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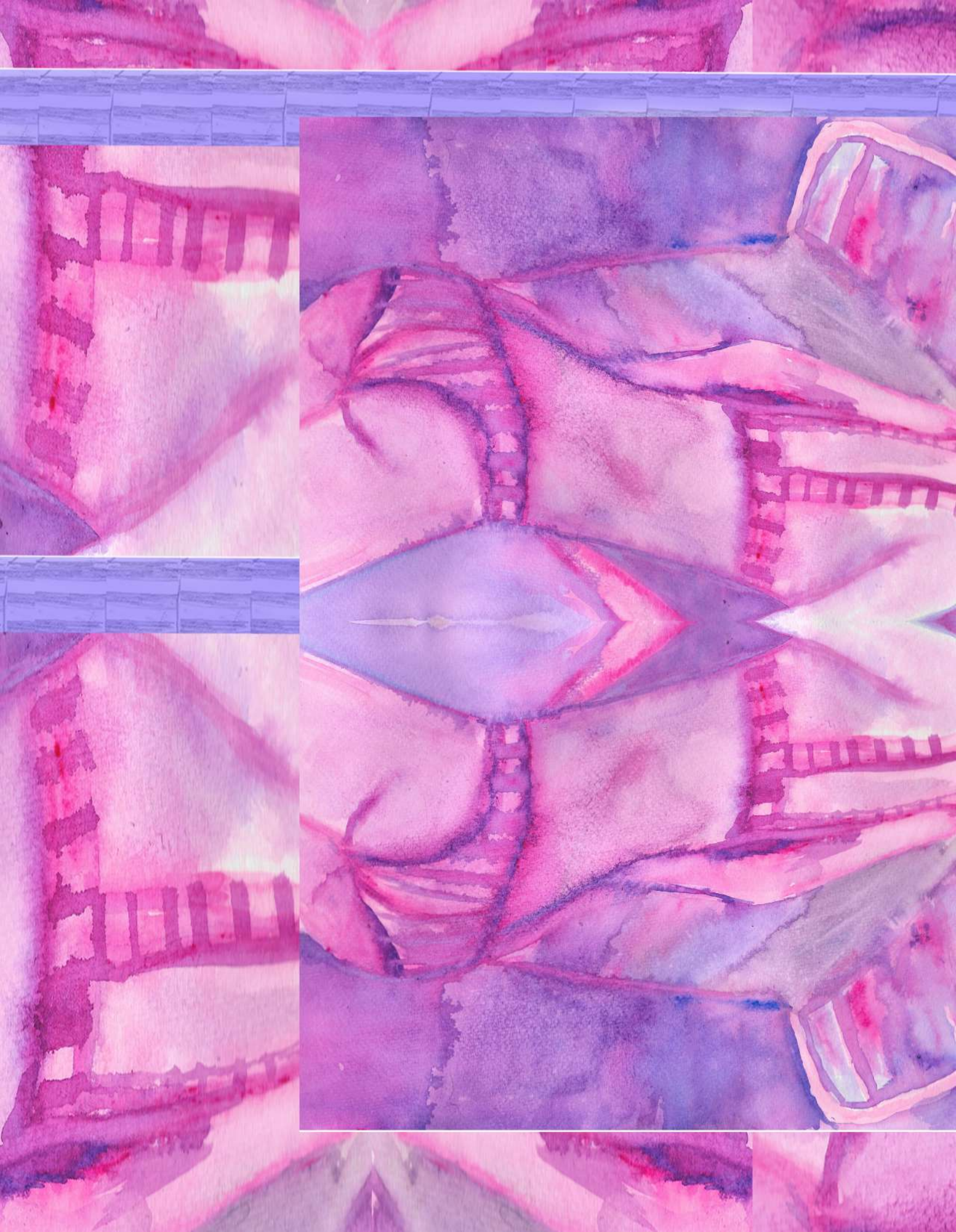
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EX OVO OMNIA



So, to recap: Sourmelina Zizmo (née Papadiamandopoulos) wasn't only my first cousin twice removed. She was also my grandmother. My father was his own mother's (and father's) nephew. In addition to being my grandparents, Desdemona and Lefty were my great-aunt and -uncle. My parents would be my second cousins once removed and Chapter Eleven would be my third cousin as well as my brother. The Stephanides family tree, diagrammed in Dr. Luce's "Autosomal Transmission of Recessive Traits," goes into more detail than I think you would care to know about. I've concentrated only on the gene's last few transmissions. And now we're almost there. In honor of Miss Barrie, my eighth-grade Latin teacher, I'd like to call attention to the quotation above: *ex ovo omnia*. Getting to my feet (as we did whenever Miss Barrie entered the room), I hear her ask, "Infants? Can any of you translate this little snippet and give its provenance?"

I raise my hand.

"Calliope, our muse, will start us off."

"It's from Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. The story of creation."

"Stunning. And can you render it into English for us?"

"Everything comes out of an egg."

"Did you hear that, infants? This classroom, your bright faces, even dear old Cicero on my desk—they all came out of an egg!"



Among the arcana Dr. Philobosian imparted to the dinner table over the years (aside from the

MIDDLESE

The Preformationists, with their roller-coaster names—Spallazani, Swammerdam, Leeuwenhoek—believed that all of humankind had existed in miniature since Creation, in either the semen of Adam or the ovary of Eve, each person tucked inside the next like a Russian nesting doll. It all started when Jan Swammerdam used a scalpel to peel away the outer layers of a certain insect. What kind? Well . . . a member of the phylum Arthropoda. Latin name? Okay, then: *Bombyx mori*. The insect Swammerdam used in his experiments back in 1669 was nothing other than a silkworm. Before an audience of intellectuals, Swammerdam cut away the skin of the silkworm to reveal what appeared to be a tiny model of the future moth inside, from proboscis to antennae to folded wings. The theory of Preformation was born.

In the same way, I like to imagine my brother and me, floating together since the world's beginning on our raft of eggs. Each inside a transparent membrane, each slotted for his or her (in my case both) hour of birth. There's Chapter Eleven, always so pasty, and bald by the age of twenty-three, so that he makes a perfect homunculus. His pronounced cranium indicates his future deftness with mathematics and mechanical things. His unhealthy pallor suggests his coming Crohn's disease. Right next to him, there's me, his sometime sister, my face already a conundrum, flashing like a lenticular decal between two images: the dark-eyed, pretty little girl I used to be; and the severe, aquiline-nosed, Roman-coinish person I am today. And so we drifted, the two of us, since the world began, awaiting our cues and observing the passing show.

For instance: Milton Stephanides graduating from Annapolis in 1949. His white hat flying up into the air. He and Tessie were stationed at Pearl Harbor, where they lived in austere marital







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x locations throughout Michigan,
Ohio, and southeastern Florida—each restaurant identified by the distinctive "Pillars of Hercules"
out front—could be said to have begun on the snowy February morning in 1956 when my father
arrived at the Zebra Room to begin renovations. The first thing he did was to remove the sagging
venetian blinds from the front windows to let in more light. He painted the interior a bright white.
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Some of my
thoughts
on color
+
process



The next morning I return to the studio and embed thin layers of transparent red pigment into the brilliant white gessoed ground of a large canvas. From this ground I push and rub other transparent paint into the surface of the painting, building luminosity into the surface of the painting. The transparent red ground fills my studio with pink light. On top of this ground I lay down a chromatic gray that stacks on top of the red, the combination makes the Grey read as a vibrating muted green. While yesterday's preparatory work for this large painting was thoughtful and deliberate, this stage of the painting is direct and urgent. At this early stage of the painting, I can usually tell if it will hold up as both an image and as a painting, or if it has lost the freshness and immediacy of the initial drawings and needs to be abandoned. This painting stands a chance; It breathes, is open and receptive. I make a series of intuitive decisions-- trusting myself as a maker. I stroke, rub, and caress the surface, sometimes losing myself in repetitious, vibratory touch-- allowing the exchange of pleasure to take place between several forms and layers of the painting.

The hours pass without me realizing. Paintings are magical. They are simultaneously real physical objects and illusionistic fantasies full of sensual experiences of making and viewing. Structures and surfaces that are touched and manipulated in the "real" physical world are covered with rarified pigments that are collected from the earth and, through an alchemical process, this muck is transformed into luminescent, chromatic goop (oil paint). As the hours pass, I continue applying this chromatic goop to the surface of the painting. In my hands, the goop is layered, slathered, and manipulated into a chromatically intense, pictorially believable image. If I mishandle or overwork the painting it transforms back into muck. Making a painting is a slippery process of handling pigments in an attempt to get the right amount of mud and chromatic intensity to exist together before the mud overtakes the intensity leaving me with a greenish-gray pool of goop. I wince at the painting turned around in the timeout corner of my studio. It got away from me; within a couple of minutes, I came to, standing in a pool of mineral spirits and muddy paint, having wiped away a week's worth of work. In a lecture at the Whitney Museum, Amy Sillman talks about the materiality of color and the frustration and joy of trying to make sense of this goop:

Color is even harder to negotiate. You embrace the vicissitudes of this toxic, expensive, and unpredictable substance, while trying to keep it looking "fresh", maintaining the illusion that it is effortless. When they talk about color as decorative, I just don't know what the FUCK they are talking about! Try mixing oil paint. Ninety five percent of the time it's just hideous. Those shimmering colors from the paint store turn immediately into pasty slop buckets of sickening green or hemorrhage brown. This is where the fetishism goes horribly wrong. (Sillman)







Connoisseurs of Sight:

A conversation between Orlando/Woolf and Parker Tyler

I have set up an imaginary scenario in which the authors of two influential texts participate in a conversation about my paintings. In this fantastical scenario, I imagine my two muses, Parker Tyler, as he exists in his essay titled "The Erotic Spectator: an Essay on the Eye of the Libido" and a character I call Orlando/Woolf, who is a hybrid of the character Orlando and the voice of the narrator from Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography*. Both texts deal with fluidity and perception-- boundaries are permeable, offering an alternative way of maneuvering through the world as a maker and a consumer of information. As boundaries blur, sensory information is turned on and senses start to misregister. In "The Erotic Spectator", Tyler allows associations to grow and shift fluidly over time and across hierarchical boundaries. For Tyler, the accumulation of everyday experiences builds a sophisticated perceptual skill set that he offers to his audience as an alternate (and empowering) mode of perception. In *Orlando*, the main character Orlando moves fluidly through various times, genders, and locations without warning or justification. As readers we are made aware that Woolf is the architect of Orlando's every move and, like Tyler, she never feels the need to rationalize a decision to violate an artificial boundary. In my imaginary scenario, I envision Tyler and Orlando/Woolf standing in a room filled with my paintings and participating in a collaborative effort as connoisseurs of perception.

In "The Erotic Spectator" Tyler describes a process of experience, primarily through sight that connects to: what and how I make, the narrative within my paintings, and the experience of looking at my work. Tyler describes being "a spectator of life as if life were a work of art" (Tyler 75). As an erotic spectator, Tyler describes how life experiences fluidly coalesce into works of art and art de-coalesces into reality (Tyler 76). Making a painting is an attempt to hold and make static ever-shifting, quotidian experiences. On the surface these moments seem mundane and repetitive, but are, in fact, the origin of the awe inspiring or the climactic. I attempt to demarcate the slippery moments of life in an equally slippery and volatile medium before it slides off of the surface of the canvas back into a pool of pigment, or the immediacy of the moment I am trying to translate onto a surface has shifted. Rather than try to use painting as a way of illustrating pictorially the complexity of everyday lived experiences, I allow the surface of the painting to be a site for lived experiences to coalesce in a much more temporal way.

Tyler advocates for a type of perception-- "eyeless sight involves vision by means of other organs than the eyes, even by the pores of the skin" (Tyler 75). Tyler describes moving fluidly through the world, allowing his senses to guide him. As an erotic spectator he lets formal connections between objects lead to new conceptual connections. He makes these new connections between the ubiquitous objects he comes in contact with through a broad range of lived experiences. Overtime he imbues everyday objects with a range of social, historical, and cultural meaning. He allows cultural hierarchies to melt away, trusting the perceptual connections that he makes. Tyler claims that "imagination may be called the abstract, all knowing organ of vision...and that most people see with the eye of the dictionary rather than the physical eye"(Tyler 76). "The Erotic Spectator" serves as a how-to guide to become one's own own erotic spectator, and in turn, an erotic creator-- it grants the reader power as a participatory agent and consumer of perceptual information, suggesting a collaborative relationship between maker, object, and audience.

The second participant in my imagined conversation is Orlando/Woolf. Virginia Woolf, as writer and narrator of *Orlando*, is an erotic maker. She gives herself the freedom to transition Orlando through time, place, gender, and orientation, not feeling the need to presuppose a decision with a clearly stated logic or reason. Throughout the novel Orlando pops, or is plopped, down in different times and spaces because, to the narrator, these things are malleable and lack fixed boundaries. As readers, we believe that Orlando exists simultaneously at all of these points in time. Without warning, a new storyline begins and rather than believing that the previous version of Orlando ceases to exist, I imagine each iteration of Orlando to continue in parallel existence. Woolf inserts known historical characters into the novel that serve as points of reference, blurring boundaries of reality and fiction. As readers, we are reminded throughout the story that although Orlando is the focus of action, his/her desires are never fully realized and the narrator (Woolf) is ultimately the one with agency.

The way that Woolf interacts with and relates to Orlando is similar to the way that I engage with the characters in my paintings. As their creator, it is important for me to consider the agency of the figures that I paint, particularly the agency of the women. In earlier paintings, the figures were all depicted with their backs facing the viewer. Over time, the figures have turned forward, confronting the viewer. They are strong and confident. The female forms used to be radially symmetrical and were so stylized that they became clichéd vessel-like forms. The current figures, while still reduced, have an observed specificity of form, making them read less as universal stand-ins for a body and more as unique specific bodies. The figures engage in consensual, pleasurable behavior and are not hiding from the viewer, but, ultimately, I am the one in control of their fate. I have ultimate agency. I am the one that experiences release and sensory pleasure in making and viewing a painting.

During the course of my imaginary conversation that took place between Orlando/Woolf and Parker Tyler they came up with a long list of descriptive words to describe my work. From this list, I extrapolated from it a few fundamental themes that run through my paintings: desire and sensation, misregistration, and the everyday.

Rather than the paintings describing the climactic fulfillment of desire and touch, they point to the inability to fully realize desire. This unfulfilled desire operates in several modes within the paintings. The couples in the paintings are never shown during a moment of contact and instead the moments leading up to, or just after consensual contact are depicted. The presence of a third figure, a dog, who is witness to the couple's private action is another carrier of unfulfilled desire in the narrative of the paintings. This dog lingers just outside of the picture plane, but its shadow projects into the private space of the couple. It feels a level of interaction in the intimate moment between the couple but, as a shadow figure; full participation is a fantasy, leaving the third presence with unfulfilled desires. The interaction of the third figure then implicates the viewer as complicit in witnessing the action between the couple and points to the viewer's inability to fully participate. Lastly my own desires as a maker are frequently undermined in my seemingly futile attempts to try and make something fleeting into a static object.

My paintings deal with misregistration of senses and desires, shapes and forms, and point of view. In viewing a painting sense of sight is heightened while touch is denied, leading to a synesthetic desire to confirm a tactile experience through vision. Shapes, forms, and colors misregister, rubbing up against each other in ways that are slightly off and create a sense of visual tension or vibration. One form appears static but then begins to slide off of the surface or transforms from body to landscape to abstraction and back again. The paintings give the viewer a feeling of misunderstanding or a sense of confusion of point of view. The viewer asks questions of who is doing what to whom and from what angle. A painting may at first appear to have a static point of view, but time spent with the painting reveals a multiplicity of reads. Embedded forms that play hide and seek start to reveal themselves and spaces flip between interior/ exterior.

The people, objects and situations that stimulate my senses and my imagination are ordinary. Rather than anticipating the results of a painting with a theoretical framework, I allow embodied experience to guide me -- I allow inclinations that excite and embarrass me to be a guiding force in the work. I spent the majority of my time in graduate school trying to avoid developing language to describe intuition, instead relying on "the eye of the dictionary". Defining the ineffable in words takes a level of sophistication and intelligence that is developed obliquely overtime, requiring a synthesis of embodied experience and knowledge into a clear and direct vocabulary. In my struggles to avoid developing the language of the intuitive I either tried to make work that illustrated a particular theoretical framework, or I tried to justify intuitive work by talking about it in terms of some text that I had just read that had nothing to do with what the work was actually doing. I came to a place where I had to reconsider the hierarchy of intellect that I had constructed in which illustrating knowledge through a highly theoretical use of written, spoken, and visual language was somehow more valuable than a display of embodied knowledge. I reached a moment of renegotiation with myself-- a type of "failure of objectification" of the self.

From this renegotiation I made a decision to listen to my erotic spectator. I trust that the many thousands of pages of text I have consumed over the past few years and the endless images I actively and passively consume, coalesce into paintings. I, like Tyler, found that this wealth of embodied intelligence had been built over time. I listen closely to what the work is saying and allow the boundaries that separate life and studio, real and fantasy, to blur, sometimes turning into an indiscernible mess that I later have to sort through or scrap altogether. The most honest and the most feminist position I can take is to allow myself to move through life as an erotic spectator and an erotic maker.





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