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Shift; Explorations in a changing sense of self

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Shift; Explorations in a Changing Sense of Self

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Dedication

This body of work would not be possible without my patient and loving family and friends especially my husband, mother, father and most importantly to my son. May you too find and achieve your dream.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family for being with me along this journey and for the next steps to come. Jon, your support through this transition has been indispensable. Mom, thank you for always having my back and be willing to look over every paper. Kim, for always helping me organize my thoughts and feelings. And to countless friends who reminded me why I was doing this and what I was capable of.

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Abstract

In my art practice I am exploring how my “sense of self” changes as both the external and internal factors continue to shift throughout the stages of my life. I have centered on two main themes: personal experiences connected to gender that are based on the female body and changes in the formation of social identity in relation to others who are part of my life. My work mainly revolves around self-portraiture and reflections of my life, usually expressed through photography, video, painting and sculptural installations. In some bodies of work, however, I have used other women or people from my personal relationships, such as my husband or son, as the subjects. I usually incorporate staging and manipulation, with an underlying performative aspect, and the results are often confrontational and raw. I hope to capture feelings and experiences about the changing sense of self, rather than facts.
Fluidity of Self-Identity

I struggle with the idea of a singularly-defined identity. This is due to the fact that I identify with various roles that are often in conflict with each other. I am married but I am also a feminist with a belief that a woman does not need to marry or take a man’s name. I am a mother and the primary source of life for my son but I also pride myself in being independent. Catherine Malabou, a philosopher, writes about plasticity, which is the idea that we are ever changing from events and unable to return to the original form.¹ Such is my search of understanding my ever-changing identity. With each event, I reassess who I am and what has changed.

Shortly after I got married I realized my identity, or my view of my identity, had shifted. When I began to be referred to as Mrs. Jonathan Ott, I had a hard time coming to terms with the idea of being someone’s wife. The struggle was related to loss—the loss of the identity that I had worked so hard to understand. It felt like a chunk of me was lost or consumed into my significant other. This led to a series where I digitally morphed my body with my husband’s, both nude and in typical figure drawing poses (Figure 1). The setting in which we were photographed was our bedroom which, although it was domestic in space, was empty. I grappled with how my perceived identity was tied to him and how I had to reconsider who I was in this partnership, and by manipulating the images of us together in this space, the final image encompassed my deep-rooted feeling of a lost self.

Like the fiber artist Alison Gates, I created this work that is about understanding aspects of my life even though I was not expecting or wishing for them change. For example, one of Gates’s artworks, *Behind the door, a means of escape*, consisted of a garment she created that looked like a dress and scarf combination (Figure 2). Upon further investigation, the dress is a canoe shape and the scarf resembles an oar. This piece was created shortly after she got married to symbolize some of the angst she was feeling. She felt the work represented a method of escape, and that as long as she had the canoe and paddle, it was a way out. Although she did not feel she would need it, it was hung on the back of the door for “just-in-case.”

I further investigated fluctuating identity in a series of portraits where I digitally removed and switched around faces using various levels of opacity. Since the face is such an integral part of portraying identity, I wanted to question what role the face plays in constructing it. Using the space in which I photographed my partner and myself, I invited a variety of people to become part of the project. The volunteers were a mixture of people I knew well, some acquaintances, and a few friends of friends that I had not previously met. We replicated the lighting and kept the stark white wall as a backdrop. I explained to them that I would present two versions of their faces: one a straight representation of their face and one with their facial features removed (Figure 3). The images consisted of a frontal headshot that had the head and shoulders visible. They either removed their shirt or tucked it below their shoulders so no clothing was visible in order to hide any sense of individual dress style. Even without clothing visible, each portrait was unique with piercings, tattoos, wrinkles and hairstyle, yet without the faces, the images lost the personalization.
Self-Portraiture

I gravitate towards self-portraiture to tell my story since it is easier to depict my personal experience with my own body. While my medium of choice can fluctuate between sculpture, photography, and video, the constant is that I use myself as the subject most of the time.

The first time I photographed myself instead of using another person as a stand-in was in my series *These Are Not Weston’s*. The photographic process of Edward Weston often consisted of a nude woman moving around in front of him; he would have her stop for a picture at various points. He saw his female models merely as beautiful objects; by contrast, I wanted to see how a woman photographing a woman, or specifically a woman photographing herself, changed the meaning behind this type of image. Like Sherrie Levine, who was known to appropriate famous works of art and recreate them as a woman artist, I recreated poses of Weston’s models from a few of his iconic images, this time using my own nude body as a subject (Figure 4). Differences were that my photographs were in color and the composition was slightly changed since Weston’s images tended to focus on an individual part of the female body, such as the breasts, while my images included both the breasts and a part of the torso to add more of the body than just a sexualized part. The process was liberating while keeping a sense of control in the process. It changed the meaning in comparison to Weston’s images by moving beyond documenting an objectified woman. There was no hierarchy; since it was a woman (me) photographing a nude female (also me) instead of a male photographing a nude female. I also had control over the photo-shoot and how my body was perceived
while Weston’s models were photographed however the photographer wanted. I had the power as both the photographer and the model.

These photographs led to another series where I was examining what makes a woman look powerful. I photographed myself in six different poses: two frontal, two on the side, and two from the back. The idea was to photograph each angle of my body in a vulnerable pose and one in a powerful pose in which the figure regained control. The poses were derived from the media: I used poses commonly found for a female and male. The six final images were printed slightly larger than life-sized on transparency paper, and the background surrounding the figure remained clear. To present the images, the pieces were hung in the center of the space in a line, one behind another, so the viewer could walk between them and be confronted by my nude form. Since they were printed on transparency paper, the viewer could see the collection of images all at once, depending on where they were standing in the installation. They were also hung above eye level so that the viewer had to look up to see the images, therefore having the figure, me, look down on them. The result was reclamation of my own power through the depiction of a strong woman in her bare form, independent of anyone else.

Continuing with the theme of the strong woman archetype, I set up a backdrop in my studio and every day I would go in and paint the backdrop from top to bottom without a prior plan of what I would paint. Each painting would cover the preceding painting entirely. I took a video of myself painting the backdrop (Figure 5) and also a still photograph of my portrait with the new painting (Figure 6 & 7). With each image/painting the figure became more and more concealed with paint, while in the video I became more and more undressed. This emphasized the plastic nature of self and how it
could shift every day. It was a cathartic process that created a sense of vulnerability, where no choice was wrong or permanent, such as the state I was in in my life. By starting over every day, it reminded me that I was free to chose my path in life and who I wanted to be at that moment.

I was pregnant with my son during my last year of graduate school. This brought up all sorts of insecurities, as I lost control of my changing form. It became a ritual to document my body as a way to take in the entire pregnancy process. I photographed this experience by placing my abdomen on a flat bed scanner and scanned the image of the underside of my belly. I started this process when I was eight weeks pregnant, and continued to make a scan every two weeks until the week before my son was born. This process made me acutely aware of the fact that the pregnancy progress cannot be rushed. Instead, I was forced to work at a slow but considerate pace. My anxiety made me afraid to miss a photograph, given that this experience could not be backtracked.

The body is the central theme of my pregnancy and post-partum work. While it includes another person, my unborn or newly-born son, this work is self-portraiture surrounding the parts of pregnancy that were uncomfortable for me. I spent large amounts of time watching my body change and not being able to control it; this brought me back to my struggle with body image that inspired an early series on my body dysmorphia from an eating disorder. Like some of my older dysmorphia work, I started to morph the scans of my pregnant body together (Figure 8). I created three separate, morphed images, which I then patterned and printed on a cotton fabric.

At this point I knew I was having a son, and was interested in exploring how gender influencing my work. With my patterned fabric, I made a series of baby attire that
would be typical in any little boy’s collection of items (Figure 9). I created a onesie, pair of pants, bib, hat, booties, and a swaddler from typical patterns found at a craft store. The sewing patterns were devoid of ruffles and bows while the printed pattern was comprised of a repeated image of my morphed belly. In the end, the items of clothing looked masculine because of the shape and also the printed surface pattern that by its very nature referenced camouflage. It also included a great deal of black—a color that traditionally would not be placed on baby girl’s clothing, specifically.

I used the scans of my belly to also create a video spanning the length of my pregnancy (Figure 10). Using morphing software I stitched together the images of my growing belly so that the final video referenced a long breath. One of the constant discomforts of pregnancy was the lack of breath as my organs shifted within my body. I also recorded the sound of my breath as I wheezed and tried to regain control, gasping for air, and dubbed it over my video. The final touch I added was the Doppler sound of my son’s heartbeat in utero. By including these two sounds, the audio depiction illuminated both the discomforting as well as the exciting parts of pregnancy.
Collaborators and Stand-ins

While body dysmorphia examines my own mental and psychological distortions, I photographed other women who possessed characteristics similar to mine (brown hair, Caucasian skin) as stand-ins for me as I was examining my disorder. The images of the women were manipulated into abstract beings, devoid of personal characteristics such as tattoos and nail polish, and in most instances, faces (Figure 11). I used a white backdrop that only showed the figure and a shadow, giving a more clinical feel to the image. Since I had no true sense of what my body actually looked like because of my disorder, I tried to visually identify and locate myself within the larger world.

In other work I used a model, such as my partner, as subject rather than myself to deal with my life situations. My husband is a veteran of the Operation Enduring Freedom war, and came home from his two deployments with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and a TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury). This was a major shift in my life. The common practices we had to do to keep our home feeling normal were distinctly outside the norm. Outbursts and memory issues were just an integral part of my home life. It was, and is, normal to have written lists all around the home so that he can remember simple tasks. I became more than just a military spouse; I was now also a caregiver.

This led to a series surrounding military personnel and the struggles that they face coming home from war. I worked in 3D photography and printing because the nature of the medium could be read as toy-like; it is compelling to me that we sell toy soldiers to children of most ages without a second thought. I photographed my husband in his military fatigues, in multiple combat positions, and printed them out in 3D almost obsessively (Figure 12 & 13). The idea of dehumanizing the person— through
multiples—but humanizing the toy soldier became my message. For one of these pieces I packaged the toy soldier figures as they might be sold in a store. On the package design, I included text that talks about the true nature of war and the idea of the invisible wounds (PTSD) (Figure 14). For example, one of the statements included “22 veterans a day commit suicide.” While this series spoke about my husband’s war experience and used him directly for the photographs, the work was mostly about my experience of experiencing him coming back from war, and my interpretation of what that did to our living situation.

In the Individualized Personality Series, I invited women of all ages and races to be a part of the project on a voluntary basis. The volunteer, whom I had not previously met, and I met for coffee so I could conduct an informal interview to understand who they were as an individual. I would read their body language and listen to what they were saying in order to gauge who I perceived them to be, based solely on this informal interview. From there, I would go to my studio and enter a large diorama I built out of plywood, two by fours, and drywall. The structure was eight feet long and six feet tall and consisted of three walls, a floor, and a roof. Through an abstract translation of each person’s personality, I covered the entire interior with paint. Afterwards, I would invite the model back and paint the front of their body from head to toe with acrylic paint that matched painted space. The final stage was to photograph her painted form in the painted structure. (Figure 15) The final pose, which became a visual illustration of the entire process, was also based on their interview.

The idea behind this project was to create an identity for the women past the initial look or the sexualization of their nudity. Instead, I focused on them as empowered
people and how they presented themselves rather than simply what they looked like. I found that the paint and textures frequently took away details like their race and age while highlighting their individual personality traits. Additionally, this series was particularly important to my work formally, because there was focus on the background rather than voiding it out entirely. While, the final work was presented as digital photographs, this series was in many respects a performance piece; the final image became as a documentation of it all.
Staging, Manipulation, and Performance

My built box, paint, interview, and models were all tools to construct the image to express an idea. These specifically constructed and painted spaces fit into the history of “tableaux,” or constructed realities, where the artist may take on many roles such as actor, director, designer, and costume designer. Much of my photography is of this genre, in the way that they are usually assembled images, set up for the ultimate photograph.

The photographs in the diptych of *Nine Months and Three Weeks Post-partum* were taken over a month apart in an attempt to show a moment in both periods of time (Figure 16). I envisioned the image with milk dripping from my breast and purposely made this happen. I composed the torso within a tightly cropped frame against a blank white wall to give the viewer little escape from the shocking photograph. There are stretch marks, acne, veins, razor burns and scars, and while not all pregnant bodies change like this, I wanted an authentic representation of how mine changed and how unnerving the actual body image could be. Each half of the diptych emphasized the most changed features.

In *Three Weeks Post-partum*, I chose to include my son. My experience has been that when my son is around he is the first person to be greeted: I become second or almost irrelevant at times. While I thought he was important to be in the photograph, I dressed him in a white onesie and photographed him from behind, without his face or head present. With this strategy of composition, he becomes an androgynous, arbitrary baby and brings the focus back to the post-partum woman. I also chose to photograph myself without my face or head present. Even though there are distinct parts of the photograph that make it me—such as the tattoos and stretchmarks—without the face the
image could be of anyone. With this absence, I hope to give the body a universal relationship to the pregnancy/post-partum experience. Like my photographs where I used women as surrogates for myself, my intention was to leave behind the identity of the face in order to make the images about more universal.
Female Body and Abject Image

With the images of my pregnant and post-partum body, I move past the traditional and mainstream depiction of women and focus on what happens realistically to a body. The leaky breasts and the veins pumping towards the nipple are common but yet are not commonly shown. Through these images, I hope to break down the stigma of these body characteristics and show the variations that are present even though it may be uncomfortable for viewers to view the body in this abject state.

This work is much like photographer Catherine Opie’s vision in her *Madonna and Child*. This is an image of herself breast-feeding that references the traditionally painted Madonna and Child image of the Renaissance; but unlike the original imagery, her appearance and child’s age (a three year old) question the traditional look of a mother. Opie is tattooed and has her hair cut short, she has a scar that reads, “pervert” across her chest, and she uses a red backdrop that elicits love, strength, and power while still keeping it simple enough for the image to emphasize her relation to herself and son.

An artist who also focused on the post-partum was Rineke Dijkstra. In 1994 she photographed three women right after given birth. The women were naked and the images were raw. They stood erect with their newborn in their arms. One image, in particular, showed a woman completely naked in mesh hospital underwear and a giant pad that is given post birth. Her eyes are locked with the camera and she tightly grips her new child. The image is rattling and shows the body in the harsh stripped post-birth.

An additional influential piece is the collaborative work *Womanhouse* created by 23 women in 1972 in Las Angeles. It was a key early piece in the women’s art movement where the rooms were designed to honor women’s experiences. One of the rooms titled
“Menstruation Bathroom,” by Judy Chicago, was a small room that featured only feminine products and a small trashcan, typically one you would find in a private bathroom. The trashcan was filled to the brink with used menstruation products where the blood was visible. Julia Kristeva talks about menstrual blood being abject describing it as standing “for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference.”

The photographer John Coplans, who took nude photographs of his body when he was 60 years old, has also influenced me. His images are black and white and do not include his head or face. He emphasizes a specific part of his body and lets the wrinkles, hair, and freckles or age spots show. With his image Three Quarter View, Straight he photographs his nude body from his shoulders down to his mid-thigh. He is slightly hunched over, causing his flesh to sag further. His penis is also visible, along with his testicles that droop down with gravity and age. The hair on his chest is wild and has grayed. His images are counter to the typical photograph of a nude male; frequently we see images of men as chiseled and young whereas in these depictions his body is rounded and feminized. Like Copeland, I am seeking to photograph the non-idealized body in its abject state.

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From Here, Forward

My current work continues my earlier ties to the female body and the feminine experience. As a woman in 2016, I have found that parts of my experience like menstrual cycles, leaky breasts, and vaginal discharge that are completely normal are still hidden and I would like to normalize them. More specifically, in my pregnancy and post-partum work, I focus on orifices that highlight the in-between stages such as the nipple that is often sexualized but that as a lactating breast, can no longer hold the sexual ideal; it becomes abject and hard to view. I want to continue to challenge the expected depictions of the body that are signifiers of our broader cultural expectations in hopes of challenging them.

My future work is contingent on what life events happen next and what the next stages of life bring. Throughout them all I will be searching for my place in the world in the midst of the inevitable shifts and I will continue to explore my changing sense of self. For today, however, my life is a combination of working in intervals between breastfeeding my son and continuing to make artwork about my experiences. I see 3AM more than I have in my entire life and utilize the time to think about the present and future simultaneously. While this feels like the new norm for me, I expect the next shift, and long with that new ways of seeing myself, to be just around the corner.
(fig 1.) *Marriage #5*, Tara Ott, 2013

(fig 2.) *Behind the door, a means of escape*, Alison Gates, 2006, collection of Helen Klebesadel and Akim Torres
(fig 3.) Features Diptych, Tara Ott, 2013

(fig 4.) These Are Not Weston’s #4, Tara Ott, 2014
(fig 5.) Still from *Painting a Day* Video, Tara Ott, 2014

(fig 6 and 7.) *Background Painting Study # 2 and #12* Respectively, Tara Ott, 2014
(fig 8.) *The Pregnancy Identity #2*, Tara Ott, 2016

(fig 9.) *Second Outfit Referencing the First*, Tara Ott, 2016
(fig 10.) Still from *Breathing and Heartbeat* Video, Tara Ott, 2016

(fig 11.) *Beautiful #302*, Tara Ott, 2012
(fig 12.) 32, Tara Ott, 2014

(fig 13.) Detail of 32, Tara Ott, 2014
(fig 14.) 22, Tara Ott, 2014

(fig 15.) Individualized Personality Study # 2, Tara Ott, 2015
(fig. 16) *Nine Months Pregnant VS Three Weeks Post-partum Diptych*, Tara Ott, 2016

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