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Between

by

Abigail Benkovich

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Metals and Jewelry Design

School of Art

The College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

May 5, 2022

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List of Works:

1. *Not in Vain*

18K gold

2. *NO*

Silver, dental cheek retractor

3. *Looking Sharp*

Stainless Steel, razor wire

4. *Matthew 5:28*

Razor Wire, textile, powder-coat

5. *1-800-656-4673*

Copper, powder-coat, pearls, tulle, razor blades

6. *Between*

Stainless Steel, Razor Wire

7: *Return to Sender*

Copper, powder-coat, stainless steel chain, carabiner, sheep rib

8: *Wrap*

Paracord

9: *Mine*

Paracord, carabiner, performance

10: *Installation*

Hand-knotted paracord, audience participation

Abstract:

I'm finally finding safety through learning to set boundaries in my life, which has carried into my artwork as physical barriers, whether worn or observed. Through the protection of volume, space, netting, and sharp objects, I can reclaim control over my immediate surroundings and my body.

My sculptures were constructed to protect the body. As I dove deeper into why that brings me comfort, I realized it's a reaction to the current culture that objectifies women's bodies. This is specifically significant to me as I grew up subjugated to purity culture within the Evangelistic Christian church, which often leaves young women shameful of themselves.

Additionally, experiencing assault has compounded this feeling of shame and lack of control over my body. My thesis work is a response to that feeling. I am finding healing through boundaries, finding safety in the *Between*.

Introduction:

What keeps me safe?

I have been searching to answer that question for the past couple of years, and as I started to answer it, only more questions began to form. Questions like- *Why do I need safety? What brought me to this place of seeking safety? How do I visualize my self-preservation?* I have realized that my idea of safety is centered around protecting my body and my experience as a woman dealing with the current culture of objectification of women's bodies.

To explain my view of objectification and how it has impacted my life, I cannot ignore my personal history with objectification in the context of my own body. For my whole upbringing, that view has been through the lens of Evangelistic Christianity. Growing up being subjugated to purity culture within the Evangelistic Christian church left me with an overwhelming amount of shame surrounding my body and worth.

I have been able to unlearn the degrading values of purity culture, and I am on a path of healing. I now ask again, *What keeps me safe?* Through learning to set boundaries in my life, I'm finding that has carried into my artwork as physical barriers, whether worn or observed. Through the protection of volume, space, netting, and sharp objects, I can reclaim control over my immediate surroundings and control over my body.

In addition to wearable art that encapsulates the entire body, I specifically utilize the most expressive part of the body, the face. I can freeze emotion at its peak through metal adornment exaggerating facial expression. Highlighting emotion as the content of my work takes inspiration from the artist Louise Bourgeois and her viewpoint of emotion being described best by performance. In an interview, she throws a can on the floor to visualize anger. This act helped me recognize how important performance is in activating my wearable art. In the same vein, I use

wearable sculpture on the face to exaggerate emotion and as tools to express parts of the healing process, such as depression and anger. Using materials such as sterling silver and gold adds importance and validation to those feelings.

The choice of razor wire as a recurring material in my work is intentionally jarring. The material is dangerous and can injure an audience member who touches it. Likewise, this aspect of real-to-life danger makes the concepts I'm talking about real-to-life as well. I use this danger as a tool for people to understand the seriousness of this topic.

In addition to the effects of purity culture, my thesis work is a response to my experience of assault and being left with the feeling of shame and lack of control over my body. I am healing through boundaries, finding safety in the *Between*.

Section 1: Context

I have always looked inward to gather inspiration; I use my own life and experiences to drive my making. Often my work deals with trauma, and I use it as a part of the healing process. In this specific body of work, I dove into the struggle I have with my body and its relation to the world around it.

Upon reflection, I realized that most of my struggles with my body are based on shame tied hand in hand with the church. I was ashamed that I didn't fit into the gendered mold of a "godly woman." My body, my actions, and things that happened to me made me ashamed of who I was. Researching the source of this shame, I found it stemmed from purity culture that has ravaged the Evangelistic Christian church. Purity culture is defined as abstinence-only teaching emphasizing modesty and strict gender roles and norms (Turner and Saleh, 2021). A quick look at the history of when purity culture became institutional and at the forefront of American Christian minds was immediately following the AIDS epidemic. Federal funding of "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage" programs began in the 1980s to combat the fear of promiscuity and AIDS. This program is still in effect today and over 2 billion dollars has been spent towards this cause throughout its span. The Title V section of this program sent money to schools, community organizations, and faith organizations (Klein 22). It has turned the relationship with sex and body autonomy instead into the notion of the individual- mostly centered around girls and young women- as being boiled down to being "pure" or "impure." As said by Linda Kay Klein in her book "Pure": "The purity message is not about sex. Rather, it is about *us*: who we are, who we are expected to be, and who it is said we will become if we fail to meet those expectations. This is the language of shame.... The religious purity messages many of us received as girls were not about what we might do, but about what we would *be*, or be seen as

(Klein 14)." This label of purity became the one thing that mattered to a young Christian girl. That title meant salvation, goodness, love, and even the worthiness of life. The craziest thing is that you didn't even need to have sex to be branded "impure." Varying from church to church, being "impure" could look like a multitude of things: clothing being too tight, a skirt being too short, a bra strap showing, having a boyfriend, not aligning with the gender norms of a woman, being too outspoken, not submitting to men, and predominantly, a body developing in a way that is a "stumbling block" to boys.

This term "stumbling block" refers to the bible verse: "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall" (*New International Version*, Romans. 14.20-21). Linda Kay Klein explains: "Those who call women and girls stumbling blocks interpret Romans 14 as a metaphor: girls and women are technically free to dress how they want, just as we are all free to eat what we want, but if girls and women care for their brothers, they should dress and behave modestly so they don't become stumbling blocks to them (Klein 29)." Most of my shame stems from the idea that young women are stumbling blocks and that their worthiness as a person is centered around others' opinions. In my teen years, basing the line between "pure" and "impure" on my developing body and clothing choices put me at war with myself. I tried to be modest, but the line between modest and being a temptation was always moving. Growing up in this culture made me equate my body as this wrong, inherently sexual object, that I should cover or face shaming from my community.

On top of the shame I felt living in my own body, I silently grappled with feelings of nothingness because after emotional abuse and sexual assault, I was "impure." After those

experiences, suddenly all the teachings I heard of damnation and unworthiness were about me. Suddenly, the lesson that I was "damaged goods" and something to be discarded, filled my head.

The peak of the federal funding for the "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage" program occurred during my childhood and formative teen years (Klein 22). Women who are currently twenty to thirty years old are the first generation to grow up with this program- not the first generation to be influenced by purity culture, but the first under an educational program, compiled with the rise of the internet and its own set of ways to shame. Now entering adulthood is where the greatest danger lies, growing out of church youth groups and entering adult settings like college campuses or bars. Young women in these environments new to them have to deal with the intersection between the degradation of women in Evangelistic purity culture and the mainstream inequity and objectification of their bodies. They are more vulnerable to assault because they do not have the tools to protect themselves from objectification, in fact they go into these situations believing they are the ones at fault for unwanted attention or touch because of what they were taught in the church. This mindset is also critically dangerous in young relationships, young women do not believe they can speak up to their partner, as it is part of being "submissive" like they were taught, which opens the door for being taken advantage of. Talking about the harms of purity culture in my thesis will hopefully shed light on this critical issue regarding young women's safety and mental health.

I also create wearable art for the face to add an emotional performative element to my work. I am echoing this idea of conveying an emotion being the central aspect of the work by the artist Louise Bourgeois. In a video interview, she explained her emotion and anger and then threw a can on the ground, stating "You want to break this, it will not break" (Storr, R., 2022). By that action alone, she implied without words, "there it is, that is what I feel." She brought that

feeling of anger to the physical realm, both in action and the resultant action. There is a sense of exaggerated emotion by doing physical acts with the body. These gestures explained how you feel exaggerated in force, length, danger, repetition, and obsession. To explain how I feel when I think about being touched non-consensually, controlled, objectified, or shamed, I have this innate response of repulsion to get everything out of my immediate physical space. This exaggeration of distance, volume, and anger manifests itself in barriers, sharp objects, and obsessively wrapping and covering myself repeatedly until I feel safe. For the audience to understand, these pieces cannot be static; activation happens through performance, whether through a photo of a movement in the piece, in a video, or in live performance.

The bulk of my thesis toes the line between accessory and garment, occasionally accessory being the garment. I have been increasingly interested in fashion and fashion history, studying old and new references and how fashion is a tool for self-expression. In creating my garments and accessories, some significant influences are from garments and their designers. Iris Van Herpen is a substantial influence on my work; her work consists of laser-cut textiles, acrylics, and 3D printed shapes repeated by the thousands to create gowns. I see her use of repetition in my work as well. Another influence in my work is Craig Green, a men's streetwear designer who uses unconventional materials and creates sculptures on the body. His use of structure in garments made by tent poles, elastic cording, and inflatables inspired me to create striking silhouettes that come far off of the body. In addition to countless other fashion inspirations, the house Schiaparelli has been a considerable influence, especially in my jewelry accessories. Daniel Roseberry, the head of the house, has recently re-invigorated the house with other-worldly surrealism. He uses jeweled and golden body parts as accessories and has encouraged my love of motifs of anatomy in my art.

Section II: Evolution

Starting in the fall of 2020, I came to the Rochester Institute of Technology with an appreciation for minimalism, Renaissance art, wearable metal art. The themes I was dealing with in my undergraduate career spanned from body dysmorphia to religious trauma. It was in starting my Masters of Fine Arts program that something new introduced itself to me: healing. As I actively heal from the past, I find myself facing and identifying what hurt me. Consciously or subconsciously, I created things that covered the face or body in an attempt to feel safe. In creating something that made me feel safe, I was able to heal. That feeling of safety manifested itself as boundaries around the body; first, noticing this in the comfort of wearing sunglasses, I could see this field that kept me from the world. That disconnection allowed me to relax and take a step away from any hurt the world placed upon me.

I started knotting paracord to create coverings, and while I was making a netting garment, people asked me, "why not use a pre-made net? The knotting takes so long". In my reflection, I was drawn to the act of knotting. The time and effort put into making the net, consciously creating every knot myself, acts as a metaphor for creating boundaries in real life. Setting boundaries and committing to them takes time and practice, as does making a netting composed of thousands of knots.

For the next couple of semesters, I focused on wanting to conceal the face, cover the body, and recognize an obsessive, repetitive aesthetic in my work. The idea of safety, netting, utility objects, and sharp metal as ways of protection was comforting.

Beginning this year, I was fabricating sharp objects like cones as spikes on a glass wrecking ball. It wasn't very safe, but the danger wasn't real enough. Then I made a necklace with half-broken bulbs of glass, and the naturally sharp edges of the broken glass gave that

real-to-life fear of bodily harm that I was looking for. As I put it on in front of my professors, they were concerned because it was dangerous, which was the exact fear that I wanted to evoke. I ordered razor wire in bulk and started creating garments with it, which gave the cactus-like effect I was going for.

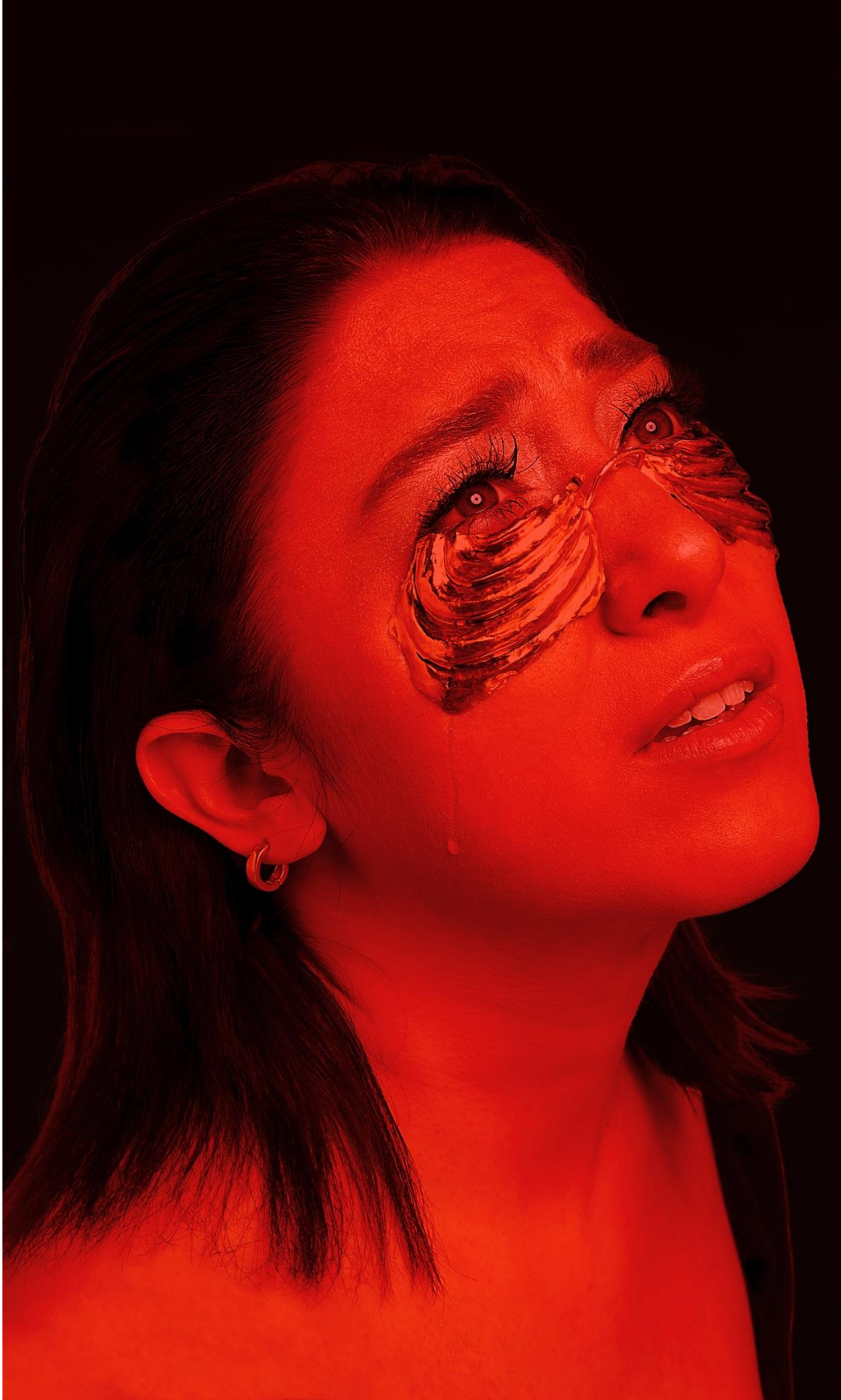
Section III: Body of Work

After reflecting upon the questions I had for myself, such as *Why do I need safety?* and *What brought me to this place of seeking safety?* Finding that this need came from roots of shame and objectification while growing up in the church, and doubled-down after assault and objectification of women in the secular world, allowed me to have this sense of comfort when surrounded by boundaries. I was then able to answer the question of *How do I visualize my self-preservation?* This is seen in my finalized body of work in unconventional jewelry, wearable sculpture, performance, and installation.

As one of the leading materials in my work, why metal? One of the attributes I love most about metal is its permanence; unlike other materials, it lasts centuries. In that longevity of the material, I find validation in what I'm creating. Since I visualize emotion in my work, there is an assurance of my feelings when I make work out of metal. In addition to validation, the metal adds an element of luxury and importance. Therefore, creating wearable face art made from precious materials validates the emotions I am visualizing by saying their worth is as precious as silver and gold.

The culmination of needing to express emotion and using luxurious material resulted in 18k golden eye bags. As previously stated, metal is permanence and, therefore, validation. I was inspired by my hatred of my eye bags, especially when they would become very prominent when under a mass amount of stress. I thought they were unappealing and something to fight actively. Thinking about them further, I realized that I would get very severe eye bags when under a lot of stress, precisely when I was in deep mental distress, such as dealing with anxiety, self-hatred, shame, or depression. All the tears wear on my face, and the salt makes the area around my eyes

puff up. It was a shameful, visual reminder of my pain. In creating the golden eye bags, I want to validate sadness and pain because those feelings were essential in the healing process. Creating this work in 18k gold signifies the importance and preciousness of pain.

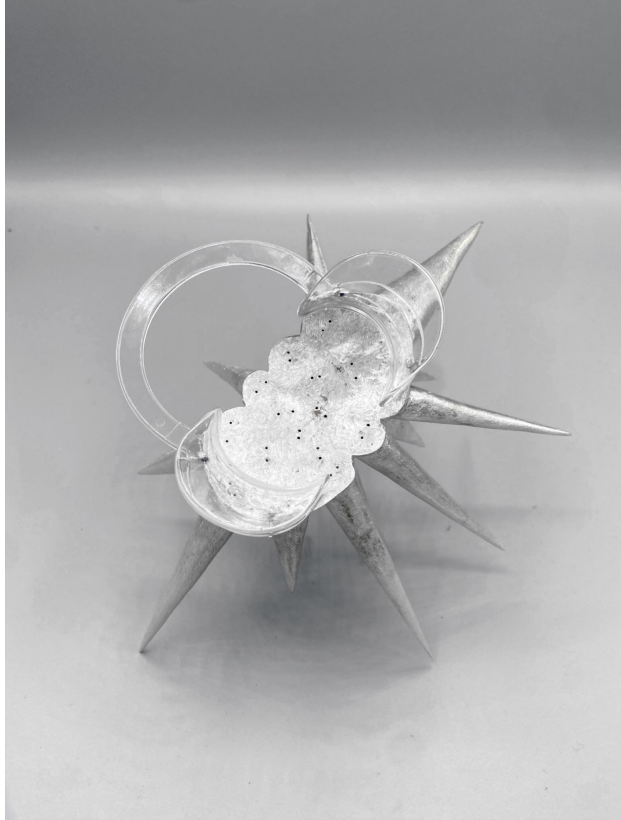




(1)

I created another piece of jewelry worn on the face, composed of sharp silver spikes exploding from the mouth. With this piece and its subsequent documentation, I displayed anger. Throughout my life, I have people-pleased, repressing anger to make other people feel comfortable. Women and anger are not supposed to coincide especially in the Evangelistic community. Being the "good Christian girl," I had these expectations of always being happy, "I wasn't allowed to experience anger or sadness because that was just evidence that you're not strong enough in your faith. Now, I am learning not to people-please anymore, which is the way I express anger for what I went through, for my younger self, and using it to be able to stand up for myself now. One of the steps in the healing process is anger, and this piece is my manifestation of that emotion.





(2)

My work is based on raw emotion. In my face art or coverings, I utilize the part of the body that is most expressive. I wish to visualize those deep-seated emotions, freezing them in metal at their peak. When I cover my face completely, it's to completely cut off the world from me, from my vulnerability, from the ability to access or read my emotions. It also acts as a way for me to put up a shield and be able to process whatever I want in my own time underneath that shield, away from public view. This specific instance of creating a covering of the whole face can be seen in the headpiece made out of razor wire.



(3)

Matching the razor wire headpiece, I created an outfit out of razor wire. The outfit consists of a wrap mini skirt, a tube top, and elbow-length gloves designed to show more skin. In a thesis all about boundaries, covering, and armor, why would I include an outfit that instead reveals the body? In this thesis and my life, I wanted to cover my body entirely in my art or wear 3-XL clothing so no one knew what my body looked like, as a protection from being shamed for showing my skin. I find comfort and security in coverings, but I also found as I transitioned from wearing tight, semi-revealing clothing to oversized clothing during one point in my life, there was a sense of relief to the community around me who pushed modesty and how one's morals lines up with how much of your body you show off or cover-up. I wanted to include a piece to show that even though I feel the most comfortable in oversized clothing, I am still valid no matter how much skin I show. The razor wire reinforces that my body shouldn't be inherently sexualized and that wearing revealing clothing does not equal consent to touch.

I want to reclaim neutrality on the women's body, and that it should only be sexualized when the woman wants to be sexual. The mini skirt and the tube top remind me of parties, bars, and clubs, which can feel like a battlefield for a woman. It feels like I've been trained my whole life to stay safe and protect myself from men when entering those spaces. As a woman, you're taught to cover your drink so you won't be drugged, to give a fake number to men instead of denying advances in case they might get mad, that people grabbing your ass is inevitable, and to just ignore it, to walk home with your keys sticking out from your fist, to always look over your shoulder, don't walk in the dark, don't walk alone, actually just try to avoid walking in general. With all of those rules in mind, it feels like women are constantly entering a battlefield. I want the razor blades that make up the revealing clothing to be the woman's armor. To show that revealing clothing doesn't make a woman weak or shameful, but that she is strong, she is not

morally less than someone who covers up, she is confident, and she is not an invitation for non-consensual touch.



(4)

The red, bloody hands of the razor wire gloves are inspired by the bible verse, "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matthew. 5:28-29). Just as the Bible verse Romans 14:20-21 has been used out of context for centuries to call women stumbling blocks, I want to use the idea of Matthew 5:28-29 being taken literally as a way to start the conversation of men being responsible for their feelings, and not degrading women for men's thoughts. The bloody gloves imply the removal of the lustful eye.



(4)

As much as the razorwire garment is anti-touch and anti-objectification, I want to acknowledge the invisible scars when that boundary is invaded. I do this through a tulle garment embroidered with red powder-coated hands and wounds made from copper electroforming. Through this piece, I visualize the scars of being touched against consent; even though there are no physical markers, the handprints on my body are still something I have to carry with me daily. Through this piece, I am wearing my scars and making them visible for the first time, for they are only visible to the public when we begin to speak up about them.





(5)

The second razor wire garment in my body of work is meant to bring in the aspect of the safety found in volume around the body. As previously stated, you exist in your personal space that cannot be intruded on because of the boundary between you and the world. (6)





(6)

Continuing to tie in the theme of religion in my thesis work, I created a wearable wound in copper and red powder-coat on the side of the body, visualizing where a rib was removed, and chained a sheep rib to the injury. The objectification of women and the inequity of women to men (especially in the church) stems from the ongoing rule of a patriarchal society. The first instance of patriarchy in the Bible is Genesis, "The Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man" (Gen. 2.21-22). While there are many opinions on the significance of Eve being created from Adam, I wanted to have a tongue-in-cheek commentary on this, portraying a rebellion against the patriarchy in the church by a wearable art piece that depicts a removed rib from a woman's body. The work metaphorically says, "Here, Adam, you can have this back; I don't need it."



(7)

In addition to the knotted paracord work, I have previously joined paracord in parallel strips to create a textile. In this iteration, I made two long paracord wraps that are used to be formed around the body in a sculptural manner. Each time styling them on someone is different, as there is no set way to put it on, but the act of obsessively wrapping the body repeatedly remains the same, it reflects trying to feel safe after a traumatic event. Wrapping and wrapping, every time increasing the sense of comfort. With all of my sharp objects in my thesis, I wanted this one to be soft, something the wearer could be hugged by.



(8)

As referenced earlier, performance is an integral part of my work. I wanted to include a video of the act of knotting myself into a ball. In this two-hour piece, I show the slow, imperfect, and self-indulgent knotting process. The further along I got with this process, the more I thought about how every knot is for me, putting time into me and being entirely mine. When I cannot control the world around me, I was at least able to control the immediate space around me in this barrier I created.



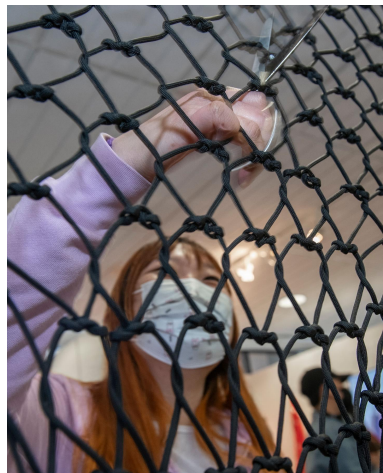




(9)

The installation of a barrier of knotted paracord around my entire exhibition is meant to make the audience an active agent in exploring boundaries. The audience is given a choice to cut the paracord wall or tie the holes closed. Through this action, I want them to actively think of their involvement in invading boundaries and how this could be relevant to their own lives.





(10)

Conclusion:

The work from the past couple of years, culminating in the show's installation and the opening reception, was everything I had hoped for. I included pictures of editorial shoots with the fashion-based pieces, tv with the performance piece on a loop, models walking around wearing the garments, and the audience was ecstatic to interact with my art through the cutting and tying of the paracord. I loved handing over the design reins to the audience, adding graffiti to the wall by knotting different shapes, and creating aspects of the wall I would have never thought of myself. Walking around and listening to people participating, some people were nervous about cutting the thing I spent so long knotting; some were relating the number of knots in the red paracord they were weaving to the number of their family members. Others were creating icons like hearts out of the knots in the wall. This hand-over of control to the audience was the conclusion to the story I have been telling through the creation of my thesis. The process of moving beyond my individual experience to include the viewer allowed for the work to move from a personal experience to a human experience; the barrier became something that united many instead of isolated one. Instead of building a wall, I created an opportunity to connect. I end with this question, what keeps *you* safe?

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