

I am You are Me

by

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M.F.A., University of Georgia, 2006

A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art
of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Athens, Georgia


2006

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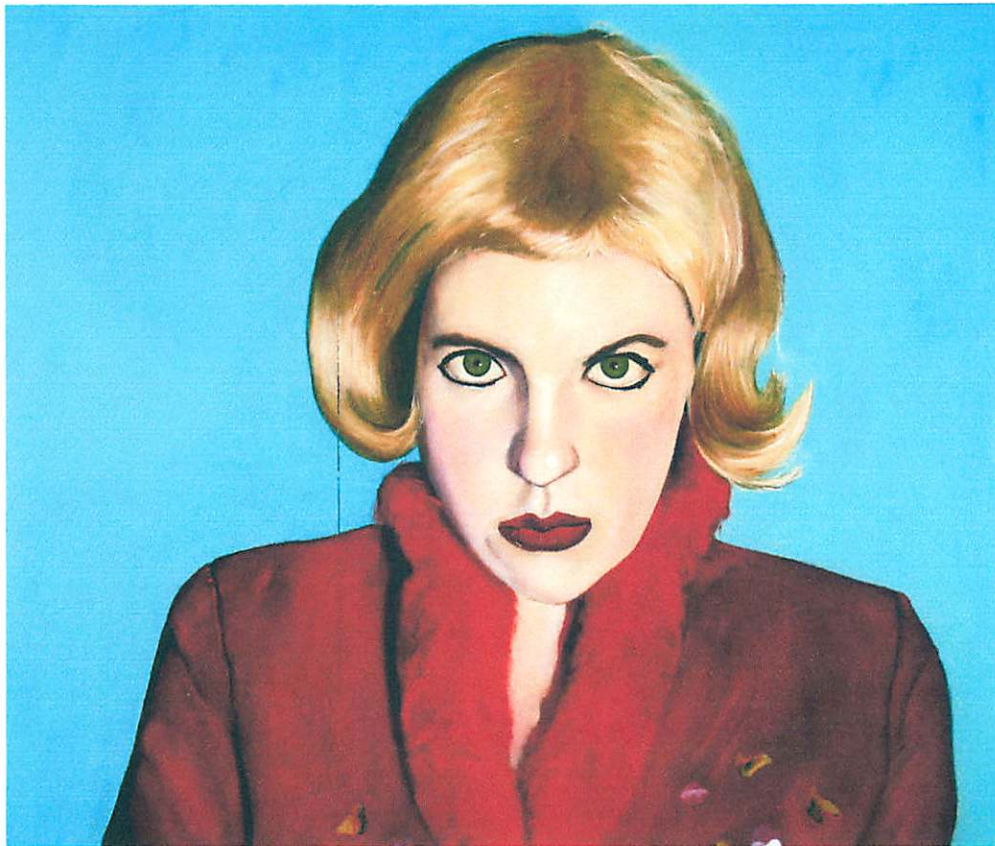
Approved:


Judith McWillie, Major Professor


Date

In my work, the photographic image has always played a major role – most overtly when I worked solely in photographic media, but the importance of the photograph as a starting image became more significant when I began to paint. Photography has become increasingly prevalent in our collective conscience since its discovery 150 years ago not only in the sheer number of its products but in its power to prove or disprove, to record, to remind, to commemorate, to communicate. It is such a large part of our daily lives, we are no longer aware of the sheer scale of its prevalence and the effects it has on our unconscious minds.

Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* was an initial personal source for understanding the power that the photograph holds. The "punctum" of a photo is that which Barthes defines as the essential quality that gives the image its power to affect the viewer. While I left photographic imagery as an end behind, in painting I am always seeking this same quality - at times directly utilizing the punctum of the source photo - but the painting never comes out as it was intended, even when the faithful translation of photo-realism is utilized. It is the process of discovery that makes painting worthwhile, and my work while completing my Master of Fine Arts has been directed towards an exploration of how to use the photographic image in painting, and how those images convey and transform a person's identity.



Jen Bandini, *Me Again*, 2005. Oil on panel; 60 x 72in

Having grown up engrossed in television and movies, I feel as if I learned a lot about social interaction and identity from watching people on screen. I watched so much

television that I believe it became difficult for me to separate reality from fiction. My previous paintings utilizing my own and strangers' family snapshots as source material brought me to the understanding of how much we identify ourselves with those kinds of images. It seems difficult to separate our "true" selves from the images we see printed on paper.

When I was working on a series of films last year I became interested in how identity is understood and created in film. I began creating characters for myself to play that were based on stereotypical female identities. *Me Again* was made from an image of one of those characters taken directly from one of my films. The title is meant to be self-reflexive and contradictory; the character is not me but is me at the same time, and the "again" relates to paintings of myself in character executed prior to graduate school. The character is a promiscuous yet ethereal seeming woman who in the film plays both the object of an extramarital affair and an angel who carries the philanderer to heaven upon his death. Not knowing these details does not reduce the impact of the image – the giant head stares back from the panel, her intense eyes and plastic lips serving as the painting's punctum.

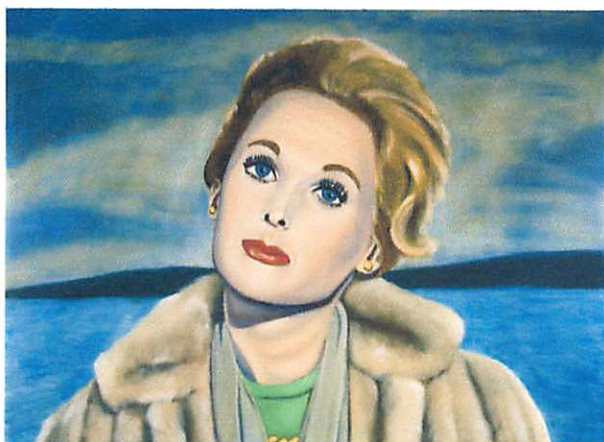
After the completion of *Me Again*, I became interested in juxtaposing my invented identities with real ones from the history of film. In selecting characters from classic films, I wanted to explore the origins of the female archetypes created in cinema. By selecting less immediately recognizable actresses with strong personalities, I could better show the fuzzy line between reality and cinema. While the idea of repetition derives from a Pop influence, I did not want the identity of the actress to immediately overshadow the character, as is the case in Warhol's paintings of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. While still recognizable, there is at least a moment of uncertainty, where perhaps the scene and costume might be familiar before the face is known.

In creating these new paintings, I turned also to the format of the diptych rather than the standard singular format for several reasons. Creating multiple images of the same subject is the most obvious way to reference the passage of time in painting, and I wanted to reference film. Additionally, numerous images of the same person give the sense of multiple identities, and the fact that the images are very similar yet different conveys the subtleties of discerning identity. The diptych, itself, gives the viewer a sense of history and time-honored traditions. My choice to use specifically *two* images was a desire to create tension between the two; not only are the two personalities at war to dominate, but there is a struggle for each to dominate the viewer, so that in the end the identity of the subject and the painting itself really exist in a no man's land somewhere between the two as the viewer's attention is evenly divided. In viewing the paintings, it is impossible to see both at same time, due to placement and the repetitive imagery. The eyes are forced to bounce back and forth between the two, creating movement similar to the animation of film.



Jen Bandini, *Sangria, Sangria*, 2005. Oil on canvas; 40in. x 92in.

Sangria, Sangria is a pair of paintings of actress Giulietta Masina as Juliet from Federico Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits*, chosen because the main character in that movie is a middle-aged woman struggling to understand her own identity. She is in a dissatisfactory marriage to a philandering director who dominates her life and whose personality eclipses



her own. Masina, who plays Juliet was in real life married to Fellini who was also a philandering director, so the story is Fellini's idea of Masina's struggle to maintain her own identity in his shadow. The two images represent the struggle to reconcile Masina/Juliet's inner (left panel) and outer (right panel) identities.



Jen Bandini, *Birds of a Feather*, 2006. Oil on canvas; 84in. x 54in.

Birds of a Feather depicts Tippi Hedren's lead character Melanie Davis in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. Her character is a very wealthy party girl who has recently reformed and is looking for virtuous love. I chose this character because I have seen interviews with Hedren from that time period and her personality was almost indistinguishable from the character she is playing. The top image represents this glamorous woman as she gazes towards her soon to be lover Mitch, and the bottom one is from moments later in the film when a seagull comes out of nowhere and attacks her head. We have wonderland and a

smack on the head from reality. The contradiction between who we think we are or wish to be and who we are or used to be and the anxiety that might cause is visually represented here. The title - *Birds of a Feather* - refers directly to the title of the source film, but also to the proverb, "Birds of a feather flock together." "Birds" in this case refers to one's changing identities, so the title suggests that one cannot escape the past.

A third pair of paintings, *Breakfast for Two* also refers to an identity struggle. The woman in this pair is Audrey Hepbern in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, a classic story of a woman striving to be the exact opposite of what she is; the main character grew up poor and orphaned on a small farm in the Midwestern United States. The movie begins after she is already living in an apartment in New York City, struggling to make ends meet and hoping to make it in high society; she dresses the part, but Holly Golightly's earnings are made via dubious means. The conflict here is twofold: Holly was a farm girl who wants to be a city girl, and she has become a prostitute in order to survive in the city while she endeavors to become a wealthy wife.

In *Breakfast for Two* we find Audrey as Holly awoken from slumber after a late night on the town. The first panel depicts Holly dreaming away of the riches and glamour that await her as her seemingly noble cat watches over, and the second panel reveals a rude awakening as the noble cat attacks. Sleep is the only respite from harsh reality and the dreamer has endless opportunity to become someone else. After the sudden jolt of a quick awakening, the dreamer slowly and reluctantly reacquaints herself with the reality of her actual identity.

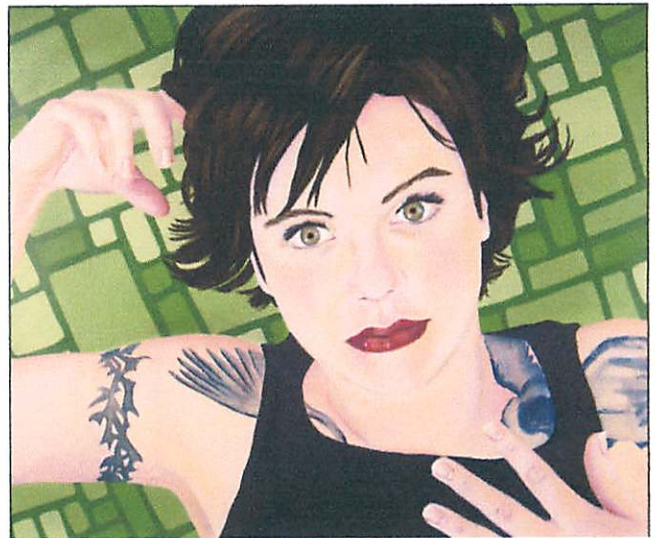
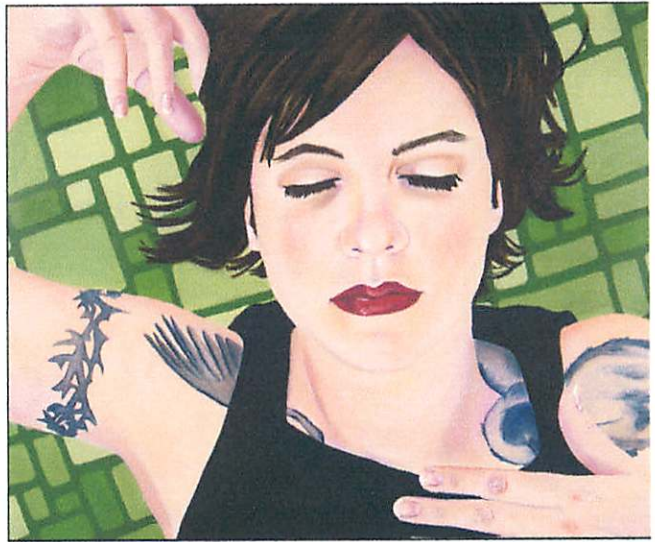


Jen Bandini, *Breakfast for Two*, 2005. Oil on panel; 60in. x 120in.

The three previous pairs were all made from shots I lifted directly from the source films but they are not actually film stills. A "film still" is not really a "still" from a film; it is really a photograph taken during the shooting of the film for promotional purposes and is constructed to appear that it is directly from the film. I decided to return to invented identities by creating my own film stills – constructed scenes from films that have never

been made. By doing this, I could more directly explore my own versions of female identity stored up in my subconscious from years of visual bombardment.

The first set I created with these intentions is from the story of a rock star wannabe who is making a cover of Pat Benetar's *We Belong*. The first panel depicts the protagonist happily dreaming of her lover, the other half of the "we" in the title. The song proclaims, "Whatever we deny or regret, For worse or for better, We Belong, We Belong, We belong together." The second panel offers an alternative to the stereotypical heterosexual "we" partnership. "We" is in this case not *him* and *her* but becomes *herself* and *herself*. If the first panel with eyes closed is about inner identity and the second with eyes open represents the subject's outer identity, then *We Belong* becomes an affirmation of a unified self where the inner and outer identities are reconciled.



Jen Bandini, *We Belong*, 2006. Oil on canvas; 80in. x 48in.

The subsequent pair based on this idea of constructed film stills is my version of a glamorous woman seen in the most common of contexts. *A Tisket, A Tasket*, presents the belle after the ball, the movie star after the premiere, the princess after the stroke of midnight. The choice to depict this character using the bathroom relates to the notion that for most people it is unpleasing to think of the object of one's desire performing a necessary bodily function.

The title for *A Tisket, A Tasket* originates in the nursery rhyme, which reads:

A tisket, a tasket,
A green and yellow basket.
I wrote a letter to my love,
But on the way I dropped it.
I dropped it, I dropped it,
And, on the way I dropped it.

A little boy picked it up,
And put it in his pocket.

A few nursery rhymes that have survived the centuries have secret codes embedded within or tell dreadful stories such as that of the Plague, but many of them have no meaning whatsoever and are simply a collection of pretty words set to a tuneful melody. People, nonetheless, attempt to decode these songs. This rhyme is no exception as it has no known origin, and it even includes invented words – tisket and tasket – to meet its



Jen Bandini, *A Tisket, A Tasket*, 2006. Oil on canvas; 76in. x 50in.

ends. Using *A Tisket, A Tasket* for the painting's title might offer two interpretations: that physical attractiveness is just a ruse and does not necessarily belie an inner beauty or to go further, identity is just a collection of appearances and actions within which there is no truth.

In working from images from my own films, the films of others and my constructed film stills, I have explored how painting serves to remove the viewer from the real-life subject. Photography serves as an intermediary between the subject and the viewer. When viewing a painting from an image from a film with which the viewer might be familiar, there are several layers of remove; first there is the actor, next is the film in which the actor appears, then the copy of that film, then the digital image I take from it, then the print-out, then I serve as an additional intermediary, and finally there is the painting. There is a huge disconnect between the image in one's mind with which

he/she is familiar and the many-times removed recreation on canvas, but still the similarity is enough for recognition to occur. This idea fascinates me as it connotes the impact that visual imagery has on our minds and the staying power of the identities we witness, believe, and record in our memory banks from everyday mass media. The newer paintings create familiar yet anonymous identities as a reminder of this phenomenon.

From here I intend to continue exploring the gray line between real and constructed identities and the ways in which individuals interpret their identities through our visual culture.