

Tender Loins

By

Victoria Dugger

B.F.A. Columbus State University, 2016

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Benjamin Britton, Major Professor

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The Menu



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The Chicken or The Egg

My artwork is about disability. Stemming from my own disabled experience, I am interested in how the self is molded by the world around us, specifically, how the world and our environment name our bodies. I examine the integrity of normality, othering, and relation of self to the body. My goal is to offer a more inclusive representation of the human experience.

I question the characteristics of visibility and how they may contribute to or prevent the personification of disabled women of color. I grappled with these questions long before my decision to make art. When I was three years old, I was injured in routine scoliosis surgery. Although I have no recollection of the surgery or my recovery, the remnants of the injury remained; I was paralyzed. One moment I was “able” according to the standard of society and the next moment I was something else entirely.



Fig. 1: My mother, twin brothers and myself, 1994



Fig 2: Me at the Children's Hospital of New Orleans, 1995

My engagement with this subject transcends art making. If I were not an artist, I would still be on a similar journey of self-reckoning. Early in my art education, I came to realize that art was a safe space to express both the insecurities and triumphs that I felt as a black disabled

woman. I use paint and materials to explore the dense ambiguities of my place in society. Art has become my machete to clear away the brush of life.

I explore an alternate reality through a doubling of signifiers such as “twins” or shadow characters made of black glitter. The use of the “twin” represents my older brothers who are identical twins (fig.1). My figuring of twins also connects through another form of doubling, W.E.B Du Bois’s idea of double consciousness. According to DuBois, this sensation is persistent and fixed. Double consciousness is the social philosophy of inward “twoness” felt by Black people, or in my case, “threeness” (Du Bois). The concept of two being one, and vice versa, is joined by the body identified from the outside as disabled.

Disability implies a lack of ability: one is either able or disabled. This implies that one is either useful or useless. As language evolves, the terms around disability have changed. The contemporary third model of disability studies centers the focus on societal challenges and not on the “shortcomings” of the individual. In my work, I elucidate the disabled experience and offer an expanded visual lexicon of the spectrum of ability. My goal is to blur the lines between separate entities such as self and body, ability and non-ability, past and present, and reality and fiction.

Chopped Liver

Over the past three years, my studio practice has included two- and three-dimensional artworks. In the fall of 2019 and the following spring, I was making work in alignment with my application to the MFA program. This work was primarily graphite, ink on paper, and soft sculpture. I layered drawings and images to create a gestalt depth. For example, in fig. 4, *Perfect*

Body I: The Premature Birth of Venus, I collaged transparent medical images and graphite on canvas drawings.



Fig. 3: Still Life 7, graphite on watercolor paper, 9in x 11in, 2020



Fig. 4: Perfect Body I: The Premature Birth of Venus, gouache, graphite and clear vinyl, 12in x 17in, 2020

This work orbited around the context of the “disarticulate figure.” My understanding of disarticulation, at the time, only referred to its physical context. During my research that year, James Berger’s *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability and the Narratives of Modernity* stood out to me. Berger’s comparison of the separation of conscious self and physical body with the enforced isolation and stigmatization facing marginalized groups illuminated concepts of race, disability, and societal isolation in my own work (Berger).



Fig. 5: Good Grief, video still, 2020

My practice also involved video work that acted as assemblages of my own memories with popular culture and mass media events. For instance, *Good Grief* (fig. 5) was based on the 1994 attack of Olympic Figure Skater Nancy Kerrigan. I thought this incident, viewed by many as a national sporting tragedy, paralleled my own experience of paralysis. This piece was a continuation of a personal examination of another type of disarticulation and twoness: the discrepancy between private and public grief.



Fig. 6: It Ain't Broke, gouache and ink on paper, 21in x 30in, 2020

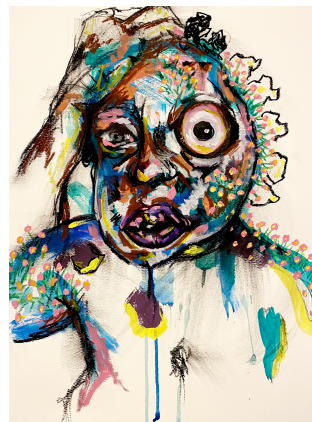


Fig. 7: Thicc Skinned, gouache and charcoal on paper, 18in x 24in, 2021

Through the fall of 2020 and into the following spring, I expanded my practice into painting, printmaking and sculptures, and embarked on a process of world building that included signifiers of the natural and built environment. The way those settings were represented became important for my questions about how the disabled body engages social and psychological space. An example of this is the disrupted bodies in *It Ain't Broke* (fig. 6), whose obscured background suggests the small amount of social space in society that disabled women of color occupy. This piece and others (fig. 8 and 9) refer to the wide-open space of landscape as a contrast to the ways

our freedom circumscribed by society. I also intend for my use of nature and animals to pose questions about the intersectionality of animal rights, ecofeminism, and disability rights.

Additionally, *It Ain't Broke* (fig. 6) is an example of the inclusion of printmaking into my practice. The relief-printed gut pattern describes a fragmented body. In these works, a watercolor middle ground posits a vocabulary of the temporal fragility of tissue and organs, and the ink serves as a metaphorical container or physical ridge to attach textural elements such as glitter.



Fig. 8: *Water Me*, gouache on panel, 24in x 24in, 2021



Fig. 9, *Now You See Me*, gouache on paper, 9in x 11in, 2020

During this time my research led me to Leduc's *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space*, where he talks about nature as presented as an obstacle to the protagonist in western fairy tales or narratives (Leduc). The unpredictability of nature became important in opposition to a domestic space where rights, etiquette, and customs are dominant concerns in determining justice. In *Now You See Me* (fig. 9), I make a hybrid of a domestic space (bathroom tile surface) and the natural environment (a joyful, idyllic landscape) as the backdrop to allegorize naivety, oppression, desire and fear.

Within this fictional world, the sculptures are ambiguous figures made up of synthetic hair, nylon stockings and gouache. They are connected by similar materials to their painted counterparts from the same universe. In *Little Vicky of 3 Years* (fig. 10), I communicated to a

specific audience with materials typically found in black beauty culture, intending for the limbs to convey atrophy, or the deterioration of muscles, a symptom of physical disability or immobility.



Fig. 10: Little Vicky of 3 Years, nylon stockings, synthetic hair, and ballet slippers, dv, 2021

My research has evolved to explore the physical, metaphorical, and societal meaning of the “other,” and to whom visibility is granted. I will continue to describe my practice here in terms of visibility, nature and ambiguity.

Visibility and the Distressed Body

Disability theorist Tobin Siebers challenges the idea that chronic pain or illness nurtures the ego. Siebers states that while a state of chronic pain might cause one to be constantly aware of the body, the self becomes othered. Cognitive separation from the body occurs when disability is introduced to the human experience (Siebers). This is where I believe double consciousness and disability intersect. The non-disabled body does not experience this twoness; it disappears within its seamless and transparent function. The body and self are unified. Through this unification, autonomy is achieved. Much like surgical sutures, autonomy allows the seams that

hold together the consciousness and the body to dissolve. The disabled consciousness is a manual entity that is aware of its physical ridges, or seams.

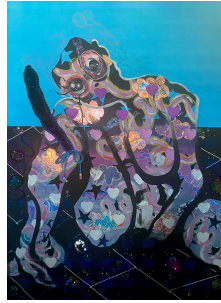


Fig. 11: Out of the Woodwork, gouache, glitter, and synthetic hair on panel, 36in x 48in,



Fig. 12: Frida Kahlo, The Two Fridas, oil on canvas, 68.3in x 68in, 1939

My exploration of self-portraiture is in reference to Frida Kahlo (fig. 12) and our shared experience of disability. Kerry James Marshall's (fig. 13) and Kara Walker's (fig. 14) use of silhouettes to imply Blackness is also important to my work. The silhouette removes any specific traits that might lead to prejudices (race, gender, etc.) while referencing Blackness. The illusion of the black silhouette signifies a fixed state of twoness. Silhouettes allow the figure to be both visible and invisible, absent yet present. Camouflage, by way of hiding the figures within themselves, either as silhouettes or overlapping patterns, has become effective in communicating the spectrum of visibility. Transparency thus becomes an identifier of non-disability, or autonomy.



Fig. 13: Kerry James Marshall, Supermodel, acrylic



Fig. 14: Kara Walker, The Keys to the Coop, 1997

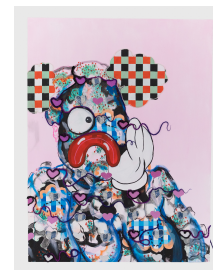


Fig. 15: Fix Your Face, gouache, glitter, and pearls on panel, 36in x 48in

Nature and the Domestic

In my work, nature takes on multiple intersecting opportunities for inquiry. First, nature is a place where there is natural equality, a place of severe “natural” justice, not socially-produced justice. Nature and its inhabitants are also used as religious symbols, for example, the snake or vine motif recalls the gendered punishment in the Garden of Eden. The isolation of nature alludes to the de facto segregation of inaccessible environments in society.

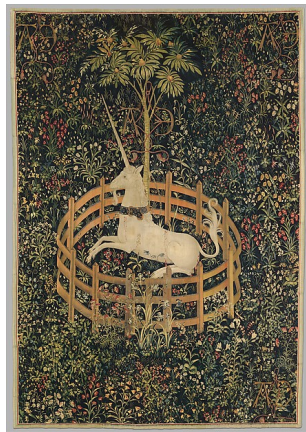


Fig.16: *The Unicorn Rests in a Garden (from the Unicorn Tapestries)*, 1495-1505

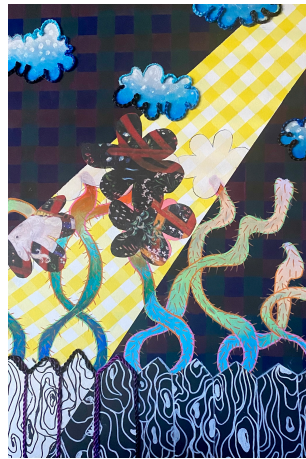


Fig. 17: *Untitled*, gouache and synthetic hair on panel, 24in x 36in, 2022

The flower pattern in *Untitled* (fig. 17), inspired by *The Unicorn in Captivity (from the Unicorn Tapestries)* 1495-1505 (fig. 16), is a reference to black women disrupting established industries where they have been colloquially referred to as “unicorns.” The fence in fig. 17 is meant to reference the confinement of the unicorn. The fence becomes a physical ridge, the same as the physical body is a boundary to the internal self. This barrier is paralleled in Leder’s *The Distressed Body: Rethinking Illness, and Healing* where society’s mistreatment of distressed bodies becomes a systemic barrier to integration (Leder).



Fig. 18: David Lynch, *Blue Velvet*, video still, 1986

I also employ the domestic space and many associated symbols as another way of asking questions about visibility, oppression, and empathy. Growing up as a disabled black child in a predominately white and almost exclusively non-disabled space of a pristine American Suburb left me feeling excluded, much like the children in *Outside Looking In* by Gordon Parks (fig. 19). The fence also references David Lynch's 1986 film *Blue Velvet* (fig. 18), where the picket fence was a symbol of middle class suburbia. I appreciate the way the pattern in the children's clothing in Park's photograph intersects with notions of pattern in my work.



Fig. 19: Gordon Parks, *Outside Looking In*, Mobile, Alabama, photograph, 34in x 34in, 1956

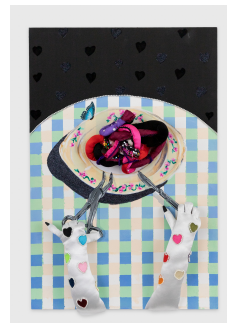


Fig. 20: *Them Guts*, velvet, glitter and gouache on panel, 24in x 36in, 2022

My use of gingham pattern is a connection to southern etiquette and its problematic performance. I associate the gingham pattern with outdoor leisure activities and southern gentility, but also its adjacency to domestic trappings of white-supremacy and patriarchy.

Painting the pattern by hand allows for inconsistencies within the traditionally manufactured, or “perfect” pattern. The gloves in *Them Guts* (fig. 20) symbolize several references; southern debutantes; minstrel shows; the operating table; and cartoon characters. The guts in the piece are meant to represent the harshness of nature, while the gloves represent order and sterility. To me, this imagery together poses questions about the prospects for liberation in a systemically oppressive structure.

Ambiguity and the Poor Image

The ambiguity of bodies and objects morphing into different things and shifting perspectives is an essential entry point for my work. *Fix You a Plate* (fig. 22) consists of a table and a birthday cake. The cake is both a dessert and a metaphor for the body. The hands serve two functions; to implicate physical depth as well as the spiritual unknown. In my work the images and subjects shift between representation and abstraction. Because of this, the subjects become unknown and unnamable.



*Fig. 21: Thomas Ruff, jpeg
r1104, 2007*



*Fig. 22: Fix You a Plate,
gouache and glitter on
panel, 24in x 36in, 2021*

I propose that abstract painting is a form of the poor image. *In Defense of The Poor Image* (fig. 21), Hito Steryl defines the poor image as a copy in motion. Steryl goes on to say,

“Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard” (Stery). In the context of this statement, within my paintings the bodies and objects appear to be illegible and at times unresolved. Clearer objects and figures are ranked higher in value on this scale, whereas the blurry image is poor. I believe the superior value placed on non-disabled bodies in society stems from their immediate clarity and their apparent potential to contribute to capitalism. Because of its assigned entangled states, the distressed body loses its apparent legibility, and so ranks lower on this societal value scale.

Color and Camouflage

In my work, I often shift colors of the landscape, figures, and objects from their natural colors to a more fantastical color palette to reinforce the fiction of the narrative. For example, in *Make a Wish* (fig. 25), the ear and hair of the figure are kept in their traditional color, whereas the rest of the body acquires a patterned surface like camouflage. Here, the use of color reinforces twoness to represent reality and the internal alternate reality of the painting.



Fig. 23: Walt Disney, Alice in Wonderland, video still, 1951



Fig. 24: Lisa Yuskavage, Given and Nel'zahs, oil on linen, 11.1in x 15.5in, 2010

My color palette is influenced by 20th century animation, specifically that of the 1951 Disney film *Alice in Wonderland* (fig. 23) and the contemporary work of Lisa Yuskavage (fig. 24). The over-saturation of color creates a jubilant atmosphere in contrast to the more sinister or adult content. I use repeating color and patterns (fig. 25) in the foreground and background to

camouflage the figure within its surroundings, much like the patterned interiors of Matisse (fig. 26). This marrying of disparate states and cultural references reiterates the continued idea of intersecting selves.

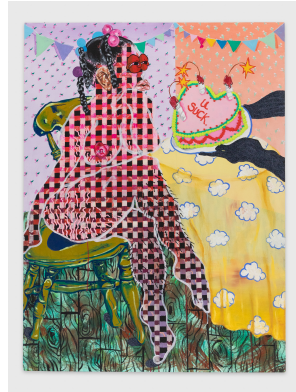


Fig. 25: *Make a Wish*, gouache, glitter, and molding paste on panel, 36in x 48in, 2021



Fig. 26: Henri Matisse, *The Woman in Yellow*, oil on canvas, 1923

Just Dessert

My work in the MFA thesis exhibition *Downstream* begins with *Out of the Woodwork* (fig. 11) which shows a figure sitting on a wood panel floor made of fabric and synthetic hair. I used three-dimensional objects as drawing material to blur the surface of the painting and its pictorial depth. The braids and sequins disappear into the two-dimensional pictorial plane as the entirety of the floor is viewed, but they also reappear as a three-dimensional texture on the surface of the panel. The figure is doing the same, disappearing onto the floor yet re-emerging onto the surface.

The second painting, *It Ain't That Deep* (fig. 27), is an interpretation of *Narcissus* by Caravaggio (fig. 28). This painting revisits Tobin Seibers' comparison of ego and disability by presenting the figure admiring itself in a pool of water. I have replaced the pond with a kiddie

pool. The pool, vulva-like, becomes a well or portal into this fictional world, much like the rabbit hole of Alice in Wonderland (fig. 23). The inclusion of a well is also a reference to the Bible verse of John 5:1 Verse 15, A Man Healed at the Pool of Bethesda. In this story, a paralyzed man sits at the Pool of Bethesda for 30 years waiting for someone to put him in the healing water. The function of the well reinforces the origin story of my narrative.



Fig. 27: *It Ain't That Deep*, gouache, sequins, and glitter on panel, 36in x 52in, 2021



Fig. 28: Caravaggio, *Narcissus*, oil on canvas, 43in x 36in, 1597-1599

In *Black Magic*, my third and last painting, I revisit the intersectionality of animal rights and disabled rights. This painting is meant to challenge the stereotypical association between Black people and chicken, as well its parallel association to Voodoo.

I consider this work emblematic of my continued questions: *Who or what grants visibility? How do systems oppress nature, animals and marginalized groups? How does empathy become obscured?*

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