My Body In Visual Culture

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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2014
This thesis tracks four major shifts in my art making process (glass blowing, sculpture, photography, installation) since 2011. *This Embrace*, is an installation of sixty photographic self-portraits mounted on cardboard. The installation explores the body and the impact of visual cultural influence. It broke down not only material boundaries, but also the boundaries between my daily life and my studio practice. I will explain how each material has been influential as well as how other artists and writers have affected the installation’s development.
DEDICATION

This document is dedicated to my family and friends who give me endless experiences that shape who I am.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Richard Harned, Carmel Buckley, and George Rush for their generosity and support. The amount of knowledge imparted by each has undoubtedly expanded my research and continues to inspire both my personal and artistic practices.
VITA

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CHAPTER 1: GLASS

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Figure 1: Comparison – Glass vs., Me – Hand Written List
I believe there to be many similarities between glass and myself. This relationship is based heavily off of the atmosphere of a glass studio, the performance of process, and the properties of glass.

The atmosphere in glass shops is high energy. It’s a place, often male dominated, rich in sexual jargon and innuendo. For example, the reheating chamber for the glass is called a “glory hole.” The glassmaker is repeatedly sticking a pipe in and out of it.

Communication in the studio happens through speech and body gestures. The movement between the gaffer (head glassblower) and assistant(s) develop into a repetitious dance. This partnership often creates sexual tension and this environment fuels my work.

I like being physical and pushing my body and its limits. I have to be one step ahead of the rest, because as a woman, I must constantly prove my commitment to the material. Men may be stronger physically, but I am competent enough to keep up with the best of them (for example, I use my hips to take some of the weight of the glass, versus using just the strength of my arms).
Unqualified Triumph is a piece I made right before graduate school. It exemplifies the characteristics of the body, sexuality, and importantly, glass. In this artwork, there are three chairs. Each one has white sandblasted blown glass pillow on its seat. These pillows are slumping and oozing off the chairs, implying a soft and flexible quality, yet because they are made from glass, they are rigid and still. The glass was blown into a mold made from an actual pillow, then heated up and laid down on top of the chair seat with a protective layer of dampened newspaper. I let it naturally flow and deflate to take on the form of the structure. I’m playing with the chair as a stand in for the body.

I am drawn to glass because it is a performative medium. I thrive off of its studio environment and competitive nature within it. The act of making, in the “Pants Blow” series, requires balancing, forming, heat, blowing, and communication skills.

My focus was on the lower body, and to explore this idea I blew glass straight into denim jeans. Denim jeans are built to move around in, for body protection, and
durability. After dampening them with water to increase the time that it takes the glass to
burn them, I slip a large mass of glass, with a bubble inside, down into the pants.
Through a team of people, blowing, and lots of smoke and fire, the glass metamorphoses
into a strange bodily form. The jeans burn away leaving only scraps of fabric on the floor.

Glass is a great vehicle for the exploration of interior space because of its
expansion properties. This process and material are somewhat unpredictable, which is
what draws me to it. The obscurities of these forms relate to the body but are not literal
interpretations. Each piece has different markings, places of tension, size, thickness, and
so on. Often glass is driven by technique with a specific end result, but here I work the
opposite by using glass in the most unpredictable way.

Figure 3: Pants Blow (process shot), 2013
After so many years of working with glass, I feel some of the excitement wearing off. This is due to several factors, but most importantly time and the restriction of the material. The time spent in the studio feels too limited by its regimented schedule and I need the option to be able to work every day and anytime of the day. I also am frustrated by the difficulty to successfully work large in glass, and how object oriented it makes one’s art. The act of blowing glass is energized and alive, but once I have the glass product, it is cold and static and I lose interest. My experiences as a glass artist taught me so much about my body and its limitations, but I know I can experience more. This is the base of my sculptural understanding and the place where I catapult off into the unknown world of sculpture and photography.
CHAPTER 2: SCULPTURE

I expanded my material language and took what I learned from glass (my interest in volume, space, and the lower body) to find new ways of making. I am drawn to everyday materials that are cheap and readily available. Denim Jeans, cardboard, and concrete are the materials I use to better interpret my body.

Figure 4: Interior Wall, 2013
Interior Wall is the first piece I made using actual denim jeans. I purchased three pairs of jeans from the thrift store in different sizes, stiffened them, painted them, and applied layers of paraffin wax on the inside. I then inserted these jeans flush into an eight by eight foot wall so it would hide the form. The jeans interior space became abstracted into cavernous holes referring to an orifice. Interior Wall played on the viewer’s curiosity. Have I seen this place before? I was inspired mostly to make this work because of my own experience of taking on and off my pants and how amazed I am by the volume of my body in regards to the empty jean form.

![Figure 5: Leg, 2013](image)

Next I began pouring concrete into jeans. Concrete is inexpensive, fast to set, and strong. The process of using concrete works similarly to glass. Both materials start out as powder then change to a liquid and finally harden. The concrete, when wet, stretches the pants and later I rip the jeans off to reveal the form and textures created from the denim.
I cast long legs with rebar piercing through them, knee high casts, twisted legs and truncated stump-like feet. Casting into jeans was similar yet extremely different to my process of working with glass. Both materials are heavy and challenge my body with its weight and are similar in how they expand inside the material. Concrete has more of a tactile roughness to it that excites me versus the smooth glossy surface of glass, which feels too precious to me. It crumbles, sheds, and cracks in a supportive manner. Unlike glass I can be rough and kick around the cement without damaging it. Broken or cracked glass is not desired, but broken stone sculptures can still be labeled as beautiful. A prime example is the sculpture of Venus de Milo whose arms were broken off. Venus de Milo is widely renowned for her missing arms. There is a mystery built up around the sculpture and this is what makes it so interesting.

My sculpture Leg is disjointed and separated from its body singled out and discarded. The leg becomes abstracted by its disembodied structure but still reads as a leg or some kind of limb. Heavy in its resting place it evokes a strong and solid material presence. Concrete has a weight that most people are familiar with and they are also familiar with the weight of their own leg. Yet it is on display in a grandiose gesture propped up on a wooden support. There is uneasiness about the work that aims to cause discomfort and attractiveness at the same instance. We all know how it feels to be in a body so how can one interpret that feeling and translate it physically?
In the summer of 2013 I began combining materials around the studio (concrete, cardboard, tar, and Xerox prints). Collaging with these materials gave me material freedom and endless variations to depict weight and the female body in space. The cardboard became a second skin the paper is adhered to. There is simplicity in working with these inexpensive everyday materials. I’m aggressive and carefree by cutting and ripping at the cardboard’s edge. My choice in combining all these contradicting materials is a reoccurring theme that is also important when I’m working with glass. I like the dualities between a cardboard figure holding up and being held up by concrete. This relationship is not likely to ever work due to the impermanence of the cardboard
compared to the permanent structure of concrete. I’m using the concrete here as a foundation and base for my ideas around the body and home that I explore in the upcoming chapters along with the introduction of portraiture.

Cardboard and concrete are materials that have become essential to my practice and relate back to my life growing up in a mobile home. Mobile home neighborhoods build and decay simultaneously. One day there is a house and the next an empty lot with cinderblocks and debris. I see the cinderblock as a foundation, both literal in the way it holds up a home and as a metaphorical replacement for the legs that hold up our bodies.

Cardboard is a cheap, accessible material that is durable yet short lived like a mobile home. The cardboard is rigid in its corrugation structure but can be crushed and scored/ bent to be soft and pliable. It’s a material for temporary use. The figures I create have a life span. They are not meant to last forever and the materiality of them will never gain value. Concrete and cardboard to me are blue-collar middle class materials that are used every day and often go under appreciated. Their tactile qualities of being rough/smooth, soft/hard, flexible/rigid speak to me through material language that relates directly to my experience of a body.
CHAPTER 3: PHOTOGRAPHY & PERFORMANCE

Through exhibitions of Francesca Woodman and Cindy Sherman and video images of Carolee Schneeman I was inspired to explore photography and portraiture. Their works are raw and unfiltered; they grab you out of your comfort zone and face you with their view of the world and their bodies within it. I needed to be more direct with my concepts of body identity and photography felt like the right step forward.

I have trouble accepting glass as a material because it does not relate specifically to me as a person. I saw a retrospective of Francesca Woodman’s photographs at the Guggenheim in 2012 and this led me to experiment with digital photography. The intimacy of her images attracted me; she captured powerful and real emotion in her poses.

Figure 7: Glass Portrait, 2013
I cleared out my bedroom and brought all of the strange glass forms from the Pants Blow into my private space. I used a camera to capture the expression of these shared moments between me and the object. I undressed and began interacting with the forms. I held them in my arms, I sat next to them for comparison, and laid with them. I was trying to relate to the glass in a new way, could these glass forms be more to me than just objects?

In the end the images were a portrait of my relationship to glass. No matter how much I embraced them, they were hard, cold, sharp, and rigid. Even though I felt the images were successful they were successful because they helped me to understand my lack of interest in them.

Figure 8: *Body Landscape I*, 2012
My dad sent me a hand held scanner, about a foot long and an inch or so wide. I began experimenting with it on my body. First I scanned my hand, then my arm, and eventually longer durational scans of the entirety of my body.

The body is essentially the home for the mind, but it determines a lot about our personality and state of being. We all have an idea of an image of who we are, but do we really know ourselves or do we only know the image in the mirror. I was attempting to close this gap by viewing myself through a new lens. By interpreting my skin as “land,” I was mapping out my body to discover unsearched areas of interest. They were grotesque yet beautiful. I like to stand somewhere in between. The high gloss of the image made it seem shiny and glass-like. Since the scanner used glass to create the image I was thinking about the photograph as a glass window to explore the surface of my skin and to push the boundaries of self-identity.

The images began showing me another relationship that exists, the relationship of you to your self. In many of the photographs there is a moment of contact that happens. For instance when the lips coming together or the hand touches the surface of the body where there is a shared intimacy. This was the start of developing a new kind of relationship with my self through an image.
My next step in experimenting with my image came when I found a black and white striped blouse at a thrift store. I took it home and when it came to wearing it, I hesitated. I was faced with what to wear, and how I would be seen differently. I was questioning my identity, and by wearing the blouse I felt sexless. So I began photographing myself in the shirt to capture this feeling and to examine why this shirt in Figure 9: *Dividing Line* (video stills), 2013
particular made me feel this way. No matter what you put on; you will appear as a particular woman with one particular identity, which excludes others. I set up my tripod and began taking hundreds of photographs. I began looking at other artists who performed for the camera such as Lynda Benglis, Eleanor Antin, Hannah Wilke, Sarah Lucas and Cindy Sherman. These artists used their own bodies as the locus for their art. At this time I went to see Cindy Sherman’s traveling exhibition at MOMA in New York. Sherman insists, that she is not a photographer but, rather, an artist who uses photography.

I was never trained formally in photography and never cared to learn the particulars. The image quality is not an issue for me. I reject the idea of what is considered a “good photograph” in order to define it on my own terms. I am more interested in how the vernacular pictures raise questions and issues about the representation of identity. Reading a conversation between John Waters and Cindy Sherman, I found parallels in the way she worked that resonated with me. She explained that she worked alone in the studio and took her own photographs. She tried after ten years of working this way to include other people and allow for others to take the pictures but it wasn’t working for her. She had to connect to the work through being herself. When you have another person in the room with you, you tend to perform, or they may affect the way you work.

There is this moment when you’re in the studio by your self, taking pictures and there is no need to pretend to be anything but yourself. I believe this creates a “raw” image. This idea of being “raw” is what I am after. If I think too much about the pose or
the image in the end it feels contrived and unrealistic versus when I trust my instincts and let my body do the work.

The piece *Blanket* depicts me pensively staring with a relaxed face. This is the face one makes when no one is looking. This gaze is mysterious and rich with questions. Even though both images appear to be the same but flipped they are in fact two different photographs. I discovered that I have a stereotypical “feminine” side and “masculine” side depending at which angle I look at myself or photograph of myself. I covered the images with a thick coat of tar to blanket the surface leaving only the face in one and creating a mask for the other. I was questioning how many details one needs to realize the sex of a person; can you tell by the eyes? The nose? The hair? The clothing?

Everyday we are performing for ourselves and for the people around us.

Figure 10: *Blanket*, 2014
Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist, is interested in the idea of the “male gaze” in cinema. Mulvey’s concept behind the male gaze is the gender-powered asymmetry in film. Women were objectified in film because heterosexual men were in control of the camera. Mulvey’s writing inspired me to make a short silent video titled, *The Dividing line*. This video depicts myself in the same black and white striped shirt unbuttoning it in slow motion. The anticipation grows and the audience awaits the reveal. When my hands move to unhinge the last button I immediately button it back up.

“Women artists explore erotic imagery because our bodies exemplify a historic battleground we are dismantling conventional sexual ideology and its punishing suppressions and because our experience of our bodies has not corresponded to cultural depiction.”

-Carolee Schneeman

In Carolee Schneeman’s video *Fuses*, she and her partner are engaging in sexual activities that never come to climatic end. This video is built through rhythmic sequences but the action is nonsequential, and nonnarrative. The film is silent which adds to the intimacy and examines non-descriptive pleasure; it also takes away the sounds that audiences may be accustomed to when viewing erotic images. She was trying to approach what lived- sexuality felt like. My video was meant to do something similar to Schneeman; to build up sexual tension through a daily activity. I cropped the head out of

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1 Schneeman, Obscene Body/Politic, 28
my video, *Dividing Line*, because I didn’t want my gaze to affect the viewer and I also wanted there to be a moment of questioning gender identity. The lines of the shirt correspond to two genders (male and female) and the title *Dividing Line* refers to the split of where my blouse buttons together. This line becomes the border of my body that explores the culture that has surrounded women in terms of erotic iconography.

I continued to take photographs but struggled with the flat image and loss of dimension. I was using tar on the images to bring in texture and relief. I wanted these figures to come off the wall and this is what led me to using cardboard. The idea of a “cardboard cut-out” is a popular and cheap way to put the image of a person in a space.

I began playing with Xeroxed prints adhered to sheets of cardboard. This satisfied my need to find a material that is cheap and accessible along with dimensional. I was looking at Sarah Lucas’ work at the time to study how she grouped objects together into an installation and also how she made herself present in her work. She is aggressive and sexual. Lucas treats her photo space similarly to her three-dimensional space in the way that she re appropriates found objects and uses similar language from her sculptures to her photos. Lucas stated, “Being laconic is quite important.”

She tried to make the photos as quickly as possible while the idea was fresh in her head. The immediacy of taking a snap shot of her idea or feeling at the time captures a truth about her as an artist. Lucas said in an interview that her portraiture, cemented a relationship between herself and the work. These photos are not only for an audience but most importantly they are

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2 Collings, Sarah Lucas, 73
about Lucas herself. The intentionality of what one wears and what they choose to include in a picture talks about a specific gender identity. “I don’t dress in a special way and then turn up for a photo- but then again, I do, because dressing is always special.” The way she dresses up a sculpture with physical layers is the same way in which Lucas decides what to wear each morning.

The hardest part when photographing myself is deciding what to wear. I used the white and black striped blouse for a while until I decided that it wasn’t the look I was trying to portray. I also was not sure what “look” I wanted. So I began testing different outfits from my everyday wear, to taping my breasts, to finally arriving in the nude. All these articles of clothing were implying different unwanted meanings so I stripped the body to its bare essentials.

I’ve always struggled to live up to the stereotyped standard of what it means to be a woman. I had a lot of sexual experiences growing up which heightened my curiosity of the body. I’m making to visualize my thoughts and experiences of being in a female body. My work pushes me past my comfort zone into facing who I am as a person.

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3 Collins, Sarah Lucas, 66
CHAPTER 4: INSTALLATION

“...The more thoroughly a woman is classified the more easily is she controlled... The new woman is the woman not yet classified, perhaps not classifiable.”

-Ruth Benedict

I have been searching for a way to define myself and realized that there are no words to encapsulate who I am, or I wouldn’t be me, I’d just be another sub category of woman. My life experiences, and everything around me have formed who I am.

My thesis installation, *This Embrace*, explores three main themes: material, identity, and cultural reference. The scape I created encompasses the artistic research done in the studio through making, life experience, and academia.

*This Embrace* is composed of sixty cardboard cut-outs. Each cardboard cut-out has a black and white Xeroxed print of myself. These nude photographs were then arranged in space with concrete castings of legs, and cinderblocks.

Gender is an important element in the meaning and reception of my work. The construction of female identity, established through visual codes like pose, scale and gesture. To me identity is malleable and fluid. My turmoil is to understand what it is to be

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4 Mead, An Anthropologist at Work, 108
a woman in our modern society. All I have to offer are my own personal experiences. This is my chance to re interpret how I view myself, faced with the representation of all women. We all have the curiosity of viewing ourselves from someone else’s perspective. This grouping of figures is my chance to see myself from a different vantage point. I’m able to embrace myself through eye contact and touch by collaging multiple figures together.

Figure 11: Grouping, 2014
Women have been depicted as an object of visual pleasure. The images I take of myself are attractively strange. They aim to get your attention through the striking quality of a nude body and keep your attention through the strangeness of them. They are both larger and smaller than my scale. Some of the body parts are smoothed over or cut out. My gaze stares out at the viewer and upon other figures in the installation. This eye contact both evokes awareness of the female body in space and attracts and repels simultaneously. I’m redefining the culture around women and doing the work through my own language based in material and photography. I’m not a definable woman. My body’s form may be initially recognized as a woman but it is not clear.

“There is always a dimension of ourselves and our relations to others that we cannot know, and this not-knowing persists with us as a condition of existence and, indeed, of survivability. We are, to an extent, driven by what we do not know, and cannot know, and this “drive” (Trieb) is precisely what is neither exclusively biological nor cultural, but always the site of their dense convergence.”

- Judith Butler

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5 Butler, Undoing Gender, 15
When I began photographing myself I found that my poses were referencing my western culture. I photographed myself with no expectations. I knew I would be naked, they would be of my whole body and those were my only limitations. After reviewing the hundreds of images that I took, I began to recognize my poses as images I’ve seen before. My figures are a virtual catalogue of the images we carry around with us each day. I was drawing from the unlimited supply of images provided by movies, television, magazines, the Internet, and art history. The pictures show us how identity, and the representation of it, relies heavily on pose, gesture, and facial expression. The pose that I have selected for this work suggests traditional representations of the female body in visual culture and challenges their meaning.

Ceźanne’s painting from 1905, *Large Bathers* was the basis to how I framed my installation, *This Embrace*. The positioning of the trees and standing figures creates a pyramidal composition. The bodies are gargantuan and heavy. The women are broad shouldered and depicted by curvaceous lines and rounded shapes. The staging depicts an intimate moment of these women by the water under the shade.
of trees. The viewer is witnessing a private moment. A moment dreamt up by a man for the pleasure of other men.

Metropolitan Museum Of Art describes the *Three Graces* as, “These young girls, linked in a dance-like pose, represent The Three Graces: Aglaia (Beauty), Euphrosyne (Mirth), and Thalia (Abundance). They bestow what is most pleasurable and beneficent in nature and society: fertility and growth, beauty in the arts, harmonious reciprocity between men.”

Instead of marble stone I use cardboard. Both sculptures use a subtractive method for carving to reveal the human form. The process of taking away material piece by piece is a way to leave some of the cardboard to reveal the material I’m associating with.

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6 Metropolitan Museum of Art
Unlike the Roman sculptures, which are missing their heads, two of my figures look straight out at the viewer with piercing eyes. Instead of the Roman pots and fabric flanking the sides of the Roman sculpture, I have a concrete leg and they stand upon a pedestal of cement. These images interestingly enough have a strong presence and sense of weight. Their flatness is made believable by the illusion of a body in the round frozen in an image. The black and white quality of the print gives a glowing marbleized appearance. Also by including other elements like cinderblocks and concrete castings it furthers the illusion of space.

There is a lone figure in front “Graces” that is poking fun at the viewer’s role in the gallery. I asked myself, what is it to replace a “classical” body with a “modern” body? Also has the body changed? I find that the bodies in classical sculpture differ from artist to artist and here the girl’s bodies are almost replicas of one another. Their marble skin shows no blemishes and are polished to a perfect surface. My figures in return are the raw image of a woman’s body.
I also took visual clues from Renoir and his painting, *Large Bathers*. Renoir’s painting attempts to show the viewer all sides of the female figure in one glance. This is why the females are often in strange awkward positions. Male painters made painting for other males. I depict myself posing in a similar fashion, but I cut off my hair and removed the breast. This androgenized figure lacks erotic markers attempting to detract sexual arousal. There are two smaller figures embracing the larger one. These figures are attracted to this woman and are embracing her by touch and using her as a place to rest.
“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be–looked-at-ness.*“⁷

-Laura Mulvey

I aim to attract and repel in my works. I am playing the part of stereotypical female poses, and yet changing small details within the physical figure. The largest change is the Photoshopping out of the breasts and pubic region. Effacing the body is less aggressive and more about idealization. A body with no sex organs is indefinable and powerful. This nameless body has no gender to answer to. Therefore this body is free to do as it pleases.

I make this work because it is pleasurable. I receive pleasure out of the interaction of myself with myself. The “me’s” (me plural) are at my disposal and I can play with them through arrangement. I set them up for affectionate embraces and interactions with themselves and the audience.

⁷ Mulvey, Visual and Other Pleasures, 16
I set up three tiers of hierarchy:

1. **Larger than life scale**: About 8-9 feet tall. Highest in the hierarchy and the idealized body (breasts and pubic region are removed)

2. **Real life size**: My height, five foot four inches tall, is the second highest in the hierarchy. (All body parts are intact)

3. **Small scale**: Standing at 46” tall these figures are supporting characters and lowest in the hierarchy (All body parts are intact)

Figure 15: *This Embrace*, diagram, 2014
The larger than life figures don’t need to identify with female parts to be a woman. Their skin becomes smooth like marble and their gaze stares right at you. You know they are women because of the shape of their hips and buttocks but it’s that strangeness that keeps you looking. This strangeness happens because people define/label you by your appearance. If your appearance is indefinable or appears to be neither male nor female one can’t help but argue which one it is. “There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at.”

I want to see the shape of my back, how I balance my weight and gesture with my arms. I want to see myself interacting with myself and imagine what it would be like to do so. The self-portrait is a way to freeze a moment in time and a place for reflection.

The images that are my actual height are interacting with the large-scale figures touching, hugging, and reaching for them. It’s in this embrace that you begin to see the relationship between me and myself. The figures become someone else and my personal attachment to them begins to melt away. I see my self in a detached pictorial space.

The smallest figures are referencing putti, or putto. Putti are found in classical art as infants that were believed to influence human lives. I put myself in a position of the putto to portray affection and the need for this person-to-person interaction. They mimic the larger figures, and use them as a resting place. They also are curious and are found looking up at or touching the other figures. They are in shared experience amongst themselves. Some pensive in stare, others with a longing gaze deep in thought.

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All the figures in the installation, *This Embrace* represents the different moods of my psyche. They become a new entity of myself. Installation is my way to collage all of the different materials and themes I’m interested in. I use this method to create a landscape to describe the overarching theme of what it is to be a woman.

Figure 16: *This Embrace*, 2014
CONCLUSION

Through four major shifts in my art making process (glass blowing, sculpture, photography, installation) I created, *This embrace*. This installation encompasses all my interests in materials, the body, and the influence of visual culture. I am finally seeing the glue that cements my interests together from one shift to the next. It is in this glue that I’m discovering who I am and dissolving the boundaries of my daily life and my studio practice.

*I’m living in between the soft and the hard, the female and male. This territory is my unknown and opens up endless potential.*
BIBLIOGRAPHY


