of

sex, and in fact I came to the conclusion that sex was a necessary part of the whole thought process. It is my opinion that avoiding the topic would mean to lessen the power of the work, while its inclusion deepened the concepts of the struggle and the paradox of good and evil. After the initial introduction to the series, it is my hope that the viewer will discover the topic of measurement broached by the use of the tape measure, corset and dress form devices, which along with the implications of the yellow circle as detailed earlier, will lead the viewer to encounter the deeper message of the individuals struggle for approval and acceptance.

So, while I have drawn from my own life's experiences as a women, a fashion designer and a Christian to develop this dramatic situation, the series of paintings, with its underworld-like environment, has evolved into a darker philosophical message than I had first imagined. With reference to Dante's *Inferno*, my figures seem caught in their weaknesses, even trapped. However, though the environment is dark and foreboding, I have also hinted at the promise of escape through multiple sources of light, doors that are standing open and stairs that lead up

RESEARCH

Influences

While I was familiar with a few pieces of Vincent Desiderio's paintings before I began *The Cult of Beauty*, I had not been introduced to his entire body of work. My mentor at the time, Perin Mahler, recommended that I research Desiderio's work and I was delighted to find a kindred spirit in more ways than one. A Representational Postmodernist, he deals in symbolism and large scale allegorical paintings, many of which are three-panel altar pieces with contemporary subject matters. His work is pictorially rich in Western art history and as an artist he is undaunted by emotional themes. Stephen May states in his essay on Desiderio's

At a time when so much artwork seems haphazard and indecipherable, created by artists with little art history knowledge and limited skills, the art of Vincent Desiderio stands out. Well-versed in Western art history, rigorously trained in this country and abroad, sensitive to the world around him and influenced by personal family history, he creates large, erudite paintings filled with meticulous detail, dramatic lighting and sweeps of emotion. (May 1)



Fig. 5 (Desiderio, Vincent. *Grapheme*, 2009, Marlborough Gallery, New York.)

oil on canvas on panel, oil on panel

left: oil on paper on panel: 11 2/8 x 5 3/5 in.

center: oil on canvas on panel: 11 1/2 x 12 in.

right: oil on paper on panel: 11 3/8 x 5 3/4 in.

At first, I was intimidated with the idea of actually incorporating the three panel altar piece, wondering if, along with the psychological environment of the work, I might be getting too dark and emotional. However, after viewing the work of Desiderio, I found the influence and determination I needed to carry off my own vision of the triptych. Though both of us were working in triptychs, the images of his 3 panel altarpieces seem more ambiguous

and subliminally connected, while mine is a more direct reference to the historical religious roots of the devotional object. And, though we share the theme of a tortured soul, his son Sam - a severely disabled young man - is a victim of his fortuitous circumstances while my paintings deal with the subject of choice. Both battle invisible foes; though one a disease and



fig.6. Desiderio, Vincent. *Spiegel im Spiegel*, 2010

oil on canvas, 84 x 108 inches,

Marlborough Gallery, New York

Fig 7. Jacobson, Regina., *Capitulation*, 2012, oil on canvas,

36 x 48 inches, property of the artist

the other pride, the body language of both subjects help engage an empathetic viewer in the emotional narrative of being overwhelmed - body and soul.

In addition to sharing emotionally driven contemporary narratives of vulnerability, a love for figurative representation and three-panel altarpieces, I also became aware of a curious affinity we both have for staging darkened shallow rooms scattered with vintage props. It was at this point I realized that, though the setting and subject matter are psychologically dark, there is a level of comfort brought into this environment through the familiarity of the vintage props, which helps maintain a sense of safety and allows the viewer to bear the internal psychological state of the subject.

Vincent Desiderio was the most influential artist on my thesis paintings but another major influence arose from my research on an actual Renaissance period religious altarpiece,

the *Isenheim Altarpiece* by German artist, Matthias Grunewald. Grunewald, an architect, hydraulic engineer and painter, took five years to create the altarpiece. Marilyn Stokstad states in *Art History, Revised Version, volume 2*, “His unique style expressed the continuing currents of medieval German mysticism and emotionalism.” (pg. 730).

It was created for the Abbey of Saint Anthony in Isenheim, whose hospital specialized in the care of patients with skin diseases, including the plague and leprosy. The altarpiece commemorates a major saint - the fourth-century Egyptian Anthony the Hermit, and was thought to be able to heal those who looked upon it. (Stokstad 730)

The treatment for the skin diseases was of special interest to me as the theme of *The Cult of Beauty* deals with a skin disease of a different sort- the sins of the flesh. The plague has historically been seen as God’s wrath poured out on a sinful people and leprosy as a metaphor for sin.

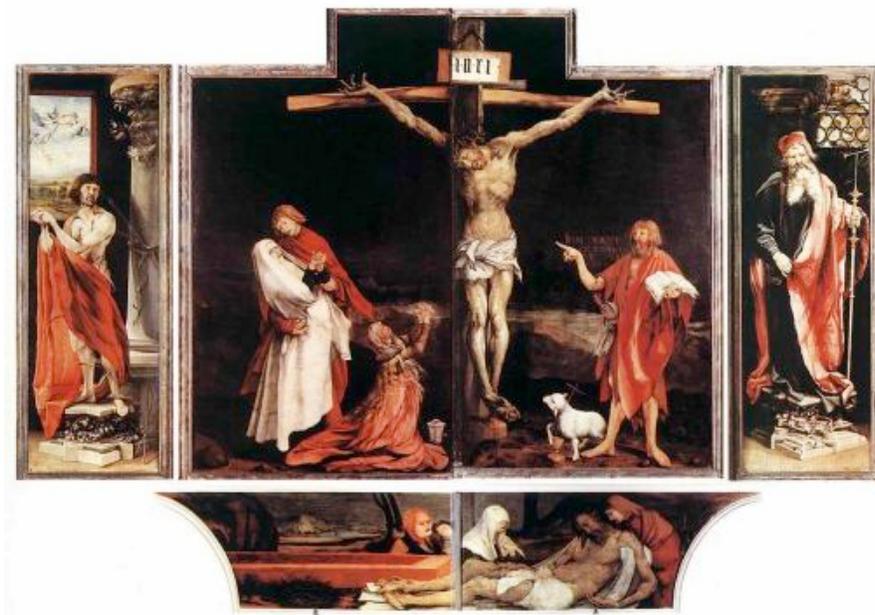


fig8.Grunewald, Matthias. *Isenheim Altarpiece*, closed. 1510-1515.Center panels: *Crucifixion*; predella, *Lamentation*:side panels: *Saint Sebastian and AnthonyAbbot*. Oil on panel, center panels 9’91/2” x 10’9”,each wing 8’2 1/2”x 3’1/2”, predella 2’51/2” x 11’ 2”. Musee d’Untelinden, Colmar, France.

The images from the central panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, “Crucifixion” with its two side panels, “Saint Sebastian” and “Saint Abbot,” were the main reference for my photo shoots that I set up for my altarpiece. It was a general reference rather than specific but the gesture of the figures in my two side panels were derived from the Isenheim piece.

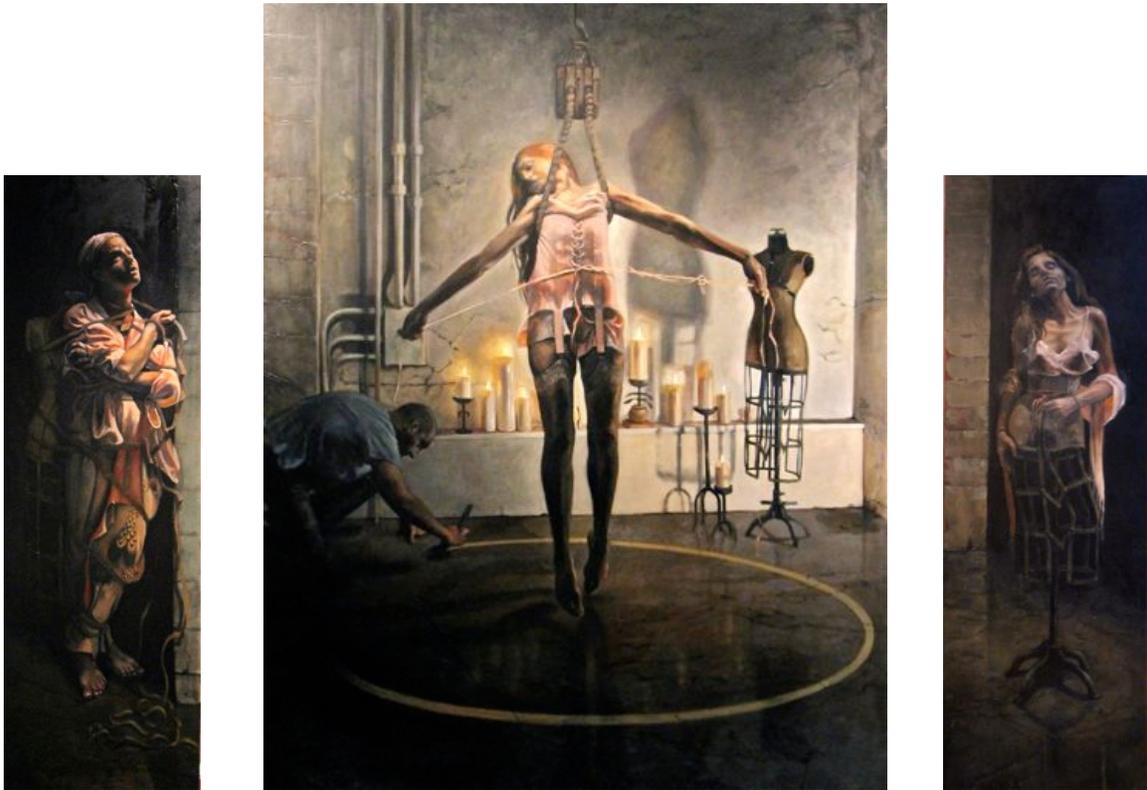


fig.9. Jacobson, Regina. *The Cult of Beauty Altarpiece*. 2012-2013, Oil on canvas. Left panel, *I Dreamed a Dream*, 72 x 24 in. oil on canvas. Center panel, *My god- My god*, 84 x 66 in. Oil on canvas. Right panel, *My Precious*, 72 x 24 in. Oil on canvas. Property of the artists.

Grunewald had illuminated the figure of the crucified Christ to symbolize moral goodness and truth, but I silhouetted most of the cruciform female figure in *My god-My god*, instead shining a light from below up and onto the dress form and casting a overbearing shadow onto the illuminated back wall which seemed to achieve a sinister effect. At the same time the top half of the female figure was illuminated from above. Using illogical light from both above and below added the subtle idea of a war between heaven and hell for the soul of

the self-martyred figure who is seen pulling her corset strings to obtain her own physical perfection.

Typical of Christian altar pieces from this time period, the *Isenheim Altarpiece* central panel tells a story from the life of Christ while the side panels depict a martyr or a patron of the arts who would often be portrayed as a saint.

It was my intent that the altarpiece in *The Cult of Beauty* cause the viewer to connect the level of devotion and self sacrificial attitudes of the women in my paintings with that of the Christian martyrs and Christ's crucifixion. The historical religious gesture of the central painting references the crucifixion of Christ, while the side paintings, though alluding to the martyr and patron of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, are also reminiscent of the story of the two thieves on either side of Christ at Golgotha. The left side painting of my altarpiece entitled, *I Dreamed a Dream*, is particularly reminiscent of the thief that speaks to Christ, saying, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." (The NASB Bible, Luke 23:42) The title of the right side painting in the triptych is, *My Precious*, from that very familiar line in the Lord of the Rings trilogy; the term was given to the great ring of power by those who were devoted to and enslaved by it. I thought this name provided the perfect bridge for the metaphor of the second thief on the cross at Golgotha with the bewitched half-female, half dress form figure who appears transfigured and totally given over to the cult of beauty.

Along with Vincent Desiderio and Matthias Grunewal, Johannes Vermeer also lent a hand with lighting as he was and still is the master of cast shadows, shallow rooms, darkened corners, light and transparencies. Georges De la Tour and good photo references helped me with the illumination of the candles.



fig.10. Vemeer, Johannes. *The Milkmaid*,
1658-1660. Oil on canvas, 171/2 x 161/8,
Rijkamuseum, Amsterdam

Thematic Influences

I have found a form of solidarity in subject matter with the work of Jenny Saville. Though her work is brazenly honest and displayed in the full light of day to highlight what she sees as a social atrocity, and though I have dimly illuminated mine by candlelight, we speak of the same problem: a society that is overly concerned and dissatisfied with their physical body image. What I have sought to say through religious allegory, she has brutally portrayed by holding up the mirror of truth, at times even showing us the bloody scars. While we start from the same place, our messages are delivered on different emotional levels but more than likely have the similar results. My intent is to give actual form to the deeper cause and long term effects of this obsession - or any obsession - on the heart, soul and spirit of humans. In the book, *Saville*, John Gray writes, with regard to the effects of Miss Saville's artistic expression:

The effect of Saville's work is to break up and tear apart our self-image. Alongside meaning in terms of which we habitually understand our lives there is another region of experience, at once terrifying and somehow enticing, where no trace of meaning in terms of which we habitually understand our lives, there is another region of experience, at once terrifying and somehow enticing, where no trace of meaning can be found and it is in this forbidden territory that she work. (Gray 9)



Plan, Jenny Saville, 2003 oil on canvas

Regarding forbidden territory - the image of the female figure in *My god, My god*, may, to some extent, provoke controversy and chastisement from the church and critics over the image of a woman in a slip and corset, posed in reference to Christ's crucifixion.

Literary Thematic Influences

I have already spoken of *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri's Inferno* as central to my vision and theme. In his epic poem, those who have succumbed to some form of vice, are sent to the appropriate level of punishment, described by Dante as the nine circles of Hell: Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Anger, Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery. The monster, Minos, judges and determines the level of punishment to be assigned. We hear Dante's description of this judgement process:

So I descended from the first enclosure
down to the second circle, that which girdles
less space but grief more great, that goads to weeping.
There dreadful Minos stands, gnashing his teeth;
examining the sins of those who enter,
he judges and assigns as his tail twines.
I mean that when the spirit born to evil
appears before him, it confesses all;
and he, the connoisseur of sin, can tell
the depth in Hell appropriate to it;
as many times as Minos wraps his tail
around himself, that marks the sinner's level.

(Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*, canto V:1-12)

As also mentioned in the Introduction of this Thesis, Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), was a noted Professor of Literature at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, a Christian philosopher and prolific author during the first half of the twentieth century. In his book, *The Weight of Glory*, he examines the use of the circle/ring as a practical measuring device to gauge the social and philosophical human need for acceptance. Lewis states that we are faced with this notion of measurement throughout our lives. In school, our jobs, with our friends and in society, we seek approval and by it, admittance into certain groups. To be rejected or disapproved causes wounds that might serve to invalidate our personal worth as human beings. He implies that everyone living is affected by this effort to gain acceptance when he writes:

I believe that in all men's lives at certain periods, and in many men's lives at all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside.

(Lewis pg. 146)

I've heard it said the choice is possibly are only true possession; this concept, underlying the theme of the Cult of Beauty, speaks of freewill. I found this principle to be at the core of the epic novel, *East of Eden*. Author, John Steinbok portrays the saga of of the Trask family; its a repetition of the story of Cain and Abel played out through two generations. The book deals with each generation's freewill - the term "Thou mayest," pointing to the Biblical principle that each person has the ability to choose good over evil. Steinbok's crucial point of the novel is that we have the freedom, as individual, not to follow in the footsteps or conform to the pressures or expectations of our predecessors, society or culture.

The research necessary for my thesis has added additional breadth to my understanding of how the human experience and the dramatic impact of life's choices have on the individual; it is similar to ambient light, in that we are made aware of the presence of something by it's reflection onto the surface of other things in its surroundings.

METHODOLOGY

Inspiration

I am usually waiting for inspiration to come walking around the corner, and always disappointed when I miss an opportunity. Inspiration usually comes first in conceptual work. In large ways, my work is always affected by travel, museum visits and gallery exhibitions.



fig. 11 &12. Sarkis. 2012. Mixed media installation. Loire Valley, France. Photographs by Regina Jacobson.

During a trip last year to France, we were very fortunate to happen upon a solo exhibition of a contemporary stained-glass artist, referred to as Sarkis. Seventy-two stained glass windows, referencing both historical and contemporary subject matter, were installed

against the dark textural surfaces of the interior attics within the Chateau, Chaumont, located in the Loire Valley. It is hard to express how moved I was. The exhibition made such an impression on me that I have referred to these images throughout the entire last year with regards to my Master Thesis work. The pictures have influenced the color palette for my current work, helped guide my choices regarding light quality, surface texture and continue to feed my choices regarding the emotional depth of my imagery.

When moments of inspiration like the one stated above are mixed with life experiences , art history, music and beauty, they fertilize and irrigate the imagination which unfurls like buds and inspires more creation.

Staging Environments

One of the many things I've learned from working with Pamela Wilson as a mentor is the importance of staging the environment; collaborating models , and studying light and props to support the emotional aspect of the story or theme. I now “shop-‘till-I-drop-for-props,” that will function as symbols to expand and support the narrative while adding variety, detail and texture. I shopped for months to find just the right dress form. Who knew there would be so many for sale on line? I was looking for a certain type of character with patina, one that no longer looked perfectly held together. The one that I ended up buying was from a local antique store right by my studio in Orange. This will sound rather anthropomorphic, but it seemed to have a strong personality. Many of the others were completely inanimate, but this one really had an attitude. It was interesting that one of my models looked at her and said that she felt the dress form really needed a hug; I have a picture of her embracing the form which someday will be a painting. I have learned not to

settle for something that is close enough, but to keep looking until I find the one I connect with. The right prop adds so much dimension to the story.

The Photo Shoot

I decided to use my studio for the backdrop of *The Cult of Beauty*. My studio is in an old 1929 icehouse in the City of Orange, CA., and like the dress form, has a strong physical presence that I believe has influenced my creative process over the years. I thought the space would be believable as an underworld-like environment but could also transcend to represent the psychological aspect I desired. It is poured-in-place concrete construction, concrete floors and old wire glass windows - a great source of influence for this series of paintings. I set up my studio for the photo shoots where I had professional lighting, privacy and the ability to stage and create a specific mood for the large altarpiece painting, *My god-My god*. I wanted to suspend the model from the ceiling but she had to be comfortable enough to get some good images without torturing her. I bought a swing from a school equipment company, taped off a big yellow circle on the floor, set up candles and additional ambient lighting and even played the right music for the photo shoot, *Te Diem* by Arvo Part. It was a lot of work, but the images were amazing and a great source of reference throughout the production of the work.

References

Photo shoots are usually done over several days and are often followed up with reshoots to refine images. Though I am not too adept with photoshop, I do manipulate the images for light, shadows, contrast and color, etc. I very seldom work from one specific photo image but reference multiple sources, especially the work of other artists whom I feel would complement the series. A giant stack of reference materials are often spread out on the

cabinets in my painting area. But, while references point me in a direction, the paintings inevitably take on their own personality.

Sketching allows me to explore concepts, emotional content and composition before which prepares me mentally for the direction during the photo shoot and helps save time and money. The camera continues to build on the premise of the predetermined theme. After the photo work, I go back to sketching small details that I want to exaggerate or reduce. Different layers of possibilities are revealed through sketching that would not necessarily happen with a camera. These little subtle nuances of a certain gesture or the perfect tilt to a head, can transport a painting from being good to great.

The photos, the sketches and all the fundamentals of art work together help to guide the direction of the composition, light, balance, and cropping to direct the movement of the painting, divide the canvas, direct the narrative and cause the eye to move through the proposed painting. The painting size influences the emotional impact of the work; some works cry to be big and other want to be intimate. In *The Cult of Beauty*, the iconic cruciform image was selected to be the largest piece in the series - 84" x 78", because of its overall emotional importance to the series.

Composition

The composition in, *My god-My god*, used the large yellow circle to define to the floor plane and draw attention to the centralized figure as well as reinforced the ideas of the occult ritual and measurement. The cruciform figure was placed in the middle of the picture plane, central to the room in the shape of the cross. While the circle defined the two dimensional floor plane with the oblique shape of the O, the figure fills the depicted three dimensional space of the room with the shape of an X or T. This X/O composition can be

seen in several of the other paintings as well: *Capitulation*, *Measured Reflections* and *Cloistered*.

Things Change

One of the things which I find interesting is the way that ideas change and develop during this whole creative process; some are due to re-conceptualization which is inevitable in a large body of work and the other is what we call happy accidents - those incidences that are out of our control. To give you an example of the more spontaneous event I will have to recount an accident in my studio. The studio was really crowded and I was attempting to move one of the easels around so that I could move another one into its place. At first I was going to exchange paintings and then decided to rotate the easels as well. But, in the process of changing my mind I neglected to tighten the braces back down on the painting and as I went to roll the easel, the painting fell from the easel and landed on the sharp corner of another painting that was sitting off to the side; a domino affect followed with four paintings hitting the ground. Gratefully only one was damaged; the paint cracked but it was in an area depicting the back wall of the shallow room. My immediate concern was that this painting was to be delivered to the Laguna Art Museum for the MFA 2012 Spring show, so - trying to make lemonade out of lemons - I painted more cracks in across the back wall as a *temporary* fix. But something profound happened; the painted cracks brought a whole new visual support for the thematic content of temporal beauty increased the sense of vulnerability, which I found intriguing. So, the cracks became an integral part of the motif and a symbol of age and decay. Then while adding them on the floor of *My god-My god*, I was inspired to see if the cracks could take on the reticulated characteristics of a serpents skin. Both Dante and J.R.R. Tolkin include fiery creatures that torment souls in their epic works. (I

figured, if they could do it - I could do it - so I did it.) However, the point is, all this layering of meaning came from that happy accident.

The other way that changes occurred during my thesis work was from the time honored discipline of formal criticism. Though I did rotate mentors and advisors to some extent, I kept Pamela Wilson all 5 semesters as either my mentor or advisor. Perin Mahler, Sharon Allicotti, and Randall Cabe, and Pamela all gave input, supported and challenged my direction and made suggestions to direct my research. But one of the last changes made was due to the challenges set before me in a regular meeting and as a result, I made the addition of the dress form strapped to the back of the figure with measuring tape in *I Dreamed a Dream*. This addition was necessary to round out the meaning of servitude in the triptych altarpiece and balance the composition among the three pieces. While this was an important add - as important as the discovery of the cracks - this would not have happened without the formal criticism of the mentoring program.

Technical Process

I am an Indirect painter, for the most part, building multiple layers of paint, and transparent glazes to achieve my desired effects. I start with a very lean grisaille layer of transparent Raw Umber, Alizarin Crimson and turpentine, with a touch of medium, to establish the form in light and shadow, adding opaque Titanium/Zinc White to the lightest lights. I am always amazed at this first layer as it establishes the form and energy of light that will be seen in the finished painting; for me this layer can work like landing lights on an airport runway. Working in the historic and archival process of fat over lean, I can quickly return to the canvas to glaze back the previous work and continue establishing light and form.

My second pass of paint which I actually squeeze out onto a glass palette, sets up the following color palette that I use with Copal Varnish for the next several layers : Raw Umber, Alizarin Crimson, Thelo Green, Viridian Green, Titanium/Zinc White, Cremintz White, Blue Ochre, Terra Rosa, Transparent Yellow Oxide, Transparent Red Oxide and a transparent blue, Prussian Blue or Ultra Marine Blue. I mix my blacks.

I work with the values to establish the form, make it round and give it weight. Put shadows, core shadow and cast shadow - reflected light, direct light and highlights. My process is slow and requires many layer. It usually takes twenty layers before I feel it is finished.

When the painting is dry to the touch, I will take my painting medium on my fingers and hand burnish a thin layer of Copal Varnish, rubbing in a small circular motion over the entire surface of the painting. This evens out the whole surface of the painting, bringing up darks that have gone dull and gives a nice even sheen to the oil paint. Many times I have wanted to leave the painting at this stage, but, I have taken care to build up the painting in an archival manner and will varnish the paintings after it has been dry for 6 months or longer.

Letting Go

Letting go of the work is the most difficult part. Not that I want to keep it for myself, but I know that after it leaves my studio I no longer have control over what happens to it, - how it will be received or perceived, or if people will even care about it. I find that I want the work to be appreciated, or at least acknowledged. I am disappointed when someone walks up to a painting with their arms crossed, and - knowing that I'm the artist - says nothing and walks away. I would rather they hate it than have no response at all. But, that is just me

seeking approval of others and wanting to be accepted into the circle of “successful artists” - isn't it?

CONCLUSION

I can see the light at the end of the tunnel; graduation is a month away. The time has flown past and my experience in the MFA program at LCAD has been so much more than I had anticipated. My desire to be steeped in the principles of strong narrative painting has been completely met and far surpassed. I have learned through exploration and discovery how to develop and execute a body of work on a given theme in a way that is impactful and believable. This is a powerful tool that will be at my disposal as an artist for the rest of my life. I have gained the courage necessary to undertake a large body of mature conceptual work and found a new confidence in my ability to produce and defend artwork that could compete on a professional level in the contemporary art market.

When I came to the MFA program I was limited by my insecurity - afraid to step out and try something other than what I was doing. I had moved beyond the work done in the undergraduate level, but felt that there was so much more. Unable to really grow on my own, I had become bored and frustrated with my work; I would say that overall I felt stuck.

Establishing the work of *The Cult of Beauty* for the master thesis involved the development of a series of paintings in combination with learning how to express my concepts in this written thesis - My particular subject dealt with the social and moral issue of choice with regard to societies current obsession with physical beauty. The representational figurative paintings that I produced for my thesis had to be supported by art history, researched, and explained. The evolutionary path of my creative process detailed my personal history, important sources and influences that helped shape my choice of expression.

All this was a hugely transforming undertaking. I was challenged to support my theme, not only through art historical research, but through the work of other current artists, current issues and literary works. While the research and writing were an enormous amount of work, I understand that my art is so much stronger because of it. I have matured as an artist because of these challenges and I know this MFA experience has forever changed how I will approach my own art and the art of other.

Other than accomplishing my goal, the part of the MFA program I feel I benefited from most and I believe will have the longest lasting effects on all the grad students is the formal criticism: the mentoring program, the visiting artist lectures and faculty/peer critiques. These opportunities to interface with professional working artists who spent hours studying and discussing my work with me, encouraging and challenging me, directing research and helping me progress through to a positive end, would never have been available to me on my own.

I will be continuing the theme of *The Cult of Beauty* as this is a message that resonates deeply with me and I am not ready to let go of it quite yet. As it continues to grow I hope it will have the opportunity to travel as a body of work, being exhibited in a way that honors and enhances the sensitive message it contains.

I want to continue to grow as an artist, challenging myself to utilize the tools that I received through the MFA process and never again settle for work that is just good enough. I don't think I am the kind of artist who will be making comfortable art for a living room wall anymore. I have changed; while I have the strength I want to stimulate conversations about life's ultimate questions, questions that cause viewers to take a stand. It is my passion to create great works of art that will affect change within the lives of people viewing it. It is my

hope that I will be afforded the chance to travel with my work, meet and exhibit with other artists who are passionate about their creative process and impact it has on the hearts of humankind for good

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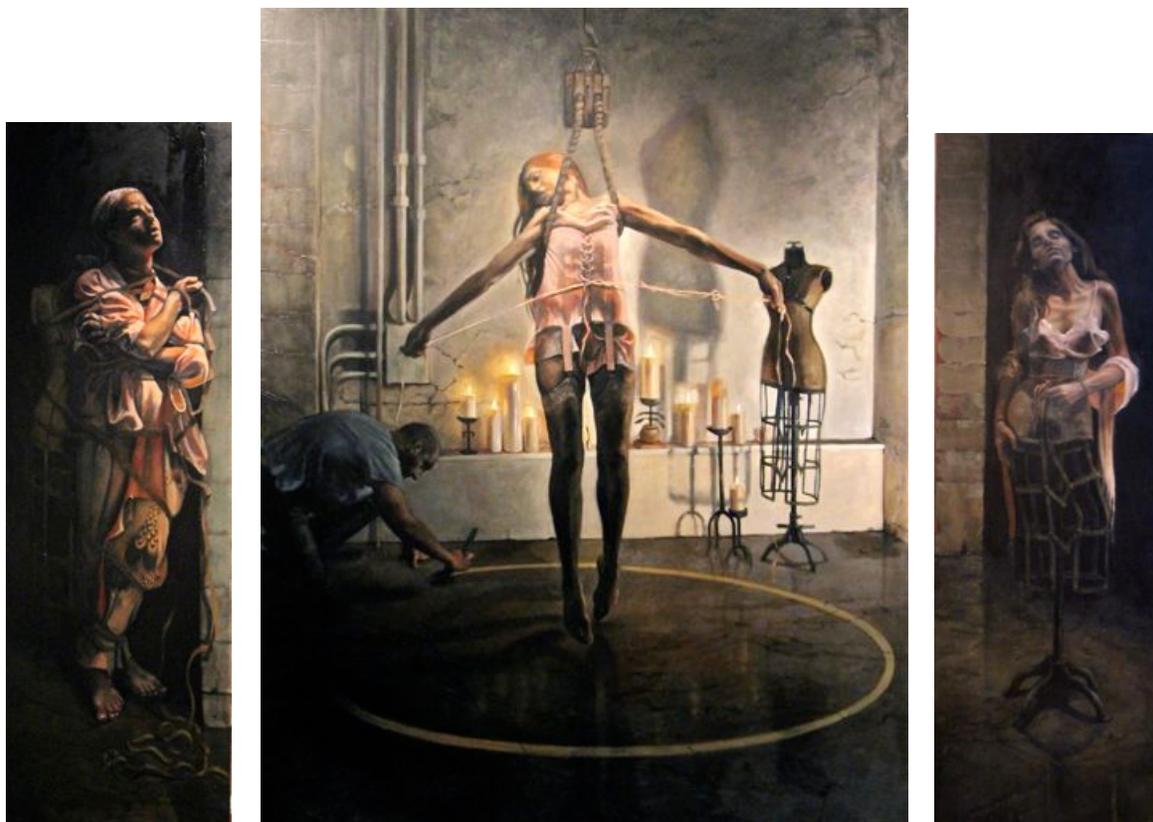
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APPENDIX A



Cult of Beauty Altarpiece, 2011-2013, oil on canvas, 84 x 126 in. (overall)



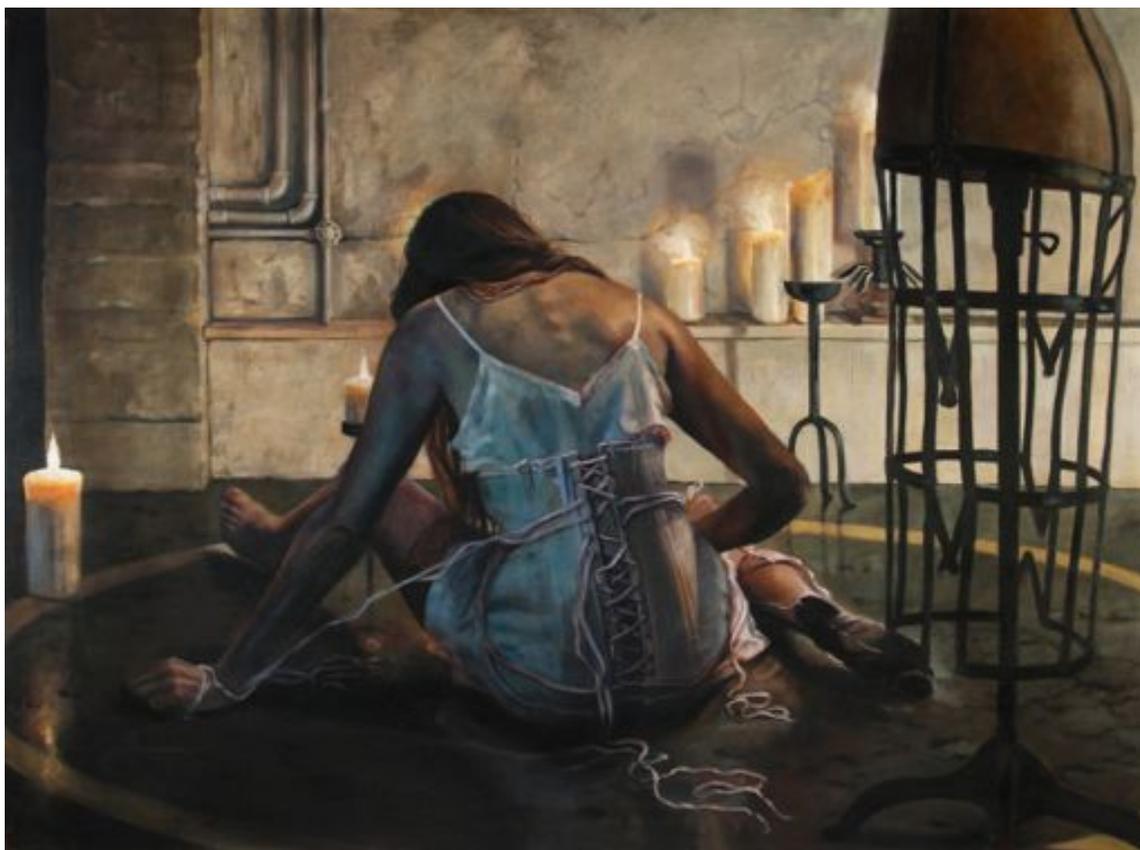
My god-My god, 2011-2013, oil on canvas, 84 x 66 in.



I Dreamed a Dream, oil on canvas. 72 x 24 in.



My Precious, 2011-2013. oil on canvas. 72 x 24 in.



Capitulation, 2011-2013, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in.



Measured Reflections, 2012-2013, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in.



Cloistered, 2012-2013, oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in.



Make Believe, 2013-2013, oil on canvas, 30 x 18 1/2 in.



Inherent Bloom. 2012-2013. oil on canvas, 18 1/2 x 30 in.