

aquhairium: Talk to Me



Autumn Fawn Hernandez  
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I recently sat down with myself and had a good old hairy chat. It was much overdue and needed, which I soon learned. Although we had some opposing views, our passion and interest for hair was identical, which helped keep my conversation flowing. I've found that anyone else I've ever spoken to about hair doesn't quite have the same excitement and passion as I do, nor do they share as many ideas. Therefore, it only made sense that I interviewed myself on the subject. Over the course of time I spent with myself, I quickly learned that my daily thoughts are immersed and intertwined in hair. The strong push to have this interview was my recent hair installation<sup>1</sup>. I created a dark space with 10 lit glass cylinders, hanging in a circular arrangement, filled with water, air and hair. This installation is the result of the compilation of the past 21 years of life and a jumping off point into hairy years to come.

I see no benefit in hiding this amongst the rest of my text. Thesis statement:

I am investigating people's reaction to hair when it is not their own or on their body. I have gathered hair from many sources; salons, friends and strangers and used this as a medium to draw the viewer in to a close examination of my obsession. Through the use of the basic elements, water, air and light I alter people's perceptions of this overlooked material.

In order to share my thoughts effectively, I had to have a conversation with myself, hashing out questions and issues relating to hair. In this way, I am essentially giving a tour of my hair-infested thoughts through a personal conversation I initiated with myself.

[Smiles at self]

Autumn: So, I hear you're into human hair. Can you please finish this sentence for me: "It all began \_\_\_\_\_".

Autumn: I can't answer that. It's been more like a progression, like a build up of people, places and things that have made me exactly where I am today. There is no one beginning point.

Autumn: Sorry, but I don't buy that. There has to be at least one point in your life where you can look back on it and think of as a beginning. It has to start somewhere; it didn't appear out of thin air.

Autumn: Fine, I'll make up an answer (mutters under breath: just to make you happy, even though it's not the real answer). I studied abroad in Perth, Australia my 2<sup>nd</sup> semester, junior year of college. I took 3 jewelry design courses, one that was an upper-level class with a lot of freedom and an awesome professor. For the entire semester we had to choose one alternative material, which basically meant no metal. I browsed through art magazines for inspiration and saw some jewelry made out of wax and decided I'd give it a whirl. As it turned out, the kind of wax I started working with was more difficult to manipulate than expected, so I moved into hair removal wax. I ended up making wax and hair pendants<sup>2</sup> and a 15-foot-nylon-leg, hair-stuffed runway piece<sup>3</sup>. My class's reaction to my runway piece was amazing. Many of my classmates cringed in their seats and became extremely animated. Around the same time as this was going down, I received an email from IP saying I should start thinking about what I wanted to do for my project. It only made sense to continue on with hair. It was ready to come home with me.

Autumn: I can just imagine you right now, the wild foreign American girl in Australian jewelry classes, whipped in the mix of a program consisting almost entirely of Asians. They must have thought you were pretty crazy, aye?

Autumn: Yeah, it was pretty ridiculous. Most of my fellow classmates were proper Asian girls working with sterling silver and pearls. Hairy pendants were pretty out there for them. I remember one girl seeing one of my pendants during critique and crunching up on the couch, head in lap, arms wrapped around her legs, refusing to look. It was amazing. It's just such a satisfying, overall good feeling when someone reacts like that to something that I created. I guess in that way my art is like an extension of my thoughts. They're seeing my thoughts translated into a physical object.

Autumn: It's funny to think that your thoughts are so 'out there' to someone else, that they couldn't even look at it. Do you want people to feel that way? Do you want them to look away?

Autumn: No no no. My intentions aren't to make people look away. I like to challenge people, to push them out of their comfort zone. We can learn about others and ourselves through

this process and become more open and positive to other new ideas and ways of seeing. I think it's important to challenge ourselves daily, to step out of our own stubborn thoughts and try to understand others and open our thoughts to the endless possibilities of life and hair.

Autumn: Wait. Is this project for you or for others? Who's your audience?

Autumn: We're all my audience. Every one of us. I don't have a narrow, specific audience with a precise response desired. Anyone, anything, everyone, everything. The idea is to get a reaction out of the viewer. Whether it is an appalled disgusted response or a curious, amazed response, that's up to them. A reaction is key, doesn't matter what kind.

Autumn: Then does it bother you to know that you probably enjoy it more than anyone else ever will?

Autumn: No, because I'm me. I'm the one doing the enjoying- I'm on the good side. And now that I've been over here, there's no way I'm ever turning back.

Autumn: "Over here"?

Autumn: Okay, I've never really told anybody this, but in my head there's a hair spectrum that I categorize people by. I don't even do it consciously, but I do it to almost everyone I know and meet. You see, I am one end of the spectrum and everyone else follows. That's what I mean by 'over here'.

Autumn: Is anyone... (Gets cut off immediately)

Autumn: I am yet to meet anyone remotely close to my end of the spectrum. I don't expect to either. Although, I must say that IF I did meet such a rare individual... I don't know what I'd think. That'd just be weird. Maybe we'd team up? Oh, now that I think about it, I'd love to meet her. There'd be so much hair, everywhere, always. Sounds like a good plan. That might have to be my next mission- finding a hairy partner in crime.

Autumn: Good luck with that; maybe it'll be a hairy dude though, instead of a girl. Kill two birds with one stone. But I want to know, what do your friends think about all this hair business?

Autumn: Most of my friends are getting pretty immune to it all. Well, really only my close friends and family are. If you're around someone enough and hear about the same subject constantly, it's inevitably going to become somewhat normalized and dulled down, sooner or later. I also noticed that some have grown more interested in hair because of me as well. Many people tell me that they notice hair more and think about it often. I love that. It's like spreading hair awareness or something. It's wonderful.

Autumn: What about people who walk into your studio, what do they think?

Autumn: You can't expect me to know what someone else is thinking. I can tell you what they say and how they react, but who ever really knows what anyone is thinking.

Autumn: Then tell me what they say.

Autumn: I remember one day after the All Student Show a couple of friends came to my studio<sup>4</sup> and hung out for a minute. They were cracking up checking out my studio walls. I've placed words next to hair images, such as, 'nasty', 'typical', 'weird' and 'beautiful'. Apparently they got a kick out of this. Other people have told me that it's weird or gross, and others have commented and inquired about specific hair they see on my walls. There's a range of opinions.

Autumn: I know you have hair<sup>5</sup> all over your studio. Where did it all come from?

Autumn: I started tacking hair on the walls once there was enough to need to keep it organized. Bags piled up on the floor of my studio and little notes and bags of hair got tacked all around my studio. Friends, family, salons, whoever could give me hair, I got it from.

Autumn: Do you sit in your studio looking at hair all day long?

Autumn: That's not really how it works. There were times when I did just sit and take it all in, but most time in my studio was spent on a computer, under a microscope, or doing other hairy activities. I'm much more of a hands on kind of gal, I like to be touching and doing things with my hands whenever possible.

Autumn: What other hairy activities are you referring to?

Autumn: I got into felting hairballs<sup>6</sup> for a while. I'm actually still really fascinated with this practice. I also made a hairy hat<sup>7</sup> and some jewelry out of hair as well. I also got into some hair paintings<sup>8</sup>, which I'd like to continue to pursue in the future. Sometimes I'd just play with the hair too, and not make anything specific out of it. It's such a malleable material; it's easy to become engulfed in one hair sample for a long time.

Autumn: By engulfed do you mean obsessed? I know you've been tossing around the word obsession with hair. What can you tell me about that?

Autumn: It's become an obsession. It didn't start at one, but it's definitely there now. I don't want you to get freaked out by the word obsession though. It's a really fun, solid, exciting feeling that stimulates great conversation, art, ideas and reactions. It's a healthy obsession. Don't worry.

Autumn: Okay, good. I've been a bit nervous about that. It's settling to hear that it has gone in a good direction. I know that obsessions can often take a bad turn or become fetishes. I can see you've chosen a better path.

Autumn: I don't know if I'd go so far as to say that I've chose this path. I'm pretty sure it chose me.

Autumn: The hair chose you?

Autumn: I chose it/it chose me. We chose each other. We were meant to be. Once it started it became a hairball effect. I'm so far in, who even knows where any of it starts anymore.

Autumn: Now that I've gotten some background info I'm interested in your recent installment. I'm told you're calling the piece *aquhairium*. Did you come up with that?

Autumn: Sadly, I didn't. I wish I could take credit for it, but I can't. I mass text some close friends and family one day to brainstorm project title ideas and my friend Bradford text me back, "Autumn's Aquhairium". I wasn't totally in love with it until I wrote it alone as, 'aquhairium<sup>9</sup>', THEN I knew it was it. It was one of those names that once you heard it, nothing else could sound right. That's when you know.

Autumn: What does it mean?

Autumn: It's playing off the word aquarium, which we all know is a tank of water that holds watery creatures. I have cylinders of water holding hair, hence, aquHAIRium.

Autumn: So, would you consider your hair a watery creature and how long do you reckon the hair will survive in the water? Or has it already died? Is it ever alive? Does it decompose? What do you do with the hair after you're done with it? Does it smell?

Autumn: Question overload. One at a time.

Autumn: Those are just jumping off points. I don't expect you to answer every question. Answer what you want, how you want, I'll figure the rest out on my own.

Autumn: I've been telling people that *aquhairium* gives hair life after death. Our hair on our bodies is actually dead, but when it is placed in a cylinder, in such a way, it puts emphasis, light and life to an otherwise overlooked specimen. When just sitting in the cylinder of water the smell is not apparent. It is not until I dump the water out do I smell anything, but it is pretty foul when I do smell it. I'm sure that if I kept the hair in water long enough it would decompose, as we know water can break down just about anything. For the length of time I've been keeping the hair in water it doesn't decompose, as much as it just starts to feel different and smell.

Autumn: I want to know about *aquhairium*. How'd you come up with the concept behind it and what made you choose it as your thesis? I know you bounce around a lot and can't seem to stay focused on any one thing for a long amount of time.

Autumn: I got the idea when I was at a friend's house one night. He was doing the dishes and I saw running water filling up soapy, bubbly glasses. I had a few bags of hair on me, as

usual, and got the idea to stuff some in a jar with water. I put a lid on it and shook it up, which created bubbles to collect on the hair. In regular lighting I couldn't see the bubbles too good. I went in a dark room and put a flashlight under the jar, which lit up the air bubbles beautifully. There's something so satisfying about the simplicity of the hair in water that intrigues me and meets my desires to keep life as natural as possible. Hair in water isn't a crazy concept, nor is it something that rarely happens. We shower, swim and get caught in rain many times in our lives. Yet, we are never able to freeze time and step back to witness this combination of water, light, air and hair in these instances from an outsider's perspective. My installation captures this grouping of elements in such a way that puts emphasis on the hair. The air bubbles collect in unique ways to different hair types, depending on cleanliness, texture, moisture, thickness, etc. I am able to stay interested in this concept because of this. It is always changing and can never be perfectly predicted. Although I can somewhat anticipate what will happen to the hair under water, I do not know until it happens. The hair has a life of its own and a mind of its own, which keep me lured in and wanting more constantly. It's new and different every time I put the hair under water.

Autumn: You have photographs of these moments of hair in water....?

Autumn: What started off as documentation, turned into photographs<sup>10</sup> displayed in Douglas J exchange. I photographed the hair submerged in water with bubbles I breathed into it. The photographs serve as a great way for the viewer to see through my lens. As a photograph there is a loss in the repulsion, and an increase in beauty, which is perfect because that is what I always see. They are suitable for a salon setting because of this and are aesthetically pleasing, intriguing, and beautiful. There is a range in discussion on the photographs, mostly consisting of different ideas of what the photograph is of. Here the ambiguity creates interest and often delight when hair is revealed as the subject matter. The photographs are a captured second in time and special in this way because no two photographs can be the same, nor can they be replicated.

Autumn: You mentioned the word specimen earlier. What's that about?

Autumn: Ha, yes, specimen. You can't expect me to say 'hair' every time I mean hair, do you? Specimen has become a term I use for certain hair I collect from people. Some specimens are juicy good ones and others are nasty dirty ones. It's really fun to get a bag of hair unexpectedly placed in my studio, and not know what I'm getting into until I open it. The surprise specimen can be overwhelming sometimes.

Autumn: I see. Let me ask you something a little off topic. Still hair related, obviously. You recently dyed your hair<sup>11</sup> blonde. So, do blondes have more fun?

Autumn: I can't answer that question. It seems to be the question everyone wants to ask me about being blonde. I have fun, regardless of what hair color I have. My blonde hair is so unhealthy it's disgusting. I never realized how bad dying your hair really really is, until I did it myself. It feels different. It feels extremely unhealthy. I am constantly comparing it to my natural, brown hair. That felt healthy. I'm happy with the color

though, it's just the actual feeling in my hands; the dry, brittle, stiff, roughness. It's all for the sake of art though, so that's better.

Autumn: That's not true. Going blonde wasn't just an art experiment for you, you wanted to be a blondie, didn't you?

Autumn: Honestly, I really like my natural hair color. I think going blonde is just one of those girly things we have to do to feel different, to add some spice to our otherwise normal, routine lives. It's one of our only body parts we can alter to such an extent and in so many ways. It's like piercings and tattoos, which I'm also a fan of. My hair often changes depending on my mood, kind of like a mood ring, but mood hair.

Autumn: Hold up. Does your hair affect your mood or your mood affect your hair?

Autumn: What came first, the chicken or the egg?

Autumn: Are you avoiding my question or is that your real answer?

Autumn: I mean, what do you want me to say? I think that our hair often matches our outfits, our mood, our attitude, and our style. It's just part of the mix. None of it needs to distinctively come first; it all just goes together and happens in unison. It's all part of us.

Autumn: I don't entirely agree with that. Hair is an extension of who we are; it is another part of the self. It's a stronger representation of who we are than any other body part. This is because we get to alter it in many ways. It's a piece of art on our bodies, like a blank canvas waiting to be utilized. We intentionally manipulate our hair, as a reflection of how we feel and what we want at that moment in time. Our mood triggers need for hair alterations; our hair doesn't create our mood.

Autumn: Yes, however some people don't ever do anything with their hair. I let my hair air dry and do its natural wavy hair style as often as possible, regardless of what my mood is. But maybe that is an expression of how I feel at that time. Lack of effort can be seen as intentional here. I'm intentionally not doing my hair to say something about my feelings and myself. Then again, it could also mean nothing. Maybe I'm thinking about it too much.

Autumn: You can never think about hair too much. Hair is an extremely extensive topic to discuss. There's so much meaning to be found in every strand, every specimen and every conversation about it. I don't expect myself to have all the answers figured out so quickly. I also know that my opinion changes rather frequently, so there's no use making any statement real concrete real fast. Anyways, I'm interested in the beauty, repulsion aspect of your piece. Tell me about it.

Autumn: Hair is beautiful; it's not just an extension of a person, it's a body part. The human quality of the hair can create repulsion. Although I'd like to say it's not at all like



handling fingers or toes, in a way it is; it is just another body part. Other body parts suit to go bad and smell, whereas hair doesn't go bad, nor does it smell. Well, that's a lie. I've collected bags of hair from salons and opened them later to a terrible stench. That's when you know something other than hair has gotten into the bag. People have a hard time getting over the fact that the hair is disembodied. They don't know where it came from; it's mysterious and potentially dirty. This causes the repulsion. The individuals who get repulsed believe hair belongs on the body, whereas I know that's not true.

Autumn: Then what's the deal with hair salons? There's hair all over the place and it doesn't bother people.

Autumn: (For the average person) There is a time and a place for disembodied hair. Haircuts are extremely common and accepted almost worldwide, so it's okay for hair to be on the ground at a salon. If you can associate the hair with it getting cut it's not so offensive, but when it's clearly not in the process of being cut, and it's in some other form and location, people get repulsed.

Autumn: Are you ever repulsed by hair?

Autumn: Not really. Like I mentioned earlier, I have opened some bags of hair to find a nasty smell, but other than that I'm rarely appalled. I've come to find the beauty in every type of hair from every body part. The only repulsion I have doesn't exist in the hair itself, but the other stuff that gets caught in it and mixed in with it. This is also the cause of bad smells. The physical appearance of hair doesn't bother me in the slightest, ever.

Autumn: What about hair that you've cut. Does that ever gross you out? And how did you start cutting hair?

Autumn: I thoroughly enjoy cutting hair. It doesn't gross me out. It all started with Halloween 2010<sup>12</sup>. My costume was a hairdresser and it was ridiculous. I had a smock, apron, scissors, comb and blow dryer as props. At some house I found a gigantic cardboard box/fort to hang out in with convenient cut out windows. This ended up being my salon that night. People were actually lining up outside the box waiting to get their hair cut. It became the cool thing to do at that party and I was supplying the service. I also managed to get a hold of a synthetic beard and wig at some point, which was quite wonderful to experience.

Autumn: Okay. Let me get this straight. You were in a cardboard box on Halloween, cutting people's hair and then doing what with it?

Autumn: I pocketed it, obviously. Some people didn't believe me, that I was really cutting hair and I had to grab wads out of my pockets to prove that I was in fact cutting hair. It helped me convince them that they should let me cut theirs too. Now, don't get too impressed, I wasn't giving full out haircuts, it was more like snipping random chunks out of people. It actually turned into common activity I partake in- cutting hair. I have a lot more experience in cutting guys<sup>13</sup> hair though, and I think I'm better at it too. My

little tagline for cutting hair has become something along the lines of, “I have no professional training, it takes long, but it looks good”. Cutting hair is art. I relate it to sculpture often because you are taking away from the original artwork in front of you. The scary part with hair though is that there’s no adding hair back in like you can with clay or some other material. I guess that’s also part of the thrill.

Autumn: Are you afraid to cut girls hair?

Autumn: You know what, I think I am. Girl’s hair means more. I remember one of the first books on hair I ever got into said this very same thing. The book read, “Women have much more symbolic capital in their hair than men, and men often have more such capital in women’s hair than in their own”<sup>14</sup>. The book was actually on Asian hair, but that specific quote was referring to hair worldwide. It’s so true too. Everyone knows women’s hair matters more. That’s why I’m not as confident to cut girls hair. I’m worried I might really mess something up that matters, unlike guys hair, which grows out in weeks and no one really cares about anyways.

Autumn: People care about man hair. You’re being rather bold saying guy’s hair doesn’t matter at all.

Autumn: It’s not that guys hair doesn’t matter, it’s just... it’s not a big deal. It’s the same with style and fashion too. Girls just care more about appearance, so hair gets tied up in that. It’s just how it is.

Autumn: What about African American hair. I know that’s a big deal. I’ve gotten a lot of questions about black hair, what do you think about that?

Autumn: Many of the books I’ve read touch on or focus on black women’s hair. Chris Rock recently did that movie on African American hair<sup>15</sup>. Honestly, it’s just not my cup of tea (or my shot of vodka, if you know what I mean). There’s just so much wrapped up in black hair, issues dealing with power and politics, and concerns that I’m just not interested in (for now at least). Although, there were certain parts in some readings that peaked my interest, specifically the hair straightening. One of the black hair books talked about African American’s finding bliss in straight hair<sup>16</sup>. The whole issue on straightening and relaxing hair intrigues me because I’ve had phases where I was straightening my hair daily. But I can’t really relate to the intensity of straightening that they go through. It’s a topic that I’d rather talk to someone about than read about, that’s for sure. It’s better to get a personal account on the issue, to really grasp it. Even then, it is difficult to understand.

Autumn: Are there other areas of hair that don’t interest you or you don’t care about?

Autumn: I feel somewhat similar with the Victorian hair art. I can appreciate it but I don’t want to do it myself. I found some interesting artists, who do Victorian hair art<sup>17</sup> today and was very impressed with the detail involved. In a way it’s like the African hair for me. I can appreciate it and learn a bit about it, but it just doesn’t do it for me. It’s very

specific and intricate, which isn't really my style. It's beautiful though, and can really blow me away, but it doesn't have any beauty repulsion. It's done in a way that is comfortable and safe. That's when I lose interest. There's only beauty there.

Autumn: Do you see yourself continuing with the beauty/repulsion idea in the future?

Autumn: Definitely. Not only that, but with hair in general. My life is so consumed with hair that I don't see myself escaping any time soon. I don't want to escape it. I'm fascinated with human interaction and feelings and hair stimulates both. I view this art as a jumping off point and bridge into more compelling hair art to come.

Autumn: Sounds exciting. I'm anxious to see what comes next.

Autumn: Me too. Cheers.

I'm including a list of references that they did not make it into my interview with myself, but is part of what got me where I am today. I'm not one to casually quote a book or reference a specific artist on the spot in conversation, unless it really struck me. Instead of awkwardly forcing them into conversation, I'd rather have them as a great resource to look back on and use whenever necessary.

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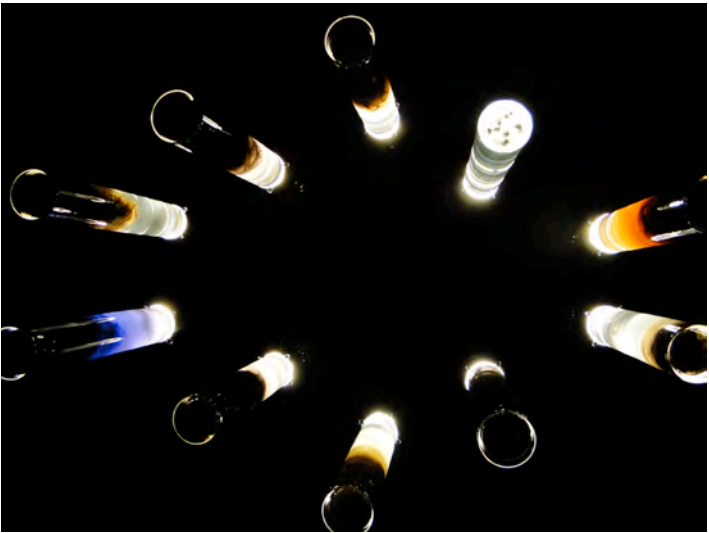
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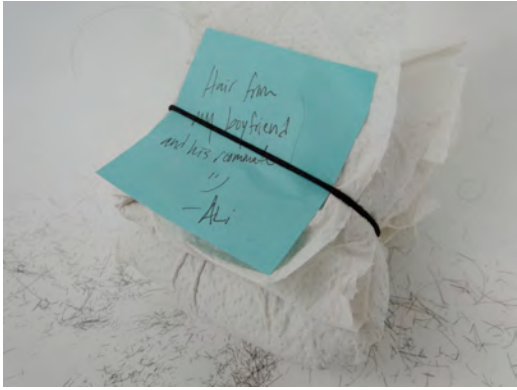


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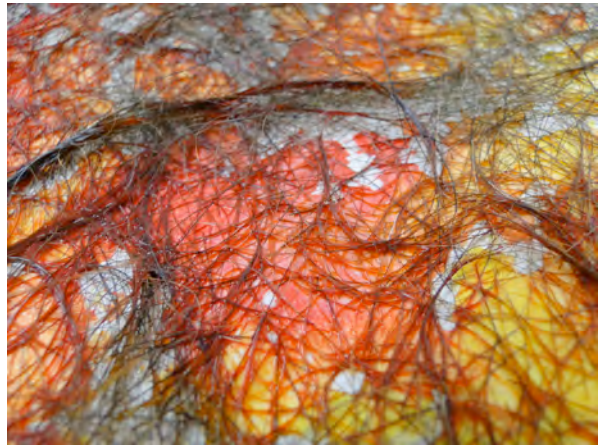
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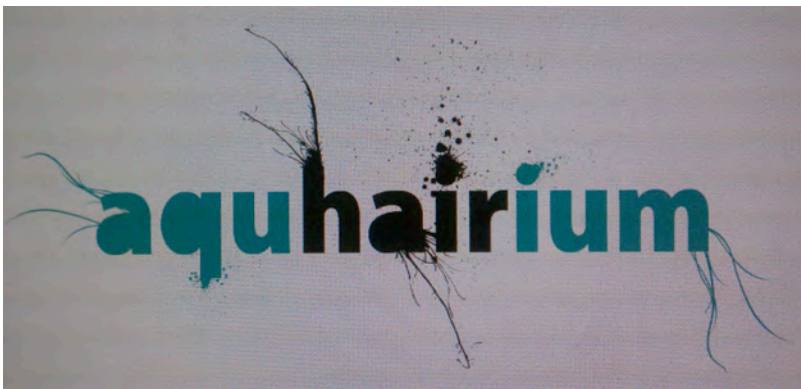
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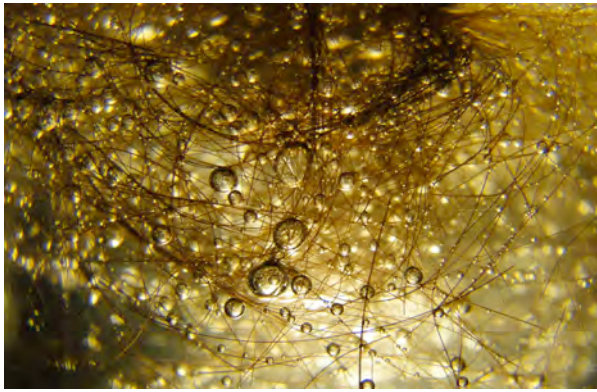


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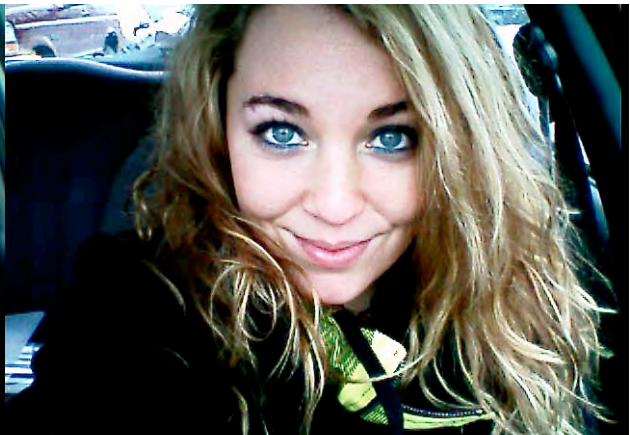
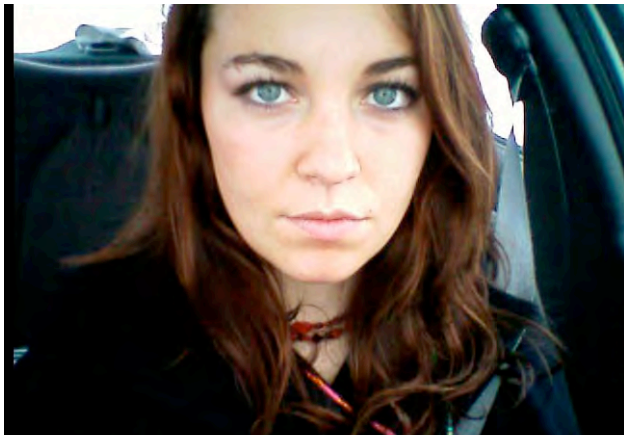
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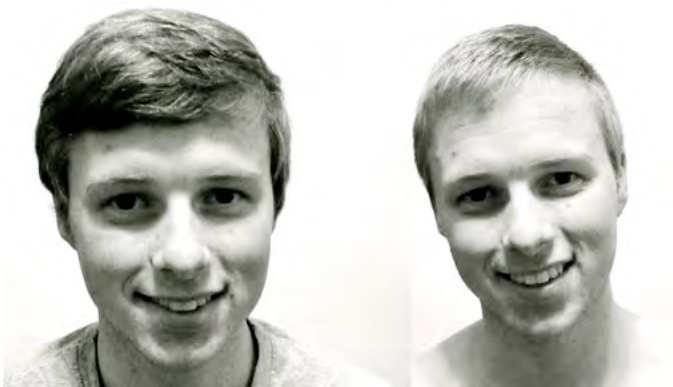


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<sup>14</sup> Alf Hildebeitel and Barbara D. Miller Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures (State University of New York 1998) 7

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1213585/>

<sup>16</sup> Althea Prince, The Politics of Black Women's Hair. (Insomniac Press, 2009) 115

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.victorianhairartists.com/lucycadwallader.html>