

*efflorescence*

**INTRODUCTION:**

My installation is composed of small sculptures, a life sized figurative sculpture immersed in a bathtub and a series of silkscreened prints, all of which challenge gendered ideas of love portrayed in popular media. Post sex revolution, there is a need for new imagery that challenges strict gender roles, where men are strong and women are dependent. The piece challenges the classical renaissance sculptures of Michelangelo, strong Fabios on romance novel covers, and dramas of 1950s romance comics that exist. The sculptures employ subtractive, additive and life-casting methods using plaster. The bathtub evokes intimacy and private space and references the classical block of marble; just as the block of marble contains a form within it, so does a bathtub filled with water. In addition, the silkscreened prints hung inside the private room opposing the sculptures, creates a comparative juxtaposition. These prints are based on source images I have been inspired by that are repetitive in form, narrative and relationship to romantic love. Over all the work will call into question female audience, male genius, and gendered ideas of love and art.

**CONTEXT:**

My research began with a curiosity about romantic love, and how it is portrayed visually in art and popular media. I initially found myself drawn to romance novel covers, particularly with the male actor that portrays the main love interest, Fabio. Fabio is a modern day mythological icon. His face and pecs are on thousands of romance novels, so it is hard not to wonder why he is chosen to be the height of female interest. He attains this hyper-masculinity and yet the hair blowing in the wind, dewy,

airbrush make up effect evokes the essence of femininity that is humorous: a Hercules and Omphale effect. He simultaneously deconstructs and reinforces gender identity in romantic heterosexual love in one image, which causes a level of unease and makes it comical.

Romance novels are the highest selling genre of book and the least respected.<sup>1</sup> Tania Modleski's book, *Loving with a Vengeance*, analyzes female audiences and their relationship to mass-market romantic fiction. She starts off by setting a distinct double standard in the literary world, "The positive cultural myths are mostly male ones."<sup>2</sup> Meaning that female works that aim for female audiences, in comparison to their male counterparts, are seen as frivolous. This theory can be applied to other fields, including the arts. However as Modeleski points out,

[Romance Novels] enormous and continuing popularity, I assume, suggests that they speak to very real problems and tensions in women's lives. The narrative strategies which have evolved for smoothing over these tensions can tell us much about how women have managed not only to live in oppressive circumstances but invest their situations with some dignity.<sup>3</sup>

The content of the books are extremely feminist in that they are written for women by women about women's issues/fantasies. For those reasons, they should be taken seriously and be valued, but are not.

The storyline of most romance novels is about a man and woman, who are equally invested in their relationship, fighting through people and obstacles with the objective of getting married. However, there is a disconnection between the feminist content and the

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<sup>1</sup> "Romance Reader Statistics." Accessed April 19, 2016.  
<https://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=582>.

<sup>2</sup> Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 5.

images on the covers that support strict gender roles. I visually analyzed countless covers, and on every cover it was the same, strong, hyper masculine man acting as a frame for the weak, swooning female draping herself in uncomfortable contortions.



Fig. 1. A comparison between romance novel cover *Allegheny Captive* by Caroline Bourne, artist unknown 1990 and *Birth of Venus*, Botticelli, Oil painting, 1484-1486. Notice how the romance novel references Botticelli through visual cues; the similar poses of the female body as well as the use of water in both images. Source: Left: Pinterest Right: Uffizi Gallery

As I continue to look at these covers, I recognize this classical visual language that references mythological imagery from Renaissance and Classical eras. I look to classical sculptures portraying Greek and Roman mythologies. Women in sculptures about love are just as passive as the women depicted in later art forms i.e. romance novels.

This visual language directly relates to the mythology of sculpture as a metaphor for love: Pygmalion. In the Ovid's metamorphosis story Pygmalion, a sculptor, who

loathes the female sex, secludes himself from the outside world to work on his art.

Ovid writes,

In the course of time he successfully carved an amazingly skillful statue in ivory, white as snow, an image of perfect feminine beauty- and fell in love with his own creation. This heavenly woman appeared to be real; you'd surely suppose her alive and ready to move, if modesty, didn't preclude it..." (Ovid, 10:246-250).<sup>4</sup>

The myth emphasizes Pygmalion's genius in creating a sculpture so beautiful and seemingly naturalistic that he, the man who created it, forgets that it is not real.

Therefore evoking deep emotions of love, lust and affection. This creates a misogynist relationship between artist, art, and romantic love. The ideal woman is beautiful and silent and the man is the skillful genius who creates her. Pygmalion is a story of patriarchal power in romantic love. In John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*,

Berger gets to the essential problem in figurative art. Berger writes,

In the art-form of the European nude the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal relations is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity.<sup>5</sup>

Now that we know the effects of imagery and the ingrained gender roles in the creation of said imagery, we must analyze the tropes of femininity of which women are basing themselves off of.

We can see this in Bernini's sculpture, Apollo and Daphne, Apollo is struck by cupid's arrow and consequently falls in love with the first thing he sees, Daphne. Daphne

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<sup>4</sup> Ovid, Grant Showerman, Frank Justus. Miller, and G. P. Goold. Ovid. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977) 10:246-250.

<sup>5</sup> John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 52.

was also struck by Cupid's arrow, however it had the inverse effects. Apollo actively and aggressively pursues Daphne. Daphne flees from Apollo and asks her father, the river god, for help. Her father turns her into a tree. Daphne is powerless and yet, the audience is meant to sympathize with Apollo, who longs after a woman he can never have, instead of recognizing the sexual assault implications.



Fig. 2. *Apollo and Daphne* by Bernini, Marble, 1622-1625. Notice the gendered differences between the two actors portraying the story of Apollo and Daphne. Source: *Galleria Borghese*

There are obvious differences between a sculpture by Bernini and a romance novel cover in terms of material, and context, but the underlying gender roles are identical. The differences lie in the creator and the intended audiences. As Berger has pointed out, these sculptures were made by male sculptors and made for male audiences while romance novels were made for women by women. This gender binary poses a problem

in art about love and asks: whose love is more deserving, serious and profound? The answer is almost always male.

This gendered love is constantly revealing itself in most media. There are countless interesting male leads who are multifaceted paired with two-dimensional female characters. Prime examples of two-dimensional female characters are in romance comics. Aimed toward a female viewership, yet created by men. The storylines have two types of women: those who are hopeless, passive, damsels in distress or extremely sexually aggressive femme fatales.



Fig. 3. Left: *Heart Throbs*, Vol 1 #50, cover art by Bernard Sachs and Ira Schnapp, ink on paper, 1957  
 Right: *Heart Throbs*, Vol 1 #146, cover art by Don Heck and Gaspar Saladino, ink on paper, 1971  
 Examples of the two female character tropes in love are depicted as damsels in distress or femme fatales.  
 Source: Wikia: *Heart Throbs*

In Molly Haskell's book, *From Reference to Rape: The Treatment of Women in Movies*, Haskell shows that women are valued and characterized by her relationship to sex.

Haskell argues that virgin types in film are women who are either unaware of or deny

their sexuality and are depicted as childish, naïve and dependent on male help.

Meanwhile the whore is drenched in make up, posed and very aware of her sexuality.

Femme fatales use their power of sexuality for evil purposes. These stereotypes are everywhere: movies, romantic comic, romance novel covers, classical sculpture and even classical mythologies. They manifest in constructed image of these women. Just as female personalities are based on sex, the female body is sexualized in both art and pop culture.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

I knew my work would manifest in sculpture early on. In the beginning of the school year, we had a daylong make-a-thon where we spent a whole day making anything we wanted. I started by getting large pieces of paper to draw large figures on. However, I found myself staring at the mass of brown butcher paper, charcoal in hand, not knowing what to do. I quickly turned to woodblock and started to carve. I turned out a couple of prints of flowers, but was not convinced by them. Finally, I started to play with clay. Creating forms and manipulating the bodies was easy to me and from then on I knew it would be sculpture.

I am familiar with additive sculpture, a process in which you use clay to add form to your sculpture; however, I had recently learned the subtractive method in which I carved away marble to create the final form. I wanted to further explore subtractive sculpture, in the mindset that I would create a series of subtractive sculptures for my final piece. I made a block of plaster, took some reference photos and began to carve. It took a couple of weeks and although I was pleased with the outcome, the skill was fairly low.



It soon became clear that I was not going to become a master carver in the next few months, so I turned to what I knew I could do and do well. There will be a time I will learn how to carve masterfully; I just did not trust I could do it in the time allotted.



I tried other sculpting methods to see what would work best. I tried using a plaster additive method starting with a wire metal armature and adding wet plaster to create form. However the plaster would constantly slip off. Once it was the perfect consistency to stay on the armature, it was gloppy and hard to manage and ready to harden at any second. Once it did dry I tried to carve away the excess material, but it had hardened too much. It was an unpredictable, messy process so I decided that if I were to sculpt, I would do something I had more control over.

I attempted life casting using alginate. I attempted to cast a friend's entire face, but the mold was weak and distorted completely. Not wanting to waste material, I tried a second time, using my own face and only covering my nose, mouth and bottom half of my face so I could see what I was doing. It came out perfectly and I responded to the isolation of the essential body parts, which would later become essential to my concept. I did not like, however, the lack of hand in the making process. This led to mold making. I would sculpt in oil-based clay, mold it and cast it in plaster. I would be able to capture a lot of detail and all the air bubbles and imperfections were easily fixed.

For a while, I agonized over the pose my figure would be in. Creating countless unsatisfying sketches with different combinations of males and females interacting with each other. I tried making them equals, I tried making the female aggressive and the male passive, but the end results, in my mind, were too simple, preachy and humorous for all the wrong reasons. They were counterproductive. Hyperaware of constructed imagery and the connotations/references that went with them, I wanted to find a way to desexualize the female body while still using figurative form. Unfortunately there are not many existing sculptors that do so. I looked to feminist artists who used the figure in a way that did not sexualize it. Many feminist artists moved away from fine arts and worked with performance art, crafts and unconventional materials. There were different methods used to insinuate the body and strip it of it's imposed sexual nature. Eva Hesse used the spirit of minimalism, size and materials to suggest body. Ana Mendieta used her silhouette to evoke the female form, but the absence of body desexualizes the subject.



Fig. 4. *Untitled (from the Silueta series)* by Ana Mendieta, 1973-1977. Mendieta desexualizes her body by integrating herself with the earth. In this case, she uses flowers. *Source: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago*

I am doing something different by reclaiming a male art form (sculpture) and confronting the “master” material although I have the spirit and objectives of those female artists. I wanted my work to be serious without a male presence, which I felt was essential to my concept. Thus I removed the male character.

I knew I wanted another element to accompany my sculptures that made my art and research more accessible to the public. Initially I experimented with creating a zine to accompany the sculptures. Zines are innately accessible and feminist; it is a low form of art that signals a rebellion against the preexisting patriarchal structure. I thought it would marry well with my sculptures. However, I received a lot of doubt from my professors. I was heavily involved in my sculptures because they were time consuming and what my zine would be based off of. Unfortunately the external pressures made me reconsider and the zine evolved into collaged prints. Once I have time to reflect I do hope to eventually make a zine about my sculptures. The silkscreen prints were inspired by a small exercise I did. I printed out select images from my research and isolated the women. I started to create visual repetition in form and narrative through these quick, non-committal collages. They were fun to make and allowed my humor to come through. I decided to make large silkscreened prints from them since printmaking has a political history too. Silkscreen printmaking was a easy way to mass-produce an image which allowed it to be a vehicle for political and social works.

### **CREATIVE WORK:**

My attraction to sculpture seemed process based; however, it is also conceptually based. As I have discussed before, sculpture is a metaphor for romantic and passionate

love as seen in Ovid's myth, Pygmalion. It is important to acknowledge that Pygmalion is problematic. A man creating the ideal female form perpetuates objectification of women. Berger eloquently analyzes the effects of gender in relationship to artist, muse and audience. Berger writes,

One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. . . . Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.<sup>6</sup>

Berger explains the effects images have on artist, object and audience in relationship to gender: the inherent, active masculinity of art making and the assumed femininity of passive subject being observed for the artist's purposes. This creates a disparity in gender roles where men view and women are looked at, ergo women construct their identity around male gaze. This is essentially the story of Pygmalion. Initially, the sculpture is an object. It cannot speak, it has no action, and it has no thought. Equating the "ideal woman" with a passive sex object.

I struggled with my own art, knowing I do not wish to perpetuate these misogynist associations with sculpture and Pygmalion, but I want to maintain this link between love and sculpture. My purpose taking on a male dominated art form, sculpture, is to question the idea of the male genius and reclaim it as a female artist. I do this by using similar materials and content, but changing the composition and lens to make it more about the subject and less about the viewer gazing at the subject. This was when I turned to Ana Mendieta and learned to insinuate body to desexualize it.

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<sup>6</sup> John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis, *Ways of Seeing*, 50.

With the masculine art of figurative sculpture and the feminine art of ambiguous form, I came to a conclusion. I returned to the isolated body parts that I responded to in my alginate experiments and decided the majority of the figure would be submerged in a bathtub in the center of the room. I sculpted plaster flowers to lie on top of the “water” surface as an ambiguous, romantic veil. The only visible body parts are her knees, one hand, the bottom portion of her face and her hair. All of these parts are modeled after myself, in attempts to depoliticize, desexualize and avoid idealizing the female figure. This also references Michelangelo’s Prisoners, figures stuck in blocks of marble that are similarly ambiguous in nature and confined to the material of which there were created from.



Fig. 5. *The Atlas* by Michelangelo, 1530-1534. Michelangelo has many incomplete sculptures that are known as Michelangelo’s slaves. Notice how you can see the artist’s process and the beauty of the motion and ambiguous nature. *Source: Accademia*

The interior walls have a row of the partial female faces, like an army emerging from the walls, turning the room into a block of marble.

Outside of the room, are a series of silkscreened prints to make all the visual research I have done accessible and bridge the gap between high and low art. The images range from Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* to Playboy centerfolds. They concentrate on the woman's repeated contortions throughout time and media, challenging their assumed naturalism as well as the critiquing the man's role through the absences of man. They attain humor and brevity; however, the punch line will not be the female characters, but rather the ridiculousness of these repeated tropes constructed by men.



Installation is key to my concept. First, I hung the partial faces onto the walls and sealed the edges with silicone cock and painted over everything with the same paint use on the gallery walls, so the viewer could not tell where the piece stopped and the wall began. I placed the bathtub into the middle of the room and hung the prints on the opposing wall. Once everything was in place, I collaborated with Tom Bray, lighting professional, who works in the Duderstadt studios. Initially I just wanted to fill the room

with a pink light to give the space with a certain fuzzy, romantic aura and maybe have a video of reflecting water projected onto the floor. Tom recommended I use Photoshop and Aftereffects to paint the lighting and color I desired. It took three days to get the film to run correctly at the right size where it registered with the bathtub. I created a short film of reflecting water that changed colors from blue to pink to purple to stark white. Requiring the audience stay in order to observe the gradual change.

My final touch came moments before the opening. I placed real white rose petals on the floor surrounding the tub and a single white rose on top of the faucet. It draws attention to the sexual nature of the work. So often women, their sexuality and their bodies are equivocated to flowers. She is blooming, budding, flowering, or she's deflowered. As the show remains open, the flower gradually falls apart, showing the fragility of beauty and purpose of the flower: dark reality. It works to contrast the eternal nature of sculpture and remind the audience of time and change. Making the white roses an homage to the feminist artists who helped me complete my work namely Ana Mendieta.

Having people view my work in the gallery gave it a new life. When the viewers walk into the gallery they can see a sliver of the bathtub. The light invites them in to see an intimate moment of a woman inside her own space. Faces protruding and collages confronting these constructed realities. Watching children be mesmerized by the changing lights and colors. Listening to people who were amazed by the skill, realism and beauty I was able to achieve.



## CONCLUSION:

### *efflorescence*

[ef-luh-res-uh ns] noun.

1. The state or period of flowering.
2. An example or result of growth and development.
3. *Chemistry*.
  - a. The resulting powdery substance or incrustation.<sup>7</sup>

My piece is a flowering revolution for me and hopefully other female artists who wish to pursue traditionally male dominated art media such as sculpture. My thesis began as a yearning to fill what I saw as an empty space in representations of love. A body of work that exemplified female love and romanticism in a way that was profound and true. The underlying problem of what made some art serious and not serious was

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<sup>7</sup> "The Definition of Efflorescence." Accessed April 19, 2016.  
<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/efflorescence?s=t>.



further engrained into the materials and could not be solved through pure representation. Sculpture is inherently linked to masculinity as we see in the mythology of Pygmalion and sculptures such as those by Michelangelo and Bernini. Therefore, my thesis became my challenge, as a female artist using these masculine materials, to create a classical sculpture of a woman free from objectivity.

During the opening, I expected to feel a sense of completion and calmness, but watching people interact, interpret, and take photos of my work gave it new life that made me realize that my work will never be complete. There is still much to investigate and create that I was unable to do with this project. I had to narrow my focus, which left little room for other key identifiers such as race, sexuality and income, all of which I would like to explore in relationship to classical sculpture in the future. Specifically race, I used myself in order to depoliticize the fact I am a woman of color and all of my references are European men. *efflorescence* allowed me to discover my place and responsibility as a female artist of color in a predominantly white, masculine field. It inspires me to ultimately found a studio space and gallery for artists who identify as female with an all female identifying staff. There is a need for safe spaces where women artists can claim space for themselves without the external patriarchy.

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## Image Credits

Fig. 1.

Left: Unknown Artist, *Allegheny Captive* by Caroline Bourne, 1990. Source: Pinterest. 2016, Digital Image. Available from: Pinterest

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/451908143833892054/> (Accessed April 19, 2016).

Right: Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*. 1484-1486. Tempera on Canvas, 172.5 x 278.5 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, <http://www.uffizi.com/> (accessed April 19, 2016).

Fig. 2.

Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne*. 1622-1625. Marble, 243 cm. Galleria Borghese, <http://www.galleriaborghese.it/> (accessed April 19, 2016).

Fig. 3.

Left: Bernard Sachs and Ira Schnapp, *Heart Throbs, Vol 1 #50*. 1957, ink on paper, 7 x 10.5 inch. Source: Heart Throbs. 1957, Digital Image. Available from: wikia, [http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Heart\\_Throbs\\_Vol\\_1\\_50](http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Heart_Throbs_Vol_1_50) (accessed April 19, 2016).

Right: Don Heck and Gaspar Saladino, *Heart Throbs, Vol 1 #146*. 1971, ink on paper, 7 x 10.5 inch. Source: Heart Throbs. 1971, Digital Image. Available from: wikia, [http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Heart\\_Throbs\\_Vol\\_1\\_146](http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Heart_Throbs_Vol_1_146) (accessed April 19, 2016).

Fig. 4.

Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (from the Silueta series)*. 1973-1977. Silver dye-bleach print, 50.5 x 40.3 cm. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago. From: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, <https://mcachicago.org/> (accessed April 19, 2016).

Fig. 5.

Michelangelo, *The Atlas*. 1530-1534. Marble, 277 cm. Accademia, <http://www.accademia.org/explore-museum/artworks/michelangelos-prisoners-slaves/> (accessed April 19, 2016).