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You Know that Feeling You Get Right After You Vomit?

Yeah, I Want to Feel That.

By

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

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
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Committee Approval

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Abstract

You Know that Feeling You Get Right After You Vomit?

Yeah, I Want to Feel That.

You Know that Feeling You Get Right After You Vomit? Yeah, I Want to Feel That is an ongoing collection of photographic and sculptural components existing as found object mixed media such as oranges, wood, flowers, and inkjet prints held by T-pins. Through a surrealistic indulgence of abjection and uncanniness, with an implied bodily violence, this series of work comes to an understanding of time, identity, and existing between social boundaries creating a push and pull to define “in-betweenness”. This contradiction causes a psychic dissonance, or a mental contradiction of belonging; to exist in-between is to exist uncannily. “In-betweenness” is represented by images of my body fractured and separated into limbs and torsos as a metaphor for the split psyche. By referencing traditional tropes within art history, such as flowers, fruit, the nude, and death portraiture, I redefine myself in my own terms from the ground up.

You Know that Feeling You Get Right After You Vomit?

Yeah, I Want to Feel That.

Until my time here at Rochester Institute of Technology, I've never had a sense of communal belonging. Before this time, I drifted listlessly through life labeled as "different", the odd one out, or a failure. I've existed awkwardly between boundaries and categories, standing between Chinese and American culture, or my bisexuality. I held the belief that I was 'wrong' because of my difference, that I was inferior and that fighting for survival was my given role. I have pushed my art towards a surrealistic navigation of these perplexities, stitching together the end of one moment of time into the beginning of another time, hoping for the end of isolation and the beginning of acceptance. With the effects of COVID-19 causing havoc worldwide, for myself, similar feelings of "in-betweenness" reflects a similar feeling that I've felt from the past. The sense of living in between, while akin, has mutated and has become condensed, pretending that everything is still 'normal' as time bleeds together. Time is ever ticking, yet everything is seemingly still, stuck in limbo, pretending to be "normal life". The days bleed into each other almost seamlessly, leading every day looking uncannily like the one before it. Together familiarity and unfamiliarity speak to the uncanny as an "in-betweenness" currently in early 2020, we all are living in a time of in-betweenness during this COVID-19 pandemic.

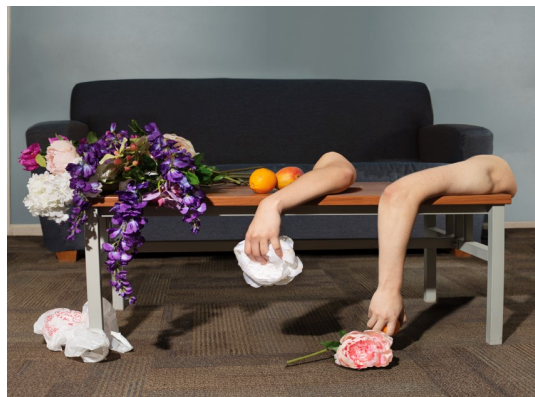
You Know that Feeling You Get Right After You Vomit? Yeah, I Want to Feel That explores the "in between", the concept of abjection- specifically, its trace in the uncanny, and its representation through Surrealism. I use humor to strike a tension with these melancholic aspects of my work, celebrating life in an uncommon fashion. The title was birthed from my partner and

I's continuous bouts of vomiting, as we both have weakened immune systems, but are not technically immunocompromised. We had come to an understanding of the bittersweet respite that quickly follows the sudden panic, the rushing heart rate, and the nausea. Leaving us humble and kneeling in front of the toilet with a sour taste in our mouths, heavy breathing, and greeted with a wretched smell. Julia Kristeva, in "*The Powers of Horror, Essays on Abjection*", describes the concept of abjection as a state of repulsion and attraction to a point of mental rejection from something that was once a part of our self that now no longer is, which blurs the line between one's self and not-self. What defines these lines and boundaries is abjection, existing as the "pre-desire", lawless and feral – such physical paradigms of abjection are, feces, urine, sweat, hair, semen, and blood. Drawing from Lacan's psychoanalytical theory, abjection threatens life and leaves one feeling miserable. It is a perversion of the laws within human society. Kristeva states that "Abjection draws me towards the place where meaning collapses" bodily waste, decay, religious heresy, death, cannibalism and murder are unacceptable and threaten the individual's self-image as being whole. Abjection naturally occurs before the understanding of social constructs and is the state of being cast-off, devoid of desire. As what is cast-off resides outside of the body, by the structure of desire. Abjection threatens life, its misery and is a perversion of the laws within human society. Self-abasing actions threaten social constructs, which work to maintain that bodies and thus society should be pristine, flawless, clean, and safe.¹

I explore the mutability of identity through symbolism like fresh and rotting oranges, fake and real flowers, cleavers, torn apart chickens, often paired up with disembodied limbs. A clear

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 7-24.

example is (*Figure 1*). In *Peony* (*Figure 2*), my bandaged and scarred hands hold an artificial peony over a sink, with bandages and soiled tissues in the basin. My hands hold the flower gently, bearing a feeling of sensuality and implied sexuality, yet it is an artificial flower; it is but a mere impression compared to a real peony. Flowers are often full of life, yet in the image it's a fake. It is surrounded by clues of bodily waste that give off an air of decay and false hope. My work is seductive yet repugnant, there is a perceived violence that uses the perceived destroyed body as a metaphor of a fractured psyche and identity. My work does not imbue violence for the sake of violence being shown, but it is a way of expressing raw untamed signs of life, speaking to the rejection of defined lines and pushing boundaries in order to assert myself.



(*Figure 1, In Limbo, 2020, inkjet print*)



(Figure 2, *Peony*, 2019, inkjet print)

A great example of a contemporary artist that uses the idea of abjection within his images is Norwegian artist Tjorbjørn Rodland. He deals with themes of desire, sexuality, discomfort and fetishism. Rodland constructs his images with intent to question truth within an image through perversion as he teases out hidden desires with the pairing of striking and serene visuals.² For example, his work *Crossed Confections*, 2015, chromogenic print, a pair of eclairs rest upon thin gold bars, with false teeth embedded within the glistening chocolate frosting and choux pastry implying someone had bitten the pastry and it had pulled teeth from their mouth. Obsessed with attraction and repulsion, the visual combinations of opposites, Rodland achieves a visual push and pull, resulting in a confused guttural response of desire and disgust.

By the pairing of striking and serene visuals, I create a psychic dissonance in order to hold a conversation of contradictions. In *Rotten Luck* (figure 3), I place oranges that are beginning to rot on my bare lap, conveying a perverse sense of inward and outward rejection and sexual disgust. This work stems from being unable to match what was expected of me: to be stronger, smarter, straight, more Chinese or less Chinese. Oranges are a symbol of luck and

² Brian Sholis, "Torbjørn Rødland." *Frieze*. August 19, 2015, <https://frieze.com/article/torbjørn-rødland> ³Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 10-13.

prosperity in Chinese culture, yet I let them rot as I pile them up. They become a farcical acknowledgment of my failures that thirst for acceptance. In this case, the oranges plants conflict within the subconscious, where innate impulses lie.³ The oranges sit seductively on my lap yet show signs of danger with their rot. While I objectify and sexualize my own body, I am not using myself in an excessive or irrational way like Rodland often does with his subjects. Despite this, I too tap into unearthed desires, whether that is a newfound sense of outward and inward disgust, acceptances, and desires.



(Figure 3, *Rotten Luck*, 2019, inkjet print)

In terms of visual representation, Linda Nochlin describes damaged bodies and their relation to desire in “*The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*” a flayed male body becomes emasculated and domesticated, while a destroyed female body becomes the embodiment of raw desire.³ The removal of limbs in my work portray vulnerability, as the disembodied limbs are isolated and attach themselves to the surroundings only in symbolic items, creating new meanings. The fractured body connotes a time of duress and unease and in this case, separated body parts desire for the body to remain whole. This is exemplified by phantom

³ Linda Nochlin. *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, (The Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures, 2001), 16-26.

limb syndrome, a condition in which an amputee experiences pain coming from a removed body part that the mind believes is still attached. In *Chop//Chop*, (figure 4), my arm and an orange are being cut by a cleaver held by my other arm to show an illogical scene of needless and confusing violence. Such illogic images demonstrate the unexpected that comes from the acknowledgement of abjection. Allowing the abject in in the presence of death affirms life, giving it meaning.



(Figure 4, *Chop//Chop*, 2019 inkjet print)

Focusing on Freud's structural model of the human psyche, specifically the id and its relation to the abject, I uncover the veiled desires that social constructs were made to hide. In Freud's analysis, the id is the part of identity that perceives our wants, sexual desires and survival. It is the most primal part of the human psyche⁴. The abject relates to the id's pure drive and unconsciously avoids displeasure or pain, while actively seeking indulgences and desire. Displeasure is caused by impulsive or unstructured desire, while a socially guided or structured desire grants pleasure. Unlike ego and super-ego, the id cannot delegate concepts of reality. The id is the part of the psyche that overtly desires the abject⁵. The super-ego psychically punishes the id and ego for acting upon desires that outer forces consider unacceptable. This breeds guilt

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 9-12.

⁵ Bert R. Sappenfield *Personality dynamics; an integrative psychology of adjustment*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 1954): 76127.

as it stands in opposition of the id's wants, blocking and judging other appetites. Through the return of the repressed, the unconscious resurfaces and is chastised by the super-ego; the dismembered body seeks the unattainable, to be whole once again.

Hans Bellmer is a surrealist artist and philosopher most famously known for his photographs and sculptures of dolls and mannequins in the mid 1930's. While problematic due to his sexist and fetishistic views of women and his suggestions of pedophilia, what I employ are similar visual strategies. He compares the doll's body to rules of language structure, through the interchangeability of masculine and feminine parts.⁶ Words and sentences can be minced, cut apart and packed back together in a verbal tango as puns, wordplay, double entendre, anagrams and jokes. He represents the contortions of language, exhibited in his dolls with their interchangeable parts. While he used a binary definition of masculine and feminine, not uncommon for the time period, I speak multi-vocally, employing similar visual strategies of mincing, hacking, and reassembling while engaging with gender, ethnicity, class identities, or personal experiences.

I use photography as a tool to make my own truth instead of finding it, whereas Bellmer uses his dolls to manipulate truth. He alters the dolls and takes a straight image, coaxing out suppressed desires of power and sexuality. A controlled image, or an image that has been set up, distorted, altered or edited in post process can still hold truth if an image requires manipulation to be proper especially if it is an integral component of the image. Bellmer takes a straight image to manipulate truth, but I manipulate the image to show truth. In this case, to sever parts of my body within an image is the representational truth of my desire to be integrated. While the images are

⁶ Livia Monnet "Anatomy of Permutational Desire: Perversion in Hans Bellmer and Oshii Mamoru" *Mechademia* Vol 6, 2011 (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 290-296. doi: [10.1353/mec.2011.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/mec.2011.0015)

manipulated, they are still representations of my body and myself. I mix digital composites with straight photographs and sculptural aspects to create a feeling of dreamlike sensations, further pushing the notion of in-between.

Much like Bellmer's work, I employ surrealistically removed body parts to express the violence of abject desire. Bellmer primarily focuses on the ideas of submission of sexual desire pushed upon human representatives, whereas my work depicts real human parts, my own body and real blood. Allowing myself to become doll-like, and dismantling myself like a ball-jointed doll, allows for a dehumanization of myself to the point where my body becomes uncanny. This uncanniness is a result of pushing the boundaries between perceived genders and the key identifiers of gender. I allow my body to exist within a realm of uncertainty and to embrace my own loss and in-between state.

In conversation with Bellmer's visual strategies, my work, *Hearth* (figure 5) is a torso sitting alone in a doorway. It is unclear whether the limbless and headless torso is entering or exiting the doorway. *Hearth* speaks to the powerlessness within Bellmer's dismantled bodies. Dolls are often viewed as just a child's toy, and though slightly creepy, given their resemblance to the human body, dolls are often made of plastics, rubbers, cloth or other materials, leading to their real-life nature.⁷ This view of dolls in relation to Kristeva's thinking is different, as she describes a corpse as soulless, the signifier of death, cold, stiff, once full of life, but now no longer.⁹ The key difference between a doll and a corpse is that a doll can never be alive, while a corpse was once alive. Both have elements of the uncanny; we vehemently reject the non-human yet yearn for the human-like representation. A corpse is made of flesh, and can rot, whereas a

⁷ Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, "Silicone Embodiments: The Breast Implant and the Doll," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* Vol. 11, No.2, (June 2015): 4, <http://liminalities.net/11-2/silicone.pdf>⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 109-124.

doll will never be human, only human-like. This yearning between rejection and acceptance is fundamentally a self-abasing apology. With these two properties, abjection and mystery, I proclaim a sense of in-between through my work using my hacked-apart body.



(Figure 5, Hearth, 2019 inkjet print)

Surrealism allows for the approximation of the otherwise incomprehensible; unlike logic, absurdity does not need to make sense, and with absurdity follows humor. I apply these two qualities to navigate my own race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and social relations. Using humor as a platform to understand the unknown, Pixy Lao's "Experimental Relationship" depicts herself and her boyfriend Moro with gender-equalizing humor. There is a notable strangeness within Pixy's relationship; Moro is younger than Pixy by five years, and Pixy is Chinese while Moro is Japanese, which by itself highlights a historic cultural conflict. Her images are playful and sincere as she constructs scenes that depict clear yet flipped power dynamics from the social

norm. For example, her piece that shows her eating a papaya put in place on Moro's crotch permits humor to be the main driving force behind her images.⁸ Wit and comedy allow an entry point to serious conversations to critique social norms, identity and racial tension. Her work exudes an awkwardness: Pixy stares into the camera, sitting with the papaya on Moro's crotch in front of her, with Moro holding the shutter release and taking the photo. The image, while awkward, reveals a playfulness and trust between the two.

Contemporary artist, Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian* (2019), is a sculptural wall piece made of a banana and duct tape, looks back to Duchamp's ready-made art. Cattelan uses humor to critique with the banana replaced every two days to remain fresh. The replacing of the banana in "Comedian" represents a Sisyphean task and the refusal of aging. While the main similarity with my work to Cattelan's piece is merely fruit on a wall, my work is about the passing of time and an acceptance of death. Pairing my disembodied limbs with flowers, oranges, like in *The Wall* (figure 6) highlights the conflict between the subjects. The presence of (simulated) death paired with flowers and fruits is reminiscent of condolences offered at a funeral, to wish the spirit of the departed well, and to show respect. My work uses symbols of death as an affirmation of being: blood flows, flowers wilt and dry, oranges grow mold and rot—all this bearing witness to life and allowing the cycle of life to continue. "The Wall" is a "living piece", meaning it continues to grow as it is being shown. It isn't being replaced over and over. It's being added to as it expands and grows and dies, and then grows some more.

⁸ Dale Berning Sawa, "Pixy Liao's Best Photograph: Eating a Papaya off My Boyfriend's Crotch," *The Guardian*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/feb/21/pixy-liao-best-photograph-papayaboyfriend>



(Figure 6, *The Wall*, 2020, mixed media)

Andres Serrano's photographs are meant to challenge the notion of bodily disgust. *Milk and Blood* (1986) was created amidst the AIDs crisis of the 1980's, where the virus spread like wildfire, and fueled bigotry and hate towards LGBTQ communities. In a similar fashion to today's COVID-19 outbreak, hate and stigma of Chinese and Chinese American identifying individuals has increased dramatically once again. Serrano's *Milk and Blood*, 1986, is an abstract photograph that is perceived as a flat pane of white and red. Titles play a crucial role within such work as the red and white are so abstracted that without the title, *Milk and Blood*, the work would not have as much of a visceral impact. The title directly contextualizes the flat panes of white and the red. It is the inclusion of the title itself that helps give the mental recoil. Knowing that the white and red are milk and blood, conveys sexuality and violence through the duality of the attraction of beauty and the repulsion of "grossness" of the abject.⁹ Such "grossness" comes from the fact that the milk and blood is not of our body per say, but it is from someone or something else's. Bodily rejections that do not belong to ourselves, hold a deeper sense of repulsion due to

⁹ Michael Brenson, "Review/Art; Andres Serrano: Provocation And Spirituality," *The New York Times*, December 8, 1989, Section C, Page 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/08/arts/review-art-andres-serrano-provocation-and-spirituality.html>.

their foreign origin.¹⁰ While his subject matter can be perceived as dirty, gross, or repulsive — his photographs are clean and purified, very much in the likeness of a reliquary as the photograph is simply a representation devoid of the physicality and potential danger.

My titles are deliberate to help contextualize my work by further referencing art tropes such as in *Madonna Without Child*, (figure 7), a portrait that involves a dismembered chicken head and foot posed seductively reflects a perverse humor and power unlike Pixy Liao's displays of power and humor dynamics. The title references and parodies the tradition of Madonna and child paintings made to give a focus to hope and worship. Such a display and context bear both the abjection of a destroyed body as well as the abjectness of heresy destabilizes the illusion of "humanity" as a social construct as the act of seeing who or what resides behind the curtain disenchant the public.¹¹ The posed chicken's head and foot are inviting yet are clearly and evidently dead. There are no signs of rot, decay nor blood, ridding the body of a few denotations of abjection and disgust. Yet the evidence of violence is still clear as day. By giving this corpse a pseudo second life, I subvert the abject and uncanny and elevate it to a surrealistic quality, highlighting the line between alive and dead while shattering the barrier between sanctified and profane.¹²

¹⁰ Kristeva, "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," 140.

¹¹ Richards, Morgan, "Taking The Piss: From Serrano to Surfwear," *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy* 92, no. 1m, (August, 1, 1999): 33-42, doi:[10.1177/1329878X9909200106](https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X9909200106).

¹² Shine, Tyler, "Taboo Icons: The Bodily Photography of Andres Serrano," *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 4 (August, 3, 2015): 24-44, <https://doi.org/10.5195/contemp.2015.141>.



(Figure 7, *Madonna Without Child*, 2020, inkjet print)

Now more than ever, in the era of COVID-19, a time of social reversal, where seeing others while outside brings fear and repulsion, in-betweenness becomes a positive and negative force as society seeks the safety of isolation. By combining seductive and repulsive elements, creating a visual and psychic push and pull, my work speaks to removing the boundaries while being situated between two extremes, celebrating life through humor and the abject and uncanny. I find and make my own truth to where I belong in a world of uncertainty. My work is not a memento mori, but is a memento vivere, or a remembrance to live. Speaking out to existing “inbetween” with a visual style that wrestles the dualities of beauty and disgust and life and death, through the relation of abjection and the uncanny with *You Know that feeling after you vomit? Yeah, I want to feel that* and a sense of belonging, I use surrealism influenced imagery to examine the abjection and the uncanniness of being in between. I want my work to bridge a sense of belonging through the incorporation of impurity and the acceptance of what is left intact.

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