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Man : Woman : Human

by
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Abstract

The present day atmosphere seems to be so much about one or the other. Whether it is politics, religion, or even something as small as Apple or PC, it seems like it is impossible to exist in the middle; you either “are” or “are not.” With the blinders firmly strapped on, there is so much not coming into view. By only seeing things in absolutes, is what we DO NOT experience and believe as important as what we DO?

This is a cumbersome question without a simple yes or no answer. However, rather than attempting to create some kind of resolution, this thesis attempts to reframe this question (in a broader sense) in an effort to remove the blinders and experience things beyond ourselves. More specifically, it attempts to shift the focus from “I” to “We” and how inextricable these two are in defining and understanding each other.

Because there are so many facets to this issue, I narrowed my focus on one aspect – gender. I also provided context for the body of work by framing it specifically as a marriage ceremony. Each piece makes a statement on its own, but this statement is made stronger by presenting it with its companion piece. For example, the piece entitled Intimate I, a girdle made of nails and a carriage bolt, is visually powerful on its own and presents clear tension between male and female contexts and materials. However, when paired with the piece Intimate II, an athletic supporter made from straight pins, the presentation becomes more complex and less one-sided. Both gender roles are literally standing right in front of the viewer, side by side with equal importance. While the viewer expectedly draws on their personal history to interpret what they are seeing, the “other” is also right there, on display for them to experience as well.

One cannot shift the social focus centuries in the making by displaying a few pieces of art in a gallery and writing a few words. But hopefully this thesis does call on us to take pause. We stop for a moment to take in a little humanism in a post-humanist age in hopes that it opens the door a crack. Perhaps it lets enough light in to start to question what we think we know about ourselves and ultimately the whole of humanity.
“Man is an individual and as such is at once himself and the whole race, ...the whole race has part in the individual and the individual has part in the whole race.” In Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Dread*, he puts forth the idea that the self and the whole of humanity are interdependent and inextricable. Yet, somehow they are always separated and viewed in isolation.

Both groups and individuals are broken down into their least common denominators and labeled in the most convenient terms in order to be understood. This is not true understanding. In accepting and identifying that the self is whole and the whole is the self, we can begin to unravel the full potential of what it means for us all to be Human.

When dealing with this issue in this arguably current post-humanist age, it is difficult to defend the necessity of this understanding - I will address this issue more directly later on. However, for now I will suffice it to say that I am a human creating work that will engage and be viewed by other humans. Each of us is a member of society on varying levels, whether consciously and/or unconsciously, and we each have our own individual and collective histories. Whether a post-humanist or a humanist, these parameters are ones which both camps can agree upon and the parameters within which I will present this thesis.

Within humanity, certain social constructs have developed. Over time, some may have changed while others come and go, but their existence within humanity remains. This body of work attempts to reveal these social constructs, such as gender, race, and faith, as arbitrary categories used to supposedly “define” us as individuals while suppressing and diluting what it means to be Human. Like the Surrealists, the work was created utilizing everyday objects and traditional icons as a way to connect
the viewer with the familiar. However, the context in which the familiar is presented is neither traditional nor common. When confronted with the everyday outside its usual context, the audience becomes engaged in a self-examination on both a conscious and unconscious level. Upon viewing this work, the viewer is led down a less familiar path of questioning and doubt. Some questions will be answered and some will remain ambiguous. However, it is the questioning itself, not in the conclusions, where the self, free of ambiguous social constructs, can be re-defined and aspects previously repressed are re-discovered.

Carl Jung believes this potential lies within all of us. We are all made up of both a collective unconscious as well as an individual conscious. While an individual is unique, they are not without an inherent history – the history of the human race. Kwame Anthony Appiah further elaborates on this in *The Ethics of Identity* by stating:

> To say that collective identities – that is, the collective dimensions of our individual identities – are responses to something outside our selves is to say that they are the products of histories, and our engagement with them invokes capacities that are not under our control. Yet they are social, not just because they involve others, but because they are constituted in part by socially transmitted conceptions of how a person of that identity properly behaves (21)

It is the social environment surrounding the individual which pushes aspects into the conscious while others are suppressed into the unconscious. The images created in this body of work draw upon this potential. In viewing and interacting with the familiar and the unfamiliar, we are forced to access our collective history in order to make sense out of what we experience. We begin to develop an understanding of the “other” within ourselves, leading to understanding on a broader scale. The connection is strengthened by a physical awareness of both the object and the medium, whether in a wearable or non-wearable format. The relationship created between the maker, viewer, form, medium, and context leads to an intangible idea of what lies within humanity, in which we are all individually a
Before continuing on how the work provides visual support for this Jungian ideal, it is necessary to clearly define “humanity” in the context of this thesis. Though, admittedly, an element of hypocrisy is at play here – I am creating boundaries in an attempt to further break them down. However, I feel it is necessary to narrow our scope on a definition of “humanity” in order to avoid being distracted by that debate which cannot be resolved in a concise dissertation.

When referring to “human” or “humanity,” I am referring to both the physicality of the race as well as the condition, to a certain extent. From a physical point of view, perhaps the most telling definition of humanity came in the recent coding of the human genome. Mapping out our DNA on the most specific and minuscule level allows us to see that we are 99.9% genetically identical. The undeniable acknowledgment of our oneness as a race makes us realize that issues such as color, gender, and sexuality are almost insignificant factors in defining the Human.

The non-physiological elements which frame humanity are more abstract and, therefore, more complex. While endless arguments exist on the nature of the human condition, I attempt to neutralize a large portion of the debate immediately; I specifically do not define humanity as good or bad, religious or secular, or by any other dogmatic terms. It is not beneficial to force humanity into this type of “either-or” definition. Choosing sides does not allow for greater clarity on the subject as it is being presented in this context. Instead, I shift the focus of the human condition based on an inherent desire to express and explore through communication and interaction with themselves and their environment. These desires are the vehicle through which many other aspects of humanity are executed and organized.

As stated earlier, in addition to defining “humanity” in the context of this thesis, it is equally important to address to what extent humanity is still relevant, if at all. In this technology driven age, many believe that society has moved beyond the human – so much so that it has the ability to by-pass
humans all together. In Donna Haraway's *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*, she makes the argument that the cyborg (defined as “...a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction (Haraway 65).”)—the icon of the post- and trans-humanist world, is the only thing that can break-down and transgress the conventional social structure. According to Haraway, the “cyborg has no origin story (67),” they operate only on a conscious level, and their existence is based on a series of partial identities allowing them to easily disregard boundaries. This is to say that the cyborg does not carry the collective baggage inherent to humans. However, to believe this ideology is to deny the cyborg, and technology in general, is the result of human ingenuity.

Regardless of which side of the humanist/post-humanist debate you fall, the fact is technology can and does re-create itself, but it did not create itself. Therefore, while technology may have replaced humans on the conscious level, the collective unconscious human origins which are a part of us all cannot be erased or denied.

Where I do agree with Haraway is that humanity seems to operate within a framework of “...identities [which] seem contradictory, partial and strategic...gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in 'essential' unity (Haraway 72).” Each category society puts in place exponentially clouds the importance of the race as a whole. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the constant distinction between genders. On a daily basis, what we do, how we act is in some way affected by whether we have been classified as either a male or a female. This is to say that all humans fit into two categories without any consideration for anything in between or overlapping. There are some anatomical reasons to categorize in such a manner, but how much are these physical differences simply exaggerated by costuming deemed “gender appropriate” by society? Beyond this physical argument, what aspects of femininity and masculinity are inherent versus societally imposed? The conscious and unconscious human existence is so deeply entrenched in our own history that one may never know to what extent the human race has been self-manipulated. However, by posing these aforementioned
questions, I began to explore the potential of what lies beyond the accepted categories of male and female and how these possibilities can be expressed visually.

I also find myself heavily influenced by the balance I unwittingly strive to achieve in my most personal relationship - my marriage. While on one level we both subscribe to traditional gender identification, we often times find the socially accepted gender roles do not have a place in our relationship. Our interactions allow us to notice each other's humanity beyond our assigned genders, which is what I believe makes our marriage something deeper than a social contract in which we simply play our respective parts. My individual experience, as well as the recognizable “staging” of the traditional marriage ceremony, served as a visual focal point for the work.

Like the surrealists of the 1930s and '40s, I attempt to “doubt what is usually taken for granted, and to think how everything could 'just as easily be otherwise,' attaching no more importance to what is than to what is not (Magritte 10).” In order to achieve this, the work has to move beyond symbolism and become a visualization of thought – a fundamental shift in philosophy. This comes about “... not by giving new information, but by rearranging what we have always known (Magritte 10).” By using objects, icons, and traditions deeply embedded in the human unconscious, the work remains approachable. However, by juxtaposing them against each other, they demand a second look in order to begin to digest the intentions of the pieces.

I began by exploring both the form and the materials utilized to create this body of work. The process was very organic and intuitive. While I used my training as a jeweler and metal artist as a starting point, I remained open to all the possibilities that emerged throughout this process. The early pieces focused on traditional jewelry forms, such as bracelets and necklaces, but I quickly found this limiting and, to some extent, gender biased. Several pieces then expanded into body adornment based on non-specific forms. However, this approach was too broad and the intentions were unclear. Through this process of trial and error, I arrived at a happy medium. I utilized recognizable, wearable
forms which are significant to both genders – the collar and the cuffs of a shirt. These forms are unique in that they can be very proper, as in suit shirts, as well as very fetishized, as in the Playboy bunny costumes. The wide range of function attached to these objects allows the material to more directly control the viewers' perception of the pieces. I chose an equal number of male and female materials to create a set of six collars and cuffs – sandpaper, copper screen, and wood veneer with screws for buttons (see Hers figure 1A) and bee's wax, fur, and dish clothes with pins for buttons (see His figure 1B). However, in order to further question the usual context of these forms, I placed a female model in the collar/cuffs set made from male materials and a male model in the set made from female materials. The interaction of the form and the materials with the body presented a more complete idea of humanity.

Subsequent pieces utilized a modified version of this body-form-material formula. I began including my husband in the process by having him choose the male materials and I continued to choose the female materials in an attempt to further equalize the outside gender-specific impact. I also allowed myself the freedom to let the materials guide the wearable form, often times creating the female form pieces from male materials first and then creating the counterpoint.

The first two pieces following this modus operandi are Intimate I (figure 2) and Promise I (figure 3). While each was successful in illustrating the relevant aspects of humanity, I initially had difficulty figuring out the possible formal connection between a nail girdle and an electrical clamp ring. Another element needed to be introduced in order to unify the pieces beyond their philosophical intentions as well as move them beyond their simple symbolic irony. Upon completing Promise II (figure 4), the connection became more apparent. The pair of rings were reminiscent of the traditions involved in a Western marriage ceremony. From the costuming to the rituals, marriage in this context is the quintessential gender-identifying event in most societies. By incorporating this familiar tradition into the work, it provided me with the basis for the remaining pieces in the series as well as giving me
the connecting thread to pull through a number of the works already completed.

96

After embracing this decision, the next obvious step was to create the traditional costuming for the marriage ceremony using gender-specific materials for both. Ceremony I (figure 5) was completed first, tailored out of materials chosen by my husband from the hardware store. I also began sewing Ceremony II (figure 6), a tuxedo constructed from antique lace. However, I stopped after completing the vest, bow tie, and cummerbund. These three pieces are the identifying aspects of the tuxedo; making the entire suit would detract from these essential elements and perhaps become visually confusing to the viewer. The pieces were set aside for later consideration.

The connection of the wedding dress, tuxedo and rings to the marriage ceremony was apparent, but how did it pertain to some of my earlier pieces, specifically Intimate I? From a formal standpoint, the girdle was not everyday apparel for modern females. However, it was still used for special occasions, such as weddings. Is has become a part of the costume which is present, but never seen. Intimate apparel for both males and females is not only wrought with gender symbolism from a formal point-of-view, but it has the most direct relationship with the body itself. By revealing what is traditionally kept private, another layer of the human condition is exposed. The direct male counterpoint to the girdle was immediately completed – Intimate II (figure 7). However the remaining two wearable pieces were a bit more challenging. Intimate III (figure 8) and Intimate IV (figure 9) did not share a direct formal connection as the previous two pieces did. Yet, they held true to the intention of the undergarment series and to the thesis as a whole.

Upon completion of the final two wearable pieces, I started considering how display would affect the body of work. Having chosen to fashion the collection after the Western marriage ceremony, the orientation of the pieces in the gallery space would have to reflect this decision as well. With this in mind, I opted for a rectangular-shaped section along the back wall of the gallery which could be mostly enclosed using movable walls. Certain elements of the “church” setting needed to translate into
the gallery space. An aisle was created by setting the pedestals for the *Intimate* series on either side, leaving an open space running through the center. The pieces worn by female models were on one side of the aisle while pieces worn by male models were on the other, duplicating the separation of the groom's guests from the bride's guests onto opposite sides of the church. The *His* and *Hers* series followed suit, creating a second row behind the pedestals. *Ceremony I* and *Ceremony II* were placed at the far end of the aisle. To compensate for the difference in scale, the bow tie and vest from *Ceremony II* were sewn to a canvas and hung on the wall above *Ceremony I*. This gave it more visual weight and kept it equally as important as the full dress it accompanied. I also placed *Ceremony I* on a dress form rather than a model so the body was implied rather than physically present on both pieces. A pedestal holding *Promise I* and *Promise II* was placed in the center of the aisle closer to the back wall, signifying where the exchange of the rings traditionally occurs.

After considering which pieces to include and their placement in the space, an important aspect was still missing – the alter. Not only did this have a ritualistic purpose, but it served as the focal point, something the created “church” space was still lacking. Another wearable piece would not be appropriate because it would shift the gender balance to either side. Instead, both the male and female needed to be represented in one piece as the culmination of humanity. I also wanted to preserve the sacred aspects of an alter without the formal restrictions of a table-like form. After much research and consideration, I complete *Reliquary* (figure 10).

Standing alone, it is perhaps the most directly representational piece, something I wanted to avoid at the outset of this thesis. However, when viewed in the context of the complete body of work, *Reliquary* grounded the philosophical and formal intentions of the thesis. The circle and square elements were taken from Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* drawing, a widely recognized work which is said to illustrate the perfect proportions of the human body. However, I needed to replace the obviously male figure used in this illustration with something less gender-specific and, ideally, without
a human form at all in order to challenge the viewer further. My Catholic background helped me to

quickly think of the reliquary as a suitable substitute.

Reliquaries are containers used for keeping or exhibiting something that serves as a remembrance of a person, place, or event (Webster's Third New International Dictionary). Often times, they were used to contain a piece of the remains of a martyr or saint within the Catholic church. However, I was looking to use the reliquary in a broader context, similar to that of Robert Rauschenberg's reliquaries in the 1970s. Rauschenberg created his reliquaries from everyday objects and for the people in his life, not for the elite few. But perhaps most importantly, his reliquaries captured the essence of the individual, his history in relation to that individual, and their collective histories within the time and space they existed. All are intertwined but none are clearly defined.

The center of Reliquary was created in this same spirit. I utilized a found object - a wooden box - containing items collected from both males and females in my husbands and my own family. These objects were a combination of collections, items unconsciously selected to be placed together in decorative containers on dressers and night stands. While putting all the individual collections into one, it became impossible to tell what was gathered from a male and what was gathered from a female. Although the objects themselves were not sacred in the traditional sense, the formation of each collection, and ultimately of the collaborative collection, was the most pure representation of humanity without the restrictions of gender. Reliquary was placed at the end of the aisle on the back wall, facing the Ceremony series, and completed the church-like space in the gallery.

Through exploring and questioning one existing social structure implanted in humanity – gender roles - I embarked on a journey of what “could be” instead of “what is.” Although this body of work is a visual interpretation of my thoughts along the way, it does not attempt to ultimately define my experience as truth. It only serves as small beginning to an endless, and perhaps naive, notion –
what is possible if we make the effort to free ourselves from the arbitrary social constructs that bind us everyday? Can we transgress the boundaries of what it means to simply exist as an individual in an effort to explore what it means for us all to be Human? Each person will take a different journey, evoke different questions, but perhaps this small step, if taken enough times, can reveal our common Human history and begin to guide us down the path of true understanding.
Works Cited


Figure 1A - “Hers”
Figure 1B - “His”
Figure 2 - “Intimate I”
Figure 3 - “Promise I” together

Figure 3 - “Promise I” apart
Figure 4 - “Promise II”
Figure 5 - “Ceremony I” back & front

Figure 6 - “Ceremony II”
Figure 7 - “Intimate II” front

Figure 7 - “Intimate II” back
Figure 8 - “Intimate III” front

Figure 8 - “Intimate III” back
Figure 9 - “Intimate IV”
Figure 10 - “Reliquary”

Figure 10 - “Reliquary” detail