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Meredith Stern Artist Statement

“Generations” (Collage Series: 2013- 2014)

The “Generations” collage series are visual mementos I’ve created to explore, analyze, and deconstruct gender tropes and to visualize the lived experiences of being a feminist in our current society. Personal narrative, history, and ideology merge to create a series of colorful textural collages. History notes from my family’s recently deceased matriarch merge with my own hand printed images to create imaginative scenes depicting journey, home, love, and struggle. The central characters engage in various activities and rituals in whimsical landscapes that are both perilous and fertile. These visual vignettes depict various scenes inspired by my own experiences, the stories of my ancestors, and ideas around gender in our culture at large. Themes include migration between spaces, the construction of home, the evolution of family, and development of identity. This series centers on creating dialog around the issue of gender liberation by creating a place for narrative and discourse that challenges a presumed “male gaze.” As narratives deconstructing and analyzing gender are typically marginalized in the art, I place them at the center of my artistic work.

“The Four Elements Converging At The Soul Of The Universe” and **“At The Nexus Between Innovation And Desolation”** are a pair of other worldly creatures or Gods who signify creation and ruin. Their auras reflect chaos and control. These gender- neutral creatures represent the forces that bind all of us and express the tensions of opposing forces and the space in between.

“Another Migration For Wary Wanderers” and **“Growing Peace Down By The River”** are both tributes to my family members who migrated to escape religious persecution so they could build peaceful lives for their children. Strong matriarchs have governed our family throughout several generations and this piece honors these feminists who have shaped my life.

“Stating The Obvious” is a tribute to the writing done by bell hooks in her book “Feminism is for Everybody.” Her definition of feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” remains the most useful framework for working towards gender equality.

“Through The Looking Glass Ceiling” explores the trope of the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl.” This film character is typically white, quirky, traditionally feminine, and serves to assist a male character (also typically white) in his quest to discover happiness and success. Much like Alice in Wonderland, she looks at the world with whimsy and naiveté. A glass ceiling hovers darkly above her as she never achieves her own enlightenment or success. This ceiling also prevents her from being the main protagonist and relegates her to being a supporting role. Instead she is presented as a simplistic character solely needing validation through her relationship with the male character. Her trajectory is mitigated by the male protagonist’s desire and journey.

“Tireless Optimism In The Face Of Endless Revision” reflects the process of an endless struggle for equality. With each gain made with gender roles shifting, inequality persists. We face a never-ending set of obstacles through systematic gender oppression which remain largely unchallenged within the framework of capitalism. There is still massive structural and institutional barriers which disproportionately negatively affect women, queer people, and people of color. Survival requires us to constantly balance our anger and frustration while finding space for hope and optimism. It’s a continued struggle requiring organizing and movement building. Efforts to simply reform specific aspects of our society have been unsuccessful at shifting fundamental power imbalances that exist along intersections of class, race, and gender lines. Radical feminism calls for restructuring our society so that it can become fundamentally anti-sexist.

“A Woman’s Place” is a double entendre. It references the old adage “a woman’s place is in the home.” It also refers to the need for a woman (and everyone) to have a place of her/their own where one can be free of judgment. Many feminists have created various types of gathering spaces, often termed “safe” (or safer) spaces, where women, queer, and/or transgender people can find community and a physical space where we can be ourselves without being subjected to a heterosexual male gaze. This piece is about trying to find a space where we can navigate our inner desires that may at times conflict and/or align with society expectations of our behavior.

“Angry Women In Forever Deep Waters” gives a nod to all the unseen and unpaid labor women have done historically in the service of their families and society at large. Low income folks engaged in domestic work continue to be dominated and exploited – sometimes by upper class women who have been unable to connect to women outside of their own economic class. This image also depicts the incredible mask we often wear to hide our anger and frustration while we do the work necessary to survive and/or support our families.

“Eve Was From Africa” serves as a counter narrative to an extreme racist discourse aiming to whitewash the ethnicity and cultural diversity of iconic legendary figures. Jesus was a Galilean Jew –defined by contemporary land boundaries, he would be described as Middle Eastern. Saint Nicolas, the man who inspired the Santa Claus myth, was a 4th Century Greek Bishop of Myra (which is part of modern day Turkey). Geneticists have determined that all living modern humans can be traced back to two people who lived between 100,000 – 200,000 years ago on the continent of Africa. Our original mother, referred to as “Mitochondrial Eve,” was what we would today describe as a woman of color. While evidence demonstrates all of these people had dark skin, these figures are currently portrayed in the mainstream culture as light skinned, thus promoting white supremacy. This demonstrates purposeful and institutional racism within the religious and secular realms of our society. Such choices display a purposeful ignorance of the reality that all humans belong to one singular human race, as well as a diminishment of the important diverse cultural heritage of the myths and legends we find solace in. In this piece flora and fauna surround “Eve” as she sews the fabric of a quilt meant to represent the beautiful diversity of our cultural ancestry.

“Rabbit Done Three Ways” is a triptych expressing the three main states of being that are presented to cis-gender women in our society: that of virgin, mother, and whore. Scene one is titled, **“Chaste / Noisettes de Lapereau Sauce Cacao”** (Baby Rabbit in a Chocolate Sauce). Scene two is titled, **“Fallen / Lapin a La Cocotte”** (Rabbit Stew). Scene three is titled, **“Creator / Roti de Lapin Farci”** (Roast, Stuffed Rabbit). We are bombarded by a set of paradoxical standards prescribing how we can succeed in our society based on where we fit into these three sexualized categories of identification. Rather than define our lives through our mental and emotional lives, these categories are fixated around our sexualized relationships to cis-gender heterosexual men. I use rabbits as a metaphor for women as they are prey rather than predatory animals, much as women and femininity are generally still viewed within mainstream society. Rabbits are generally quiet animals but when they do make noise, it sounds like a woman’s scream. Their main mechanism for defense is to flee from danger, and thus represents a state of extreme victimization. The phrase “breed like rabbits” has also been used as a derogatory metaphor for human mothers. Each image has a descriptive English word and a French recipe title. Rabbit dishes are common in French cuisine so I found recipes that would in some way relate to the English word.

“8 Chapters Blooming” (Porcelain Series: 2013-2014)

This set of 8 porcelain platters titled “8 Chapters for Blooming” are tributes to musical groups that influenced my own journey into feminism. Many of my artistic creations have been made while these song lyrics were resonating in the background. Some of these artists explicitly identify as “feminist” while others express their gendered experiences with lyrical subtlety. Each platter has a quote from the band listed on the label hung below it. The titles reference some of the 5 stages of loss, the 3 stages of birthing labor, as well as additional descriptions of emotional well being. My path into acquiring a feminist analysis and identity traverses an emotional arc that reflects some of these states of being. To accept the institutional barriers marginalized people face in our society is a difficult process. Finding the inspiration, people, and projects that are working for equality involves working from a place of both pain and love. Bringing to life a societal transformation that at the core promotes true gender equality is the beautiful goal of creative feminist resistance.

- Platter 1: “Grief/Awakening: Bikini Kill”
- Platter 2: “Denial/ Frustration: The Ex”
- Platter 3: “Anger: Missy Elliot”
- Platter 4: “Bargaining: Dog Faced Hermans”
- Platter 5: “Transition/ Rebellion: Huggy Bear”
- Platter 6: “Acceptance/ Struggle: Rah Digga & Bahamadia”
- Platter 7: “Laboring/ Movement Building: Queen Latifah”
- Platter 8: “Birthing Love: Lauryn Hill”