In tension

Alicia Ross

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in_tension

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ABSTRACT

The conceptual subject matter of in_tension falls between two major categories: the personification of two conflicting female roles (the need to be a nurturer and the longing to be an object of sexual desire) and the amalgamation of biological and societal foundations in which we see ourselves and others. These two major categories are more principally bound by the larger schema of relations between the sexes and the molding of our desires through social conventions. My artwork tends to explore the conflict many women encounter—including myself—of which roles they wish to partake and the friction between the voyeur or the exhibitionist, the mother or the mistress, the photographer or the subject. The juxtaposition between performance and voyeurism has always been prevalent throughout my work, between familiar templates and the content within them.

The friction of unresolved conflict can be found throughout the exhibition, from the Ishihara Test Series to the Sampler Series and Love Swing. Through the juxtaposing of various diverse elements, it is my intent to bring the viewer’s attention to a variety of female specific conflicts. The third-wave feminist notion of reclaiming power over cultural imperfections through mimicry and performance is a prevalent and hopefully successful strategy in my exhibition. It continues to influence my work. While it is never my intent to answer all the questions surrounding the themes of my artwork, it is my hope that my work sparks discussion that adds to a greater visual discourse.
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I would most like to thank my parents, who even though might not thoroughly understand my compulsion to make the type of artwork I do, have enabled me to pursue my studies at RIT through their financial and continual emotional support. I am forever grateful.

This body of work is dedicated to them.

Alicia Ross
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The conceptual subject matter of *in_tension* falls into two major categories: the personification of two seemingly conflicting female roles (the need to be a homemaker/domestic and the longing to be an object of sexual desire) and the amalgamation of biological and societal foundations in which we see ourselves and others. These two major categories are more principally bound by the larger schema of relations between the sexes and the molding of our desires through social conventions. My artwork tends to explore the conflict many women encounter—including myself—of which roles they wish to partake and the friction between the voyeur and the exhibitionist, the mother and the mistress, the photographer and the subject. The juxtaposition between performance and voyeurism has always been prevalent throughout my work, between familiar templates and the content within them. (figures 1, 2)

**Ishihara Test Series: Stills**

In the year 2000, I launched a personal website that showcased my artwork. At that time, my artwork was mainly composed of female nudes. Several of the figures I posted on my website were tied up with rope and seated in chairs. Naïvely, I was blind to the notion that some people, mainly men, would assume my intent was to titillate rather than invoke any kind of meditation. Rather, I had intended for my audience to see the bound figures as metaphor. In hindsight, however, I suspect my work was unconsciously shaped by our collective societal admiration of the sexy pop-icon. At the time, I became
disgruntled as I continuously received numerous emails from a global audience of men requesting that the figures be arranged in various positions and or costumes. The requests were exceptionally disconcerting as most of my work at that time consisted of self-portraiture. As a major component of my thesis, the images in the Ishihara Test Series are a reaction to a more sensational response to my previous work, as well as new exploration in design and content.

I was drawn to the notion of using color-blindness in my work because it was a visual deficiency prevalent to a specific gender: men. The reason I began veiling explicit images of women with the template of the color-blind test was two-fold: 1) to draw attention to the biology that determines the way we see the world (using color-blindness specifically because it showcases an example where men and women interpret the same image differently) and 2) the content that lies beneath the template exemplifies the societal forces that shape our ways of seeing—personal identity and how we see others.

While adult color-blindness is most prevalent in males, men and women are all born color-blind. It is not until the fourth month of life when the cones in our eyes develop that we can differentiate colors. Ironically, while females carry the colorblind gene, 5-8% of men are color-blind, whereas only 0.5% of women are affected. The largest percentage of men afflicted by color deficiency is composed of Caucasian males. Hue is confused by color-deficient people. Thus, if the hues that make up an image are the same value and saturation, there is no visual clue to distinguish them—this principle is the primary concept of the familiar Ishihara Color-blind Tests. The hues, as well as the combination of colors that comprise these images, were selected because of their difficulty to be differentiated by the color-blind. Low-saturation or muted colors of the
same value are the most challenging to discern. Combinations of colors that are particularly difficult to differentiate by the colorblind are: reds and browns, reds and red-oranges, saturated red and black, green and white, some shades of green and blue-green, turquoise (or aqua green) and browns. While I implemented a level of artistic license in some of my color choices, the majority of the colors in the Ishihara Test Series were based on the original Ishihara color plates. I made a concerted effort to make the series look as aesthetically credible as possible—often digitally desaturating the image to make sure the image was comprised of alike tonal values. The original concept for the Ishihara Test Series was to utilize the color-blind template as a way to address a section of my male audience that I believed to be misinterpreting my earlier artwork; thus, adding a new dimension to the imagery.

**The Evolution from Anonymous Figure to Celebrity**

The composition used in my first Ishihara Tests Series (figure 3) mimicked the original vision tests in that several of the women are bound to mimic the shape of numbers. In addition, they are composed of randomly placed circles and they appear circular in their overall composition. However, through the ongoing production of this series, the numerical reference to the original color-blind tests became obsolete as the imagery evolved into a metaphor for societal forces that have merged with our biological hardwiring to shape our “innate” sexual desires. The use of the template draws correlation to the foundations of biology that influence the way we see and the pornographic imagery addresses the societal influence popular culture has on forming
identities.

I use the word “innate” in quotations because with the saturation of popular culture from birth, it is almost impossible to discern what is humanly innate and what is a product of cultural influence or both. Developmental psychologist Erik Erickson believed it was not an even balance of biology and culture that shapes our personal identities, but rather that “…the severity of the identity crisis is largely dependent on cultural factors, not biological ones”—giving even greater heed to the content within visual culture. Decades later, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin concur in Remediation: Understanding New Media, “This is not to say that our identity if fully determined by media, but rather that we employ media as vehicles for defining both our personal and cultural histories.”

The central images of the Ishihara Test Series were photographed from Internet pornography websites—sites that were created solely to satisfy the desires of the modern web surfer. Suddenly, while scanning hundreds of pornographic websites in search of images to appropriate, the tables turned, and I found myself performing as the voyeur. These pornographic sites that my series appropriates specifically satisfies the newly construed “innate” desires of the modern web surfer because it portrays not only the female form, but further perpetuates the female form within conventions of which our society has defined as desirable—for instance, red lipstick, blush brushed cheeks and the stiletto heel. While the historical tradition of applying make-up might stem from biological motivation (for example: when we are sexually excited our lips and cheek engorge with blood making them red), we have embraced the painted lip and blushed cheek look as the cultural symbol for what is sexy. Perhaps even more interesting,
Internet pornography sites serve a purpose of fantasy fulfillment for men as well as women, but simultaneously create a detached view of how women really act and look—as well as men for that matter. The posed, plastic looking celebrity porn star portrayed in the *Ishihara Test Series* directly speaks to the idealization of the female form through pornography websites, as well as visual culture as a whole.

The specific *Ishihara Test* that bridges my work with anonymous porn stars to my work portraying celebrities is entitled *Shiva*. (figure 4) *Shiva* depicts a mound of women lying face down, spread eagle in a mountainous landscape. The heap of bodies is crowned with another naked woman who is grinning and looking at the camera. Her victorious posture, with her arched back and hands resting on her thighs, gives the viewer the impression that she is some sort of explorer who has just plunged her flag into unclaimed soil. This image was picked out from the surplus of pornographic images because of its blatant absurdity. Shiva (the destroyer) is the supreme god in the Hindu religion Shaivism. In sculpture and imagery, Shiva is recognizable by his multiple arms that are meant to signify his immortal power. The naming of the *Ishihara Test* Shiva was not only a reference to the overall aesthetic of the original image, but to solidify the idea of the porn star celebrity as an Internet “god.” Moreover, by drawing correlation between woman and the Hindu god Shiva, I am commenting on the stereotypical notion of women—armed with their sexual power—as the ‘destroyer of men’ and or “home wreckers.”

As I stated earlier, the portrayal of adult film stars was intended to exemplify the societal component in the merging of biological forces with our societal influences to shape our “innate” desires. By transitioning from anonymous adult performers to
celebrity porn stars (or celebrities who have crossed over to celebrity porn star) within the *Ishihara Test Series*, I felt it better represented popular culture’s evolving overall acceptance of the sex industry into society and how it has truly shapes what viewers find desirable and acceptable.

In his book *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire* (2002), Brian McNair notes “In the 1990s, even if it is not directly present in mainstream media pornography became a pop-cultural phenomenon.” As a multi-billion dollar a year industry (McNair says five-billion by the year 2005), it seems hardly irrelevant to our general interpretation of visual culture. Later in the same chapter, McNair goes on to coin the phrase “porno-chic” to categorize elements in our ‘strip-tease’ culture influenced by the porn industry—Madonna, “celebrity erotica,” Jeff Koons, whom he called “artistic porno-chic.” Moreover, I titled the individual *Ishihara Tests* by the first name of the celebrity porn star to further depict this notion of general societal acceptance.

My most recent *Ishihara Tests* incorporate screen-photographed celebrities in place of anonymous figure. The recognizable celebrity becomes the familiar icon replacing the numeral, but also visually symbolizes the sex industry’s influence paired with biological instincts to create society’s contemporary representation of beauty. By appropriating images of Jenna Jameson, “the world's most famous porn star,” and placing her image within the color-blind template, her image becomes less about the immediacy to sexual satisfaction and more about the biological foundations of the gaze. (figure 5)

My *Ishihara Tests* portraying celebrities alongside porn stars speak to the societal blurred line between celebrity, porn star and celebrity porn star, as well as the infiltration
of the “porn-chic” into our society. What Western society once thought of as taboo has become a large component in our ‘strip-tease’ culture. Porn stars like Jenna Jameson have “transcended the sex trade to become a bona fide celebrity, hounded by the tabloids and fervid fans.” In contrast, celebrities such as Paris Hilton, once simply known as a famous spoiled heiress/model, crossed the line from celebrity to celebrity porn star when videos of her having sex with her boyfriend leaked onto the Internet. Video stills from the film cleverly titled, 1 Night in Paris, are depicted in the Ishihara Test entitled Paris Video. (figure 13) Other celebrities included in the Ishihara Test Series that embody the blurred line between celebrity and celebrity porn star are Carmen Electra and Pamela Anderson. The simple first name titles of the Ishihara Tests Series not only give a clue to which icon lies beneath the holey mask, but implies a ‘first name relationship’ between the subject and viewer/voyeur and celebrity.

The Ishihara Test Series also blurs the line between “distasteful” pornographic nudes and “favorable” artistic nudes, ultimately blurring the line between art and pornography. With their contemporary, almost minimalist composition and somewhat uncomfortable imagery, the Ishihara Test Series embody an odd yet attractive union of art and pornography. In her book Sexual Personae, Camille Paglia states: “Pornography cannot be separated from art; the two interpenetrate each other, far more than humanistic criticism has admitted.” She further notes, “Pornography and art are inseparable, because there is voyeurism and voracity in all our sensations as seeing, feeling beings.” Perhaps art’s relationship with pornography is to make sense of our innate and very humanistic attraction to it and often simultaneous repulsion from it. Maybe art and pornography
create a perfect marriage because like art, pornography allows us to venture to the gray area between fantasy and reality and perform acts not tolerated in society.

I am of course not the first person who has appropriated pornography in order to draw out conclusions and/or discourse about societal views that surround pornography and thus our own individual sexual identities. On the contrary, I join a long list of artists—men and women alike—who have used pornographic imagery in their artwork in order to place their own critique upon it. In an article from *ArtForum* entitled *Pornography Again—Pornography and Mass Media* (1996) David Colman surmises,

“Art, of course, has long trafficked in what is unsanctioned by society at large. Pornography is no exception. Artists have appropriated porn imagery in work ranging from Richard Prince's mid-'80s "Entertainers," electric-colored photos of porn stars, to Sue Williams' blood-and-guts paintings of copulating couples, to the output of a host of lesser-known artists, including Tom Burr, Jeff Burton, and Aura Rosenberg.”16

Perhaps appropriated pornographic images are so widely used in artwork not only because of porn’s mass inclusion into the visual culture, but because it serves as a hyperbole for sexual infiltration as a whole.

While all appropriation is perpetuation to some degree, it does not mean that it cannot be a successful artistic tactic. Juxtaposing familiar imagery with altering and/or transforming elements draws insightful analysis upon the original content. It is my belief that the ideas and implemented tactics throughout the work in *in_tension* parallel that of many other third-wave feminists who “are defined not by common theoretical and
political standpoint(s), but rather by the use of performance, mimicry, and subversion as rhetorical strategies.”

In the book *Gender Communication: Theories and Analyses* Anne Scott Kroløkke and Charlotte Sørensen (2006) explain that the tactic of mimicry and appropriation “implies that women assume the feminine role, outlined for them, without being entirely engulfed by it, playing with it and thereby positioning themselves someplace else.... Women, then may use mimicry of patriarchal discourses as playful repetition for their own purposes.” Furthermore, gender theorist Judith Butler uses the example of the drag show as an example of mimicry in her book *Bodies that Matter*. McNair elaborates on the tactics of third-waves feminist artists (though he uses the phrase “Bad Girl” art—also the title of a major exhibition curated by Marcia Tucker) who use pornography as a critical tool,

“Where [Cindy] Sherman\textsuperscript{20} appears to be unambiguously critical of the objectification of women inherent to pornography, for example, the bad girls embrace porn as a tool for exploring the meaning of sexual representation and of female sexuality itself... They play with the idea of friction or performance as liberation from the stricter codes of feminism or gay rights—the body has become a strategy in its own right... Bad girls’ art, like porn for women, is embraced by its advocates as a sexually subversive tool—a means of overcoming stereotypical notions of femininity, from whichever source they spring. It only exists because feminism has produced the conditions which make it possible...”\textsuperscript{21}
Within the *Ishihara Test Series* as well as the *Sampler Series* (to be discussed in further detail), I am reclaiming control over what I see as the male-dominated arena of pornography by positioning a template that denies men (perhaps psychically, but more importantly metaphorically) from seeing female explicit images and by translating nude images of women into a genre primarily labeled as “women’s work”—embroidery. In the *Sampler Series*, embroidery elicits the stitches to operate in the same manner as the color-blind template. This strategy of reclaiming ownership of images that portray women by utilizing yet critiquing them is much like the reclaiming of derogatory names, which has been embraced by several feminist artists and groups such as *Bitch Magazine*. Even the word ‘feminist’ has been reclaimed as a positive label, rather than the “f-word” it was once thought as by some:

“In itself diverse and chaotic, third-wave feminism is consequently not one but many. The common denominator is the will to redefine feminism by bringing together an interest in traditional and even stereotypical feminine issues, while remaining critical of both narratives of true femaleness, of victimization and liberation. They flaunt their femininity and seek to reclaim formerly derogatory labels such as “slut” and “bitch,” while stubbornly venturing into male-dominated spaces with third-wave confidence to claim power.”

**Ishihara Test Series: Influences**

The *Ishihara Test Series* images are printed larger-than-life (54 x 80 inches) on commercial vinyl to echo the commodified polish of the original content, as well as refer to a pop/op aesthetic that places the work within a more art historical and commercial art
context. The remediation of original screen-based content from Internet sources is brought back to the printed surface, addressing the odd relationship between public and private viewership and the interactivity of the Internet. All of the still images within the entire Ishihara Test Series sport the screen texture from which they were photographed. The two-dimensional texture serves as a clue as to the original content from which they were appropriated.

The posterized look that the images tend to take after they are reduced down to color and void of harsh contrast begin to look much like the pop art of the 1960s. The influence of Warhol is obvious—bright, posterized color as well as the appropriation of celebrity icons. (figures 7, 8) While Warhol’s influence can be seen throughout the color schemes of the Ishihara Test Series, his influence is also apparent in layout. Design elements such as the repetitive grid prevalent in Warhol’s 16 Jackies (1964)\(^{24}\) (figure 6) can also be seen in my print entitled Paris Video. (figure 13) Like Warhol’s 16 Jackies, Paris Video depicts several classic expressions of the appropriated icon. Unlike Warhol’s piece, Paris Video also uses the grid to depict narrative—which in turn influenced my decision to bridge the Ishihara Tests into video.

German artist Thomas Ruff’s series entitled Nudes (2000) (figure 9) was of particular interest to me while I was creating my latest work. In Nudes he too gathers images from a plethora of Internet pornography sites. Once downloaded, Ruff begins the process to transform the images into a more universal art aesthetic by digitally manipulating them, clouding the line between formal figurative nudes and “distasteful” pornographic images. The final images that result from Ruff’s manipulation are abstract beauties that more closely resemble Gerhard Richter’s Ema (Nude on a Staircase)\(^{25}\) than
anything improper.

*Nudes* are not only pleasing to admire, they seemingly evoke a level of participation from the viewer through Ruff’s use of the blur. It was also my intent to solicit a level of involvement from my viewer in the *Ishihara Test Series* by placing an optical mask over appropriated material. The mask acts as a veil over the attractive figures, hopefully encouraging the viewer to look deeper for the image’s appealing content, while simultaneously spawning a dialogue over content and context. As a result, the optical facade of porous white layers employed in the *Ishihara Tests* function similarly as the blur in Thomas Ruff’s *Nudes*, by altering the original erotic content into a more universal art aesthetic, encouraging dialogue rather than disdain. Michel Houellebecq on Ruff’s work: “Viewers may appreciate the series for its beauty alone or, like participants in interactive virtual pornography, they may also use their imagination and recreate the fantasy in their mind.”26 Another critic suggests that Ruff “...went for the nastiness, but I think he is trying to explore something that’s out there and find a way to bring it back to us.”27

Jeff Koons is another contemporary artist who plays within the gray area between pornography and art with hopes of evoking dialogue among his audience with his *Made in Heaven* series of photographs, sculpture and paintings. In this work, Koons and his then-wife, Italian porn star Llona Staller are pictured having sexual encounters. (figure 11) In the *Jeff Koons Handbook* (1993) the artist says about the series: “My work has absolutely no vocabulary in isolation. It’s about using sexuality as a tool for communication.” According to Brian McNair, “*Made in Heaven* pioneered what would
become the ever more commonplace cultural flirtation with the form and the content of pornography.”

Perhaps more successfully than Ruff or Koons, Jeff Burton in his photographic series entitled Dreamland shows the viewer a new look at the industry that “manufactures desire” by artistically photographing porn sets. (figure 11) Burton’s images crop the larger pornographic scene into tight suggestive angles, depicting something new without showing us everything. A reviewer from Artfacts.net claims “In denying us access to the narrative, which is invariably played out beyond the image, Burton contrives, paradoxically, to show us more.” The reviewer defines “more” as “a language of looking while looking away.” He elaborates, “Little is left to the imagination, but nonetheless it is left. And significantly so, for like this, Burton coerces the viewer into picturing what lies beyond the frame by appropriating Hollywood fantasies.”

I believe that like Koons, I am using pornography as a vehicle to spawn a critical discourse. While Thomas Ruff, Jeff Koons and Jeff Burton’s attempts to show the viewer another side of the sex industry (by utilizing an art aesthetic in combination with appropriated pornography) have been widely accepted or at least widely discussed by art critics, I feel that with the use of the color-blind template and embroidery, I am, as a woman, appropriating pornography with a unique female perspective.

**Ishihara Test Series: Video**

Along with the Ishihara Test Series’ vinyl prints, in_tension showcases Ishihara video pieces that deal with much of the same subject matter and design as the still
images, but introduce movement into the color-blind template. Again, the footage has been downloaded from Internet sources and looped into short video loops. While some sequences show a struggling figure, others are veiled sex acts. The struggling figures within the short looping sequences express a tension between the figure and its context—just like the figures within the Sampler Series appear to struggle within a medium labeled as “woman’s work.” Once a veil over the male gaze, the template of the Ishihara Tests evolve into a more universal mask for the sexual act—paralleling dominant social attitudes towards sexuality.

Perhaps the figures in motion provide a level of tension lacking in the still Ishihara Tests because the moving figures translate as “more real.” The continuous video loop not only speaks to the repetition of intercourse and other sex acts, but the mechanical and continuous reproduction of fetishistic images on the Internet. Moreover, by using moving images in short repetitive form, I intend to draw analogous relationship between the immediacy of the artwork, and the immediacy of the World Wide Web through its offering of interactivity. Remediation: Understanding New Media, the authors point out that the Internet is even more of a danger to those who oppose graphic content because of its offering of interactivity.

“Computer applications are setting these erotic graphics and digitizing images in motion, with, as always, the promise of an interactivity not possible with linear video. As the computer offers greater visual immediacy it becomes a greater threat to those in our culture who fear erotic immediacy.”30
Sampler Series

In my most recent work entitled Sampler Series, I explore a new dichotomy omitted in the previous Ishihara Test Series. The Sampler Series brings to light a tension between two female roles: 1) the need to be a homemaker/domestic and 2) the need to be seen as an object of sexual desire. As in the Ishihara Test Series, the Sampler imagery also employs appropriated material from Internet sources. (figures 13-16)

Once downloaded from search engine results, the nude figure is isolated and lifted from its original setting. The image is then put through a digitizing software program that translates its pixels into cross-stitch. After additional manipulation in the digitalizing program the image file is saved to a disk, which is then utilized by a computerized embroidery machine. Using the sewing machine like a drawing instrument, I make choices as to where I want the stitches to lie—often eliminating stitches from areas or only permitting the machine to stitch the outline of a specific color.

The resulting aesthetic of the figure tends to look very digital in nature, often resembling the inner working of a computer or more specifically a motherboard—therefore, the body actually becomes the medium. I am reminded of the quote: “Donna Haraway’s influential cyborg is the body as remediated by various contemporary technologies of representation. Following Haraway, many others have shown how the body itself functions as a medium...”31 This digital aesthetic juxtaposed with the handmade associations of embroidery speaks to the joining together of human and machine—between intention and automation—in addition to unifying the friction between two conflicting roles in one piece of artwork. The finished Samplers look like precious handmade objects even though they are machine-stitched. The recessed shadowboxes, in
which the finished embroideries reside, add to the idea of the precious object and lend
themselves to the notion of specimen or the fragmented body—enticing the viewer to
look closer for the ‘larger picture.’ (figure 16)

Several writers have used embroidery and needle-point as metaphor for erotic
desires. Most notably, Nathaniel Hawthorne “portrays the needle as Hester’s alter ego, as
her temptation and salvation” in his celebrated novel The Scarlet Letter (1850). In a book
entitled Threading Time: A Cultural History of Threadwork (2001), Dolores Bausum
comments on Hawthorne’s use of the needle as metaphor.

“There is a wrestling match in progress... To keep her [Hester’s] eye constantly
on the firm, round needle plunging up and down through tiny holes separating the
fine threads in her hands, but never to think of the firm, round taper that once
penetrated her own body. Never to recall her joy in that one unguarded moment
of lawless passion.”

In the Scarlet Letter, the needle serves as a mediator between Hester’s denial and
her desire—the two marry in the very embroidered letter that she bears on her chest.
Likewise, in the Sampler Series the desire to be seen as an object of sexual desire
(represented by the appropriated content) fused with the medium of embroidery (which
symbolizes the wish to be a homemaker/domestic) embodies this female conflict.

After quoting passages from books by novelists Lawrence World and Ethan
Frome, who also use needle-point as metaphor, Bausum points out: “Despite the variance
in attention to needle and thread by the three authors, when closely examined, the novels
convey a sense of power in the hands of the woman with a needle or sewing machine...”
It is my intent that the translation of explicit images of woman into stitch which occurs in the *Sampler Series* shifts the power from the photographer to the female subject.

I call these new pieces *Samplers* in order to directly reference the historic act of embroidery that has traditionally been viewed as “woman’s work.” The word “sampler” comes from the Latin word “exemplum” which means ‘an example to be followed.’ The skills gained by sewing samplers taught women skills like darning and making clothes that they could use later in life when they most likely became wives and mothers. “A young woman's sampler was her mark on the world—the pinnacle work of her education.” The earliest embroidered cloth that happens to exhibit cross-stitch dates to the sixth or seventh centuries AD. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, samplers became increasingly more intricate including biblical verses, pictures and complex stitches. Figure 10 is an example of a traditional sampler that was stitched by twelve year old Caroline Turpin in 1821 (Ohio). Notice the repetition of the alphabet in order to gain aesthetic mastery, as well as her use of cross-stitch.

Perhaps the most unique feature of my *Samplers* are jump-stitches. (figure 15) They visually differentiate my work from traditional, hand-sewn samplers. Jump-stitches result when the embroidery machine moves from one section of a color to another. Typically, the supervising seamstress trims the jump-stitches from the finished needlework. However, in my *Samplers*, I have left the jump-stitches intact so that the figure appears to be struggling or bound by the thread and her body. (figure 17) Leaving the jump-stitches intact not only references the historic conflict with the medium of sewing because of its connotation as “woman’s work,” but embodies the friction I am
most interested in exploring—mother vs. mistress. Many of the downloaded images I chose to digitize into stitch were primarily selected because they lent themselves to the final aesthetic of a bound figure.

Within this series the clarity between which types of websites housed the original content has been erased. Though some of the figures were remediated from pornography sites, others were taken from sites that display famous works of art. While some of the appropriated women are anonymous porn stars, others are recognizable fashion models.

In the Sampler shown as figure 17, the original photograph from which it was remediated belongs to Edward Weston’s *Nude on Sand 228N* (1936). This iconic image, with its monochromatic palette and chiaroscuro, embody the quintessential fine art nude. Though regarded as fine art, this image, like the other appropriated figures, was downloaded from an online source. Again, by using female nudes from a variety of Internet sources—fine art, pornographic and fashion websites—I am contorting the line between the acceptable and the unacceptable, proposing that all nude imagery objectifies the female form. But, so what? Most art historians agree that Weston approached his female nudes with the same “eye” that he photographed the curves of a toilet (*Excusado*, 1925)\(^{38}\) and his nudes are *still* highly regarded as fine art worthy. But third-wave feminists have shown us that while objectification of the female form might always exist, we do not have to sit back and simply let it exist. We can use it as a tool through appropriation to combat the very notion of objectification and reclaim power over our bodies. Laura Mulvey in her book *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989) suggests:

> “Woman are constantly confronted with their own image in one way or another, but what they see bears little relation or relevance to their own unconscious.
fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires. They are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus. Women are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies. The time has come for us to take over the show and exhibit our own fears and desires.  

Love Swing

Love Swing (figure 18) is another piece included in in_tension that speaks to the “tension” between woman as homemaker/domestic and woman as object of sexual desire. The 82 inch high by 68 inch wide swing is covered in knitted yarn and fitted over a prefabricated sex-swing stand. The inner hanging swing has no prefabricated framework at its core, but was designed based on images of manufactured sex-swings. I chose a cream colored fiber to play off the idea of innocence with the immoral stigma of the sex industry. The color juxtaposed with the embellishing ribbons is reminiscent of a wedding motif. However, the way in which the ribbons are corseted up the swing’s legs speaks to sex play and attire linked with acts of bondage. The corseted look of the ribbons also resembles the bound ankles of a ballet dancer—suggesting that the sex act is similar to a dance between two partners. The hanging swing is slightly separated by clear thread that gives the impression of form that in turn alludes to the body.

Historically, swings in artwork have been associated with fertility because their movement mimics that of love-making. In a painting aptly titled The Swing by Jean-
Honore Fragonard (1767) (figure 24), a swing, with its backward and forward motion, enables romantic flirtation between a woman and her suitor. With every pass of the swing, the young lady gives a momentary glimpse to her admiring suitor.\(^{40}\)

Several famous works of art have been created around the idea of removing functionality from the domestic object. Perhaps the two most famous works that address this theme are Meret Oppenheim’s *Object (Le Dejeuner en Fourrure, Luncheon in Fur)* (1936) (figure 20) and Man Ray’s *The Gift* (1921) (figure 19). Oppenheim’s *Object*, created during the Surrealist movement, consists of an ordinary teacup and saucer that has been entirely covered by fur. The piece not only absurdly removes the functionality from the cup, but brilliantly incorporates eroticism into an otherwise ordinary object. The piece’s concave form and overt tactility symbolizes the female genitalia.\(^{41}\) Marcia Tucker cleverly comments on Oppenheim’s *Luncheon in Fur*, writing:

“Comically condenses the domestic, erotic and inspirational functions of the male Surrealist artist’s female consort into one convenient, simultaneously seductive and repellent household object. Properly used, it could render his need for an actual woman obsolete, thus freeing her to pursue her own projects, artistic or otherwise. At the same time—to a specifically female experience of erotic pleasure: the fur-lined vessel awaiting the lips, the tongue, the stirring of the spoon.”\(^{42}\)

Man Ray’s *The Gift* was created in Paris in 1921 during the Dada movement. Thirteen upholstery tacks are glued to the flat surface of a metal iron making it unable to be used for its intended purpose. The sharp projecting nails, alongside the smooth
v-shape of the iron create sexual overtones. In addition, it maintains the idea that ironing is “woman’s work” and construction is “man’s work.” Both Man Ray and Oppenheim rely on the unexpected juxtaposition of ordinary found objects. These two pieces successfully evoke unconscious and perhaps uncomfortable urges and metaphors.  

A more contemporary piece that is visually reminiscent of Man Ray’s The Gift transforms a house-hold object into something that could be mistaken for a weapon rather than food preparation utensils. Mona Hatoum created No Way II (1996) (figure 23) by taking a metal colander and spoon and plugging the original holes with nuts and bolts. While Hatoum’s intent primarily commented upon the trifles of war, this work spoke to me aesthetically in the way she artfully divorces the items from their original function and thus renders a new dialogue of social significance.  

During a recent trip to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C., I was introduced to the work of American born artist Dan Steinhilber. In Untitled (2002) (figure 22), Steinhilber takes the idea of removing functionality from a domestic object to a new level by using it as a sculptural medium. Untitled is a floor-to-ceiling sculptural installation entirely created by intertwining paper clad wire hangers. (figure 21) This monumental sculpture skillfully breathes new life into an otherwise everyday object.  

In Love Swing, I took a contradictory approach to the artists mentioned above by aiming to transform an uncommon apparatus into a more domestic-looking object. It is my goal to make an otherwise intimidating object more approachable, as well as create a new surrounding discourse. One way I aimed to evoke a new discourse was altering the tactility of the sex swing’s cold black metal by covering it in soft yarn. By changing the color from black to off-white, the swing becomes more neutral in tone and therefore more
inviting for closer examination. By juxtaposing two items from polar ends of the
spectrum: a pre-fabricated sex swing and hand-knitted yarn, my audience is forced to
consider the question: ‘why marry these two items?’ The idea of knitting a cozy over an
existing object playfully speaks to the stereotypical notion that women need to beautify
the home through home-made means—for example, the illusion to kitschy hand-made
tissue box cozies, crocheted potholders, etc. The male attraction to items that symbolize
motherly actions like knitting juxtaposed with items that represent resistance to social
norms (the sex swing) produce Oedipal implications. Laura Mulvey explores this concept
in cinema early in her book *Visual and Other Pleasures* in a section entitled, *The Western
and Oedipal Personifications* as well as later on in the section *Oedipus: The Core Story*.

“The tension between two points of attraction, the symbolic (social integration
and marriage) and nostalgic narcissism... Here two functions emerge, one
celebrating integration into society through marriage, the other celebrating
resistance to social demands and responsibilities, above all those marriage and
family, the sphere represented by woman.”45

Perhaps the most successful element of *Love Swing* is its ability to speak about the
body while lacking a visual body. The process of knitting functions similarly as
embroidery does in the *Sampler Series*. By knitting something that could possibly be used
by men to constrict women—including myself—we regain control by constructing it out
of something less threatening. *Love Swing* employs the limiting notion that knitting is
“woman’s work” as a way to cleverly combat the constrictions of men.
The title of my thesis exhibition, *in_tension*, is a linguistic pun. The graphic appearance of “in” and “tension” functions on multiple conceptual levels. The pun that occurs with the combination of two words embodies the tensions within the various pieces. Furthermore, the underscore in the title highlights the ambiguous space between two determining actions, but also alludes to the original context of the appropriated imagery, my intention of remediation and discourse, the tension between form and appearance, high and low art, and public vs. private viewership.

The friction of unresolved conflict can be found throughout the exhibition, from the *Ishihara Test Series* to the *Sampler Series* and *Love Swing*. Through the juxtaposition of various diverse elements, it is my intent to bring the viewer’s attention to a variety of female-specific conflicts. The third-wave feminist notion of reclaiming power over cultural imperfections through mimicry and performance is a prevalent and hopefully successful strategy in *in_tension*. It continues to influence my work. While it is never my intent to answer all the questions surrounding the themes of my artwork, it is my hope that my work sparks discussion that adds to a greater visual discourse.

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2 Ishihara Tests are made up of randomly placed circles so that the viewer cannot rely on outlines to assimilate an image.
3 Erik Erikson, the psychologist who coined the term identity crisis, believes that the identity crisis is the most important conflict human beings encounter when they go through eight developmental stages in life. The identity is “a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image.” (Erikson, 1970.)
9 McNair, 39.
10 McNair, 64.
12 McNair, 61.
13 McNair, 88.
14 Miller, 1.

Marcia Tucker (April 11, 1940 to October 17, 2006) was the founding director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art from 1977 to 1999, a museum located in New York City dedicated to innovative art and artistic practice.

Cindy Sherman (born Glen Ridge, New Jersey January 19, 1954) is an American photographer and film director known for her conceptual self portraits. Sherman currently works in New York.

McNair, 200.

*Bitch Magazine* is a nonprofit, independent, quarterly magazine published in Oakland, California that bills itself as a "Feminist response to pop culture". Articles offer a feminist perspective on current political events; reviews of television shows, movies, books, and art from a feminist perspective; and interviews with all people from all walks of life.

23 Kroløkke and Sørensen, 17.
25 Gerhard Richter, Emo (Nude on a Staircase), 1966.
28 McNair, 65.
33 Bausum, 127.
35 Mattox, 1.
36 Mattox, 1.
37 Turpin, Caroline. *Untitled (Sampler)*, 15 x 16 in., 1821. Promont House Museum, Milford, Ohio. URL: http://home.fuse.net/promonthouse/turpin.html


45 Mulvey, 34.
Alicia Ross
*in_tension*, gallery entrance installation shot
Rochester Institute of Technology, SPAS Gallery, December 7-20, 2006
(figure 1)

Alicia Ross
*in_tension*, gallery installation shot
Rochester Institute of Technology, SPAS Gallery, December 7-20, 2006
(figure 2)
Alicia Ross, #2, *Ishihara Test Series I*, 20 x 30 inch, c-print, 2004, (figure 3)

Alicia Ross, *Shiva, Ishihara Test Series II*, 54 x 80 inch, inkjet on vinyl, 2006, (figure 4)
Alicia Ross
*Jenna #1, Ishihara Test Series II*, 54 x 80 in, inkjet on vinyl, 2006
(figure 5)

Andy Warhol, *16 Jackies*
acrylic, enamel on canvas
1964
(figure 6)

Portfolio of ten screenprints on paper,
h: 36 x w: 36 in / h: 91.4 x w: 91.4 cm
(figure 7)

Andy Warhol, *Liz Taylor*, 1964
Offset lithograph on paper,
h: 23.1 x w: 23.1 in / h: 58.7 x w: 58.7 cm
(figure 8)
Thomas Ruff, Images from *Nudes*, 2000, (figure 9)

Caroline Turpin
14 x 15 inches
1821, Ohio, (figure 10)

Jeff Koons, Images from *Made in Heaven Series*, 1989 (figure 11)

Jeff Burton, images from *Dreamland*, 2005 (figure 12)
Alicia Ross
*Paris Video (detail below)*
*Ishihara Test Series I*
54 x 80 inch inkjet on vinyl
2006
(figure 13)
Sampler, 16x20 in cross-stitch
2006
(figure 14)

Sampler (detail), 16x20 in cross-stitch
2006
(figure 15)

Sampler Series, installation shot,
2006
(figure 16)

Sampler, 11x14 in cross-stitch
2006
(figure 17)
Alicia Ross. *Love Swing*. 82 in tall x 68 in wide, yarn, ribbon, nylon, metal, thread, perfume, 2006, (figure 18)
Clockwise:

+ Man Ray, *The Gift*, 1921
+ Meret Oppenheim, *Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure/ Luncheon in Fur)*, 1936
+ Dan Steinhilber, *Untitled (detail)*, 2002

+ Dan Steinhilber, *Untitled*, 2002
+ Mona Hatoum, *No Way II*, 1996
+ Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767
(figures 19-24)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


IMAGE SOURCES


Meret Oppenheim. *Object*. Paris 1936. Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon, cup 4 3/8" (10.9 cm) in diameter; saucer 9 3/8" (23.7 cm) in diameter; spoon 8" (20.2 cm) long, overall height 2 7/8" (7.3 cm). Moma.org. URL: http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=80997


Turpin, Caroline. *Untitled (Sampler)*, 15 x 16 in., 1821. Promont House Museum, Milford, Ohio. URL: http://home.fuse.net/promonthouse/turpin.html
