

It's all an act: portraying the identity at surface level

By: Kate Luther

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Abstract:

In this paper, I question how portraiture can be represented through bedrooms, persona, and fabricated material. Drawing on Cynthia Freeland's qualifying conditions of portraiture, I argue that fabulative bedrooms paired with a persona are one of the most all encompassing forms of portraiture. Utilizing the implied body and careful arrangement, I build these interactive sculptural rooms and create A.I. drag personas based on historical research about the women from the 1934 textile strike. The drag personas and bedrooms serve as materialization of this research and an artistic projection of these stories.

I. Intro

Through bedrooms, persona and fabricated material culture I explore what it means to portray an identity through the surface. I am interested in how a collection of unrefined and fabricated material can be linked to an individual through a defined space. Bedrooms are a unique environment where there is a fragmented material culture that showcases the process of constructing an identity that is linked to a specific individual. Due to the set parameters of the space, the material culture in it constantly evolves by objects stacking on top of one another on the floor and pieces of furniture to create these zany material arrangements. The constant shift of these materials that are used to show the evolution of an identity creates a liveliness in the room without the presence of a figure. Bedrooms utilize traditional strategies in portraiture to showcase the essence of the individual by posing the furniture and implied body to create a flow in the space and to portray a personality. I argue that spaces like bedrooms are one of the most all encompassing forms of portraiture. There are enough details that are rooted in reality to make it feel convincing but the stacking of materials means that certain elements of the identity building process come to the front while other aspects get pushed to the back. The unintentional hiding and fragmentation of material information means that there is room for the person entering the space to construct an identity that is based on this information

that may or may not be fully accurate to the individual occupying the room. To explore this argument, I have created drag personas Lois Rogerz and Eula Micgill through A.I. that are loosely based on my great grandmother Lois Rogers and union organizer Eula McGill. These personas became points of inspiration to create fabultative bedroom portraits that explore my love and adoration of these women's personalities and stories.

II. Material, Surface, and Space as Portrait

There's a world where I can go
And tell my secrets to
In my room
In my room
In this world I lock out
All my worries and my fears
In my room
In my room
Do my dreaming and my scheming
Lie awake and pray
Do my crying and my sighing
Laugh at yesterday
Now it's dark and I'm alone
But I won't be afraid
In my room
In my room
In my room, in my room
In my room, in my room¹

Bedrooms are often one of the first places where an individual is given a space to comfortably explore and materialize their identity. This space, which occupies the intersection between public and private, is customized by one individual on the inside but with traces of the family home's external influences seeping in. Identity shifts and

¹ *The Beach Boys – in My Room Lyrics* | *Genius Lyrics*, genius.com/The-beach-boys-in-my-room-lyrics. Accessed 23 Mar. 2025.

changes over time, while there is some external evidence of this shift through material means it often only shows the finished product. Bedrooms are this space that materially indicates the past and current shift of someone's identity and enmeshing of timelines that is tailored to the individual that occupies the space. The surfaces in a bedroom often highlight an explorative period of someone's identity. Especially in adolescence, bedrooms showcase the tension between past identity, the current, and the aspirational one. During that age, an individual often wants to explore who they are but having to do so in a small space with the influence of a family.² The surface



Fig.1 Portia Munsion "Nighstand" Found figurines, string & rope, bedside table 51 × 34 × 27 in 2021

treatments on furniture pieces are applied in a swift manner to accommodated a quickly evolving identity. As more material gets added to the surface, details of past identity exploration gets omitted but never fully erased. Pieces of furniture like nightstands and dressers become a dumping ground for these temporal skins. These furniture pieces are some of the most used objects in a bedroom because its the place where essential items like morning medication and

clothing are housed. The functional

² Lincoln, S. "'I've Stamped My Personality All Over It': The Meaning of Objects in Teenage Bedroom Space." *SPACE AND CULTURE*, vol. 17, no. 3, Jan. 2014, pp. 266–79.

components like drawers are embedded within the object so the objects on the flat surface on top are intended to be used or put in a proper place in the near future. Quickly items like the the clothes I plan to wear tomorrow are stacked on top of the dresser with a decorative lamp in the corner that is on top of a band poster I have been meaning to frame. Though the placement was meant to be temporary these objects tend to linger longer than expected quickly building on top of one another to create these miniature towers.

The surfaces of the furniture and walls in this highly personalized space are patchwork paper ephemera and makeshift towers that are precariously arranged. Installation artist Portia Munson creates these highly curated stackings of thrift store finds on top of make shift pedestals that mirrors the aesthetic quality found on surfaces in a bedroom. In her piece “Nightstand” fig.1, the thrift store lamp figurines that are stacked on top of the found nightstand take over the furniture piece. She mimics and slightly exaggerates the additive surface treatment of these generic domestic objects that one would typically see in a bedroom space. The act of stacking creates a statuesque presence in these small and unimportant objects. Excessive number of trinkets placed upon a surface on a piece of furniture results in these three-dimensional entities to become almost like a raised surface. For example, the thread binding the lamps together in Portia Munson’s piece acts like cobwebs which creates this tension of the objects appearing untouched, but the material revealed the presence of the hand in arranging and binding the lamps. The threads are a hazy filter on top of the thrift store treasures that connects the array. Much like when dust collects on a bedroom nightstand, when a material coats the collection of objects an

enmeshing of the environment and arrangement occurs, and the legibility of the items in the stack suddenly comes into question. Though the identity of the objects become clouded in this process, the hand of the artist and the specificity of the arrangement come through this filter as a blurred collaged raised surface.

In a bedroom portrait, the surfaces on the furniture and floor acts as a foundation for the collision of decorative and functional objects. The stacking of these objects on this surface creates a fusion of the environment and object that mimics the process of collage. In a bedroom portrait, collage is seen as an act of stitching together and tacking down to create a skeuomorphic surface. Textiles, clothing, paper scraps, and posters collide into one another to create these quick temporal skins that coat every surface. These materials start as objects in the round but are reduced to a limp exterior when the body is absent or the intervention of the hand to turn



Fig. 2 “Wooden Floor” up cycled suit pants and thread 9x7ft 2025

an object to a material. Given the quickness and rapid turnover of these skins, they are often applied in a haphazard manner which results in flat material being wrinkled, ripped, and squished together. The once smooth paper and textiles suddenly fold like a skin that covers the furniture, walls, and floor. The faux wooden floor in Eula Micgill” (fig. 2). installation is a skeuomorphic collage is created by reducing secondhand suit pants to strips of fabric that are quilted together to cover a wooden structure and to mimic the look of wooden floors. The strips of suit pants don’t lie flat like a traditional piece of fabric because they still have traces of the objecthood of a suit pants. Details like pockets, buttons, and pleats remain intact to showcase where the material came from which causes a slight warp with the pattern. This surface acts like a stretched-out blanket on the floor structure which suggests its temporality. Though the muted brown tones and the rectangular shape could be read as unassuming, the evidence of a material source and the indication of hand creates a personality to a surface that isn’t necessarily available to a form.

Stacking and collage are both additive and subtractive processes used to overtake and obscure an object or surface. The additive nature of these processes is important to point out because it showcases how these accumulative techniques are used to



Fig. 3. “Bed” up-cycled leopard print fabric, acrylic, dye, gesso and textiles 9x4x11 ft

communicate and construct an identity. The surface is the first piece of visual information that someone takes in when entering a bedroom. The dimensions of a room have a standard rectangular form, so it's these additive and homespun veneers on these surfaces that cause the eye to slow down and add personality to the space. For example, the bed in the "Lois Rogerz: Same as Always" installation has strips of thrifted leopard print fabric appliquéd on the surface of the bed (fig. 3). While all the



Fig 4. Beverly Semmes Velvet, organza, faux fur, silk, Alexander McQueen dress, stuffed and taped AMQ clutch purse and strap, taped AMQ shoes, painted plastic resin dog with AMQ clutch purse chain, 118 x 118 x 171 inches. 2021 Courtesy Locks Gallery, Philadelphia.

appliqué comes from the same print category there is a lot of variation of the print itself and the material it was manufactured in. From lycra to cotton to silk, the bed was adorned with an array of fabric types that featured the leopard print on various forms. The variation, amount, and fragmented quality of the appliqué suggests a continued interest in what kind of identity the pattern communicates and a collection over time. The pasting on the surface of the furniture and walls showcases an intent to communicate an interest and cultivate an identity through material and space.

Drawing on Cynthia Freeland's

qualifying conditions for a portrait, I argue that bedrooms are one of the most all-encompassing forms of portraiture. Freeland states that a portrait must contain a “recognizable physical body along with (2) an inner life, i.e. some sort of character and/or psychological or mental states and the ability to creatively pose”.³ Bedrooms not only have the presence of a body but also the evidence of one inhabiting the space. This room is frequently covered with imagery of the self, loved ones, and divine divas that take in the form of photographs and posters. While the walls are plastered with these images the floors and raised surfaces are dusted with bodily matter-like fingernails, rogue hairs, and flakey pieces of skin. The evidence of the pictorial, and the imagined body all inhabit the bedroom that plays with the recognizability and the *residue of liveliness*. When an article of clothing is strewn about on the floor, the garment may have the absence of a body but a presence of a figurative notion. For example, in Beverly Semmes work “Marigold” (fig 4.) a found velvet robe drapes on the hanger exudes a bodily presence because we understand clothing as an object worn by and made to fit the body. Even in the absence of one, the functional associations with this object cannot be untethered with the intended function. The excess material from the robe that falls on the floor wrinkles and folds like skin that’s adorned with decorative objects. The intermingling of object and implied flesh that occurs with the “Marigold” creates a personification and a liveliness that creates the illusion of a surface having a lived experience. The surfaces of bedrooms are where the play and the development of a character and the emergence of a persona come to life. Unlike traditional forms of portraiture, having material and

³ Patrick Maynard, Portraits and Persons: A Philosophical Inquiry, The British Journal of Aesthetics, Volume 51, Issue 4, October 2011, Pages 449

pictorial fragments allows an audience to see the process of constructing an identity and the ability to create a one that draws on factual and fabricated evidence.

Creating a believable character often begins with a touch of reality and a strong creative vision from the artist. Bedrooms provide enough of the recognizable matter to be the perfect catalyst to play with the aspirational and actual identity. Lastly, bedrooms heavily utilizes staging not in the traditional sense as a sitter poses for in image but rather using intentional arrangement to create a flow and atmosphere.

Posing in a bedroom is a technique used to incite functional use and to build a mood.

The way furniture pieces are arranged in a bedroom can help a body navigate the space so that they can interact and access material information. This type of posing allows for the illusion of intimate knowledge of the person who occupies the space.

The architectural structure of a bedroom acts as a limiting force that impacts the pose of the furniture and the arrangement of objects in the space. In order for the space to be functional, the furniture in the room must be arranged in a certain way so that it is livable. This rigidity may limit the pose, but it allows for the creative expression to be on the surface. For example, the rectangular restraint of a painting strongly correlates with the set physical dimensions of a room. The framing device in both cases allow for the focus to be on the surface rather than the form and forces an additive process on the designated surface.

The strict parameters incite a zany quality with the material application on the furniture and walls. Zaniness is often seen as this overly eccentric quality in a space or individual that seems impossible to encapsulate. However, zaniness shows up the

best in a contained, restrictive environment⁴. In a limited spacial setting like a bedroom, the additive surface treatments have limited range of movements in terms of where it can go. The expansion of the room isn't possible so moves like stacking, cramming, and collaging are done to ensure all of the desired objects fit into that space. This set architectural space results in these manic assemblages of material that have varying degrees of personal, functional, or monetary value. The temporary quality of the arrangements means that things have the potential to be shifted at any



Fig. 5 “Lois and Lorrainee: wearing Lois in Red” ai generated images, great grandmother’s lingerie top, thread, and acrylic 2024.

given moment (fig. 5). While the objects have a limited capacity in terms of places they could go, they are constantly moving and shifting but in the same place. Like an

⁴ Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories : Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard University Press, 2012.

indoor bicycle, the equipment may be moving at various levels of speed but the person riding it isn't actually going anywhere. Every time someone takes a shirt from a drawer, adds a new poster to the wall, or changes the sheets on the bed the material culture of a room shifts. The act of existing in the space highlights how a restrictive environment leads to a zany curation of objects and an emphasis on the exterior.

In every bedroom portrait I construct, I think about how I can create a fixed space that is specific to the individual I am creating the portrait of. For my great grandmother's bedroom portrait, I wanted to model the confinements of the room and the arrangement of the furniture to mirror the same set up she had while living in a textile mill town in Gadsden, Alabama. Each mill town bedroom had a uniform layout. There was a fireplace in the upper right-hand corner followed by a bed close by on the left with a small vanity or dresser that closely followed. This layout was designed to make for a quick build and provide the bare essentials. The design for these houses was meant to create the most efficient workers for the textile company rather than a place for meaningful rest and comfort. With the inflatable furniture and the small dimensions of the room, I played with the room's breeding efficiency by making the space inefficient and having the furniture over-perform a useless task.

For the bedroom portrait of Eula McGill, I was struck by the mixture of masculine and feminine undertones coming through in her interviews. In every photograph of her, which was mostly taken at a labor union conference, she was often the only femme

presenting person in a sea of men⁵. Eula stood proudly in her shoulder padded suits with slap stick lacey appliqué armed with her quick wit and no-nonsense attitude⁶. This fashion choice, to me, mirrored how she played with and pushed up against



First conference of the Georgia Textile Workers Organizing Committee, Atlanta, Georgia, January 15, 1939.(Eula in the far right corner in the plaid suit)

gender norms during that era. The strong shoulder created a V like shape that one

⁵L1984-70_481, Labor Photographs, AFL-CIO Region 8 records [Folder 26 of 46], AFL-CIO Region 8 records, L1984-70, Southern Labor Archives. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta.

⁶L1984-70_560, Labor Photographs, AFL-CIO Region 8 records [Folder 33 of 46], AFL-CIO Region 8 records, L1984-70, Southern Labor Archives. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta.



Eula Mae McGill at the 12th annual Tennessee State CIO Council Convention.

would typically see in a suit tailored for men but then the ill placed embellishment or the bright pink color palette was a detail often used in women's clothing. I built a room that had the rigid form of a 1930's suit designed for a man but created in a bright pink color palette accompanied with velvety pink buttons. The back of the suit

highlighted that desired V shape that men's suiting often tried to achieve but it also looked strikingly like an hourglass which is often a desired shape in women's fashion. The suit room, much like Eula, took on an alluring statuesque presence in a white cube gallery space that is filled with suiting details on the interior with just enough room for one person to occupy the space at a time.

Dirt Portraits - Material Residue as Portraiture

In a space like a bedroom, particles of the outside come in and the furniture encounters continual contact with the hand and body. The repeated touch and continued use of these objects in a bedroom causes them to have a layer of dirt and grime caked on the surfaces. Traces of the outside come into this private space. Inadvertently, the external material is becoming intertwined with the carefully curated material culture in the space. Dirt portraits is an ongoing series that explores how to capture the residue of liveliness, its place in portraiture, and viewing it in a concentrated raw manner. Inspired by Adam Milner's series "Bedroom Fossils", I wanted to capture the grime and dirt left in an artist studio that felt untouched. Milner often takes inspiration for the compositions found on a street like crushed Cheetos on the ground to arrange the material findings they found in the bedroom(fig.6). The composition I got after sweeping up a pile of dirt strikes



Fig.6 Adam Milner *Bedroom Fossils*, 2016
eyelashes, violets, mosquitoes, and belly button lint, on embossed rag paper, in maple frames;
21.5cm x 21.5cm each, four parts (23cm x 89cm framed)

me as this beautiful collision of materials that would not typically occur in a finished artwork. The personal, artistic, and the natural matter all came together to create an assemblage that gave fragments of an experience of the artist inhabiting the space(fig.7). To begin a “Dirt Portrait”, I sweep the floor of the artist studio and get on my hand and knees to grab any other material that found its way to the ground. My findings are anything from body hair, food wrappers, evidence of artwork’s failure, and creation. The findings are kept in a zipped compartment then taken to my studio to be sewn together. I sandwich the dirt in a water-soluble fabric stabilizer film and use the sewing machine as a binding agent to ensure the material sticks together. The



Fig.7 “Alejandro” hair, snack wrapper, plastic, canvas thread, thrown out poetry, and thread 2023

thread on the surface acts like a drawing mark so my role in creating this portrait is visible but each different component of the dirt is legible. The material I gather comes from one specific place and individual so the dirt I gather is undeniably tethered to them. The type of material I gather is the unrefined and gross evidence of liveliness that is present in every bedroom but hard to replicate. The “Dirt Portraits” go through a level of abstraction by condensing the material to create a concentrated viewing experience of this residue. The findings are a material representation of usage in that space but also evidence of my interpretation of the individual.

III. Persona as Portrait

Persona is the extension and exaggeration of an individual's physical and personality traits. This performance device highlights the idyllic and pessimistic view that society and self-have on the performer. Warren defines persona as “when performers explicitly play “versions” of themselves, there is also a level of deception involved—not necessarily with malicious intent but certainly aimed at sowing levels of uncertainty or misrecognition within the viewer. This sense of uncertainty is what accounts for much of their appeal. A common characteristic of many of these personas is that they are not content with constructing one or two layers of fiction.”⁷ In my work, I think of the persona as a semi-fictitious person who helps bring specificity to fabricated material and space. A persona anchors all these different elements, so it has a purpose and acts as a guiding force for my aesthetic choices in space. When utilizing this performance device, it’s important that I show my role in the making and evidence in historical research. The goal for these personas is to showcase my love and artistic interpretation of the individual through costuming and world building.

Lois Rogerz Persona

When creating the drag persona Lois Rogerz, I took inspiration to create this character based on my great grandmother Lois Rogers from family stories and historical research. When developing her costuming, I used a simple red polyester matching set that had vanity fair tags still intact that were my great grandmothers from the 70’s. In every image I saw of her, she wore a semi fitted silhouette that was patterned in one or two colors with lots of gold jewelry(fig.8). The clothing itself was something you

⁷Warren, Kate. “Double Trouble: Parafictional Personas & Contemporary Art.” *Persona Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016.



Fig.8 Movie stills from “The Same Bitch as Last Time” Lois Rogerz (right played by Caitlin La Dolce) 2024

would see most women wearing during her era, but that simple base was an opportunity for her styling to shine. Having the garment itself be an index of that era connected Lois to that period but styling choices like the haphazardly teased wig connects an audience to her personality and attitude. I styled the actor in Lois’s original red lounge wear set. The red color and the shiny fabric created an boldness on stage but the loose fitting silhouette suggested a relaxed attitude with the persona. Accessorizing the matching set with the beetle broach and gold earrings created a quirkiness with persona but also furthering the laid-back attitude. For the makeup, I wanted to harden and intensify the facial features by giving the performer a thick high arched brow with sharp black wings that went past the temple. The extreme angles of the brow and the eyeliner lifted everything up so it appears as though her face is permanently stuck in an angry expression. The color palette in the makeup was a key part in creating an attitude for the look so the crimson red eyeshadow and splotchy blush established an unbridled fiery spirit with the character.

The makeup in combination with the lounge wear set creates a persona that is at her wit's end but still has to put on a face of having it together. I chose the "stage name" Lois Rogerz to keep close to her actual name because I wanted an audience to be able to easily sift out where the inspiration for this character came from but the simple gesture of adding a "z" call attention to the artificial quality with the character.

Eula McGill

When creating the persona and bedroom of my great grandmother, I became fascinated about her time during the 1934 textile strike and the history surrounding it. I wanted to learn more about some of the prominent women figures during the strike and their perspective of the era. My fascination with Lois's hometown of Garden, Alabama continued and I was curious to see if there were additional information about the women from the strike who lived in that area. I came across Eula McGill's archival material which contained hours of interviews, photographs, and impromptu singing. She had a lot of material to go off of in terms of creating a persona so I thought that she would be the perfect person to continue this series with.

Eula McGill was one of the most prominent southern women leaders during the 1934 textile strike. Originally born in Georgia, Eula started her career working in the textile mills in Gadsden, Alabama before moving to Montgomery to do the bulk of her labor union activist work. She was very public about her role as a labor union organizer and conducted several oral and video interviews. After listening to 18 hours' worth of interviews with Eula, I was only able to glean small bits of biographical

information. In a lot of oral history interviews, the goal is to find out what the individual's role was in a specific event or describe the how and why a historical event came to fruition. A lot of personal details about the individual often get passed over in this type of setting. So, while I had several hours of her talking about the environment surrounding the textile worker union, I had about 45 minutes' worth of her talking about her personal life. In that time, she talked about her father's influence on her joining the union, her lack of ability to spin yarn properly, love for dressing up, and would unprompted belt union worker songs at random points during the interview. A detail that I latched onto during her interview was the fact that she once dressed up as Rudolph Valentino for Halloween as a child who was a popular male silent film star in the 1930's. The curious choice of the Rudolph Valentino costume and my perception of the subtle personality choices in the interviews became a jumping off point for my projection of her. She had a deep, flat, and gravelly voice and this stoic quality about her. The way she spoke and carried herself made me think of Bea Arthur's character "Dorthy" in the 1980's Television sitcom Golden Girls. This character was no nonsense, a bit of a bubble pricker, but fiercely cared for and protected the people she loved. All these qualities felt really reminiscent of how Eula conducted herself and spoke about her work. For the drag persona which Eula was a catalyst for, I was inspired by her stoic nature, the connection I felt she had between Bea Arthur's character Dorthy and her choice of dressing up as Rudolph Valentino for Halloween. I named the persona Eula McGill so that there would be an apparent connection to her actual name yet a clear error in spelling to denote the artificiality of the persona. For the images I created, I did a

drag king look that combined the suaveness of Rudolph Valentino with the earnest attitude and suiting styling of Eula.

A.I. and Photography Transformations

After photographing myself in the drag persona that was patterned after each individual, I fine-tuned an A.I. text to image model with the photographs that I created. I used this model as a queering device in the work to create subtle yet, monstrous drag personas. I was inspired by Jake Elwes piece “Queering the Dataset” where they took a dataset of 70,000 images of human faces and inserted 1,000 pictures of drag performers(fig.9). “Inserting the drag images - what Jake refers to as disrupting or even corrupting the dataset or injecting queerness into it - resulted in these monstrous, alluring, and queerly moving images, where the images move queerly and are queerly moving or affecting.”⁸

⁸Parslow, Joe. “Kings, Queens, Monsters, and Things: Digital Drag Performance and Queer Moves in Artificial Intelligence (AI).” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 33, no. 1/2, Feb. 2023, pp. 128–48.

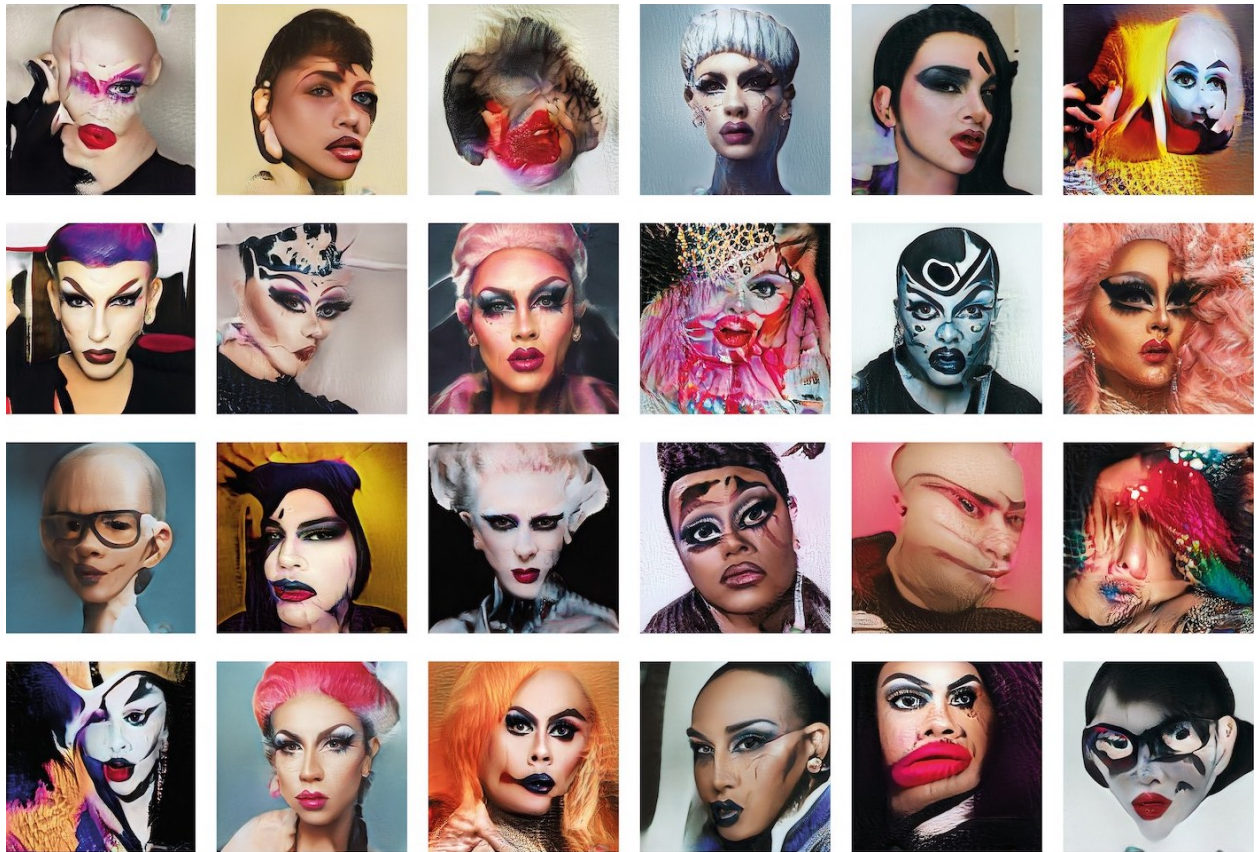


Fig.9 Jake Elwes Series of 24 prints. Archival pigment prints on Platine Fibre Rag paper 21x21cm

I was interested in distorting the figure to the point where the process and use of this type of technology was obvious. Adding images of myself in drag into that text to image model helped ensure that the tool would not function to its fullest capacity. In the written prompts, I would input illogical descriptions of the kind of image I was hoping to get. For example, Lois was known for having a boob teapot in her house that she would frequently show off to guests. In the model that I fine-tuned with her images, I typed out in the text bubble to create an image of a “glamorous southern women wearing a red dress pouring tea from a boob shaped teapot.” I would get an image that had boobs and teapot but never a boob shaped teapot. Using an A.I. model felt like playing a game of telephone, I became interested in what information was

lost and what imagery was unintentionally added. One of the main functions in that piece of technology is pattern recognition, so any sort of irregularities or fraying from the binary causes it to malfunction and create a monstrous form(fig.10). Integrating a text to image model into a bedroom portrait mimics the enmeshing and deletion that can occur in the formation of an identity. This way of making showcases the layers of fiction being used to construct a persona and makes evident of the process being used to do so.

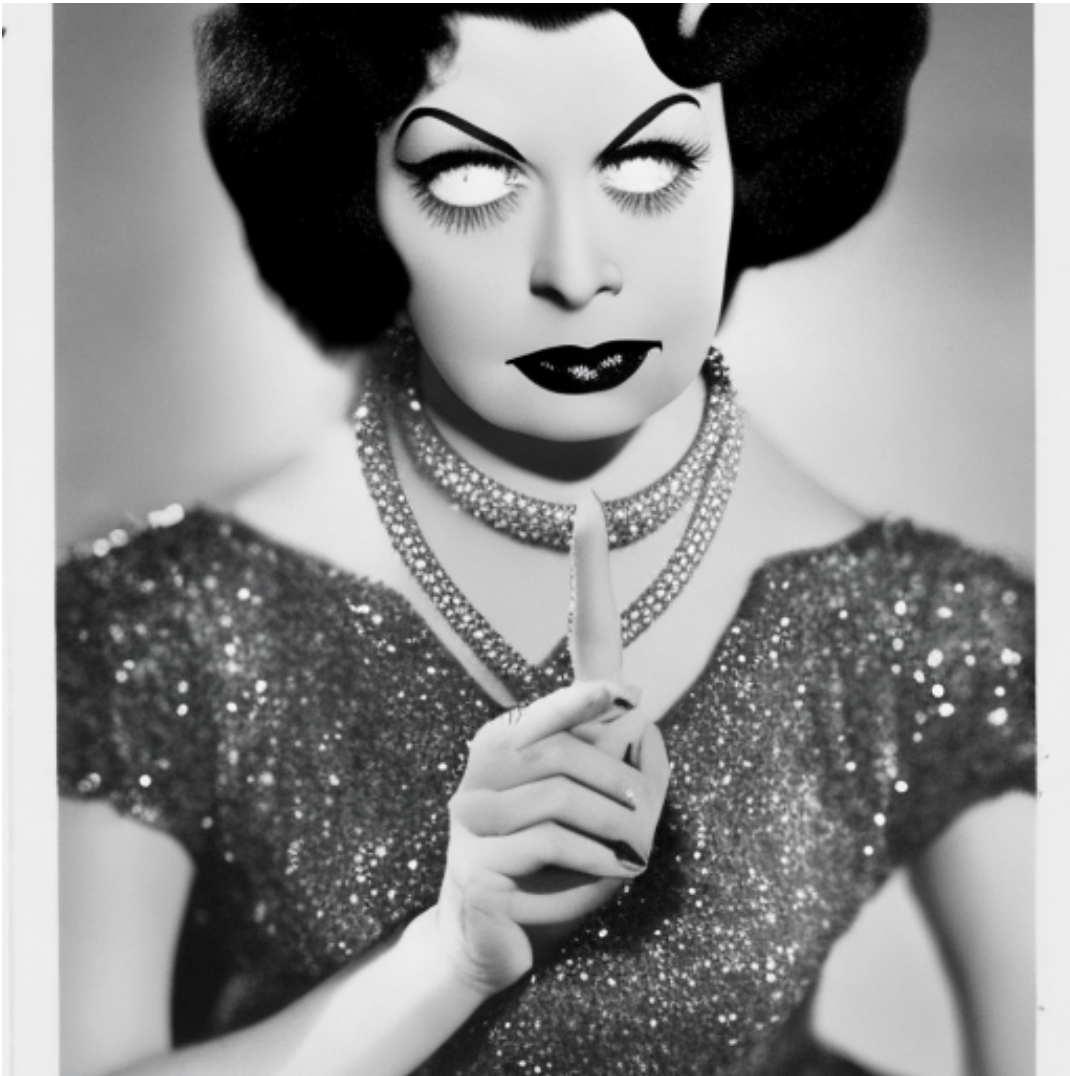


Fig 10. "Lois tries her darnedest to flip you off" A.I. image 2024

IV. Fabulation: Emphasis on Environment where all parts come together

Persona, material culture, and a specific space constraint are the key elements to create a fabulative environment. The space sets the stage, a curated material palette creates a unique logic, and the persona is the anchoring point that gives those elements a purpose. Time, legibility of object, and the figure all come into question to create an experience that plays with the ideal and the grime of reality.

Pee Wee's Playhouse is a television show where a childlike persona constructs a maximal living space filled with imaginary friends, do-it-yourself surface treatments, and personified objects. The set and Paul Ruben's persona Pee Wee toys with ideas of liveliness and age to create an environment that confronts reality and escapes it. Pee Wee Herman is clearly being played by a middle-aged man but has the aesthetic taste mannerisms, and preferences of a child. He wears a tight grey suit with a red bow tie that you would often see on an adult, but he styles it with this plastic clown-like shoe that is slightly oversized that suggests the act of dressing up and outgrowing. Pee Wee also oscillates in the space of being a human and an oversized doll. The excess blush on his cheeks, hair that looks like a tailored made helmet, and his limited, awkward and impulsive robotic dance moves flatten the person who plays the character to feel like an object. The playhouse is a small space that is full of lively objects yet is not livable space for an actual human, but it somehow meets all of Pee Wee's needs. The confinement of the space creates a safe womb like structure that incites comfortability to wrestle with watered down questions about ideas of friendship and

kindness.⁹ The ambiguity surrounding Pee Wee's age suggests regardless of what generation you are a part of that these simple questions about morals resonate with everyone. Though the playhouse is filled with these personified objects that are labeled as "friends" he's asking these questions and having conversations surrounding morality with himself. The show plays with the enmeshment of figure and object, illusion of isolation and connection, and play as a disarming mechanism to talk about simple virtues.

"Lois Rogerz: The same as always"

"Lois Rogerz: The same as always" is a fabulative bedroom portrait of my great grandmother that explores her identity through a camp aesthetic lens, historical research, and past down stories from family. Lois Cowan Rogers was born in Gadsden, Alabama in 1919. Her thin, willowy body stood a little over five feet tall. The thick short curly black hair framed her angular face and matched her eyes which were dark as coal. The clothing that Lois wore served as a blank canvas for her fake gold necklaces, earbobs, and bright red lipstick that caressed her big smile which revealed her one tooth in the center of her mouth. I know about Lois from stories my grammy would tell me of her in the late years of her life. She was not always portrayed in the most positive light; in fact, my family would often describe her as someone who was difficult and crass. In those stories of her life, there was always humor baked into each one and a reverence for who she is while acknowledging the good, bad, and the

⁹Caldwell, John T. *Televisuality*. Rutgers University Press Classics, 2020.



Fig.11 photograph Lois(2nd on the left side bottom row) in front of the textile factory she worked at

ugly of Lois. For example, my aunt would talk about how her house was hotter than hell because she kept her fireplace on all the time even in the middle of June. In the same breath she would chuckle at the fact that her house was filled with lude sexual references that were disguised as functional domestic tools which she made sure to point out. Before she lived in that small ranch style house, Lois spent her later teen years living in Dwight Cotton Mill Village working as a spinner in the textile mill(fig.11). Those mill town homes all had the same floor plan and furniture pieces, a fireplace in the middle of the space with a small vanity for clothing and a bed tucked away in the corner. When designing her bedroom, I wanted to include details about her living spaces that she occupied throughout her life. I followed the exact floor plan

from her time living in the mill town, but I made sure that the fireplace was the focal point and that the skin of the furniture became the main catalyst for fabulation.

Every surface in the room incorporated an artificial interpretation of a natural material. The leopard print, vinyl wood sticker, faux fur, and deer rug are all reproductions of expensive building and decorative materials(fig.12). The material culture in the space mimicked the process of taking historical information about grandmother and running it through a camp aesthetic lens. It was important that my interpretation of her story was evident, so every surface of the room had an artificial haze coating every corner. Working in a camp sensibility in the space was a fitting choice because it heavily relies on irony and artificiality to create a theatrical experience. While the material is fake, it is clear what the source of inspiration was. The surface treatments on the side tables were meant to mimic the look of wood but the seams of the sticker and incorrect direction of the grain showed the hand of the material. The deer rug in the room had the shape and feel of an animal skin rug but the plastic eyes, tufts of shag carpet and pulling threads made light of this illusion(fig 13.). Playing with the story of a real person and pairing it with an obviously artificial material culture makes my role evident in the interpretation of the individual while still showcasing the source of the research.

Lois was never known for wearing leopard print, yet it covers every surface in the installation. In my eyes, she was a camp icon, a perfect combination of bawdy glamour and grime. I chose this pattern for her because it encapsulates camp



Fig.12 “Lois Rogerz: the same as awlays” solo exhibition at the Hapeville Depot museum 2024(full installation shot deflated)



Fig.13 Grandma Ran Over a Reindeer”: carpet, dye, acrylic, fringe, and plush animal deer 36x48in 2024

beautifully. Most women own an article of leopard print clothing, so the print itself is not particularly unique but when used abundantly the print takes on its own personality that can either overtake the person wearing it or create a larger-than-life character. The print in the bedroom helps give the furniture pieces a personality that adds to the form, and it creates an association to the body. The bed contains strips of the print appliquéd on the surface that act like a faux wood grain or strips of paint. All of the furniture pieces were anchored by a purple leopard print carpet. The deep jewel tones of the carpet and the shaved rosette shapes created a deepening effect in the space to define the perimeters of the room and act as an anchoring point to the installation. The artificial quality of the leopard print seamlessly fit into the specific material culture of the room and created a skin like surface treatment on the inflatable furniture.

To further establish artificiality with the room, I wanted the furniture pieces in the space to feel lively and the figurative imagery to appear like static objects. The subtle inflation of the furniture pieces creates a breath like movement that gives the leopard print skin that was reduced to strips of fabric a new sense of liveliness that abandons its original role of clothing to become a hybrid of a still body and a lively object. Like in Pee Wee's playhouse, the furniture in the room has limited yet animated movements which create a fusion of a friend and a functional item. The type of movements helped define a personality to these objects. The vanity, for example, is a place where someone stares at their complexion for a long time to apply makeup or to admire their facial features. The air pump over-inflates the form of the vanity to feel like a puffed-out chest that imitates the inflated ego that can



Fig.14 “Vanity” (Inflated state) acrylic, dye, and textiles
26x14x36in(installation shot)2024

occur when staring at yourself for too long(fig.14). The reflective material on the vanity is crumpled and doesn't function as a mirror but it is in the shape and place of one. Subverting its initial purpose takes away the one source of identity reflection to represent the ego artificially. The vanity much like all the furniture in the room, both over-performs as the intended object yet underperforms at its intended function. The movement of the bed worked in opposition to the intended function. A bed is typically known as a place of rest, yet it was the most active piece of furniture in the room. The posts in the bed as it was inflated acted like quivering legs and the mattress bend and folded like a body in motion. The flickering light and the subtle breath-like movement of the fireplace created a calmer liveliness in that corner of the room. The gentle movement matched the contemplative act of sitting by a fire and reflecting which drew the attention to the fabricated imagery on the walls.

The breathing furniture relinquishes its objecthood to become a fabricated body and the photographs in the room become flat inanimate objects in the space. The digitization and flattening of figures in the images become static objects in the room reinforcing the liveliness of the furniture. For example, when viewed from near the footboard, as the tops of the bedpost shiver and shakes it frames the burlesque A.I. generated image and highlights the stillness and the plasticity of the photograph(fig. 15). Even the archival images of Lois are subtly manipulated and flattened through cheap thrift store frames and exhausted paper. The image of her in front of the factory is printed on brown card stock that is then crushed by hand to reveal the



fig. 15 "Tea with Lois" AI image and gold frame 2024
36x48in

breaking down of the image and the softening of the figure. Lois bedroom is a materialization of my perception of her, a residue of her lived experiences, and the removal of reality through artificial intelligence.

Eula MicGill

After completing Lois's room and conducting a lot of historical research surrounding the 1934 textile strike, I wanted to feature the most prominent southern women leader of that strike. I was interested in highlighting women from that specific region of Alabama as a continuation of my last bedroom portrait. Eula McGill was a very outspoken leader in that region. In a lot of archival material and documentaries surrounding the strike, Eula's deep and flat southern drawl always appeared front and center. I became really drawn to her alluring presence in these spaces and how she was able to take the driver's seat as an interviewee. Her power, offbeat humor, and tenderness inspired me to create a bedroom portrait of her.

With Eula's story, I wanted the room to be clear about my methodology and framing surrounding the persona and bedroom. Firstly, acknowledging that Eula's story was a catalyst and source of inspiration for the fabultative bedroom portrait. The room is not a historically accurate depiction of her but rather an artistic interpretation of a specific historical time and story. The type of information I used is available to the public and centered on her activist work. I was never going to get the full personal life details of Eula. Unlike with the portrait of my great grandmother, I had family

members who could tell me more intimate details about her life and felt more inclined to tactfully explore that in her portrait. Eula McGill is a public figure so there are several interviews, images, and texts about her designed for public use that I felt comfortable using in my work.

In the archival material about Eula, the early connection she had to union work, the nature of oral history as a medium, and style guided my aesthetic choices for the room. In video interviews, she told the story of first hearing about labor union organizing from her father. She frequently tells this story but every time she tells it details get added and or omitted. This is a common trait in a lot of oral history archives where the same story gets told slightly differently each time. The transcript from those interviews shows what pieces of information she thought were important to tell at that particular time.

Version 1

MCGILL: Well, uh, I guess the -- the first time I had any, uh, conversation with my father about the union was, uh, during World War I, uh, my mother, who never worked outside the home, she liked any kind of public speaking, and she, uh, anytime anybody was going to speak -- [they used?] -- back then, they was going to have a speaker, and they'd pass the word around, there going to be a speaker up on the square, or the street. And yeah, Mama always went. And, uh, so this was a Labor Day celebration, they had a big Labor Day parade in Gadsden,

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and then they ended always at the end of Broad St, down by the river, and that's where they had the picnic, and the barbecue, and the speaking, down on the riverbank, under the trees. And, uh, I, uh, guess that's the first time I really paid attention to what they were talking about. So, we were eating supper that night, and Papa -- of course, he, -- he had to work Labor Day, the -- he worked at the steel plant then -- didn't celebrate Labor Day, only people that got off on Labor Day was people who had union, mainly craft unions, very few, uh, manufacturing plants were organized. So I asked my dad, I says, "What is a union? Papa, what is a union?" He says, "Well, it's an organization of workers, uh, banded together for their, uh, for the better of their working conditions. He said, just like any other group, he said, "Everything's organized just about except labor," said that "doctors

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have their Medical Association, and the, uh, merchants have their Merchants Association, the Chamber of Commerce," and he says, "that's what they're organized for," and he says "workers should do the same thing." He said, uh, "Always remember that, uh, your -- if you live in this world, and you don't try to make it a better place to live in," says, "you ain't living, you're just taking up space."¹⁰

Version 2

"Papa what is a union?" I guess that's the first time I ever really realized what he was talking about. And he told me, he said, "Well," he said, "A union is an organization of workers banding together to try to improve their working conditions." He said everything else is organized, even

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the preachers has ministerial associations, why shouldn't workers be organized. That's what he said to me. And he also said if you live in this country and don't try to better yourself -- or make the world better, you ain't living, you're just taking up space. And he also told me, he said, "A person who says their satisfied, there's no room for improvement." He said, "Never be satisfied. Be content, but never satisfied, you always want to try to better yourself." That's what my daddy told me then. And it stuck with me.¹¹

Version 3

MCGILL: Well I told somebody one day. I said, "You know, I never -- I was young and I was working and I said -- but when I paid a dollar and a half to vote and join the Democratic Party and a labor union, I didn't go nowhere but up after that. I had no -- there wasn't no future a person have if they don't have some hope. And without -- if you're just working every day in a mill with no say so in any of your conditions, I just wasn't raised that way. It's like I told you my **father** said to me when I was eight years old, "Why

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shouldn't workers be organized? Everything else is organized." And why shouldn't workers be organized? Why shouldn't they? He said, "You sure you're in business as same as the boss is. And you should help him make that business go, by the same token, you should have some say so about your working conditions because you're in business same as he is. He's putting up the money but you're putting up your life and your labor." And I was raised that way. And I was loyal to a company. I felt like if I worked for a company I should support this company and make it go. By the same token, I was due some respect too because I was part of that company because I was putting something into that company too, my life and my labor. He needed me and I needed him or the boss. And it should be a partnership. I see nothing wrong with that. And I think as time has gone by, more and more -- they call it enlightened management -- recognizes that. A disgruntled worker can do a boss more harm if

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they don't have some way to let off that steam, get that grievance off, they can cause the company more grief than you can imagine if they haven't got some way of settling their problems.

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Eula McGill, interviewed by George Stoney, Judith Helfand, and Jamie Stoney, 15 August 1991. L1995-13_AV0566, The Uprising of '34 Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University.

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Eula McGill, interviewed by Judith Helfand, 2 May 1994. L1995-13_AV0763, The Uprising of '34 Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University.

An aspect about oral history I became captivated by was the fact that same story could be told differently each time and it can contained new pieces of information. The slippage of memory that happens in these historical accounts guided my approach to the material palette in her room. I wanted to incorporate this phenomenon materially, so I translated that into only working with textiles and see how I can manipulate it or add to it but still having the nature of the material be present. Throughout her portrait, I mostly used textile-based material for the wall and floor treatments of the space. The same medium is used on the surfaces of the bedroom, but it is applied and stitched together in a slightly different manner every time.

A moment from her interview that inspired my textile design is when she talks about how her mom made clothing from what they had lying around the house. It was common money saving hack in the 1930's to create dresses out of feed sack fabric so companies got wind of this and started making their feed sack fabric bright and heavily patterned to encourage people to buy their product. After studying the trends in feed sack fabric design, I created a custom print inspired by Eula's story. It was common for a lot of these fabrics to have floral motifs but that to me felt too feminine for her, so I used a tomato as the main imagery for the print.¹² The tomato in the print stood for a gender-neutral motif that harkened back to the Amalgamated Textile Worker Union emblem. The emblem had a floral button-like form with a pin

¹²McCray, Linzee Kull. *Feed Sacks : The Colourful History of a Frugal Fabric* / Written by Linzee Kull McCray. Uppercase Publishing, Inc., 2019

going through the center, so I used that basic shape as a point of reference for the pattern. A tomato pin cushion was used in the center as a textile motif nod that was encapsulated by a green scalloped circle with a sharp needle piercing through. The zany plaid pattern framed the elements together and was another gender queering device use to fuse the often-masculine pattern of plaid with the bright pink color palette.

In the archival imagery of Eula, she often wore matching suit sets with a broach or a simple lace appliqué on the chest. For the details and overall structure of the room, I wanted the form to feel like a watered-down suit jacket structure. Suit jackets in particular are designed to be seen on the inside and outside. The lining is stitched together with silky and patterned fabric to create a reveal when the jacket is removed from the body. The exterior of the suit jacket is often in a solid color with pressed seams to compliment and create structure to a body. The lining of the suit room is meant to feel soft yet lively, so I used the custom print inspired by Eula for the back of the suit and had hot pink silk fabric for the sleeves to play with traditional suiting techniques. The harsh triangular sleeve structure of the room meant that the suit room is in a constant anticipatory state of reveal. From a side view angle, the sleeve covers up the bed and most of the side table but shows a sliver of the phone and a clear shot of the images housed in the single welt pockets. The structure of the room plays with the enmeshing of the interiority and the exteriority of a suit jacket and how that is like the experience of a public audience being inside a slightly exposed bedroom of an individual.

The free-standing bedroom structure is intentionally designed so that only one person can comfortably fit in the space(fig 16.). The goal was to have a more intimate interaction with Eula's story and to mimic the solitude that can happen in a bedroom. The slow fiber details, structure and suiting imagery encouraged a more private viewing experience. The single welt pocket is a detail that is typically used in the interior of the suit. That type of pocket would only be seen and used by the person wearing the suit jacket thus the images in those pockets would only be looked at by



Fig.16 "Eula MicGill" (installation shot) textiles, wood, ai images, and rotary phone 9x7x8ft 2025

the one person in the room. While the bedroom space and suiting details give the spacial illusion of closeness the images in the pockets are highly fabricated.

The “vintage” photographs in the pockets are digitally and physically manipulated through A.I. and material choices. With the type of information I was getting about Eula, I was never going to have access to intimate details about her life. While the structure of the room incited a closeness, the apparent digital failures of the images suggests that you may not be as close as you think you are. There is often a false pretense that a printed photograph offers an accurate depiction of an individual, so using A.I. as a tool with limited text description shows the use of the tool and the failure of “accuracy”. The apparent facade of the images and the evidence of material



Fig.17 “Eula MicGill” detail installation shot 2025

usage in the space acts as a reassurance that there are several levels of fiction and fabrication happening in the room.

In the brightly colored filled suit room of Eula MicGill, there are moments in the back and front of the room where the most used and worn objects take a breath(fig.17).

The subtle but quick breath-like movement in the Amalgamated Textile Worker Union suit and the pillow creates an artificial liveliness and bodily presence in the bedroom.

The pacing of the breath is different from that of the person who is interacting with the room. The suit lining in the chair moves in a quick fluid motion that suggests the body is catching its breath. While the pillow and suit are mostly static the motion in the central part of the objects implies an animated quality that isn't present with the



Fig.18 “Eula MicGill” detail shot 2025

other objects. For example, the up-cycled dress shirt quilt has ripples in the fabric and random stains but next to the delicate inflation of the pillow the quilt then becomes a residue of liveliness, and the pillow becomes an active portrayal of liveliness. The hot spotlights reveal the methods in creation and the laborious task of piecing together textiles, history, and fiction to create an interactive experience surrounding my deep respect for Eula and portraying how I see her (fig.18). The commanding yet vivacious presence of Eula McGill's bedroom portrait utilizes the artificial and implied liveliness to captivate an audience and to draw attention to her incredible legacy. Through persona, bedrooms, and unique material cultures I have attempted to create immersive experiences that explore the messy process of identity construction and what it means to convey it to an audience.

Portraying an identity through bedrooms, material and persona feels like a never ending task. As my fascination with the history and the women of the 1934 textile strike strengthens, I am interested in creating more bedroom portraits in honor of these women. Each story is completely unique yet they are all tethered together by this historical event. I want to continue to create these portraits about the women who are from the Gadsden, Alabama region. Every time I conduct research surrounding the area I think of the tales my grandma would tell me of Lois raising hell there and my own personal connection to the city. In a way, I feel connected to these women though I have never met them. Their strength, humor, gentleness, and presence remind me so much of the interesting women in my life. After completing a few more bedroom portraits of the women in that area, I want to see their stories

interact together in some capacity and see where their lives would potentially be in conversation with one another.

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