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(UN)BOUND: DISRUPTING NOTIONS

By

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B.F.A, Herron School of Art, IUPUI 2014

A Thesis

Submitted to the faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

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in Studio Art and Design

Department of Fine Arts

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2019

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ABSTRACT

(UN)BOUND: DISRUPTING NOTIONS

Reid Broadstreet

March 28, 2019

(un) bound: disrupting notions is a selection of art work that explores gender identity through the act of interpellation and the semiotics of clothing. The project aims to clearly define how concepts of “gender” and “sex” function in our language and, in turn, how the binary terms of these concepts (man/woman; male/female) enforce our genders rather than express them. Clothing is a particularly productive form for this investigation because clothing is often the way we express our gender, and yet it is also often produced for us along strict, socially-prescribed gender lines. Typically, conversations around gender are very black and white—they follow this strict social prescription—and turn on the definition of sex. I use bi-sexed garments to inform my viewer and open communication about the forgotten individuals that do not fall into a socially constructed norm.

In this thesis and in my work, I educate people on gender, sex, social constructs, the performativity of gender, and the correct way that we should understand ourselves: that gender exists on a spectrum. In order for a stronger universal vernacular, we must first deconstruct the language that is formed by

interpellation done through the theory of semiotics. By releasing the garments in my work from their functional state I restart this conversation. By reconstructing the garments into new forms or 'paintings', I am creating new dialogues. These fabric paintings allow me to use the current binary vernacular and adjust it in a way that helps explore how gender is fluid.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We construct, and are forced into, many stereotypes in our lifetime. Mainstream society has created specific categories for each of us based on skin tone, ethnicity, social class, or sex, as well as many others. This act of labeling is done through the judgment or the need to organize these individuals by people outside of their group, who have an upper hand or sense of power: a patriarchal system. The resulting labels cause unnecessary stress on the majority of individuals who do not fit into the roles allocated by the patriarchal system. This act of labeling hinders individuals from championing the world at their own leisure. One stereotype that begins to defy specific patterns of this practice is known as gender.

Societal and culturally constructed gender categorizing has the ability to misidentify and devalue those who do not adhere to the predominant, cis gendered, patriarchal and heterosexual norm. To truly understand this form of invisible stereotyping we must also comprehend that gender is a socially constructed binary. This standard is taught unknowingly to us as early as birth in Western society. The so called “normal” system fits for a person that identifies as a gender that is related to their birth sex, lives a heterosexual lifestyle, and is male. It is very exclusionary, because there is a need for humans to want control

other humans. We see this in multiple cultures throughout the world, through hierarchies, monarchies, concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, and even in democracies. Hierarchical social structures are formed by groups based off stereotypes. Everything that does not match into any of those groups become the other, a negative thing, which is outside and put below the norm. To see why this effects humanity in a negative way we have to see how this standard way of thinking is hindering people.

To further our understanding of gender, can we find a path to combat this system? We currently define gender through a binary system, masculine and feminine. However, gender is a spectrum that we are only able to talk about through this binary system, which has been established through a heteronormative majority throughout history giving white males dominance. Through these structures we misinterpret gender and often confuse it with biological sex, however, gender is nuanced and goes beyond assigned sex. Gender fluidity is seen in the everyday, but because of the lack of language around this subject we equate masculinity as male and femininity as female.

These concepts are most visible in the world of readymade fashion, where a majority of designers prescribe to this fixed system. The binary can be seen through the use of different sizes, shapes, patterns, types of fabric, etcetera. Some examples of those characteristics are lace dresses allocated toward females, while pinstripe suits are for males because they are typically worn by those sexes. Through this fusing of gender and sex in fashion causes misinterpretations of gender placed on garments causing the assignment of sex

onto inanimate objects. By purchasing, putting on, and wearing socially conventional clothes, we adhere to this construct, in fact we perpetuate it through the act of a daily performance. When deconstructing these sexed garments and reconstructing them into a new formation, I allow a discussion that opens up the ideas of this ambiguous fluidity. This deconstruction suggests that a new language needs to be created, one that is understanding of the complexities and nuances of gender

CHAPTER 2

SEMIOTICS

Semiotics and Semiology are two theories based in the consumption of the meaning of signs. As Sean Hall says in *This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics* a sign, also known as a referent, is “a mark having a conventional meaning to represent a complex notion.”¹ A sign can be many things from a word typed or written out, an image, a shape, or anything else that represents an expression toward its referent. Charles Sanders Peirce created semiotics which is a field of study based on the in-depth analysis of what signs do for language. Ferdinand Saussure's term, semiology, was a focus of principles between the reference (the signified) and the substance of meaning (the signifier). Even though these two terms can be differentiated, the meanings of signs are often referred to as semiotics. I will also do this to allow for less confusion between the two terms, semiotics and semiology, when exploring their uses in the context of gender and my own work.

Semiotics is the study of signs and their meaning. It is how we analyze them and obtain meaning about a subject. Through that understanding we then

¹ Hall, Sean. 2007. *This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics*. London: L. King Pub.

compute a cultural interpretation about that sign. This system of layered recognition is a process that we use on a daily basis to interpret and analyze how we see, and understand our surroundings. These theories are based around a visual language that we then attach a vernacular to, to communicate the meanings to another person.

The first thing that we do when we encounter a sign is obtain its signifier. We hear or see a signifier; a sign's actual form. This can be visualized in many ways: a printed word, a sound, an image, a facial expression, a painting of a pipe, etcetera. When we encounter a signifier the response that we have to it is because of the signified. The signified is the concept or object that is represented, as stop signs signify the command to stop to prevent you and your vehicle from possible harm. Sign pairs also occur in relation to gender, for example, when you see a suit you think of a male, and when you see a dress you think of a female.

Hall says that "Signs are amazingly diverse. They include gestures, facial expressions, speech disorders, slogans, graffiti, commercials, medical symptoms, marketing, music, body language, drawings, paintings, poetry, design, film, Morse code, clothes, food, rituals and primitive symbols—these are just some of the many things that fall within the subject of semiotics."²

² Hall, Sean. 2007. *This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics*. London: L. King Pub. 5

The way in which we view the world is through signs. Pierce explained signs to us in three ways to understand the different facets of what they can do within language.³ The categorical ways Pierce splits up the functions of signs to its referent are icons, indexes, and symbols.⁴ The first category of a sign, an icon, is a resemblance to the referent through representation. We can think of this in terms of photography: when looking at a photograph of a tree, the tree itself is the referent. The actual photograph then is the icon, because the picture is of a tree and we have that piece of paper in our hand. When we hold the photograph, we are not holding an actual tree; we are holding an icon or representation of the tree. It resembles the tree but it is not actually a tree.

The next category of a sign is an index. An index has no resemblance to the referent but can be represented by something else to make you think of the referent. An example of this could be seeing black smoke in the distance. Seeing the smoke is a stimulus, which makes us assume something else is happening. There must be all that smoke because there is a fire. All we can see is smoke, which is an icon of smoke, but it also indicates that that something is on fire. That indication to a fire is this type of sign named index.

The last category of a sign is a symbol. It doesn't have a resemblance between the signified and the signifier, but there is a connection that is culturally

³ Hall, Sean. 2007. *This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics*. London: L. King Pub.

⁴ Hall, Sean. 2007. *This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics*. London: L. King Pub.

learned. If we look at the American flag, we see an example of this term. A flag is made of three colors, red, white, blue, and different shapes. However, when an American sees that flag, they may be aware of its symbolism; the thirteen stripes stand for the original thirteen colonies and the stars represent the states. Others without this understanding may not see the symbolism in the flag, because they have a different relationship with the flag. Those colors and shapes on the flags of other countries do not necessarily mean the same thing. However, in the connection between those shapes, colors, and composition of the specific flag (the American flag) gives all those symbols of the flag meaning.

In the same way we put together words, colors, and shapes to carry a specific meaning (i.e. American flag, stop signs, etcetera) we also apply the systems of semiotics to gender. Through similar categorizations or visual elements combined with cultural values, we can analyze our own concepts of gender and identity through the lenses of semiotics. While we all partake in semiotic systems, acknowledging their existence enables us to better engage in thoughtful criticism of the determinants of the signs we encounter, and how we experience them

CHAPTER 3

GENDER AND SEX

Whether we do so consciously or unconsciously, we judge individuals based on how they look. Two of the major factors in how people identify you are by your prescribed gender and sex. The differences between these two concepts are commonly misunderstood and used as synonyms. However, that is not the case. We can see the differences in these two things when examining ideas of gender identity and gender roles. The reason that this occurs is due to the confusion between what descriptors such as the words male, man, and masculine mean. The three concepts have to do with the same subject area but are terms for different aspects of a whole concept within a semiotic. In understanding what these three terms mean, we will be able to decipher how we truly represent someone that falls into gendered identification. To understand these terms, we need to look at the difference between gender and sex.

Butler says” Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly

fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex.”⁵

Sex is “the sum of the structural, functional, and behavioral characteristics of organisms that are involved in reproduction marked by the union of gametes and that distinguish males and females”⁶. This is a biological entity where chromosomes shape the person that you are and reflects completely physically via the genitalia you are born with. It plays no role in psychological or mental aspects of personality or identity. In the discourse of human sexuality this is known as gender identity and relates to the terms male and female.

Gender is “the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex.”⁷ Typically known terms that we relate to this concept are “masculine” and “feminine”. The words “man” and “woman,” which are typically associated with sex are actually terms for gender as well. “Male” and “female” are used for scientific terminology, whereas masculine, man, feminine, and woman are all identifiers of gender identity, but known as gender roles.

The confusion between sex and gender is made worse by semantics. When we talk about sex, male and female, with words such as gender it

⁵ Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

⁷“gender” *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com> (20 March 2019).

becomes apparent that our limited vernacular is setting us up for failure to communicate correctly. According to *Human Sexuality*, “gender identity” and its relationship to biological sex; and “gender roles” relationship to gender is confusing. “Gender identity” is “the sex (male or female) that a person identifies himself or herself to be.”⁸ “Gender roles” are “a set of behaviors, attitudes, and emotions that are generally socially expected for men and women in a given culture.”⁹ Based on the definitions of gender and sex terms like ‘gender identity’ and ‘gender roles’ become confusing.

Shouldn’t we say ‘sex identity?’ Identity is the formation of how a person defines themselves. In terms of sex we still define ourselves with the binary, male or female. If gender is the “multiple interpretations of sex” shouldn’t your sex clearly have a term allocated for it and not just one in the ballpark that lumps all them together.

Then ‘gender identity’ becomes a term associated not to sex but to your personality traits. In current terms of gender identity, we are talking about the sex that a person identifies, non-biologically. ‘Gender identity’ should be about the gender definers that we prescribe to ourselves, but that falls into ‘gender roles. However, gender roles are something that is allocated by someone else based of our socially constructed society.

⁸ Hock, Roger. 2016. *Human Sexuality*. 4th ed. Pearson Education

⁹ Hock, Roger. 2016. *Human Sexuality*. 4th ed. Pearson Education

Gender is often associated with terms describing an individual, especially in the binary, masculine and feminine. Gender, like most things, can be evaluated with the use of semiotics through things like fashion. Gender identity is where language is failing to communicate everyone's perspective identities. Because in the binary 'gender identity' is about your defined sex, male and female, and not your defined gender, masculine and feminine shouldn't there be terms specific to each to identify.

Gender identity is not the only instance of language failing in its accuracy and specificity. For instance, paternal and maternal are used to describe 'gender roles' as well as to describe a biological function. Genes are passed down from both paternal and maternal family lines. Language should be able to accurately discern between 'gender roles', 'gender' and biological sex. Through our genetics we pass on diseases, physical traits etc. but we also all carry genetic traits from our mothers and fathers. This means that we have both male and female characteristics, and that there is multiple binaries in which we all fall. This is due to the fact that everyone has a birth mother and a birth father, and so on throughout your lineage. By examining the words used to talk about this subject we can begin to see the misconceptions between the vocabulary and the understanding of what the differences are between gender and sex. This is something that is necessary in the communication of the concept of gender.

CHAPTER 4

THE SEMIOTICS OF GENDER AND IDENTITY

There is a binary, patriarchal system that is prevalent in controlling the way in which we see gender. Gender is related to our identity on many levels. It is something that is placed upon us since our birth and therefore is one of the ways we perceive and react to things in the world. A word is prescribed to us based on our biological sex and then we are taught to work inside that sex for the entirety of our lives with the gender that is related to it. This happens before we even have the chance to form opinions or shape ideas around the vast world that surrounds us, or understand its complex history. Gender's relationship through that is based off of the signifier and the signified, concepts realized through the theory of semiotics.

When examining something whether it be received visually or verbally, we are looking at a sign. A sign is made up of two things, a signifier and the signified. A signifier is the form of a word. In this case the signifier is our sex that we are born into the world with, male or female. The signified is the meaning or message that is prescribed to the signifier when we think of the sign. Because we are taught a patriarchal system, of gender identification, we associate the signified word masculine with male, and feminine with female. We correlate terms to the signified that reflect onto the signifier. So, when we think of an image

of a man we think, based in the patriarchy, that he is big, strong, aggressive, rugged, and active. Conversely, when we think of an image of a woman, we see small, frail, calm, cute, and passive. This is relative because not every male or female has those characteristics. There have been studies that evaluate chromosomes and hormones with results stating that the levels of hormones don't make a person's sex.¹⁰

Because we prescribe certain characteristics to a certain gender, we see individual's that do not fit the constraints placed on them based on their appearance and physicality alone. Like stated before, we live in a socially constructed patriarchal binary when it comes to gender. We relate masculine gender to the male sex. Categories that we prescribe to masculinity, inherently to being male, are strength and power. Today this is contradicted in multiple ways but especially in athletics. Where athletics is prescribed more to strength and power, we associate these activities with a male, within the constructed system. Also, the very athletic artform of dance is often related to females because of the beauty and grace that it takes to perform. However, there are female athletes, and male dancers. As stated in these last two sentences there is a contradiction in this system. We build our identities on these constructed flaws.

"We are all born naked, the rest is drag."¹¹

¹⁰ Hall, Sean. 2007. *This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics*. London: L. King Pub.

¹¹ Charles, Rupaul. 2010. *RuPaul's Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style*.

~Ru Paul

Ru Paul Charles is best known as a drag queen, but is also a philosopher. The above quote defuncts the relationship between the semiotics of sex and gender. He is known for being one of the most famous drag queens in history, best known for his Emmy Award winning show *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, and for the movement of self-acceptance in the GLBTQAI+ community. "We are all born naked the rest is drag" is a quote known throughout the GLBTQAI+ community and is a symbol of light and acceptance. This is a very powerful and impactful way to talk about being born without cloths, being nude at the one time that we are 100% completely ourselves. Every signified thing after is excess and embellishment; a form of expression and art. You can analyze the semiotics of his quote and understand every word by itself. However, when conjoined together the words allude to how we conform in the world unknowingly. The quote becomes a statement about identity, personhood, and the semblance of where we want to be—free of any preconceptions.

Althusser defines interpellation as "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation"¹²

¹² Pierre Macherey, and Stephanie Bundy. 2012. *Judith Butler and the Althusserian Theory of Subjection. Décalages*. <http://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol1/iss2/13>

Using the semiotics, prescribed by our culture, embedded in clothing there is also assumed meaning in the materials that make up my art. Working with this binary, gendered garments are prescribed to us from birth. Inherently they function to clothe individuals from nudity, function to fit certain shaped bodies, as well as for different climates, events, etcetera. Clothing's importance is prescribed by what walks the runway during fashion weeks. Giving an unknown authority the power over deciding what goes in and out of style. When we put that clothing on we recognize that their choice is valid giving them power. Then that meaning associated to those garments are then associated with us through the performance of dressing and judgement based on looks. Creating a predetermined identification known as interpellation.

In other words, interpellation is the idea of making a person, a subject, through recognition of that same individual by the vocalization from a "higher power". This is done in society in multiple ways. In terms of fashion this is done through the use of semiotics or identifying a subject based on the 'signs' that are perceived by our society onto different fabrics that in a performative way are worn. By placing symbols like a bow or a football onto a garment that projects a certain characteristic of an individual. A football brings up sports which tend to be a masculine activity, where a bow is prescribed to beauty. In the binary structure of our society we associate athleticism with being masculine and beauty with being feminine. Therefore, a football becomes masculine and is geared toward the male sex, while the same thing happens with a bow in regards to females. When we begin to associate these prescribed characteristics with our sense of

“self” we become interpellated into the social structure. That is, we internalize the ideological status quo when we identify with these prescribed notions of gender—when we adopt them as part of our individual “style.” By adorning our body with these symbols, we are admitting that the binary exists and we value it because we are wearing it on our body. Through this submission the binary structure wins.

By engaging in the act of dressing we are succumbing to the binary because we choose to wear clothes which are socially acceptable based on our gender. When clothes are placed on the body, they are activated. Their function becomes a factor when it is put on the wearer’s body. The signifiers of those garments become a part of your body through a performance, the act of putting on your clothes. They become a new skin. They become part of your identity because the clothing is related to the person who put them on. Through the process of putting cloths on and the use of signs as identifiers we innately give others the authority to transform us through the act of hailing. This is the ability to identify who we are based on the fabric we choose to put on, because the cloth has a meaning placed on it. When we put it on our body it turns the wearer into a signifier. Their opinions are their own, but when openly communicated they transform non-binary people into a subject.

CHAPTER 5

DECONSTRUCTION OF SEMIOTICS, LANGUAGE, AND THE BINARY

Using the semiotics of clothing, created by the binary system, then literally deconstructing it, the work in *(un)bound: disrupting notions* creates a new, visual, non-binary language. In opening the conversation, these works ask you to re-evaluate your thoughts on the differences between gender and sex by creating new means of communication that speaks to the nuance of gender. If we understand the semiotics and the misinterpretations that shape a false sense of knowing, we can create receptiveness and understanding as well as a clearer conversation about gender and sex. This will allow us to better identify people based on who they are and not by outmoded, hetero-normative stereotypes. By revisiting Ru Paul's quote, we can comprehend why clearly defining and deconstructing the language around gender is necessary. We are all unique beings, and the fact that we are individuals should be appreciated and revered.

Judith Butler states "Perhaps also part of what dialogic understanding entails is the acceptance of divergence, breakage, splinter, and fragmentation as part of the often-tortuous process of democratization. The very notion of "dialogue" is culturally specific and historically bound, and while one speaker may feel secure that a conversation is happening, another may be sure it is not. The power

relations that condition and limit dialogic possibilities need first to be interrogated.”¹³

To obtain what Butler mentions about the “divergence, breakage, splinter, and fragmentation as part of the often-tortuous process of democratization,”¹⁴ we must look to Norris who states that:

“Thus deconstruction most often figures as a taken-for-granted thesis concerning the value-laden nature of certain binary terms (such as text/context, male/female, ‘high’ versus ‘low’ literary culture, ‘normal’ vs ‘deviant’ sexuality, or the colonial ‘centre’ as opposed to the ‘margins.’) which are then subject to reversal through a reading which stressed their inherent instability or self-subverting character.”¹⁵

What Norris means by this is that deconstruction is a very complex operation for undoing binary oppositions. When we look at the binary, we see the difference between the two so there is a clear opposition between the two, but the *différance* is the postponement through an endless chain of signifiers. In terms of sex and gender, sex has the difference of gender. Sex can be defined in multiple ways by multiple signifiers that have nothing to do with sex by alluding to it. The act of dressing, for example is a difference between genders. However, through

¹³ Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁴ Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁵ Norris, Christopher. 2002. *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*. 3rd ed. New Accents. London: Routledge.

the act of drag, which subverts ideas of gender, we get an example of *différance*. Through *différance* we can start to see how important this mundane act becomes to our sense of self. Mostly, we are just putting on clothing to hide our skin, or to protect it from the climate. However, we can also observe that gendered clothing hides or protects different parts of the body in different ways (for men or for women), and this begins to reveal how clothing hails us into our identity. These articles of clothing become a part of us through the performance of dressing because of “hailing”. This allows the clothing to become innate in how people project a persona onto you because of our society. Hall says “The way that we think about clothing can be understood in terms of garments worn by men and women, by the distinction between formal and casual wear and via the contrast between parts of the body that a given culture thinks should be covered as opposed to uncovered. These pairs of concepts help to give sense to what might at first appear to be diverse and inexplicable sets of cultural phenomena in the area of fashion.”¹⁶

Semiotics is a way to help identify something, or someone in our society. That is if we are using the words to categorize correctly. It is very exclusive because we live in a binary and because of this binary, we only have two identifiers for a spectrum of individuals. By deconstructing the language of the binary system beyond male or female we can actually talk about identifying someone in terms of masculinity and femininity. We must also understand that

¹⁶ Hall, Sean. 2007. *This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics*. London: L. King Pub.

we are not destroying or eliminating ideas of gender that is already set in place,
we are merely working with the binary to widen the scope, and allow it to
encompass different ways of identification, not solely male and female sex.

CHAPTER 6

CONSTRUCTED

Through the juxtaposition of found garments (babies' onesies) and a spider's web, *Constructed* addresses the identities that are placed onto children before they are fully functioning and able to decide for themselves what their opinions are about their identity. This judgement is made by doctors when babies are identified as a boy or girl at birth. Parents then continue this gender application by choosing how they will then clothe their babies. The clothing is manufactured, advertised, and sold based on binary concepts of gender. The parent or guardian is given a predetermined identity to the baby through the choices they make through this application. This furthers the concept of prescribing gender.

By disassembling the onesies, I physically take the clothes, which constrain the body, and render them useless. I then reassemble them to create a new and ambiguous form. I call these finished works fabric paintings. This term applies for all my abstract and non-representational reconstructions. This inherently takes away the constraint that the fabric has over the body, and it depletes the ability for the semiotics of the clothing to preconceive any child's gender identity or gender role based on its structure. This is due, in part, to the fact that it cannot be worn. By cutting and weaving these gendered fabrics I am

further deconstructing the signs (color, shape, texture, pattern) that have been placed on the baby. By weaving “boy’s and “girl’s” clothing I ask the viewer to grasp gender from a new perspective that is outside the binary.

Preconceived personas placed upon children, especially while they are in the formative years of their life can have contrasting effects on the child. This happens because meanings have been assigned to different garments (i.e. colors, patterns, textures, etc.) and because of the predetermined manner in which the garments were constructed. Additionally, a true understanding of what gender is neither understood or embraced, because it is often used in tandem with sex. By disassembling the onesies, I allow the viewer to recognize the structure and focus on the form. The characteristics of color, texture, pattern, etc. are then more clearly exposed to the viewer.

This artwork talks about two major things, the unnecessary need for identity to be placed on a person from the moment they are born, and gender as a social construct that is placed on people through the performance of putting on clothes. We as part of the human race need to reconstruct a new way of identifying people in this socially hindering construct.

CHAPTER 7

PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTED

Growing up I felt a continuous disconnect to masculinity when I compared myself to my male friends. While my male friends were interested in sports and more athletics, I was drawn to creative activities. Whether I was playing with Barbies, pretending my backyard was an imaginary world or I was watching in awe as my mother made garments for my sister's wedding and proms, I faced a strange dichotomy. There was room for male participation in creative activities, but I did not identify with the roles a male should play. In making *Constructed* I based my ideas around when identifying the self begins, who starts it, and why it is necessary.

When looking for onesies I wanted a clear connection to a certain gender, which was identified through semiotics in regards to color, pattern, or textile. This was simple because of the social constructs that everyone lives in knowingly or unknowingly. From a young age I never felt as masculine as my male friends. I wanted to look at what I was instinctively drawn to and see why those things are seen one way (masculine) versus the other (feminine). I came to the conclusion that predetermining identity starts before we are born but begins physically at birth.

I deliberately chose to work with onesies because of the connections between the fabric and the babies who wear this article of clothing. A baby's onesie is not conforming to a sex. Onesies do not form around the curves of the body, such as a female's shirt is designed to form around the breast. A onesie is created to simply accommodate a child wearing a diaper. Therefore, it is a neutral shape. Due to the gender neutrality, not forming the clothing around a certain sexed body we only allocate characteristics based on gender which is embellished into the fabric by color, pattern, texture, etcetera. By ripping the seams out of onesies, I deconstruct what the object does by making it non-functional. The process of disassembling the onesies is relevant because I diminish the value of the labeling signifiers in the clothing. This deletes the ability for the onesie to identify the wearer with the binary terms associated with them based on what embellishes the garment because the interaction between the garment and the wearer is lost.

When constructing this new form, I reference a spider's web for the viewer to associate the concepts of the dismantled onesies with the idea of the function of the web. This function acts as a dwelling place as well as a way for the spider to capture their prey. It is a vital element for their survival. Connecting the onesies in the structure of a web alludes to the spider catching its prey, yet it also functions as a domicile for the spider. There is a contradiction between these three things but it is not necessarily problematic, unless you are a person dealing with a predetermined gender from the binary and it does not associate with you. The spider web form I present alludes to ideas of home and the feelings of safety

that most homes acquire, but it also suggests a place of fear, a place that one can become trapped and defeated. This uneasy feeling between hearth and fear is where many people who do not define their gender with the binary reside. This predicament can be very harmful for those who do not identify within the perimeters of the norm.

The weaving process reveals an intersection between male and female onesies. These intersections represent a spider's prey, stuck and unable to defend. Imagine the web as the gender binary, and the woven segments are the individuals who do not identify with the binary. Emotions of constraint from the binary and the sense of being controlled should come to mind.

CHAPTER 8

CONSTRUCTED: REDEFINING GENDERED CUSTOMS

Constructed is a reaction to concepts of predetermined gender identification. By using the binary vernacular language, we must learn to define differences between sex, gender, and identity. I show violence inflicted on children from pre-birth to birth. Stuck in a binary with an undeveloped language that excludes a middle gender spectrum presents frightening consequences for the undetermined. This art work opens the conversation, internally and externally, to the lack of language within the binary to individual identity. The weaving is a physical representation of the spectrum, which I aim to reveal a universal vernacular. My visual language strives to speak of gender, specifically genders that exist without identifiers. The connection between my concept and my weaving methodology was crucial in the outcome of *Constructed*.

CHAPTER 9

BLUE AND PINK

There are multiple visual elements that identify the binary, specifically in relation to fashion. Color is an important element that functions as a signifier. Colors possess different meanings. Certain colors culturally identify male and female. We assume blue is a color that identifies males and pink identifies females, especially when identifying infants. This identification can be seen in infant clothing, toddler's toys, gender reveal parties and more. These colors have not always been associated to the same sex that we identify them as today. Culture shifts over time and fashion trends change.

Blue and Pink is an exploration of the semiotics of color identifying articles of clothing as a certain sex that exists in our culture today. Through this artwork I ask my viewers to reconsider what color truly means. Color acts as a mode of interpellation. If the concept of color is the high power, then we are the recognizers of the meaning.

In this diptych, I utilized my fabric painting methodology by deconstructing pink and blue garments. More often than not, people base their opinions on their societal understandings. Initial impressions are often problematic. They are also what drive me to create ambiguous forms by subverting our current gender associations of pink and blue. I ask my viewers,

“Are you prescribing certain assumptions to this art work?” With closer examination one should find that everything cannot be defined by the system we already have in place. Is there a way to create a new vernacular that is universally accepting of all genders?

Blue and Pink is an exploration of these concepts. Even though many see gender as a spectrum, we still only have ways to talk about the binary. The issue is important in this work because I am using the binary to contradict itself. The use of color and the binary in my work questions the legitimacy of meaning, especially relating to the idea of identifying a person based on expectations versus actions. This can also be seen in the photographs of Yasumasa Morimura who plays with gender, sex and identity. Morimura achieves performativity of gender by sitting in photographs dressed in garments allocated to both sexes and by paint themselves to look like one of the sexes. Furthermore, these photographs consciously make direct references to art history. Morimura *is* transforming. The contradictions that are occurring in *Blue and Pink* ask my viewers to transform their thinking. Adorning a person with an identity based off of a color is a form of control and ignorance.

CHAPTER 10

PROCESS OF BLUE AND PINK

Gender identification plays a major part in the success of *Blue and Pink*. Typically, multiple colors signify different meanings. Red suggests something different than yellow when applied to objects. For an example, the context between a red rose and a yellow rose changes merely by its color. In our culture, red roses are associated with love and romance, while a yellow rose is associated with happiness and friendship. When applying this association to fashion it tends to separate what can be worn and what cannot be worn, in terms of associating colors with sex. Forms of hailing, judging and stereotyping control what males and females wear. *Blue and Pink* is a resource for conversation in terms of the social construct gender.

Finding blue female clothing, and pink male clothing was essential to my process. I wanted to quickly signify male and female even if specific signifiers such as rhinestones, grommets or small-scale pockets also identified as masculine or feminine. These additional signifiers seemed to not make any judgment on the work. For example, during my thesis exhibition opening, I overheard people who identify as male state that they own similar pants and then point at them. Additionally, many females gravitated toward the pink men's clothing. This process unfolded in front of me, providing a cross-

pollinating experience that was portrayed in real time. I found the majority of my viewers described age-old associations of gendered color and thought less about the deconstruction and reconstruction of intertwined garments. I was however, able to hold open conversations with many of my viewers. We discussed binary culture and how gender fluidity is often controlled. I was elated that my artwork served as a catalyst to interact with my audience.

My blue and pink seam-ripped artworks can be accessed in a number of ways. Part of my aim was to allow the possibility for the individual viewer to engage in an internal dialogue to question what gender can be. When considering the deconstructed garments together, I hoped my viewers would collectively reconsider the relationship between the garment, the body, and what it means for these clothes to be non-functioning. By changing clothing from an index to a symbol, sex identification is lost. Through my process of intertwining blue and pink I invite the discerning viewer to become disoriented, thereby allowing possibilities for reconsidering, re-learning and reassigning meaning to the potential of gender and color.

The deconstruction process allowed me to reverse the stereotypical roles of pink and blue, male and female. The resulting artworks provide the viewer with the colors and sexes in an unexpected gender fluid state. This was achieved through the transference of colors associated with certain genders, especially when switched. I work to subvert ideas of gendered semiotics as does artist Nick Cave in *Soundsuits*. Although I identify with Cave's

need to challenge pre-determined identification and gender stereotypes, I address my work by subverting signifiers, whereas Cave obscures them.

CHAPTER 11

BLUE AND PINK RECONSTRUCTION

Blue and Pink is an exploration of interpellation. Even though many see gender as a spectrum, we live in a socially constructed binary world. The fact that we are only given two categories allows for the misidentification of people. No concrete language exists to describe the spectrum of gender. This artwork questions that notion by pointing to color, the meanings we associate with them and what we wear. This work is not meant to talk about what currently exists with the vernacular of gender, but rather to recognize a deficit in our language. We need a language that correctly identifies people that do not fit into the binary, the “norm”.

CHAPTER 12

SKINNED

Skinned is a visual abstract reconstruction aimed at identifying terms of gender through the performativity of clothing. The relationship to shedding my clothes and the semiotics related to the clothing choice provide insight into the way I am perceived through the binary. The making of a non-figurative self-portrait allowed me to explore the process of a snake shedding skin and then apply that removal process to my personal narrative of gender. Butler says “...acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.” When considering the word skin, most people think of the epidermis that encases and contains the body’s interior. Skin is what protects us from the natural world. However, the skin is not able to adjust to the weather in a way that keeps us dry from the elements or regulates our body temperature based on the climate we live. As humans we adjust due to the universal fact that our species has a survival instinct. We adorn our bodies with garments to help

our bodies function easier within those different climates. This clothing process is a performative act that we define as gender performance.

Clothing is a layer, and is like a skin. Shaped pieces of fabric connect with our epidermis and create a new, shed-able skin. Clothing, therefore, becomes a new skin because it is meant to act as protection from the elements that our skin cannot provide. When we put these fabrics on our body, they become a signifier just by wearing them. Through societal pressure the clothing falsely shapes our identities based on who we are and our values and beliefs. Our physical skin connected to our signified skin (clothing) allows for the recognition of socially constructed identity.

CHAPTER 13

PROCESSING SKINNED

In the artwork *Skinned* it was important to me that this fabric painting be constructed from my clothing. The performative act of putting on clothes and allowing others to identify me played significant roles in the making of this work. However, with *Skinned* I want my audience to look at the fabric and recognize a person. Because the artwork is clothing this is not a difficult response for the viewer. However, when I deconstructed my clothing, I realized that it was merely fragments of who I consider myself to be. Sadly, this incomplete identity is socially acceptable and is structured by me. How a male is supposed to dress and act is a problem that I faced from a young age. I turned to drag culture to reconcile this issue.

By backing the patterns of my clothing with similar shaped sequin fabric, I embraced the dress of drag into *Skinned*. Drag is an over-the-top way to create conversation about the performance of gender. Sequins are associated with glamor, night-life and the feminine. Drag has fully embraced sequins!

I chose my clothing for certain reasons. Mostly because I am not comfortable and do not want to be judged knowingly or unknowingly. When I select my clothing, I want the fabric to be as colorful but also as

masculine as possible. This has a lot to do with my fear of being judged. Even though I see gender as a construct and recognize that we are all humans with personalities, the construct still controls me.

The plaid in *Skinned* is a common shirt worn by both men and women, but can be equated with multiple types of work-related occupations and typical mid-western apparel. Blue jeans are typically branded toward the working man, and casual wear. The purple hoodie is a common garment branded for the American Eagle consumer.

When I started to cut the patterns to match my clothing, I noticed that the sequins resembled armor. I found this particularly interesting because this feminine fabric became a masculine descriptor, and spoke to my own beliefs on gender fluidity. The juxtaposition of my personal clothing and the sequin fabric signifies the part of myself that I make visible to everyone and the part of myself that is not necessarily visible. This recognition helped me translate the necessity and importance for discovering a correct way to identify ourselves.

Weaving the fabrics, I intend for the viewer to see that an individual has both sides of gender developing their character, femininity and masculinity. By removing the warp and weft threads, making holes, and weaving the sequin fabric I deconstruct garments to reveal gender fluidity. The removal of the warp and weft threads returns the garments back to their previous state thereby revealing that my artworks are constructed. This opens questions of the meaning of fabric. Why do we embed associations into clothing and why do we project our expectations onto the person wearing the clothing? This artwork

shows the way in which I perceive my full identity, how I expects to be acknowledged in society, and most importantly how I encourage the viewer to see themselves completely.

CHAPTER 14

SKINNED: RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

Skinned is a representation of queering the norm in relation to gender identity through everyday fashion. The addition of the sequins combines male and female to articulate concepts about gender fluidity through the intersection of drag performance. The removal of clothes, like a snake shedding its skin, responds to my concerns of misidentifying a person and the promise for a renewal of the owner's clothing. The removal of individual threads from specific garments allows the viewer to contemplate the truth of the garment and social constructs.

CHAPTER 15

CONCLUSION

This world is full of people, and we all have different backgrounds that allow us to associate certain meanings to objects in the world. Two people looking at the same thing in the same place at the exact same time could view an object and have completely unrelated experiences based off the culture of their upbringing. We allow the occurrence of judging or identifying individuals to shape the way we define people only on appearance to reflect the characteristics that we believe to be true about an individual. These judgments are rash and do not allow for the improvement of society and personal relationships.

Ru Paul says it best when talking about gender, fashion and semiotics.

“In truth, you are not your clothes, you are not your profession, you are not your religion. You are an extension of the consciousness that guides the universe, for which there is no name because it cannot be defined. That’s why in reality all the superficial things

you list as your identity are in reality your “drag.” Years ago, when I heard someone say “we are all God in drag,” I knew it to be true at my core.”¹⁷

We should strive to know and identify people in their truest form. How people add power to themselves through self-identification shows an internal strength, opposed to a weakness that allows others to place opinions upon them. Projected opinions demean and do not allow for growth. By removing hailing from the manner in which we assign meaning, we open the potential of gender identification. Striving for inclusivity in an exclusive system will add harmony to our process of self-identification that is currently full of fear and judgement. We have to be able to make a change for every individual, not just a specific group.

I believe that this will happen when we examine the system in place, and create a new language to form identity. Some helpful processes are in place in terms of identifying “queer” people, but this is only reflective in the communities that have personal relationships with people that identify and live as such. Language needs to be universally used and understood by everyone. Only through an understanding of the naked self, stripped of embellishment and charades, can we navigate this world with true self-awareness.

¹⁷ Charles, Rupaul. 2018. *Guru*. 1st ed. RuCo, Inc. xi-xii.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF IMAGES FROM (UN)BOUND: DISRUPTING NOTIONS

1. *Constructed*. Installation View I. Cotton knit. 2019
2. *Blue and Pink*. Installations View II. Denim, knit, cotton, and twill. 2019
3. *Skinned*. Installation View III. Denim, knit, cotton, and sequin fabric. 2019

IMAGES



Constructed. Installation Veiw I. Cotton knit. 2019



Blue and Pink. Installations View II. Denim, knit, cotton, and twill. 2019



Skinned. Installation View III. Denim, knit, cotton, and sequin fabric. 2019

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2018 University of Louisville M.F.A. Open Studio Weekend Exhibition, Louisville, KY

University of Louisville Masters, Open Community Art Center, Louisville, KY

2017 Annual Spring Student Exhibition, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

2016 Queer Voices, Gallery K, Louisville, KY

2015 The Cathode Ray of Justice, Center for Interfaith Relations, Louisville, Kentucky

2014 in·ter·sect / ,intər'sekt/ , Herron School of Art and Design, Basille Gallery, Indianapolis, Indiana

2013 Photo Takes Over Sculpture, Herron School of Art and Design, Eskanazi Sculpture Building, Indianapolis, Indiana

Something Inherently Imperishable, Herron School of Art and Design, Fine Art Building Photography, Indianapolis, Indiana

Soundwell, Herron School of Art and Design, Fine Art Building, Indianapolis, Indiana

Videos Without Borders, IUPUI Cultural Arts Gallery, Indianapolis, Indiana

2012 ISO 27, Herron School of Art and Design, Fine Art Building Photography Basement,
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