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## ABSTRACT

Through bodily mark-making, overlapping and layering multiple lithographs and screen prints, and the use of color, I strive to reference a sexual encounter within a figural landscape, so the figure is both the subject and the space its placed in. The improvisation and impulsiveness that guides my decision-making relies upon the decision made before it, a process that parallels the improvisation of contact that two bodies share during sex. In the rendering of these experiences, the intersection, consumption, and combining of flesh are symbolic of Eve's fall from innocence and rise to maturation. Printing with themes of consumption, gluttony, and sin, I work to blur the lines between what is considered good and evil, referring to the cyclic nature of birth, growth, decay and death.

Abject Utopia

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(CD-ROM)

The terms “abject” and “utopia” reside at opposite ends of an unconventional spectrum of good and evil. Their written existence is stagnant; these terms are solidified by their definitions and remain at opposite ends of this spectrum. However, through art making they can exist together with separate and overlapping meanings, simultaneously pulsing within the imagery, complementing and providing tension contained by the artwork. I make meaning through these seemingly opposite terms, in pursuit of understanding the undulating space between them. *Abject Utopia* is a project that involves contradictions in both ideas and process. Printmaking lends itself to contradictory manipulation; I use lithography and screenprinting impulsively to layer and combine my images to create unique renderings of sexual encounters. The improvisation and impulsiveness that guides my decision-making relies upon the decision made before it, a process that parallels the improvisation of contact that two bodies share during sex.

Through lithography and screenprinting, I am able to build a composition by layering multiple images and combining repeated marks and textures. By juxtaposing both grotesque and sensual forms, I attempt to explore my own relationship with abject/utopian imagery as well as hoping to provoke that of the viewer. I challenge my own comfort levels with my subject matter in pursuit of pushing what I find too shocking or explicit to include in my imagery. The spontaneity suggested by my mark making contrasts with my primary medium, lithography. The tension of the controlled process, and my instinctive marks

parallels my ideas and concepts that motivate my work. Within my figural language, I use lithography, screenprinting, and watercolor to layer, thereby achieving a dynamic composition comprised of multiple textures.

Lithography is a slow printmaking process that relies heavily on specific chemical reactions in order to properly transfer the image. I must relinquish control, thus creating a distance that changes the relationship I have with the overt imagery. The time involved in lithography causes a removal from the original drawing on the limestone to the final print, a procedure that can be seemingly counterproductive to my kind of image making. That being said, however, artists are at the mercy of their mediums, being at once restricted by their limitations and, simultaneously their seemingly infinite possibilities. This removal is beneficial to my process, giving me more time to make decisions and gain distance between my personal imagery and myself. My relationship with the imagery is often changed after the time has passed, and rather than making the image precious, I can objectively make decisions relative to the concepts and meanings I am currently exploring.

The inherent process of printmaking lends itself to my project comprised of tensions, juxtapositions, and polarities. Through the layering of multiple images on different stones, printing the stones repeatedly but in different positions on the paper, a cohesive body of work develops. Historically, printmaking has a commoditized trajectory, predominantly associated with reproduction. Rather than using lithography to make editions, I create unique prints, thus placing

validity in the aesthetic of the medium. I treat each sheet of blank paper as an opportunity to explore new compositional strategies, making unique prints with a set of stones.

Having gathered source materials prior to drawing on the stone, I am then able to combine multiple studies while creating the image. Many of my sources I use in my work comes from pornography which provides various body positions and shapes, while also offering the combination of bodies and flesh. From my initial representational figure drawings, I redraw the images, removing the body parts that are irrelevant to my concepts. Through the multiple drawings, the original figure is unrecognizable. At this point I begin to address the stone. In order to build a varied image on the paper, complete with a different use of shapes and line qualities, I use multiple stones that will be printed together on the same larger sheet of paper. I do my best to plan ahead, however lithography can be unpredictable. After a stone has been printed, it cannot be printed again, so it is hardly a forgiving process. The finite nature of the process provides a constraint that often dictates my thinking. I print the stone as many times as I can before the image is illegible, supplying myself with a variety of combinations of prints to develop.

*Unwanted Growth* (Figure 3) and *Parasitic Temptation* (Figure 5) depict renderings of a female figured being penetrated; the body is comprised only of a torso, which, from an alternative point of view can also be seen as a buttocks and two open legs. The disfiguration and abstraction disguises this explicit image,

while also existing between festering mold and other bodies. Using the same lithograph, the image can be followed and spotted in different prints, thus functioning in different ways. In *Fruitful Origins* (Figure 4) the same stone is printed; however it is embedded in dynamic, colorful imagery that reaches the edges of the rectangle. Though I used the same stones to create an exponential number of prints, the process of combining the sheets of paper was a curatorial process, and I began to understand how the prints agree or disagree. Working within my own aesthetic logic, I created multiple panel prints, emphasizing their negative space, while joining them at their moments of most activity. Each print is comprised of the same multiple lithograph prints, however through the process of linking the panels, their individuality was crucial in decision-making. Specifically, *Unwanted Growth* (Figure 4) consists of three united panels that accentuate not only the organic movement of the image, but also the negative space upon which the imagery moves, as if overtime the imagery would eventually consume the white space.

I attempt to create distance between myself and the allegory of the female form. Though I do want to give a gestural nod of acknowledgement to the greater female ideal depicted in art history, I am not interested in perpetuating an unrealistic ideal, searching for the origins that spurred the formation of this ideal, and readdressing myths and stories that hold a discarded, ignored truth. Helen McDonald in her exploration of the female nude writes, “There is no such thing as the ideal female body. Even the old masters would have agreed that an ideal is a



concept no a thing.”<sup>1</sup> This begs the question, who defines the ideal, where does it come from, and, if it is so ambiguous, why does humanity strive to achieve it?

Beginning last year, I found myself depicting the same female figure repeatedly; she always had similar bodily proportions and rarely varied in size. Sometimes she doubled as a representation of myself, while she simultaneously represented every woman, and no woman. In my exploration of ways to render flesh through an abstracted female figure, contorted in overtly sexual positions, and with amputated limbs, I reduced her to the bare essentials: fertility. This figure can be seen most obviously in *Parasitic Temptation* (Figure 5) and *Unwanted Growth* (Figure 4), jutting out of a chaotic interaction between herself and the mold, overlapped by body parts such as thighs and breasts. The character of Eve from Genesis functions as the ultimate constructed and deconstructed feminine ideal who is scorned by her carnal sin; she is the representative of every woman, while being no one specifically. I understand Eve to be a myth living within women of the Western world, but in my work she is abstracted, amputated and lacking such agency. She has been reduced to her fertile body, and remains only as a vessel, a container of a fixed function- to remain fertile.

Through disfiguration, overlapping, and disguising I hope to emphasize the female figure as a symbol of fertility and sex, while at the same time, embedding her deeper within chaotic corporeal landscape, making the explicit

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<sup>1</sup> Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 1.

nature of the work more subdued. These ideas are contained within all my prints (Figure 1-5); however the figure can explicitly be seen in *Parasitic Temptation*, (Figure 5). When printing that specific stone, I strove to be more overt to make my ideas more clear. The conversation in my work attempts to suggest that the allure of taste, touch, and sexual awareness, as well as bodily distortions can cause the female figure to be reduced to an object of desire. In an attempt to confuse the lines between the beautiful and the abject, taboo and propriety, explicit and non-explicit, I strive to find the tension and the balance where the work is at neither ends of the spectrum. Instead, I seek to place these seemingly dichotomous notions in a metaphorical grey area that carries truth about the female form. J. Harold Ellens discusses this notion of a 'grey area,' "The radical and tragic distance [is] between the perfect world we can imagine, and the flawed one we create."<sup>2</sup>

Ellens words were at the forefront of my mind while I began to use watercolor in the print, *Fruitful Origins* (Figure 4) which was my final step. Within the dichotomy of utopia and reality, there is a truth that encompasses both entities, and neither at the same time. Through the use of exaggerated flesh tones, salmon pink, yellow ochre, and other colors that I imagine to be contained within the body, such as the blue and purple blood of organs and tissues, the body is referenced rather than represented. In this case, *Fruitful Origins* teeters between

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<sup>2</sup> Ellens J. Harold, *Sex in the Bible, A New Consideration* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), p. 55.

these juxtaposed meanings. At the root of this print, and what I hope to achieve in all my current artwork, is the ambiguity between paradise and reality, beauty and the abject, perfection and failure. I hope to render fleeting moments that capture both the utopian world we imagine, and the abject world that we create.

In *Fruitful Origins* (Figure 4) the figure is veiled within a stratified composition of prints. Embedded within the layers lies a secretive, feminine narrative, paralleling the myths and narratives that women have carried for centuries. I am interested in cultural myths that are embedded in our daily lives, existing under a guise of neutrality. The close examination that my work requires also speaks to the necessity of closely examining the constructed ideas of femininity that are engrained in women's consciousness. I found a kinship in the artist Kara Walker who uses myths in combination with historical truths to tell a story. The tension between fable and truth brings about a poignant understanding of a human urge to make sense of your world, "given what you've been given," as Kara Walker explained.<sup>3</sup> In her installation of *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, 2008, Walker expresses a hysterical reality made up of truths about an American experience at once personal and universal. Her title is in the first person; she places herself into her work to make sense of her own reality. Through the use of the female figure, I attempt to understand my reality, specifically the relationship I have with my body.

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<sup>3</sup> *Art In the Twenty-First Century, Season 2: Stories* (New York: Art21 Inc, 2003.)

Bodily mark making, overlapping and layering, and using a sensuous color palette of exaggerated flesh reference a sexual encounter. In the rendering of these kinds of experiences, the intersection and consumption of flesh and mold expresses the ambiguity of Eve's fall from innocence. This liminal moment is in reference to the stages in between birth and death, a stage in which humans are in constant flux. We gain knowledge, lose innocence, live and decay simultaneously. In my sculpture, *Chicken Tits*, I use humor and irony to depict an oxymoron of birth and death. The sculpture contrasts form and image, made up of hollow egg shaped sacks, which consist of the image of raw chicken wings. Through working sculpturally, I was able to juxtapose form and image in order to play with the tensions between birth and death, and allude to their cyclic nature. My interest in amputated limbs stemmed from the packaged pieces of raw chicken at the grocery store. Distilled from the chicken's internal organs that are deemed unappetizing, the chicken breasts, legs and thighs are left to connote inspirations of a chicken dinner. I became interested in how body parts can transcend their origins to connote new associations.

By rendering the flexing relationship between the deterioration of beauty and the obtainment of pleasure, my mark making refers to a sexual tryst, an experience that encompasses both polar opposites that lie on my spectrum of ideas. Within this binary, beauty is at the height of its innocence, and the inevitable decay of that naïveté looms and festers, often in the form of mold, unwanted growth that exists uncontrollably and spontaneously. What lies between the light

and dark is decayed and discarded growth, a parasite that is often ignored, like the moldy bell pepper in the depths of the refrigerator. The symbols that I employ in my prints allude to a parasite and host relationship, including mold, a symbol of life and death. In addition, the amputated female figure, reduced to her fertile parts, and often the fertile parts separated from the figure resemble the packaged chicken. Thinking about themes of consumption, an action in which involves two parties, mold and the figure, it is ambiguous in the prints who is consuming who. Mold is present in all five of my prints, specifically, in the three-panel print, *Unwanted Growth* (Figure 3), it is uncertain whether the mold is consuming the figure, or the figure is consuming the mold. This indistinctness is realized through multiple layered lithographs, often using the “ghost,” print, to work with grays to achieve more depth in the image. Lithography lends itself to a layering process where my symbols can intertwine in multiple ways, ambiguously concluding that neither image solely represents the deterioration of beauty, or the attainment of pleasure, but, rather a combination of the two; a conversation begins to take place that unites both of these ideas.

The painter Cecily Brown, who embeds her explicit subject matter beneath multiple layers of paint, has recently influenced me. Cecily Brown places a clear emphasis on the viewer’s engagement with the work. Playing a game of hide and seek, she employs, “heavily loaded brush mark, fragments of color, and barely

defined human organs.”<sup>4</sup> Brown has inspired me to push my relationship with collage, inspiring me to layer several kinds of textures in order to create an image; I do this through varied lithographs and layers of translucent screenprint inks. Her painting, *On the Town*, 1998 (Figure 6) is an artwork that has influenced the color palette I chose as well as my understanding of how I want to use the body in my artwork. She uses scale to confuse the viewer, making every mark corporeal, no matter how large or small. Lithography and screenprinting provide the potential for diverse mark making, however it limits my use of scale. Within my web of symbols, meaning is created through the accumulation of layers, which at first read as a whole, but can also be understood in smaller parts. To a viewer standing before disguised nude, the sheaths of printmaking layers act as a sexual lure and veiled intimacy. I have also been influenced by the painter Aaron Noble, who collages images from comic books to refer to a specific kind of narrative that includes super heroes and quintessential villains. While Noble and I work with different imagery, in my piece, *Fruitful Origins* (Figure 4) I apply spontaneous, erratic movement, and the use of color to refer to vegetation and flesh, employing its inherent seductive qualities, and mold to symbolize consumption and decay. Just as the villain and the hero are not represented in Nobles work, his colors and shapes allude to their narrative. In my artwork, I employ flesh tones, and

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<sup>4</sup> Dore Ashton, “Cecily Brown En Route,” *Cecily Brown* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc, 2008), p. 15.

corporeal marks to suggest a bodily experience, rather than rendering a recognizable figure.

The gestures and marks rise and fall within a figural landscape. These combined marks function as both a vibrating landscape, as well a fleeting moment that comes and goes. Each piece is a sum of its parts; multiple screen and lithograph prints are combined to create one larger composition. This composition ebbs and flows across negative space in order to allude to the chaotic twists and turns of Eve's humanization. In my understanding of Eve's story, her consumption of the fruit of knowledge is also a sexual experience, thus my image making comes from my interpretation that sex humanized her. The imagery writes a run on sentence, and continues off the page with an organic logic. The rectangle of the page is not a container, but rather captures a transitory moment. *Falling in to the Light* (Figure 1) is a combination of lithography and screenprinting where the image spins and tumbles off the page. The gestures and figural parts work together to create the larger bodily landscape; figures and parts make and are in the landscape simultaneously. The body can be both an object and a subject, thus, through abstraction of the form, I hope to objectify the body while also render a subjective experience, one of temptation, seduction and lust.

It is within these mediums that the marks speak, controlled by their process, but free to dance through the landscape of color, and texture, making a new mark when they spontaneously overlap. Ironically, in the attempt to render an ephemeral moment, my ideas stemmed from the root of feminine history. The

story of Eve is hardly fleeting, grounded by time and longevity. Both the story I chose to derive my ideas, and the process I choose to work with is embedded with time and history, contrasting with my intuitive way of using lithography. With time however, the prints develop to contain growth, death, time and impulsiveness. Working with allegories, myths and fables, there is an engrained connection that lies within the unconscious, a realm that contains our perversions, fears, and wishes. My abject utopia combines the reality of human existence that longs for paradise. I work to encapsulate an escaping instant that exists between the finite moments in life, birth, sex and death. While a part of Eve dies during her fall from the garden, her fall is the moment of transition. In my story she is neither innocent, nor mature, but rather suspended in a liminal space of contorted flesh, amputated limbs, jostled by the momentum of sin, and caught by the hammock of knowledge.



## References

*Art In the Twenty-First Century, Season 2: Stories*. New York: Art21 Inc, 2003.

Ashton, Dore. "Cecily Brown En Route," *Cecily Brown*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc, 2008.

Harold, Ellens J. *Sex in the Bible, A New Consideration*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006.

McDonald, Helen. *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

## CD-ROM Information

1. *Rise and Fall*  
2012 70" x 44"  
Lithograph, screen print, watercolor
2. *Abject Utopia*  
2012 30" x 44"  
Lithograph
3. *Unwanted Growth*  
2012 60" x 52"  
Lithograph
4. *Fruitful Origins*  
2012 30" x 44"  
Lithograph, screen print, watercolor
5. *Parasitic Temptation*  
2012 60" x 22"  
Lithograph
6. Cecily Brown  
*On the Town*  
1998