SUBVERTING THE MALE GAZE: EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH ART

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The use of the female body in artwork has often been problematic. Once viewed simply as an object of visual pleasure, a sexualized form, women are now stepping up to reclaim their bodies and the connotations that go with them through art. Mira Schor, author of *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* described painting "…not as 'eye candy' but as a synergetic honey-trap for contemporary discourse," (Schor, preface). Artwork has as much power to *change* society's ideas about the female body as it had the power to initially sexualize and objectify it. This imagery becomes engrained in popular culture; it starts a conversation and changes the way people view the world. This type of artwork is both powerful and *empowering*.

I would like to focus on how female artists have re-appropriated themselves as *subjects* rather than *objects* in the visual world. How they have begun to create art about the female body, educating the viewer about it and lifting it above its current status in society. Some women who are currently part of this conversation are worth mentioning: Kelly Reemtsen, Mickalene Thomas, Niki Johnson, and Lisa Yuskavage. These artists, as well as many others, have worked to subvert the male gaze; to undermine the power and authority of the patriarchal system, and to instill confidence in women.

THE MALE GAZE

In 1964 Jacques Lacan first introduced the psychoanalytical term for the act of looking, the "gaze" and its separation from the eye. The word gaze has since then been used predominantly in the art world, with art criticism focusing on how it communicates information and assumptions about the viewer/viewed. It can be used to impose meaning upon a piece, whether the gaze comes from the viewer or the subject of the artwork (Reinhardt). In 1989,

Laura Mulvey coined the term “male gaze,” which brought to light issues of male and female roles in an active/passive capacity of viewing, in relation to the sexualized view of women in general. That, in their “traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness,” (Mulvey p.837). Mulvey’s main argument is that Hollywood narrative films use women in order to provide a pleasurable visual experience for men. The patriarchal society influences the narrative film’s structure. In his book, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger does well to describe this idea:

> “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. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight” (p.19).

This objectification through imagery affects both men and women negatively. Men are conditioned to view women as the inferior sex, and women are conditioned to believe the same. Men believe that they must live up to the big, strong, masculine ideal expressed in popular culture, and women feel that they must be beautiful, sexy, and innocent all at once. Women grow up fixated on how they appear to others as recipients of this gaze. This isn’t an attack on men – certainly not all men objectify women. However, there are some seriously negative social consequences from this. Frederickson and Roberts wrote an essay extensively studying the effects of sexual objectification on women: “Girls and women, according to our analysis, may to some degree come to view themselves as objects or “sights” to be appreciated by others. This is a peculiar perspective on the self, one that can lead to a form of self-consciousness characterized

by habitual monitoring of the body's outward appearance" (Frederickson p.180). To make matters worse, these sexualized gazes are not limited to pornography as one might assume – they are also present in films, visual arts, advertising, television programming, music videos, women's magazines, and sports photography. Sexualized imagery of women is used to sell products (figure 1) to both men and women, attracting the gaze of the male customer, and inciting female customers to *want* to be that sexy woman, that recipient of the gaze. Even though this theory of the male gaze has been widely researched and explored, this imagery is still very prevalent in our culture.

When looking into this concept of the male gaze and whether or not the woman in question is being objectified, one might consider a few things: Who sees and who is seen? Who was the image made for? How does the imagery communicate information about the viewer or the viewed? The act of looking, while seemingly harmless, has a great impact on human interaction and has different connotations throughout different cultures. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright have written: "Through looking we negotiate social relationships and meanings. Looking is a practice much like speaking, writing, or signing. Looking involves learning to interpret and, like other practices, looking involves relationships of power," (Sturken, 10).

CRITICISM OF THE FEMALE IMAGE

Historically speaking, the typical viewer of artwork was male. Imagery was created by men, for men. Because of this, the hierarchy of art is relatively clear: the male image is one of power, possession and domination, while the female image remains one of submission and passivity. Popular ideas of femininity are male fantasies - The Angel in the House and the Whore. The Angel in the House is the ideal of what a woman *should* be – passive, pious, graceful, domesticated. The whore is sexual and open to advances. These are all old-fashioned

ideas, of course, yet still cling to contemporary imagery. All of this is terribly problematic in considering the forward movement of women in society as equals with agency.

Bougeureau is a prime example of an artist who painted celebrated female nudes through the lens of the male gaze. For example, *The Two Bathers* (figure 4) depicts two nude women who seem oblivious to the fact that they are being viewed, which is a clear sign of voyeurism and male fantasy. These women are figurative objects devoid of any purpose beyond visual pleasure. They lack distinct personality or any kind of information about the female experience. One can easily tell that this painting was created for the male viewer, for his visual pleasure and nothing else. It cannot be denied that the painting is beautifully rendered, however that is not the argument at hand. These demure images of female ideology that pollute advertisements and artwork alike aren't relatable to *real* women. There is nothing to be learned from these images, they say nothing about the female experience or about the world, beyond its obsession with sexualized imagery and idealized, unobtainable figures.

RECLAIMING THE FEMALE IMAGE

This call for female artists to reclaim their image coincided with second-wave feminism in the 1960s/70s, spearheaded by artists such as Judy Chicago, Joan Semmel, and Cindy Sherman, to name just a few. These women went to great lengths to normalize the female body and sexuality – to lift the female subject above its current status in art, and to inspire dialogue about gender issues. Even now in 2016 this is an ongoing battle and there are many artists, paintbrushes-in-hand, ready to fight it.

Kelly Reemtsen, a feminist artist, was inspired by an old article in a magazine that read: "Should Women be Able to Water the Lawn?" She was stunned by the sheer ridiculousness of

the concept. Of course, women should be able to do whatever they want. This started Reemtsen on a strike of paintings depicting feminine figures wielding sharp or “masculine” tools. Her show, *Smashing*, examines the metaphor of women 'breaking the glass ceiling'. These anonymous women are elevated on chairs and ladders climbing to professional and personal heights (figure 5), as well as breaking the binary of masculine and feminine. Reemtsen says the meaning behind her show is: "Empowerment, emphasizing on the message of success through hard work. Tools are metaphors for working as hard as you can. Using every tool to really drive home the message. Go out and get it. It’s a simple message,” (Hernandez). She wants every woman to see herself in the work – that is why her subjects have varied skin tones, and no face.

It is also particularly interesting to note the titles of her pieces. “To the Top,” (figure 5) “On Strike,” (figure 6) and “Unstuck” (figure 7) all contain feminist undertones of improving the status of women in society. Furthermore, she extends the message that women can remain empowering while beautiful and feminine, as culturally these ideas seem to be at odds with one another. Reemtsen wants her viewers to feel powerful and capable of rising to the top of their chosen career path, of speaking out against the patriarchy and fixing the current system. Her aggressive brushstrokes back up this fervor for empowerment.

Mickalene Thomas has built quite a reputation for herself by making large, powerful portraits of black women highlighted in glitter (figure 8). Like Reemtsen, she has taken on the task of creating work that empowers the female viewer as well as the female subject. Her works are centered around identity, self-presentation, and beauty ideals. Thomas has talked specifically about her focus on the face, and the gaze. In her latest show she says it’s, “not just what’s presented, it’s the viewer bringing their perspective to it, and the scale. About you looking at the

face. And the face looking back at you," (Tinson). She takes the subject of her paintings into consideration, the woman's confident gaze challenging the viewer with power and sexuality.

Thomas is particularly interested in depicting powerful black women, claiming that black women have really had to confront the idea of beauty and have worked painstakingly hard to alter their bodies, and their faces, to live up to the expectations set upon them by society. Her mother was a strong inspiration for her work in this matter, as she was a model in the 70s. Mickalene Thomas watched as her mother struggled with drugs, modeling, and growing old, and her take on the issue of female objectification and its mental effects is quite interesting:

> "And I was just curious of how she felt when she looked at herself in the mirror. What was that feeling? …She didn't like what she saw. Because she didn't look the same. She didn't feel like she looked beautiful. I remember her saying that the one thing she hated about being sick was that it took her beauty away. Because that's how she engaged with the world. And not that she didn't think that her own intelligence could carry weight," (Cook).

Because of these negative experiences with her mother, Mickalene chooses to interrogate the idea of beauty and power in her subjects. She introduces a complex vision of what it means to be a woman and expands common definitions of beauty. In her recent 2015 work she has zeroed in on the face and collaged different elements together to portray the multi-faceted experience of black women and their struggle with image. However, these women are humanized, gazing back at the viewer and adorned with glitter and rhinestones to highlight their realistic beauty (figure 11).

Niki Johnson is a Wisconsin-based, self-proclaimed feminist who uses her artwork to make strong social commentary on issues such as gender, identity, cultural power structures and human rights. In her personal statement, she echoes ideas of the aforementioned synergetic honey trap for contemporary discourse: “I value art as a non-exclusive experience and believe that to affect social change, you must speak up, listen to others and be willing to give of yourself. These beliefs bring purpose to all aspects of my studio practice.”

Johnson won the 2016 Voices Award for her support of women’s reproductive rights for making *Hills and Valleys* (figure 15), a large sculptural piece depicting the torso and thighs of a woman, with the Capitol building “vagazzled” in mirror over her groin, and her skin made up from cut-out pieces of signs from Planned Parenthoods defunded under the Scott Walker administration. The artwork is a protest to government officials having a say in women’s reproductive rights. This piece is interesting in that there is no face, there is only the close-up view of the thighs, stomach, and vagina of a woman—areas that would normally be considered sexual, or sexualized in imagery. Yet this work of art is *for* women, *by* a woman, protesting for women’s reproductive rights. It is not seductive in any way, shape, or form. Furthermore, the mirror reflects the gaze of the viewer from the pelvic area back onto themselves, causing the viewer to question whose right it is to be involved in that personal area.

A Vision in White (figure 11) comments on the view of Michelle Obama through the “gaze” of media coverage, highlighting its limitations. By paring down the media’s portrayal of Michelle Obama to her most discussed features, *her arms*, this sculpture exposes the ways in which her image is fragmented and problematic. When the viewer notices how much of her is missing, it is made clear how she has been sexualized and reduced to the sum of her parts, not as

an intelligent woman of American history. Johnson is directly challenging the male gaze of American culture with this piece, scolding society for its shallow imagery.

Niki Johnson was interested in the early 80s series of plates featuring artwork by Norman Rockwell, “Rediscovering Women.” The collection featured women “carrying on rosy-cheeked lives, joyful in their domesticity” says Johnson. She fixed a critical eye on how these women were depicted, and decided to re-rediscover them, and name them as well. Jane, Rebecca & Molly (Rediscovered) (figures 12, 13 &14) include Rockwell’s imagery with all other figures removed, besides the “rediscovered” woman. It brings them to the forefront of their narrative, beautifully independent and happy. This type of work clearly shows Johnson’s concern of the powerful female image in culture, that it should be one of intelligence, independence, and leadership.

Lisa Yuskavage holds an interesting place in this discussion. She has often been criticized for creating artwork that is “pornographic” in nature. It is true that her body of work is centralized around the nude female figure, though that figure is often abstracted in impossible ways. Her concepts are ambiguous as to whether or not they align with feminist ideals, but they certainly do bring into question ideas of misogyny and what is deemed “inappropriate” concerning the female body. Her artwork rides the line between innocence and impurity, highlighting the taboos of womanhood. In *Day* (figure 16) we see a nude woman, whose proportions have been exaggerated, as she looks down at her body. We are gazing upon her, but, the idea of the painting seems to be focused on how she views herself – these ideas of woman viewing herself as if a man is viewing her. Is she judging her body? Yuskavage’s work is rarely explained, and is left to the viewer to decipher, or place meaning upon.

Yet another issue regarding the female figure is the line between pornography and art—between obscenity and the appropriate. Efforts to redefine sexuality, to define this idea of obscenity, have always been a struggle. Social opinions on the morality of pornography and what is considered inappropriate are constantly challenged and ever-changing. “Rather, the meanings of eroticism and obscenity, sensuality and sexuality, art and pornography change over time, their boundaries shaped by the forms and institutions of culture and society,” (Nead p.325). Lisa Yuskavage seems to be playing with these abstract ideas of what is obscene. One of her recent paintings of a nude pregnant woman (figure 15) was recently censored by *Vault Magazine*, covering only the nipples. While many were frustrated by the need to do this, editor of *Vault Magazine*, Neha Kale said:

“I just hope that it makes people question why we police some female bodies and some representations of femininity over others and whether we need to be asking broader questions about why we do this,” (Cathcart).

Yuskavage wants to misbehave. In her talks, she mentions creating paintings that “fight back” – fight back against misogyny, fight back against expectations of *how* the female form should and can be depicted, and *who* it can be depicted by. Viewers have often been disturbed by her painting *Rorschach Blot* (figure 17). The form is quite vulnerable in position, with a mouth that brings to mind images of blow-up dolls. Yuskavage claims that this wasn’t exactly what she had in mind when making the painting, but she’s interested in the dialogue that the image inspires. “What is it about this painting that challenges how we understand or receive a female body?” she asks her audience during a discussion of her work (Yuskavage). She goes on to say that this imagery isn’t by any means *sexy*—that a blow-up doll that looked like her painting simply wouldn’t sell. She thinks that the responses to her paintings say more about the viewer

than the work itself – particularly considering Freudian theories of transference. This imagery can be upsetting to the viewer, it is rebellious and, at times nearly vulgar, but it explores the pieces of misogyny within all of us, within Yuskavage herself. We are taking on the gaze, looking at these contorted female subjects, and what do we feel? Why do we feel it?

INSPIRATION

It wasn't until my sophomore year of college that found my passion for feminism and female empowerment. While studying critical theory, I was exposed to feminist criticism and Mulvey's essay on the male gaze. I became frustrated with the submissive and presumptuous imagery of women, and began to question expectations of femininity when viewing and creating artwork. In a digital art class I interrogated Gil Elvgren's famous pin-up artwork (figures 2 & 3) by altering the images into less-sexual, more realistic depictions of women eating or working in business (figures 18 & 19). This is a concept that was lightly touched on as I wished to return to it after further researching the idea of female empowerment through art, and what constitutes as "objectification" of the figure.

Later in my ceramics course I was inspired to create work around the word "taboo," and nothing stood out to me as more relevantly taboo than female sexuality. While not an outright depiction of the figure, the work is still conceptually linked to the female experience and feminist criticism. In *Taboo* (figure 20), I spoke about ideas of female masturbation and how it is an uncomfortable topic in society, even among women. The vibrator and batteries, and the vulva are placed in separate ceramic boxes, with lids so that the uncomfortable, or taboo, subject matter can be hidden from view. However, it is still tempting to lift the lid and peek inside. This idea was also investigated in *Taboo II* (figure 21) with the taboo subject matter of the menstrual cycle, a subject matter considered grotesque, although it is perfectly natural and necessary part of

the female experience. A ceramic tampon (devoid of blood as to not push vulgarity and draw attention away from the concept) was placed inside an intricately decorated bowl with a lid, the cotton string falling from between the lid and the bottom, tempting the viewer to look inside. Once again, the viewer is forced to question their feelings on these taboo matters – if they feel uncomfortable looking at the subject matter in these vessels, and why that might be. I think that this idea could be relatable to Yuskavage's work – challenging the understanding of the female body, and why it is sometimes deemed inappropriate. Her idea of transference is also applicable here.

In my portraiture class, when given the assignment of creating a mask, I considered the implications of societal beauty expectations. How a woman is expected to be beautiful, but at the same time natural and attempting to fit into the ever-changing climate of style. In *Expectations* (figure 23), I utilized materials and techniques typically considered "women's work" such as: silk flowers, plastic lacing, needle and thread, and a pink palette. Each silk flower was hand-sewn onto the mask, which is enclosed with a corset-style lacing up the back. The mask is conveniently devoid of a mouth, mocking the idea that women are expected to look pretty but not speak their mind. This desire to use materials that drive concept is also visible in Niki Johnson's work.

In my painting, *Free Will* (figure 22), I wanted to create a portrait of a powerful woman with a challenging gaze. The orange in her hands symbolizes free will, and evokes the idea of forbidden fruit, as well as Eve's supposed fall from grace by gaining knowledge. The snakes that adorn her ears also hint at the story of Adam and Eve, while solidifying her strength and control. The woman in the painting challenges the gaze of her viewers, not caring about their opinion of her. She is not coy, submissive, or sexualized. The dark, severe coloring aids in this regard.

Throughout my years of art classes and testing the waters of feminist artwork, I decided that I really wanted to investigate the idea of the female form—when it is objectified and when it is empowered—before potentially creating problematic paintings on the subject. Because society is conditioned to this sexualized imagery: the arched back, the eyes closed in ecstasy, etcetera, it is easy to replicate unknowingly. I wanted to be educated on the subject so that I could partake in the artistic dialogue. I want to create serious artwork addressing social issues, and in order to do so I needed to know what's been done previously.

CALL TO ACTION

While we have come a long way, it is important to acknowledge the issues of female representation as old ideologies still poison mainstream imagery and media. It is an ongoing battle, but a worthwhile fight to ensure confidence and social equality among women. It's an interesting thing to consider when looking through a magazine, watching a movie or perusing an art gallery – how are women depicted? These pictures may seem inconsequential, but the mental, social and cultural effects of imagery are much stronger than one can imagine. In order to fully move away from the idea that woman must be domestic, feminine, graceful, submissive—these ancient images must be replaced with new ones—of power and strength and confidence.

IMAGE LIST

FIGURE 1

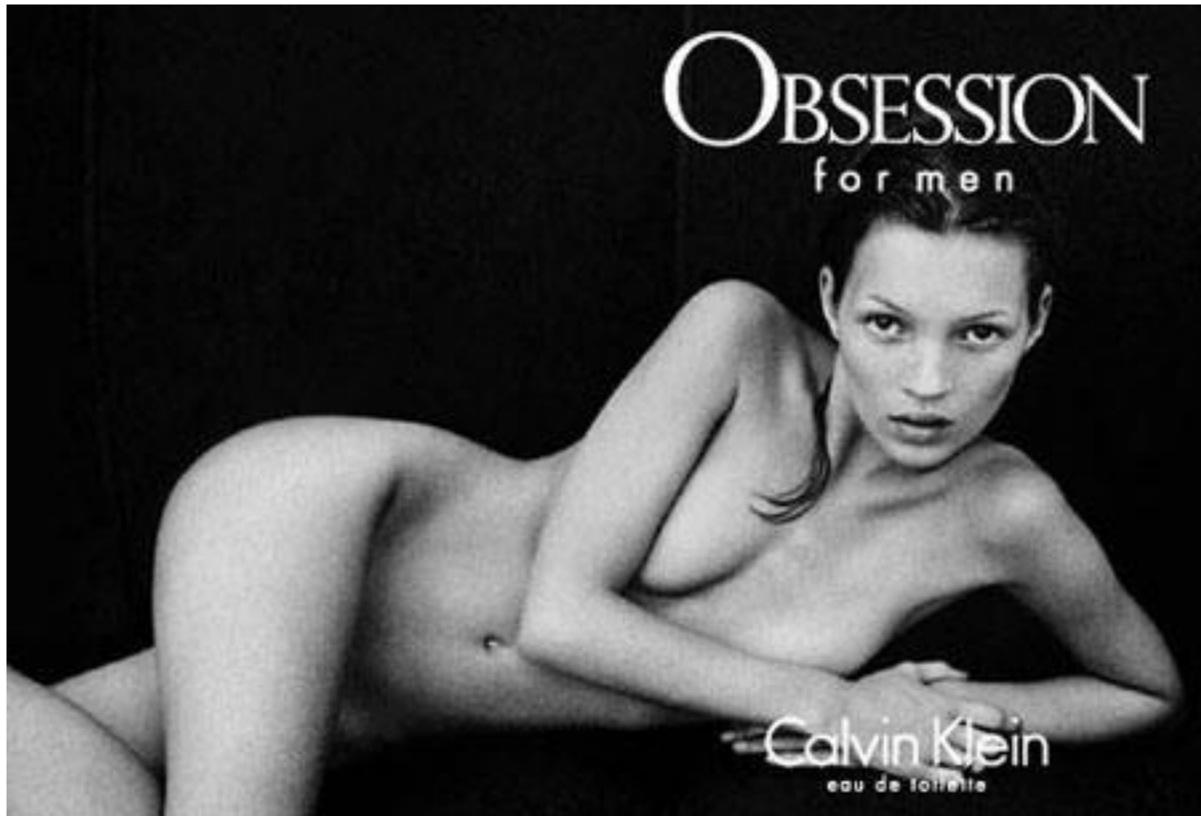

FIGURE 2

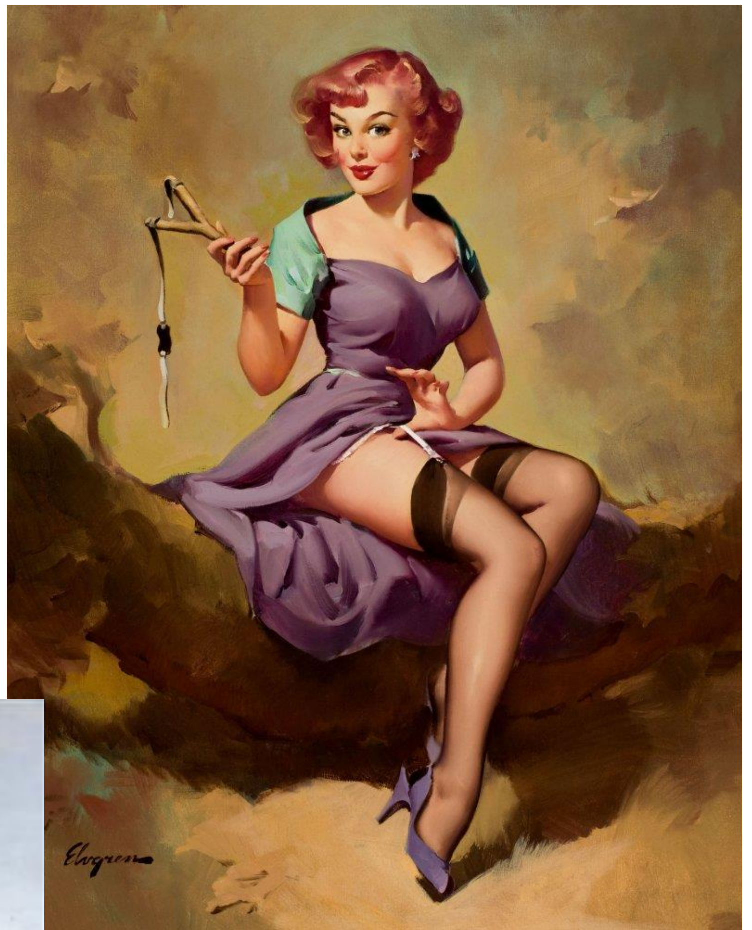

FIGURE 3

FIGURE 4

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FIGURE 9

FIGURE 10

FIGURES 11, 12 & 13

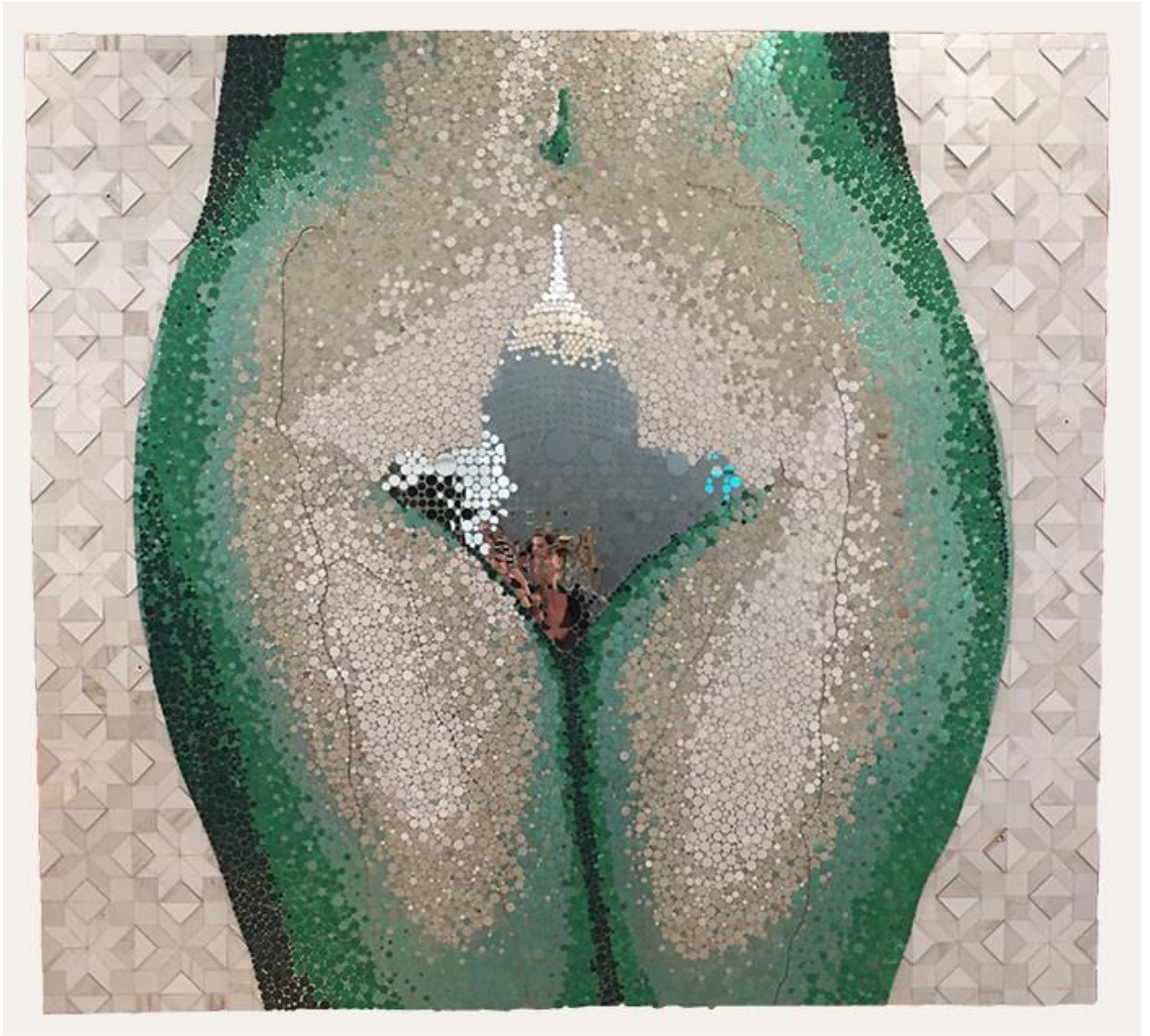

FIGURE 14

FIGURE 15

FIGURE 16

FIGURE 17

FIGURE 18

FIGURE 19

FIGURE 20

FIGURE 21

FIGURE 22

FIGURE 23

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