

Ellen Nelson

Pushed to the Margins: A Reflection on Life as a Second-Class Citizen

It was a crisp fall day in Ann Arbor. I was wearing a long black sweater with hot pink tights. Leaving my morning class at the art school, I crossed the road and stood at the bus stop with several of my peers. An SUV soon drove by, occupied two young men, also, presumably, my peers. They slowed down, and the front-seat passenger rolled down his window and yelled at me with menace, "Why don't you put some more clothes on, you big slut!" They drove away as I stood and said nothing, the idea slowly sinking in that I was the object of their disgust, and everyone around me knew it, and chose to say nothing either. Shock transformed to obstinate anger; my attempts at aloofness were quickly taken over by mortification. A complete stranger verbally assaulted me, and in a matter of minutes, changed the way I looked at myself. Who gave him the power to do that?

On my long walk home from the bus stop, it occurred to me that those strangers were going to drive away and be perfectly happy. They would be able to live their lives shaming women publicly or privately, and no one would stop them. If we some day worked in the same office, they would likely be paid more than me. They would go on enforcing a world where men have more power than women by default, and teach it to their children. In my senior thesis, based on my experience as a woman in America, I attempt to address issues of marginalization, with paintings illustrating the act of stereotyping, personal reflective painting methods, and paintings that show what we, as humans, all have in common, despite the heavy weight that we place on our differences.

What those strangers driving by did not realize in their mission to make me feel bad at any cost was that I am an artist. After some frustrated tears, I immediately turned to painting to help take control of the situation. I made a series of small, triangular paintings for an expressionist exercise that illustrated each phase of my experience, in a visual language. The deep, dark, small and sinking feeling of being publicly insulted. The feverish, muddy browns of embarrassment and denial. The glistening pink of questioning whether or not it may have been my fault. The blue-green-gray of exhaustion and oppression. British painter Jenny Saville is an artist whose paintings have influenced mine throughout the making of this series. She too uses muted blues, grays, and greens to evoke a vivid feeling of what it is like to be uncomfortable in one's own skin. She is noted for painting overweight women and transgender people, drawing heavily from raw imagery of corrective and cosmetic surgery and medical procedures. She shows the human body as a process, with the end goal of achieving the ever-elusive "ideal" body image. She shows her audience the ugly side of society's pressure to conform; how what people look like, what they want to look like, and what they feel they should look like are so desperately different. She invites her viewers to share in the fatigue of her subjects, in all of their nakedness and come away with an uneasy, visceral feeling of what life can be like for other people. In my attempts to achieve a similar outcome for my own viewers, I put my brief painting exercises into practice to help complete a series of eight 4'X4' paintings, arranged two high, and four wide. Perhaps my jolting experience with the two strangers was worth the suffering in order to gain some of the best fuel I could have asked for.

The first four paintings in the series take an outside look at how we create 'otherness.' The first painting focuses on people with the 'unseen' problems of depression

and mental illness. The second touches on those who have addictions. The third takes a look at people who are disabled, and how their social identities are so greatly affected by physical signifiers, as in the fourth painting, which focuses on people who do not conform to modern American beauty standards. In each of these paintings, the physical attributes of the people in these marginalized groups are taken apart and put on display, shrouded in deep yellows as scientific subjects in jars of formaldehyde. Anatomical imagery is used as well. Brains float around as subjects of what make depressed people, disabled people, or those with addictions different. A cirrhotic liver marks the physical, scientific consequence of a 'condemnable' lifestyle. A bulge of fat, breasts that are not the right size, a blemished face, flow together under a single category of person, the 'unattractive.'

The fifth painting in this series, although along the same aesthetic lines as the first four, is markedly different; focusing on women, it stems from personal experience. It is meant to ask the question of what it means to be a woman in America. What does it mean if I paint my nails? What connotations are there to me wearing makeup or not? The painting features a slice-away view of a mammary gland and a uterus with ovaries. Although these body parts are not outwardly visible, they make me a target of discrimination and ridicule, because they exist underneath my skin.

The final three paintings in this series are meant to portray the ridiculousness of marginalization by showing my viewers how we, as humans, are all essentially the same. One painting is entirely packed with organs, bones, and blood cells, arranged almost to look like a bouquet of sorts, glistening and pulsing. Another portrays emotion, something we all experience, with a dark hall of brains and colorful expression. This painting was inspired by my experience this year of having my credit card stolen, and used to buy iPhones. After my initial anger at the situation, it occurred to me that whoever committed this crime was from a completely different walk of life from my own. That person felt want for those iPhones as great as the want I had to get my money back. Emotion is a relative thing, with so much to consider before discounting the emotions of others. My last painting is an array of twisting, bubbling, brightly-colored DNA molecules, the building-blocks of all organic life. It serves as a reminder that we all come from the same materials, and could have been anyone on this earth. Through my more colorful, final three paintings, my last in particular, I have looked to the work of British painter Patrick Heron for inspiration. Heron, in a vastly different vein of painting, uses colors and abstraction in ways I have never appreciated before. His paintings are not technically realistic, but have proven to be the most evocatively realistic paintings I have ever encountered. For me, this realistic effect is all in how he puts colors together – his combinations of totally inventive colors light sparks in my brain; sparks of recognition and memory in images I have never even seen before. I grapple in all of my paintings with how to arrange the colors, something that Heron seems to do so intuitively.

Throughout the course of this work, I have looked to various authors to help shed light on the idea of 'being human.' The novels and short stories of author David Foster Wallace provide a great deal of inspiration for my work. Using his relatable protagonists, he richly describes feelings that we have all had, and, more importantly, felt alone in having. In his novel "Infinite Jest," my favorite book, he describes why people commit suicide:

The so-called 'psychotically depressed' person who tries to kill herself doesn't do so out of quote 'hopelessness' or any abstract conviction that life's assets and debits do not square. And surely not because death seems

suddenly appealing. The person in who *Its* invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable level will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise. Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows. The terror of falling from a great height is still as great as it would be for you or me standing speculatively at the same window just checking out the view; i.e. the fear of falling remains a constant. The variable here is the other terror, the fire's flames. And yet nobody down on the sidewalk, looking up and yelling 'Don't!' and 'Hang on!', can understand the jump. Not really. You'd have to have personally been trapped and felt flames to really understand a terror way beyond falling.

This is what motivated the first painting in the series. The idea that people can even be marginalized after death, for simply behaving in a way that others cannot, or will not try to understand. This lack of understanding among people who are different from one another is a driving factor in marginalization that stems partially from unrealized privilege. Feminist author Marilyn Frye describes societal approaches toward privilege, marginalization, and intersecitonality as the wires of a bird cage; no one wire has the power to captivate someone, but together, they do the job:

It is now possible to grasp one of the reasons why oppression can be hard to see and recognize: one can study they elements of an oppressive structure with great care and some good will without seeing the structure as a whole, and hence without seeing or being able to understand that one is looking at a cage and that there are people there who are caged, whose motion and mobility are restricted, whose lives are shaped and reduced. (Frye 7)

These elements of oppression – marginalization, stereotyping, and reductionism – all work together to create a force of subconscious prejudice in America that turns us against one another, and keeps our social capital at an all-time low. It is a depressing prospect indeed, but in order to start turning things around, the first step is merely to help people see what's going on. For people to recognize whatever privilege they may have, and at the same time, see how they themselves are marginalized. To realize that even casually using words like “gay,” “retarded,” or “girl” as insults is the very kind of action that perpetuates the cultural marginalization of homosexuals, disabled people, and women.

This series has been a journey for me in making sense of the world around me. I want my viewers to see my paintings, to look at the freshly liberated organs, the bits and pieces of humans that are “not polite to stare” at, to feel some sort of discomfort and unease, and ultimately find themselves within the paintings – times that they’ve been categorized, labeled, hurt, things that they’ve said or done to categorize, label, and hurt. I would love for my viewers to consider the capricious definition of identity, and walk away questioning what ‘difference’ really means.



Paintings 1-4



Painting 5: My person reflection on what it means to be a woman in America



Painting 6: Materials

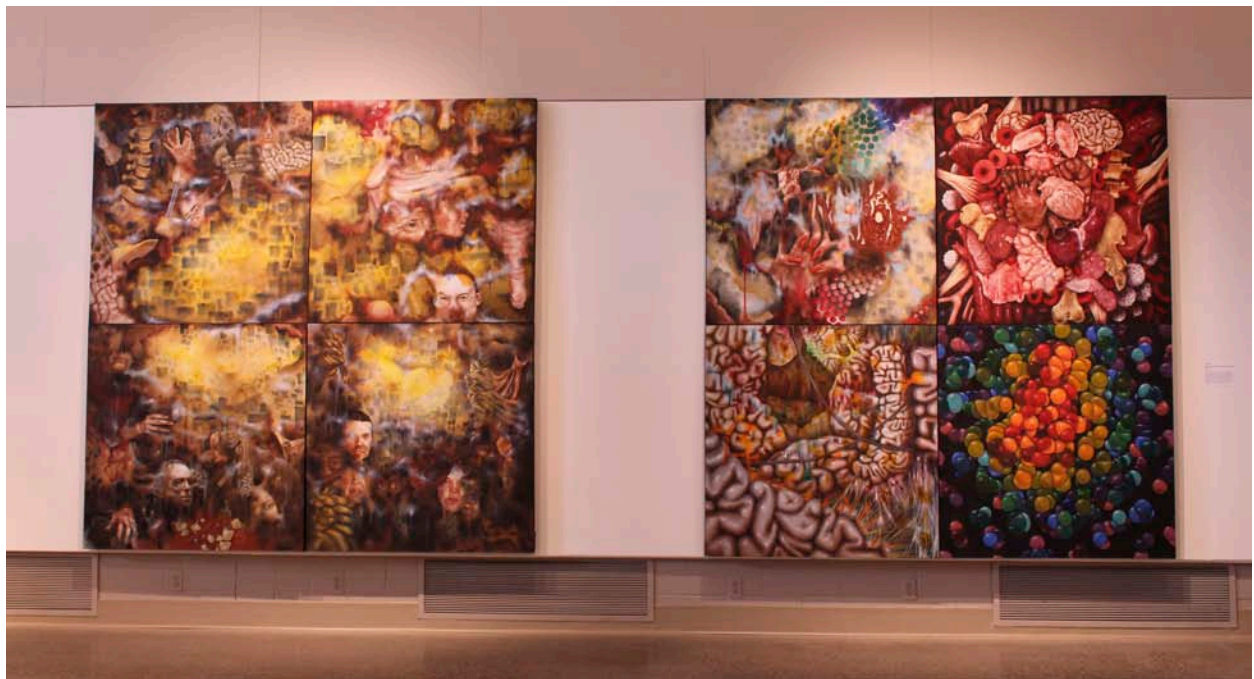


Painting 7: Feelings



Painting 8: DNA

Throughout the making of my work, I underwent some major changes in the focus of my topic. I started out wanting to show how ridiculous marginalization is by illustrating how people are marginalized. I ended by allowing the senselessness of marginalization to show through from images of how we are all the same. This piece has changed my work from the serious and literal to the provocative and painterly, from a yelling voice to a clear-sighted suggestion. It has done a great deal to change me as a person as well; I have learned this year to banish anger and frustration and embrace problem solving through artistic expression and the love and understanding of others. I know now that if I care enough about something, it will come through in my work, no matter what I paint.





Jenny Saville, *Passage*

"That's why transsexuals and hermaphrodites have become interesting to me. I want to be a painter of modern life, and modern bodies, those that emulate contemporary life, they're what I find most interesting" (Cooke).



Plan

"When I made *Plan*, I was forever explaining what liposuction was. It seemed so violent then. These days, I doubt there's anyone in the western world who doesn't know what liposuction is. Surgery was a minority sport; now that notion of hybridity is everywhere. There's almost a new race: the plastic surgery race" (Cooke).



Patrick Heron: *Azalea Garden*, May 1956

"Seeing is not a passive but an active operation . . . all art is a convention, an invention. Painting may literally claim to alter the look of the world for us. We only see nature through a system of images, a configuration which painting supplies" (Gooding).

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