Rabbit Hole

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Rabbit Hole

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School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Science

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Abstract

Rabbit Hole

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_Rabbit Hole_ is a multimedia installation, which combines drawing, performance, animation, and sculpture to celebrate gender as a performativity expression of multiple possibilities while presenting sexual identification as neutral and fluid.

In _Rabbit Hole_, I present an opportunity for the viewer to experience a disorientating fictional space, in which the physical body floats across boundaries. Constructed biomorphic forms entangle and pulsate creating an arena where gender is ever evolving, celebrating a freedom of sexuality. The symbolic representation of the rabbit within the work connects across North American and Chinese Culture.
Artist Statement

*Rabbit Hole* is a four-channel video installation that combines drawing, sculpture, and performance. In the space, formal elements are arranged to create a sense of disorientation that expands the boundaries of the physical body: constructed biomorphic forms entangle and pulsate, creating an arena where gender is an ever-evolving celebration of freedom within sexuality and gender identity.

I grew up in a small city in China where gender identity is believed to be a purely binary male-female construct, and where it is generally unacceptable for a female to publicly speak out about sexual identity. As is true for most of my other Chinese friends, I am expected to get married by a certain age and live in a male-female family unit as the only socially acceptable possibility. I came to study in the United States six years ago, and became aware of the huge difference between western and eastern thinking about gender identity and expression of sexuality. I have experienced more acceptance living in Richmond, Virginia and Rochester, New York than I ever experienced growing up in China.

During the most recent winter break, my partner and I returned to China to visit our respective parents. I intentionally grew my hair out to shoulder-length to appear more feminine in order to keep our relationship secret. When I visited my parents after spending several days with her family, they were extremely pleased with my long hair. My mother was so relieved, and shared the shame she felt because her friends could clearly see that I didn’t act or dress like a female.

Gender roles delineate how people should act in public and even within the privacy of extended families. In her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler elaborates, stating that “gender acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.” Hence, gender opens up outside of this frame of reproductive, compulsory
heterosexual performativity. My life experience has borne this dichotomy out: my partner and I find our respective relationship roles to be ever-changing and open; yet, when with my family of origin in China, I am pushed back into performance of gender acts that have become both unnecessary and foreign to me in the States.

In Rabbit Hole, I create an open, interpretive space that could be seen as a sexualized, playful, confusing, confrontational, pleasurable, or relaxing space. The space is an expression of freedom and of expanding future gender possibilities. I pack this particular work to the brim with my struggle with compulsory gender roles, which forms both a thesis and an abstraction of my own life experience.

In this artistic creation, the rabbit character is fluid, serving as both the protagonist and antagonist, constituting the two points of entry into my experiences in two distinct cultures. The rabbit takes on two distinct physical forms in this work: one hand-drawn, manifested as a doll, a drawing superimposed onto a real object in the space; the other, a costumed rabbit, alive and performing in the video. The hand-drawn rabbit, both pink and blue, symbolizing traditional representations of male and female, plays the role of witness, somewhat removed. The costumed rabbit, covered in white fur with its face obscured, is a performer, fully engaged through fluid and free movements. These rabbit images are intentionally designed to exist within the binary of gender in our society, however the nature of gender is purposefully kept ambiguous and left to the imagination and projection of the viewer to decode.

In the video, there are multiple hand-drawn rabbits, each relatively stylized, yet exhibiting different personalities. These rabbits are crowded together in a surreal world, observing each other and being observed. They represent a certain societal collective power because of how prominently they appear in the work but, on the other hand, they are also being manipulated and are therefore somewhat powerless. There is a single costumed rabbit, playing its own role as a single performer on the stage, yet sometimes projecting itself into multiple images to occupy the space more expansively, reflecting a mental sense of community, no longer alone
or isolated. The costumed rabbit is performing a variety of gestures: some actions involve deliberate touching, dancing, and playing, while others are exploratory, confusing, or relaxing, all of which creates space for the exploration of multiple and ever-increasing possible gender identities.

In Chinese culture, the rabbit is a symbol of fertility, reincarnation, spring and homosexually. According to a Chinese book entitled What the Master Would Not Discuss, written by Yuan Mei in the eighteenth century, the rabbit is portrayed as a deity who manages love and sex between homosexuals. The original story attached to the Chinese Rabbit deity is a seventeenth century folk tale about two unrelated males who come to be bonded like brother in the Fujian province in China. The elder male dies and returns as the rabbit deity who appears to a villager to demand that a temple be built for him and to pray to homosexual affairs, which other villagers secretly did, since such love was prohibited by society. Others never found out the secret but went to pray at the temple anyway. There is a second, better-known Rabbit deity in North China named Lord Rabbit. In Chinese folk stories, Lord Rabbit was sent by Chang’e (another Chinese female deity) to Beijing to help people in the world cure their diseases. In order to hide its identity as a deity, Lord Rabbit fluidly changes its gender. Lord Rabbit changes from female to male, depending on the needs of the people it serves. Therefore, in Chinese, Lord Rabbit can be called both Lord Leveret and Lady Leveret at same time.

In Rabbit Hole, four different videos are combined, along with drawings and sculptural elements, to create this installation. In the videos, glowing lights and elaborate staging with a plethora of moving elements begin to uncover the complexities of sexuality and gender. The audience of hand-drawn rabbits experiences the performance in a crowded theater space. The color palette gradually changes from intensive stage lighting effects to a more natural green and blue, which creates a celebratory environment for the different possibilities inherent in gender identity. These four videos are intertwined but are not specifically driven by narrative; open up multiple possibilities for meaning; and allow the audience more space to construct their
own stories and insert their own desires into the scene. The behavior of the rabbits draws on my own experience of performing in a heterosexual society: the mechanical facial expressions and inconsonant movements on the hand-drawn rabbits represent the difference between my experience of being homosexual and their perception of what that might mean; I will never know if they truly understand, and in this way the hand-drawn rabbits also represent observation of other bodies performing gender. The positions of audience and performer form an exchange. Additionally, the costumed rabbit’s head falls off, after which it awkwardly puts it back. This action captures my awkward struggle in performing actions that are not a part of my authentic life experience.

In Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, she notes, “the body is not a ‘being’ but a variable boundary.” In these four videos, many abstract forms represent the human body. There are movements touching and representing genitalia, but the sexual organs exist and move in the space but are not on the figures. Biological sex, sexuality, gender identity, and gender performance mix, rejecting their own boundaries, thus constructing a new experience of gender and sexuality in the video. Every element changes at once, which represents the multiple possibilities within our own bodies.

The process used to make this work and the content of the work are mirror images. The layers of drawing in the video mirror the complexity of gender identity and sexuality portrayed in the work. In addition, using a bright, colorful palette is aesthetically pleasing and represents the bright and celebratory future of different possibilities for gender identity. Combining drawings, collages, and videos gives me the opportunity to explore and encounter these complicated social issues through different mediums.

One of the inspirations for my work came from Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist, an artist who has a uniquely beautiful, playful, and colorful way of expressing herself. She approaches the representation of the female body in media ecstatically while also questioning our perceptions. Her show last year in the New Museum stimulated my thinking on how to proceed with my own work. While relaxing on a beanbag and bed in her installation, I immersed myself
in the psychedelic yet comforting environment that the artist offered. I remember laying down on the beanbags surrounded by the video and sensing the subtle suggestion of sexuality in her work slipping into my mind. Everything in the space coalesces as a whole to create a relaxing space for the viewer to take in the artwork fully and with all of the senses.

The title *Rabbit Hole* references Lewis Carrol’s novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, originally published in 1865. In the novel, Alice chases a white rabbit and falls down the rabbit hole, where she then enters a state of ever-changing bodily dimensions and mental perceptions. Alice becomes confused with her identity and is stimulated to find herself in such a strange place. The white rabbit and rabbit hole in Alice’s wonderland symbolizes the curiosity that sparks Alice’s spiritual awakening. The rabbit hole signifies the locus, the environment, and the cause of Alice’s transformation.

In the installation, the audience enters the space through a white furry opening that references female genitals, generating curiosity and intrigue for the audience as the opening draws them in from the outside. This opening in the installation is at the same time the rabbit hole, putting the audience in Alice’s position. After entering, four video projections engulf the audience. The videos are arranged with the intention of creating a space where the audience is consumed by the artwork. In addition to the videos, there are rabbit dolls in the space, which are very similar to the hand-drawn rabbits in the videos, bring the characters out of the video and into the space with the viewers. The space is filled with pillows to allow the audience to get comfortable while viewing the artwork.

Through my artwork, I question traditional gender identities and present a space to awaken a new sense of possibility in our societal constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality. The work in fact creates a dialogue between my family’s conventional, binary view of gender and my own personal understanding of gender and sexuality as multiple open and ever-changing constructions. The work was for me an opportunity to connect my own experience with larger social issues through performance, celebration, play, and humor. As I work through my
past, the compulsory gender binary construction imposed by my family and society begins to morph into a future expression of all possibilities.
Bibliography


[2] Within linguistics, John L. Austin uses performativity to express the capacity of speech and communication to not only communicate but also to construct and perform an identity.


Rabbit Hole Installation View
Rabbit Hole Installation View