

VIGNETTES

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... v

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION..... 1

II. PORNOGRAPHY FROM ADULT FILMS TO THE INTERNET 1

III. PROCESS, MATERIALS, AND IMPLICATIONS..... 3

IV. LANGUAGE AND POWER..... 7

FIGURES..... 11

REFERENCES 17

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE

1.	VIGNETTES SERIES: BUSTY BRUNETTE BABE.....	11
2.	VIGNETTES SERIES: EXTREME CLOSE UP.....	12
3.	VIGNETTES SERIES: PICKED UP TEEN.....	13
4.	VIGNETTES SERIES: TIGHT PINK.....	14
5.	VIGNETTES SERIES: CUTE GIRL.....	15
6.	VIGNETTES SERIES: TWO WHITE GIRLS.....	16

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INTRODUCTION

Vignettes is a series of six large industrially-woven tapestries examining the language of pornography and its effect when juxtaposed with non-pornographic imagery. Titles of streaming online videos from the pornographic website *pornhub.com* are superimposed over images of majestic, unspoiled landscapes. By separating these phrases from their visual contexts, the specific qualities of pornographic language become evident: it is a language of classification that is violent, sexist, racist, and degrading. This is important because the usage of such language is not arbitrary or context-specific; it reflects our genuine feelings about the societal position of women and about the extent of our voyeuristic privilege.

PORNOGRAPHY FROM ADULT FILMS TO THE INTERNET

In his article *Something for Everyone: Busty Latin Anal Nurses in Leather and Glasses*, Roger T. Pipe examines the current phenomenon of customized pornography, starting with the Golden Age of adult films in the 1970s when the release of the highly-produced *Deep Throat* and *Behind the Green Door* marked a breakthrough of adult films into mainstream audiences. Nevertheless, the market for pornographic films was so small that producers felt obligated to make movies featuring the most standard, general sexual acts in order to appeal to the largest possible audience. Straying into fetishistic territory would alienate a portion of their audience and decrease movie ticket sales; it was

not cost-effective.¹

The advent of the VCR in the 1980s increased the viewing audience of pornographic films from a few thousand to several million. Porn films were cheaper, more available, and for private home viewing. These luxuries encouraged consumers to embolden their requests for more specific acts, performers, and themes. With this significantly larger viewing audience, producers responded favorably to these demands; they no longer had to worry about losing money. In fact, doing so would only make them more money. DVD technology in the mid 1990s, with its menu feature, further fragmented pornographic filmography into a mashup of specific scenes, frequently focusing on one act or one body part. With the introduction on the internet in the late 1990s, pornographic viewing became completely customizable due to its wide accessibility, low production costs (no packaging, shipping, or retail costs were necessary), and the luxury of being able to scour the web for any video that satisfied even the most rare, exotic desires. Roger T. Price explains:

Web-based delivery methods caught on early, and pornographers began to customize their content to meet very specific needs.... Like Caucasian women with large butts? You can watch *Big White Asses*. If you prefer darker, complexioned backsides, give *Big Black Asses* a try. If Latinas are more your speed, *Big Latin Asses* can be found. If that is not specific enough, liquid can be brought in to give the gigantic glutes sheen, giving us *Big Wet Asses*. If even that won't do, then the wet asses can get an ethnic breakdown treatment as well. One need only add *White, Black, Latin, or Asian* to *Wet and Asses* and you open up another rainbow of sexual possibilities.²

¹ Dave Monroe, et al., *Porn – Philosophy for Everyone: How to Think with Kink* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 194-200.

² Monroe, et al., *Porn – Philosophy for Everyone*, 200.

When you visit *pornhub.com*³, a palette of video thumbnails is laid out on the screen in rows and columns – much like *youtube.com*. Each one is labeled with a screenshot and a title. If you hover your cursor over a thumbnail, a few selected screenshots of the video will scroll, obviously to convince you to watch it if you haven't quite made up your mind yet. That is the visual persuasion – but there's also the verbal persuasion. How do these two differ? The screenshots are limited – they are fragments of time, offering split seconds of the video but not providing continuity. The titles give us the whole picture, loaded up with carefully-chosen nouns, verbs, and adjectives with the aim of seizing your attention.

PROCESS, MATERIALS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Alienating such pornographic language from its original visual context is necessary in order to identify its power. We are so well-indoctrinated into passive acceptance of pornographic imagery in movies, television, magazines, and the internet that attempting to isolate and analyze the specific role that language plays is impossible without first removing the accompanying pornographic imagery.

In a single episode of scouring *pornhub.com*, I appropriated six titles of online streaming videos to pair with six landscape images. The range of titles complete a sampler of the various linguistic characteristics of pornographic language: violence (*cute girl getting her ass destroyed* and *2 white girls in a gangbang*), racism (*2 white girls in a gangbang*), obsessive focus of specific body parts and sex acts, denoted usually with jocular slang (*tight*

³ Why *pornhub.com*? The website's statement sums it up: "*Pornhub* is the most complete and revolutionary porn tube site.... We're always working towards adding more features to keep your love for porno alive and well."

pink pussy stuffed with thick cock and *extreme pussy close up*), underage (aka child) pornography (*picked up teen fucked*), and the specificity of minute details of a performer's characteristics designed to cater to a consumer's every desire (*busty brunette babe gets horny sucking*). I placed each of these titles among a broad range of nature scenes: noble mountains, expansive fields, waves striking towering rocks, forested cliffs, and crags rising from spacious seas; unpopulated purity, unsullied beauty, and majestic perfection.

The choice of landscapes was not a random one; landscapes in art are a universal allegory for purity and divinity. To some, landscapes evoke freedom – a sharp contrast with the accompanying phrases. When we look at landscapes in art, photography, and in real life, we are struck with a realization of something more important than ourselves and our own self-interests; some of us think of Divine Creation when we look at nature's supreme nobility. We become aware of the limitations of our scale; we feel small next to nature's sublime vastness. This universal experience inspired my decision to monumentalize the scale of each weaving. The weavings dwarf the viewer not just with their size, but also with their photorealistic similarities to real-life landscapes, which is one of the characteristics of the weavings industrially produced by the Pure Country Weavers company in North Carolina. The six colored warps and three wefts of their power-loom create a broad range of subtle colors that, when blended, can convincingly convey depth, volume, shape, and atmosphere.

In some pieces, specific phrases were paired with certain landscape images for a purely aesthetic effect. In others, the choices were deliberate. *Cute Girl* features the phrase *cute girl getting her ass destroyed* hovering over a rock formation with a distinct hole in its

center; a visual pun referencing this particular body part. In *Busty Brunette Babe*, the phrase *busty brunette babe gets horny sucking* resides over a mountain image with a steep point that falls off abruptly and continues horizontally to the end of the composition, evoking the silhouette of a breast. *Extreme Close Up* shows the phrase *extreme pussy close up* embedded in an intimate view of waves striking against a cliff. *Picked Up Teen*, however, makes a connection that is beyond visual puns – the forest scene is a reference to what oftentimes happens to such picked up teens in real life. Cases abound with scenarios of teenage girls picked up by male predators, murdered, and then dumped in an unpopulated, forested location. The vantage point in this work is crucial; being that you are looking up from what appears to be a gorge topped with a wall of imposing trees, it is apparent that you are assuming the position of the picked up teen. You aren't the dumper – you are the one being dumped. This piece references one of the many dark, sinister aspects of “middle-of-the-road” pornography: abduction of and sexual violence against underage females. On *pornhub.com*, videos thrive on views; the fact that this particular video made it to the front pages means that there is a significant number of people who find the prospect of an underage female being victimized sexually exciting. This sort of violence is a cornerstone of mainstream pornography, where assault is masqueraded as harmless play, and is consequently a recurrent theme in the *Vignettes* series, from *Picked Up Teen* to *Cute Girl* to *Two White Girls*.

Being an artist whose repertoire of work had consisted entirely of hand embroideries before I began my thesis, the physical detachment necessary in the creation of *Vignettes* created a striking parallel with pornography itself. Through the use of the

software programs Adobe Photoshop® and Pointcarré®, I was able to orchestrate to a minute degree how I wanted my image to look – much in the same way that a consumer surfing the internet can choose from a myriad of pornographic websites, each with their own minute subdivisions of even the most specific detail of a scene, act, body part, or performer. By using the computer, I created the image through choosing colors, compositional elements, and weave structures – but without being able to touch it. I had to imagine what the finished tapestry would look like, knowing the information I programmed into the files and estimating how certain colors and shapes would look together. It was a process that involved my looking and imagining, but not necessarily participating or touching – a clinical, mechanical, physically-removed experience that parallels to an extent the experience of viewing pornography. There is indeed an excitement in looking and imagining – but at the end there is a gnawing ache that desires physical closure and resents the limitations of remote participation.

Weaving, like many other crafts, moved away from localized individual production at home with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, making it a multi-faceted process that can be lovingly intimate or impassively mechanized – much like sex. As a textile major, I have had the experience of preparing a weaving on a floor loom – threading the reed and heddles, tying on the warp and rolling it back, manipulating the sensuous threads with my fingers, controlling the movements of the loom with my arms and feet, and watching this physical effort result in a slowly-growing cloth that testified to even the slightest character of my movements, such as how hard I was beating down the wefts. Programming my files for my thesis limited my participation, estranging me from the physical process of weaving.

It was only when the completed tapestries were mailed back from the distant mill to Kent that I could reclaim them under my own touch, by blocking them, hemming them, and preparing them for presentation.

Like the human body, a textile has a tantalizing potential to be touched – but we cannot always touch it. When it is presented in certain environments, we are forbidden to touch and relegated only to looking. It is the same with sex and the body. Our intimate familiarity with textiles allows us to look at it and translate its visual texture into memories and feelings; by looking at it, we can imagine how it would feel under our fingers, how the warmth and weight of it would rest on our bodies. But as long as it is hung on a wall as an art piece in an exhibition space, it is untouchable. It is the same with human beings; when we watch pornography, we can imagine the physical sensations that would result in doing the depicted acts ourselves (and that, to many, is a crucial aspect to what makes it so pleasurable). But our ability to physically indulge is forbidden.

LANGUAGE AND POWER

If *Vignettes* features pornographic language, can it be considered a work of pornography in addition to a work of art? Not necessarily. Christopher Bartel writes in his article *The “Fine Art” of Pornography*⁴ that our interest is what classifies an object as fine art or pornography. We approach fine art by taking an interest in its form, its content, and its medium – we are interested in what is being depicted and how. In pornography, our concern with the subject is purely in the interest of satisfying our sexual desires. The

⁴ Monroe, et al., *Porn – Philosophy for Everyone*, 153-163.

medium becomes, in Bartel's words, "transparent"; it is unimportant. The formal qualities, concept, and visual aesthetics of a pornographic work are only as valuable as it serves our carnal desires, and only as long as it enables us to fulfill two criteria, according to Bartel: sexual arousal and imaginative engagement. Bartel points out that the two interests – artistic and pornographic – cannot coexist in the same object because a pornographic interest always trumps an artistic one. After all, in order to appreciate the work artistically, we must appreciate the medium by which the subject is depicted. Porn makes us overlook it entirely. In Bartel's words: "One will never find the artistic value in an object that one regards transparently because one must regard the object opaquely to appreciate its artistic value."⁵

As has been demonstrated in the work of textual artists like Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, words in art have a formal as well as conceptual presence. The meaning of the words is important, but so is the media through which they are presented, and the way in which they formally interact with and contribute to the visual composition of the artwork. After all, words are made of letters, and letters are in essence visual symbols. In *Vignettes*, the blunt, pragmatic typeface, the lack of logical capitalization and punctuation, and the hierarchical size and placement of text within the landscape imagery exerts a considerable visual as well as conceptual presence. They cannot be overlooked or ignored; their transparency emphasizes that they have been woven into the landscape, both metaphorically and literally.

The bringing together of the concrete presence of words with the photorealistic

⁵ Monroe, et al., *Porn – Philosophy for Everyone*, 162.

landscapes and the physical plane of the cloth itself results in a conflict that ranges in intensity throughout the series. Each factor fights for dominance. In some pieces, such as *Picked Up Teen* and *Tight Pink*, the visual presence of the words exert a considerable force over the muted landscapes. In others, such as *Two White Girls* and *Extreme Close Up*, the transparency of the words struggle with the photorealistic qualities of the landscapes; indeed, in *Two White Girls*, the word “gangbang” is so intricately mingled among the scattered tones of the tree branches that it almost becomes inscrutable, and requires close examination to decipher.

Nevertheless, the phrases themselves contain such a powerful emotional force that they claim the composition almost entirely, regardless of how deeply they are visually embedded within the scenery. Robert Baker's “metaphorical identification” theory motivated this formal and conceptual decision. According to Baker, “metaphorical identification” is a phenomenon where a general term is used by a large portion of a given group (culture, societal structure, etc.) to refer to another group (a certain gender, ethnicity, race, etc.). While these qualifiers might seem arbitrary, they are not; they have been singled out according to the metaphorical associations they imply. To explain this, he introduces five categories of non-pronomial identifications of women: neutral (lady, girl), animal (chick, bird, fox, bitch), plaything (doll, babe), gender (referring to an article of clothing assumed only by the female gender, such as skirt or, less commonly, hem), and sexual (snatch, cunt, ass, pussy, piece, etc.). Women don't typically identify one another

according to these categories (except the neutral one); men do⁶. Baker writes:

What kind of conception do men have of women? Clearly they think women share certain properties with certain types of animals, toys, and playthings; they conceive of women in terms of clothes associated with the female gender role; and, last..., they conceive women in terms of those parts of their anatomy associated with sexual intercourse....⁷

In other words, the terms we use to refer to something (in this case, women) is not arbitrary or superficial but is a reflection of our societal concept of it. *Vignettes* is an effort to bring this notion into the light. If it is permissible to use a language of violence, sexism, and racism when referring to people (especially women) in pornography, we should be extremely concerned about how our society truly measures their worth. Many have shown strong reactions upon seeing the words contained in *Vignettes*; that is perfectly normal and natural, and how it actually should be. In this society that raises pornographic actresses to celebrity status rewards women who willingly exploit themselves with money, power, praise, attention, visibility, and importance, language may be the last bastion wherein the dehumanizing culture of pornography can be truly understood.

⁶ Mary Vetterling-Braggin, et al., *Sexist Language – A Modern Philosophical Analysis* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981), 165-170.

⁷ Vetterling-Braggin, et al., *Sexist Language*, 168.



FIGURE 1
Vignettes Series: Busty Brunette Babe
Industrially-woven tapestry
55" x 65"
2014-15



FIGURE 2
Vignettes Series: Extreme Close Up
Industrially-woven tapestry
55" x 65"
2014-15

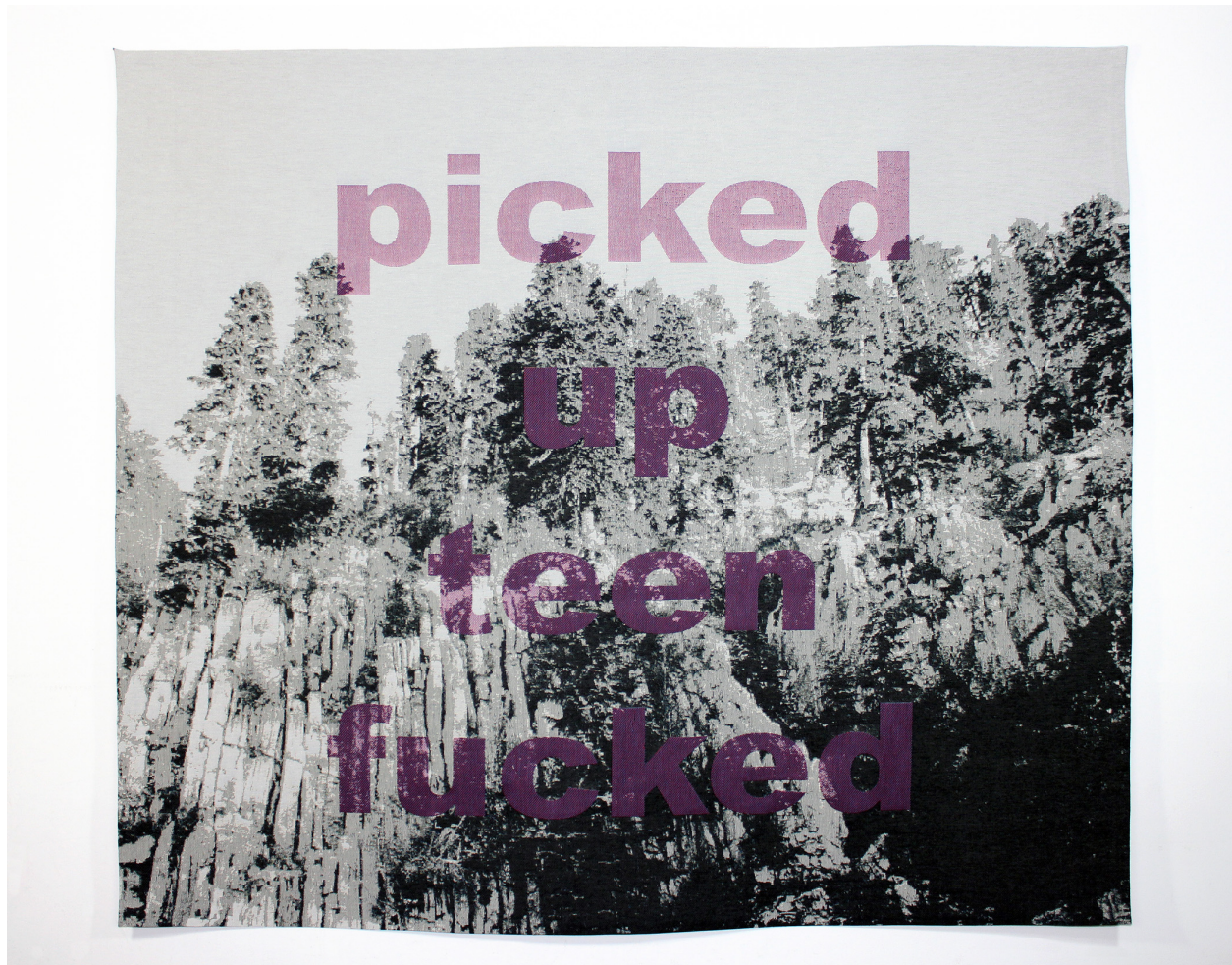


FIGURE 3
Vignettes Series: Picked Up Teen
Industrially-woven tapestry
55" x 65"
2014-15



FIGURE 4
Vignettes Series: Tight Pink
Industrially-woven tapestry
55" x 65"
2014-15

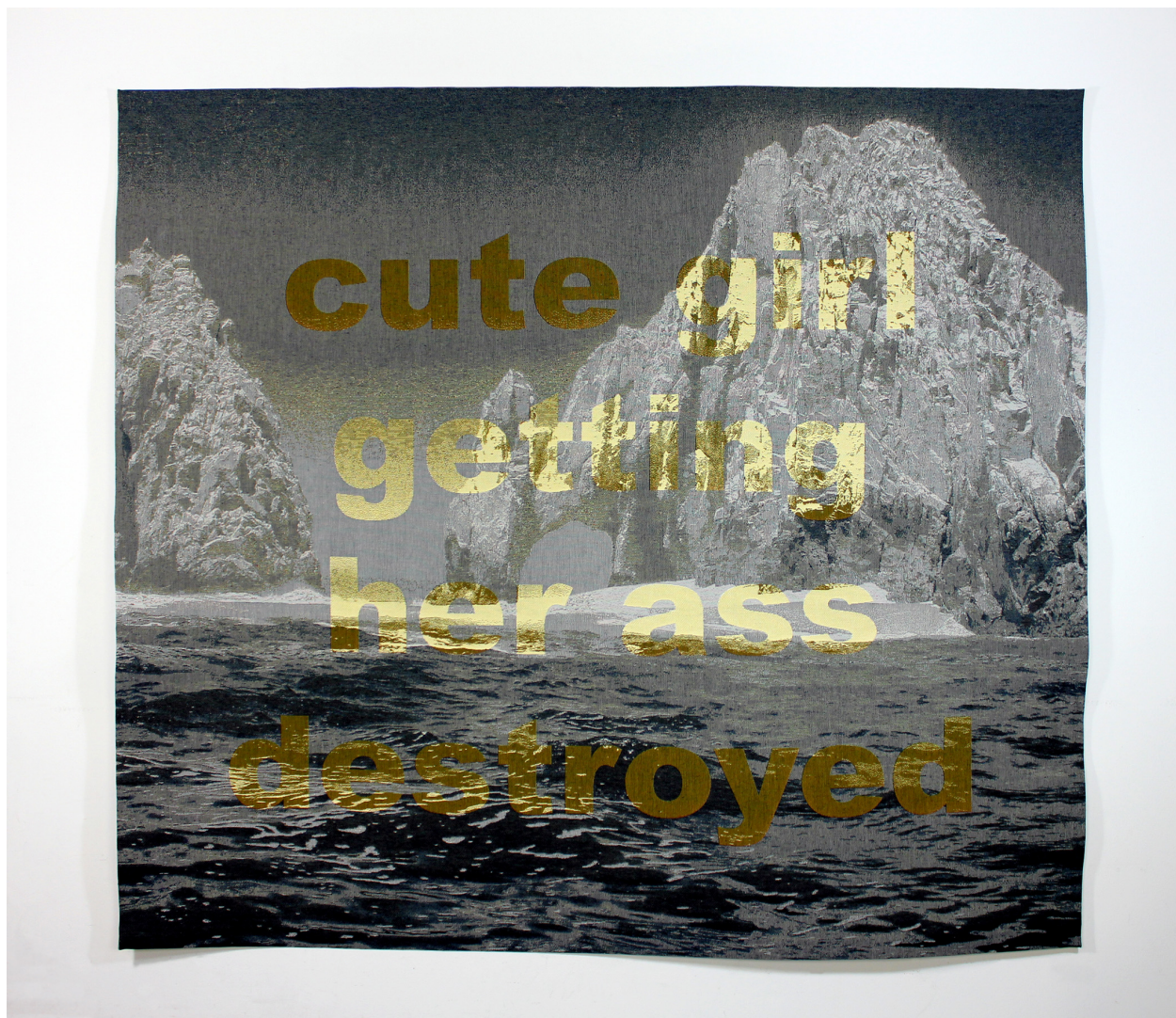


FIGURE 5
Vignettes Series: Cute Girl
Industrially-woven tapestry
55" x 65"
2014-15



FIGURE 6
Vignettes Series: Two White Girls
Industrially-woven tapestry
55" x 65"
2014-15

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