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Self / center

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Self / Center

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

School of Art, Design and Art History

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Dedication

To my wonderful family: my mom, Donna, my dad, Kenneth and sisters, April, May, and June. And to Christopher Schaffer, I love you all.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family and Christopher, as well as friends around the globe. Your support is much appreciated.

Thank you, as well, to my Thesis Committee for your feedback and inspiration: my amazing adviser, Corinne Diop, plus Leslie Bellavance, Ken Szmajg, and Dr. Karin Tollefson-Hall. You were absolutely the best Thesis Committee for me.
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8. *Supper at Emmaus*, Jacopo Pontormo, 1525
Abstract

The act of photographing myself has had a profound effect on my personal healing after surviving a suicide attempt in the winter of 2008. Coming to the end of my rope after years of trying ex-gay therapy and countless bullying in the workplace and from others left me with a fragmented self that was collapsing. It was through the reawakening and rebuilding of myself that I began to photograph myself as a means of therapy and closure. My work has consistently dealt with the elements of faith and sexuality and the problems that one goes through in attempting to reconcile them with one another. A huge cause of this problem is the Greco-Roman paradigm that views the body and soul as being dualistic and at odds with one another. In my work I show how my body is intrinsically tied to my spirituality and at the heart of my spirituality is my sexuality, the body’s personal expression of love and affection. Confronting the fears that have tormented me also echo with the journey for liberation as I make portraits that symbolize a self tormented by fear of the devil and paranormal entities which are things I argue are myths. Using the photograph as a mirror to myself and to the world opens up an avenue for me to speak as a survivor and give assistance to those who are suffering with the same issues.
I. Introduction

Self / Center is an exhibition of self-portraits that question the self on both physical and metaphysical levels. In these photographs my body becomes the central focal point; artifice and performance become tied to the act of existing in a body even without costume and dress. It is through the embrace of the physical body with its queerness and passionate desires that the foundation for my connection with God is established. The energy at the core of human existence is erotic and playful and this is where the heart of God lies. This process of photographing my self is important to my personal healing and growth. I use basic geometric shapes to imply a spiritual connection and digital manipulations of my face to confront fears about evil. In my work I continue to merge the themes of my queer identity, gender and sexuality with the tension it has created with my faith and religion.
II. Circles

In my most recent studio practice, I experimented with a fisheye lens to give me a very wide angle for capturing myself in small spaces. The work up to this point had been very tightly shot and cropped and I wanted to possibly look at expanding the plane of vision to encompass more of my environment in the frame. However, through experiments with a macro lens mount that was added to the fisheye component I began working closely with photographing my face, skin, feet, and stomach. I use both studio and ambient light to capture extreme close ups of my body surfaces. They are framed within a circular shape; naturally the lens adapter, drawing attention to the sharper focused area of hair follicles, pores or other textures in the center, creates reoccurring distortions on the edges.

The scale of the work emphasizes my attention to details of the body. Each images runs 36 inches wide by 33 inches long, large enough to confront my viewers immediately from afar. After they approach the work closer, I draw them into an intimate space where they can look closely to explore the nuance of each surface, such as my nipple, (fig.1) my tongue (fig.2) and my eye (fig.3).

Photographing myself in this manner carries with it a psychology of seeing the self and realizing the impermanence of my body. According to some theorists who write about the self in relation to photography, death becomes a reoccurring theme. This element is important for me to contemplate within the work since I had a close call with death in the winter of 2008. Using the camera as a mirror allows me to connect with
myself on a deeper level. I speak about myself but also universally speak to other queer individuals or people who struggle with a lack of self-acceptance.

The book, *the camera i: Photographic Self-Portraits*, discusses these ideas about impermanence and death in relation to self-portraiture:

Self-portraiture is ultimately a confrontation with the self’s mortality. The self that stares back at the artist was once, when the photograph was made, and is no longer; marking a time immediately removed in time, it portends the immanency of death.¹

Using the camera to convey the progression of time is important in my portraits since I am talking about healing from past experiences through my process in the present. These images reveal aspects about myself that I had buried and denied in my past, allowing me to deal with the emotional pain through the mirrored-image as a means of therapeutic self-awareness.

Jo Spence is a photographer who advocates the idea of photography as a means of healing the fragmented self. In the co-authored essay with Rosy Martin “Photo Therapy: Psychic realism as a healing art?” she proposes the idea of the photograph as a marker of progress:

They offer us the possibility to objectify and see a separate part of oneself which can then be integrated back into the overall subjectivity, or core self, as and when we are ready for it, as in psychosynthesis. Although photography objectifies, because photo-therapy is process based, photographers can act as ‘transitional objects’ towards another reality. In this sense they can be seen as stepping-stones.²

Establishing this relationship between time, self, image and healing is the underlying motivator within my work.

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Another photographer who uses the unadorned body in his work is John Coplans with his black and white images of his nude body in various positions and compositional layouts. In an essay about Coplan’s work, The Life of Forms: Fragmentation and Montage, Jean-François Chevrier wrote a powerful statement that I find significant to my own work.

It is sometimes said that the only definitive form of a human being is his cadaver, that is, his material form, from which he will ultimately retreat, shuffling off this “mortal coil,” this burden which alone is perfectly similar to itself, since it is nothing but resemblance. Life, including the life of forms, constantly deforms, even after death, on its way to ultimate formlessness. Coplan’s poignant works continue to inspire and inform my choice and use of my body.

In the image Back, (fig. 4) I am drawn to the tonal range of his skin and the texture of his body hair that give the images a very distinct topographical feel. They are tightly composed and intimate in vantage point. In each wrinkle and patch of hair there is a truth and exactness of his mortal frame that is beautiful and completely stripped bare of self-consciousness or fear. Even the small wrinkles and sags of skin say a lot about his self in an expressive style that is compelling.

Critics of Coplan’s work have seen the images of his body as being a challenge to the perfection of the body in photographs. He deconstructs the Greek classic body which is strong and sexy and without sign of aging or wear. The revealing nature of Coplan’s work parallels the vulnerability I feel when exhibiting the close ups of my body that expose skin, hair and crevices with magnified exactness.

III. Torment

The Torment series is a set of eight 16 x 20 glossy photographs with a reddish color palette. Each image is a group of 3 or 4 layered photographs of me with a shaved head, covered in white face makeup with varying opacity levels that allow the images to morph into a distorted combination of different emotional expressions. Certain facial features overlap to construct a sense of deformity. Digital manipulation has been a consistent element in my work that allows me to manipulate the color, size, and content.

The ghastly appearance of my face, (fig. 5, 6) is a charged reference to misconceptions of the Satanic. The theme of confronting Satanic evil and deconstructing fear of its supposed threats would have been taboo in my upbringing. On close inspection I came to the personal conviction that brought me immense freedom, that the actual literal devil is not a real entity, rather he is a construction of the Christian church and is merely a myth. The founder of the Church of Satan, Anton LaVey, in an interview with the Washington Post in 1986 with Walter Harrington says, “Satan is a symbol, nothing more….Satan signifies our love of the worldly and our rejection of the pallid, ineffectual image of Christ on the cross.”

I place black triangles over an eye in each piece to trigger the confusion linked to devil worship and conspiracy theories. The symbol of the “All Seeing Eye” atop a pyramid is found on the left side of the back of a one-dollar bill (fig 7). Much has been said about this symbol being tied to secret elite groups who see and know all things in the upper echelons of government. The belief of a plan to take over the world and impose an

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anti-Christian religion becomes a terrifying world-view for people who fall into this thinking and this symbol provokes these fears. In actuality the symbol of the eye in the triangle is ironically tied to the very faith that fears it. It is known as the “eye of providence” and said to be a sign of the Godhead. The painting titled *Supper at Emmaus*, by Pontormo (fig. 8) illustrates its significance with the placement above Christ showing us a divine connection to God the father whose wisdom is supposedly higher than human logic. “The All-Seeing Eye of God looks out from the triangle, which represents the Trinity. This reminds us that God always watches over us in love”\(^5\)

I was inspired largely by the sharp dark-edged triangles in the photograph *Do it for Satan*, by Robert Mapplethorpe (fig. 9). As he stands holding a gun wearing a leather jacket the sharp edges of a pentagram jut out from behind him like spikes. When I came in contact with this image there was a powerful energy that came directly from the star itself that inspired me to use similar shapes in my own work. As in much of his work there is an anti-Christian sentiment that ties into his struggle growing up Catholic and homosexual that I relate to.

Mapplethorpe was in many ways as Christian as his accusers—in the sense that he apparently believed in the devil. No, let’s put it more clearly: he believed he *was* the devil. In a self-portrait from 1983, he poses in front of a pentagram with a machine-gun: Satan’s terrorist.\(^6\)

The Torment series is based on the postmodern philosophy of Structuralism, which asserts that signs combine to construct meaning in text, art and music through active participation from the viewer. A brief explanation of this philosophy I took from reading

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5 "Excerpts from "These Truths We Hold." The Holy Orthodox Church: Her Life and Teaching." Holy Trinity Mission. http://www.holytrinitymission.org/books/english/truth_we_hold.htm
the essay by Andy Grundberg, *The Crisis of the Real* where he explains the ‘structure’ behind it.

Basically, its method is to divide everything in two. It takes the sign –a word, say, in language, or an image, or even a pair of women’s shoes – and separates it into the signifier and the signified. The signifier is like a pointer, and the signified is what gets pointed to.  

I combine black triangles over eyes allowing the combination of the signs to potentially trigger subconscious fears of the occult in the viewer. The layered face photographs point to a charged emotional state of trauma through the strategic placement that builds meaning.

Many contemporary artists have used their own body in an altered form to speak about trauma, loss, and pain. In the work of Lucas Samaras there is a charged energy of anger and intense emotion in his contorted body and menacing stare. “Distorted by anger and rage, Samaras dissolves into a howling mask ready to sink his teeth into anyone who dares to approach him.” My latest series, *Torment*, draws from the inspiration of Samaras’s saturated colors and the visual distortions of his Polaroid work, which add intensity to his unsettling images of his naked body. I feel a connection to his work in a sexual way as well since there is strong element of exhibitionism in his photographs. In his Polaroid series *Photo-Transformations* (fig. 10) the manipulations of the film emulsion heighten the experience of multiple and distorted faces much like my digital manipulations distort my face. In this way I mix the themes of damnation and salvation in an allegorical fashion to speak about faith and sexuality.

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The critic Donald Kuspit writes a passionate critique of Samaras’s particular tensions with spiritual belief and sexuality through the body’s disfigurement, in his manipulations, writing:

It is a demonstration of the process of transfiguration: Samaras has to become a devil before he becomes a saint. He has to show that he is trans-human even if all too human. Samaras in hell—the infernal Samaras—are not a pleasant sight, but then the color is divine and perversely ecstatic. Re-baptized in liquid color, Samaras becomes a sacred monster.9

By separating himself into two parts in the same systemic way that Structuralism works Samaras becomes a sign in his own creations and the agony of desire and pain is the signified. Samaras woos us into the confused world of unrealistic environments cluttered with trinkets and tokens, masked with hidden meanings. The discordant intricacies in the work attract viewers yet repulses them at the same time. It is this duality that I emulate in my work; I take the symbols of the fear of the Satanic that once controlled me and through combining them, subvert the original meaning. Ghastly stares and howling mouths echo a place of torment that I once was trapped in while the triangle over the eye flattens the image separating the actual past from the forward to a mystical and yet unknown future.

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IV. Conclusion

Despite the intimacy and personal connection I experienced my process of making the circle photographs, the enlarged body segments starkly confront the viewers with their brutal details, instilling an unsettling clinical feeling that encourages a withdrawn observation. The smaller Torment images invite viewers to look closely causing a visceral reaction to the multi-layered orifices and taught planes of the skin, and horror is evoked. In my future work I will work towards gaining more control in equating the affect of my work with my intentions. Through further explorations on the definitions of the self and its origin and construction I will encourage viewers to challenge the heteronormative assumptions prevalent in our culture, thus liberating “the other.” The empowerment I now feel is a result of reconnecting with the pain through creating these bodies of work, and I have high hopes to continually communicate deeper insights gained by my trauma even more fully into my future work.
V. Figures

(fig 1.) Nipple, Jason Anderson, 2012

(fig 2.) Tongue, Jason Anderson, 2012

(fig 3.) Eye, Jason Anderson, 2012
(fig 5.) Torment 1, Jason Anderson, 2012

(fig 6.) Torment 2, Jason Anderson, 2012
(fig 7.) One-Dollar Bill, Jason Anderson, 2012

(fig 8.) Summer at Emmaus, Jacopo Pontormo, 1525
(fig 9.) *Do It For Satan*, Robert Mapplethorpe, 1983
(fig 10.) *Photo-Transformations*, Lucas Samaras, 1973
IV. References


