

We Are All In This To Get Here

Hannah McGhee Patterson

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Committee:

Rebecca Cummins

Ellen Garvens

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ABSTRACT

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Hannah McGhee Patterson

Chair of The Supervisory Committee:

Ellen Garvens

Department Chair, Professor

School of Art: Photomedia

I was raised practicing Hinduism from birth in the unlikely environment of the Bible Belt of the South East. Eventually my art practice became an important means of metabolizing this experience. I employ the use of materials, practices, palette and imagery representative of my relationship with the Hindu practices. In this body of work, I acknowledge an awareness of the appropriative nature of my experience with the American Neo-Hindu movement. This expression of complicated identity manifests itself with a twinge of bittersweet humor in my work. Moving imagery presented as time-based video work combined with shorter repeating gestures in .GIF format act to establish a platform of visual vocabulary as a means of exploring the dualities of identity and projection.

The repetitive framework of the .GIF offers a form of rhythmic study to the viewer. These GIFs reframe basic spiritual tenants of warmth, touch, and receptivity. They act to investigate the practice of mudras; an employment of yogic gestures intended to stimulate specific glands with their sustained use and application. The repeated moving images are filmed to recall a somewhat dated aesthetic of commercial advertising and infomercials, which flooded the screens of my youth. In *Roll Tide*, a .GIF, portrays one of the most commonly recognized mudras of the tradition. A small LCD screen encased in a wooden frame depicts a gilded hand, which indicates the mudra in the position of Jnana, the yogic seal of knowledge. However, rather than depict the stillness necessary for the practice's efficacy, the thumb and forefinger grasp a small plastic gem, rolling it between the fingers until it releases a sparkle: a demonstration of an idealized result. The video, a total of three seconds, repeats indefinitely. The kitsch and glamour of the presented hand act to undermine the sincerity of the information presented. In this way, the piece makes note of the common tropes, and the ways in which "spiritual" information is interpreted and sometimes degraded in colloquial public conversation. This serves as a comment on the presentation, westernization and loss of information that may occur when a practice or ideal is taken out of its original context and re-imaged to serve as a signifier to a larger, and perhaps less-informed public.

Visually inspired by the opulence and opalescence of certain advertising aesthetics, the work combines these qualities with an interest in expressive gesture. This work is grounded in a background in still photography that focused heavily on the frozen gesture and the possibilities of interpreted meaning contained within. This further developed and became emboldened by the study of film and cinema. Symbolically, and cinematically, the hand is a potent symbol, used for giving, taking, making, to name a few of the innumerable expressive and actionable possibilities. *Gestalt* is a method used in Brechtian theater practices in the creation of caricature through gesture and puppetry. The practice has been reimagined countless ways, and notably inspired dancer and film-maker Maya Deren who employed its use in “developing the avant-garde theatrical concept of ‘Primitivism- a return to the archaic ‘roots’ of ritual as the revitalization of the ‘carnival spirit’ in ecstatic performances characterized by ambivalence, the ‘irrational’, the ‘subliminal’, and the grotesque”, and in effect acted as a projection screen to the unconscious (Hauke 248). Physical gesture conveys an interior state and with this, my work exhibits a subverted anthropomorphism. Emphasized by set design and the addition of grotesque adornments such as glitter and claw-like false nails, the isolated hands became less human in their gesture and movement.

“WE ARE ALL IN THIS TO GET HERE” inhabits an abstracted mythos of my religious or spiritual background.. The setting is dark with light filtering through lush greenery and plants. This built environment contains a stage for a figure to move through, and arise out of. Shortly after the video begins,, titles appear on screen, visible for the remainder of the piece for the viewer to refer to, a kind of mantra-cum-B movie title sequence. I chose materials familiar to offering and ritual practices, bright pink holi day pigment, flowers, fruit, and tinsel. The abstracted model recreates the figure of the lingam, a masculine Hindu symbol of divine generation, from hair, crowned with a garland. Hands with painted fingernails emerge from the greenery to open and close the lingam’s eye, an act of awakening, somehow feminized through the obsessive grooming gesture. Each segment is punctuated by droning rhythmic music, songs of the

Beach Boys, slowed down 80%. The tracks are doubled, one maintaining the original pitch, the other pitched lower to match its slow speed. This further speaks to the manner in which my western upbringing intersects with my lifelong relationship with Hindu practices. The Beach Boy music came to public consciousness around the same time as the Neo- Hindu movement in California. They embody the feel-good ideals of surf culture without being surfers themselves. They are slowed down, an abstracted form of themselves, not singing, but chanting, “Don’t worry, Baby.”

Pop music, gender, representation, and cultural identity, act as points of provocation for me in my art practice. In the sole still photograph present in this thesis work I sought out cultural and visual language to express receptivity to artists and mass performance. Inspired by Beyoncé’s eminence and influence as a performer, her positive representation of black women in a public media in which they are currently under-represented, and her enormous, adoring and loyal following (colloquially dubbed “the Beyhive”), I chose her as an appropriate fixing point for a dialogue on femininity and the power of representation. Embracing a cultural trope of the new age movement I utilized an auric photographer to document my aura for my 2013 piece *Photograph of My Aura While Watching Beyoncé’s 2013 Super Bowl Halftime Performance*. I was looking for a combined vocabulary of differing generations, the aura presented as a document that certain groups would be able to engage with and read, and Beyoncé’s performance as a massive and recognizable moment in popular consciousness. I utilized the aura as a visual expression of the subtle psychic effects of mass-performance and the psychic power of representation. Beyoncé, with her captivating hold on an exponentially growing audience represents a rarely heard voice of female empowerment. She assumes the subversive role of a mass envoy for feminine enlightenment, sneaking the words of Nigerian feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie into her albums, providing millions of young girls and women with the incentive to research and find out through their own search what it means to be a female today.

My longer time-based piece, *Suspicion, I'm Blue* incorporates these ideas. The gestures move through an entire lifecycle in a changing environment in which the subject lives, grows, struggles and dies. The tone of the setting is soft and pink shrouded in countless bright camellias and dripping plants, sharp glitter. I thought of my own tendency to reject femininity in my art making, and the dominance of male artists taught, written about, and occupying the majority of positions in the art and film professions. In a play on Picasso and Yves Klein's dialogue between their "blue periods" and focus on the female body, I thought of this piece as a sort of tongue in cheek "getting my period." The setting is entirely pink but the "blue period" male presence looms referentially in the soundtrack. The first five of seven songs refer to this thematically beginning with the Ikettes "I'm Blue" then moving to Elvis Presley's Sun Record's recording of "Blue Moon", next Roy Orbison's "Blue Bayou" followed by a shift in perspective visually as Linda Ronstadt begins her rendition of "Blue Bayou" then the Shangri-Las go on to cover "I'm Blue". In the beginning of the film as the Ikettes start, a clawed hand emerges newborn from the glittering landscape and begins to explore it's environment. It grows and moves as the blue songs continue but by the time the Shangri-Las' version of "I'm Blue" plays the young creature has become enshrouded in pink foam, shaving cream, and is struggling to free itself. As it struggles the song shifts to the Shangri-Las "I Can Never Go Home Anymore" and finally ends in flames to Terry Stafford's *Suspicion*, two girls moving into the frame to extinguish the fire.

My work attempts to delve into these complicated notions of identity, public life and private growth, using the abstraction of a foreign world grounded with painted fingernails, long hair, tones of pink and purple. It exists lodged in darkened jungles, where unseen forces move outside of, underneath, and on the edges of the frame, exerting forces which may drown out, trap, or bestow something upon the figure rooted in the scene. These built environments and uncovered scenarios are representative of a subconscious state and its interaction with a larger, public and popular sphere.