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Flesh So Peach

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
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Abstract

Flesh So Peach

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Flesh So Peach is an interactive art piece that addresses the hypervisibility of “whiteness” using the *Vogue* September 2018 issue. In this work, I remove “whiteness” from the magazine and set up a space for the audience to do the same. The removal of “whiteness” is a physical representation of the frustration, anxiety, and anger I feel with the omission of women of color, specifically within the pages of this highly influential fashion magazine. Tools typically used to promote and emphasize the ideals of beauty have been used to tear, cut, and rip away white women’s flesh. The removal of “whiteness” by both myself and the viewers is a push at the hypocrisy found in the *Vogue* 2016 statement for greater diversity and inclusiveness.



Flesh So Peach, Installation View, 2019

Flesh So Peach

Flesh So Peach seeks to address the problem of underrepresentation of women of color through the physical manipulations to the photos in the *Vogue* September 2018 issue. I chose this women's magazine, *Vogue*, whose vast influence is driven by the hypervisibility of "whiteness", where a white woman, Anna Wintour, is the editor. In this piece, I put myself in the role of editor and physically deconstruct the magazine so often touted as "the fashion bible." As a woman of color, I have always been disappointed the omission of people who look like me in magazines. The project as a whole is representative of my frustration, and that of others, not being able to see ourselves in these pages.

Flesh So Peach is an accessible, interactive experience consisting of a vitrine, two tables, several chairs, and three copies of the *Vogue* September 2018 issue in an open space within the gallery. There is no exact starting point leaving the viewer to move through this installation freely and choose whether they take a seat at one of the tables, read the magazine in the vitrine, or watch others first. At the vitrine, the January 2016 *Vogue* magazine is opened to the spread containing Anna Wintour's "Letter from the Editor." This letter is a call for "greater inclusiveness, tolerance, and diversity," but, in my project, acts as an artifact of a serious and long-lasting disingenuous gesture.¹ This gesture continues to exist more than two years after its original publication. Of the entire installation, this magazine is the only one the viewers are unable to physically interact with. The small, white, round leisure-styled table brings an air of domesticity into

¹ Wintour, Anna. "Letter From the Editor." *Vogue*, January 2016. pg. 28.

the gallery and upon its recognition as such, an invitation to sit. The manipulated *Vogue* September 2018 issue and a set of instructions are the only things on this table. The instructions on the table read, "Please sit and peruse." Peruse to imply a sense of carefulness in how the magazine is handled as well as the intention for the viewer to linger, actions usually not associated with magazines. I wanted my viewer to lose themselves in this manipulated magazine, pay closer attention to what the cuts represent, to ask the question of who was removed and why, consider the few women of color left in the magazine pages, create anxiety or anger, and be uncomfortable in the open space. In being the only person looking through a magazine, they are confronted with biases and perceptions, both my own and theirs.

The larger table, located within the installation, differs significantly from the small table. From its worn-down appearance to the selection of tools left on the table, it signals to viewers from further away that this is more of a working table, a place within the gallery where they can leave their own mark in one of the two unmanipulated issues of the September 2018 *Vogue* issue, and is a way of collaborating with myself, the artist. Here, I can begin to unify with others who also wish to challenge "whiteness." As a whole, *Flesh So Peach* creates and pushes forward the uncomfortable conversation of race and representation within the gallery space, much the same way Hank Willis Thomas's pieces *Absolut Power.* and *Scarred Chest* combine the visual history of race

with pop culture and advertising,² while giving agency to the viewer to not only interact, but add to the work, as was done in *Rhythm 0* by Marina Abramović.³

The title, *Flesh So Peach*, is inspired by the crayon originally known as “Flesh,” in which the name had implied a standardization of skin color. According to Crayola history, the name was changed to “Peach” in 1962, but the color remained the same.⁴ The crayon’s original intended user, a white child, could color with it but, a non-white child could not. I definitely could not. Growing up, the idea of who was white was pushed onto me by the media and as a result, perceptions and biases were formed that, like a habit, have been hard to break, and continue to this day. For me, anyone who was white had lighter skin tones made up of light beiges mixed with a pink tint - the same as that crayon that used to be called “Flesh.”

Since 1988, *Vogue* magazine has been run by Anna Wintour. Both Wintour and the magazine have been highly influential forces in the fashion world, so much that the magazine, particularly the September issue, has earned the nickname “the fashion bible.” Wintour, for her part, is so highly involved in the creative process, that one photoshoot, estimated to have cost approximately \$50,000, was scrapped entirely from the magazine solely at her discretion.⁵ But, even though she is a woman editor-in-chief

² Thomas, Hank Willis. *Works*, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.hankwillisthomas.com/WORKS/>.

³ “Marina Abramovic Rhythm 0,” Guggenheim.org, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5177>.

⁴ “Why Does the Color ‘Flesh’ Not Appear in the 1958 Limited Edition Box of 64?” FAQ, Crayola, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://www.crayola.com/faq/another-topic/why-does-the-color-quotfleshquot-not-appear-in-the-1958-limited-edition-box-of-64/>.

⁵ *The September Issue*. Directed by R.J. Cutler. A&E IndieFilms, 2009.

of a magazine, her perspective of the magazine, and what we as consumers ultimately end up seeing, is a reflection of the type of gaze associated with normative “whiteness” called “hypervisibility.” In “Invisibility/Hypervisibility: The Paradox of Normative Whiteness” Maureen T. Reddy states, “Whiteness [...] seem[s] invisible, transparent, to those who are white [...] and] makes itself hypervisible to those who are not white.”⁶

“Whiteness” has been ever present in our society and results in the inability for a white person to look at themselves and identify as having a “whiteness” quality as an inherent characteristic. Nor do they realize their perspective has a “whiteness” quality. In the book *White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art*, Maurice Berger defines “whiteness” as “a powerful state of mind – a norm that had been so pervasive in society that white people never needed to acknowledge or name it.”⁷ “Whiteness” then becomes an ideal standard, one that gets heavily imposed on non-whites, and results in a lack of representation of women of color. As a woman of color, I no longer wish to be “the other,” thus confronting “whiteness” in a visual manner becomes a necessary task.

Since its inception in 1892, *Vogue* magazine’s targeted audience has been the white upper class. It has only been in recent years that *Vogue* was prompted to publicly state and attempt the notion of inclusiveness and diversity. In the January 2016 *Vogue* issue, Anna Wintour’s “Letter from the Editor” piece seemed to promise a noteworthy change to the magazine in order to reflect “the shifting times we live in.”⁸ In March 2017,

⁶ Reddy, Maureen. “Invisibility/Hypervisibility: The Paradox of Normative Whiteness.” *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 9 (2): 55–64. 1998.

⁷ Berger, Maurice. *White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art: Issues in Cultural Theory*. Baltimore, Md: Center for Art and Visual Culture. 2004.

⁸ Wintour, Anna. “Letter From the Editor.” *Vogue*, January 2016. pg. 28.

Vogue attempted to showcase diversity among women on its cover, but in choosing women who have similar skin tones, did more to blend them together than to individualize and celebrate them.⁹ Any changes to the magazine have been slow or even abandoned.

Flesh So Peach is based on defying this hypervisible gaze that continues to permeate *Vogue*, particularly the September issue. The September issue is *Vogue's* largest issue published each year. A regular *Vogue* issue measures 10.81 inches high by 8 inches wide by .81 inches deep, while the latest September issue measures 13.3 inches high, 10.9 inches wide, 2.1 inches deep, and contains 646 pages of advertisements and articles. As a woman of color, I have taken editorial control of the larger magazine issue and chosen to remove all the white women's flesh from within its pages. The removal of the white flesh is in opposition to the hypervisible "whiteness" in magazines and forces the viewer to fully consider the few women of color left in the magazine pages. Choosing the larger issue allows me to make my point in a very physical and condensed manner.

In determining who was going to be removed from the magazine and who would remain, I chose to use the Pantone Skin Tone guide. According to the Pantone website, the system "[is] an innovative tool allowing for the faithful selection, articulation and reproduction of consistent, accurate color anywhere in the world."¹⁰ In this project, the Pantone color system serves as a reflection for the complexity of skin color that the

⁹ *Vogue*, March 2017, cover page.

¹⁰ "About Pantone: About Pantone Standards," Pantone, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.pantone.com/about/about-pantone>.

flesh colored crayon mentioned previously just cannot. Photographer Angelica Dass takes images of people and matches their skin tone to the Pantone color system.¹¹ However, taking over 4,000 images of people from all over the world has proven that skin tone has much greater variation than any standardized color swatch available, certainly more than the Pantone Skin Tone swatches I purchased. For my project, I compared several swatches to the images of models inside various women's magazines and found that most, if not all, of the women were lighter than the first eight lightest swatches in the fan-like deck. The swatches that appear in the Pantone Skin Tone guide after the eighth swatch become significantly darker and even lose the pink tint of the lighter swatches. The women who matched or were lighter than the first eight swatches would be removed.

I approached working through the magazine the same way the magazine is meant to be read and thumbed through: from front cover to back cover in sequential order. I used my own fingernails, tweezers, and/or a scalpel. These three tools, which are used to modify or emphasize femininity and an expectation of beauty, also represent the varying levels of frustration, anger, and anxiety that I have and continue to experience when looking through *Vogue*. Having set my Pantone parameters in place and selected the tools I wished to use throughout my project allowed me to work intuitively with the removal of the white women's flesh. I just turned the page and either began poking holes with my nails and tearing away strips, slicing edges, or plucking

¹¹ Dass, Angelica. *Humanae Project*, accessed January 29, 2019, <https://www.angelicadass.com/humanae-project/>.

away at the paper like an unwanted eyebrow hair. Ellen Gallagher has taken a similar approach in her *eXelento* piece, which shows the artist's appropriation and physical manipulation of individual journal advertisements from 1930s through the 1970s.¹² The piece is made up of paper, ink, and plasticine on canvas and measures 96 inches by 192 inches. The 396 advertisements that make up the canvas have been scaled down to mere inches, printed as a grid, and topped with yellow plasticine wigs, each made specific to the advertisement. Gallagher's additions look similar, but upon closer inspection are very different.

In my project the white women were removed one by one. Where several women have been removed from one spread, the viewers will see that not all the cutouts are created equally, nor are any two alike even when the same subject is repeated within the same page. In certain instances, not all of the flesh was removed completely. I called the remnants of flesh "traces." These traces are a reference to the woman of color's known existence, but her struggle and inability to be seen. The physical markings leave a human shaped emptiness that allows a portion of the following page to show through. There are instances where a woman of color's face will show through a cutout. Her face replaces the original face and she becomes the representative of more than one page.

I encountered several issues working through the magazine, such as how to approach the men in the pages. After much deliberation I decided that the men in the

¹² "'eXelento' and 'Deluxe,'" Art21.org, accessed February 24, 2019, <https://art21.org/read/ellen-gallagher-exelento-and-deluxe/>.

magazine pages would remain intact. Their presence in a woman's fashion magazine is rather limited and when they do appear, they serve more as props for the women rather than as focal points. Manipulating their presence in any way would have changed the direction of the conversation and dilute the original problem of hypervisibility of white women. How to approach the black and white advertisements was another issue. I struggled because determining "whiteness" when color is removed forces me to confront my own biases on skin tone, race, and ethnicity. I chose to leave these black and white advertisements intact and allow the pages to serve as stopping points for viewers to begin asking the questions of themselves how they determine who is and is not white.

Looking at the cover of the *Vogue* September 2018 issue, Beyoncé, a woman of color, makes an ideal cover model for this project. Her image has not been physically manipulated so the magazine appears whole and her presence is highlighted. The manipulations are located within the magazine, past the cover page, much like Robert Heinecken's disassembled and reassembled magazines in which only the cover was left in its original form.¹³ *Flesh So Peach* differs in that there is no collaging of the pieces that are removed from the page, no rearranging or reassembling of pages of different magazines, and no additions are being made. The pages, left in their original sequential order, collage themselves. Where Heinecken sought to use as many pieces as possible, I am choosing to avoid showing as many pieces as possible.

¹³ Heinecken, Robert, Eva Respini, and Diana C. Stoll. *Robert Heinecken: Object Matter*. New York, New York: The Museum of Modern Art. 2014.

The once sturdy magazine has become fragile due to the heavy manipulations inflicted on it. For me, the magazine serves as a metaphor for a pinnacle of “whiteness” that can be challenged and disrupted. Prior to the start of the project, the magazine was photographed in order to document the magazine in its original, complete, and pristine condition. Once the magazine was finished getting cut up, it was photographed again, spread by spread. The constant handling of the already fragile magazine by viewers is a guarantee that the magazine will get further damaged and fall apart. The images of the magazine will be all that remain of *Flesh So Peach* and in turn, they will become another iteration of the project that will be able to be circulated to a wider audience.

I want people to think about the times we live in and how we see each other. The struggle for a woman to be viewed and accepted outside of any kind of standard, whether it is beauty, position of power and empowerment, or economic status is crippling, and it is all due to the media’s bias. In the documentary *Miss Representation* Katie Couric states, “The media can be an instrument for change or maintain the status quo or awaken people. It depends on who’s piloting the plane.”¹⁴ I aim to create a vehicle for something beyond diversity and inclusion. What others may consider diversity, I consider “intersectionality.” This term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw is a metaphor for a more multifaceted way of thinking about a topic or person, not just a

¹⁴ *Miss Representation*. Directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom. Virgil Films and Entertainment, 2011.

singular tunnel vision method, such as only looking at or considering gender or class or race, but rather taking all three into consideration.¹⁵

Flesh So Peach began as a work in which I could channel my frustrations with the hypervisibility of “whiteness.” The inherent violence that comes through the removal of white women’s flesh is not a criticism of the women themselves, but rather the systems in place that promote “whiteness” as a standard. By welcoming others to participate in this project, Flesh So Peach has ultimately become a call to action for a more equal representation for women of color. I strongly believe that actions speak louder than words and *Vogue*’s actions should reflect what they print on the cover, that “Everyone’s voice counts.” But, until they can do that successfully, I’m going to keep tearing apart that magazine and empowering others to do the same.

¹⁵ Crenshaw, Kimberle. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1). 1989.



Flesh So Peach, Installation View



Flesh So Peach, Installation View



Spread of cutouts



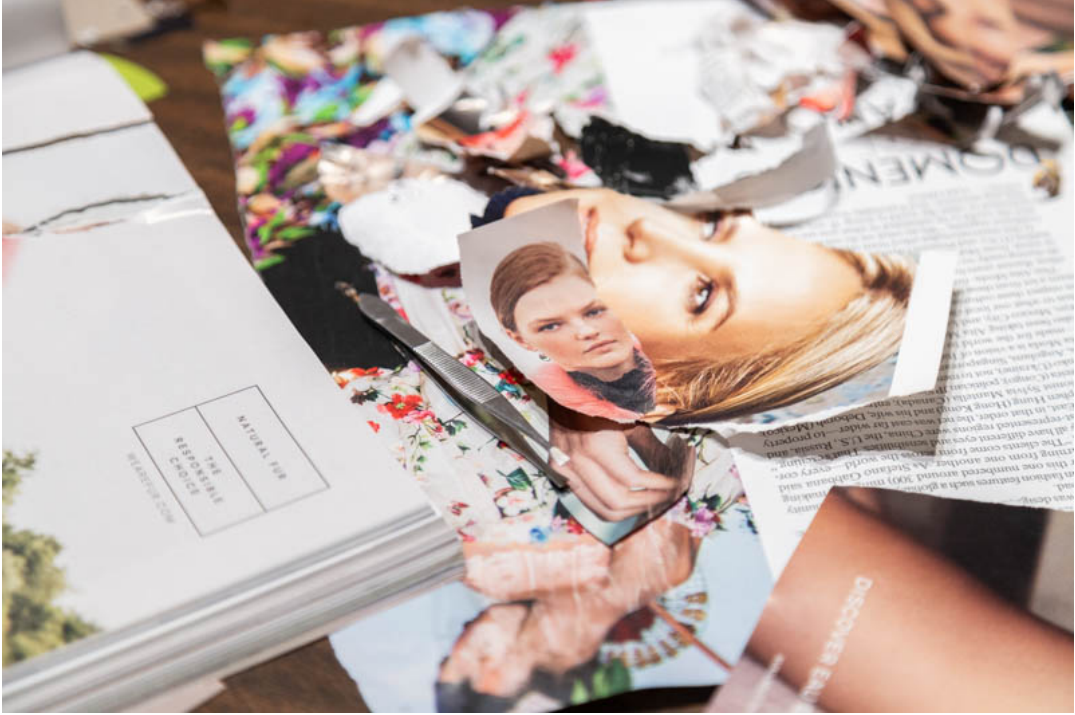
Detail of cutouts



"Work Table", Detail View



Audience participation at the "Work Table"



Remnants of “whiteness” at the “Work Table”



Flesh So Peach, Installation View

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