“PS, Your face is mobile, craggy, beautiful.”

In the Foreword to Chris Kraus’ hotly debated feminist autobiographic/fiction, *I Love Dick*, writer Eileen Myles bemoans the ubiquity of the woman in ruin-dumped, crazed, desperate, depressed, disheveled, dead and rejected throughout narrative film and literature. Indignant that the female character hardly stands a chance to stand (victorious or otherwise), Myles confesses to avoiding works by women. However, in Kraus’ novel, she declares a brilliant coup,

Miraculously, instead of the narrative ending with us in a movie balcony watching Chris’ decline, she actually manages to turn the tables—not on a particular guy, ‘Dick,’ but on that smug impervious observing culture. She forces it to listen to her describe the *inside* of those famous feelings. Myles breathily concludes that by “marching boldly into self-abasement and self-advertisement, not being uncannily drawn there, sighing or kicking and screaming, but walking straight in,” Kraus strategically turns female abjection inside out, refusing the certainty of failure by simply finding presence. Chris the author/protagonist exists, feels, and plots with intention. She lives with agency. As Kraus cleverly makes the reader aware over the course of the story, simply insisting on being is a radical act for women.

Such an insistence on self and subjective presentness is central to the works featured in *My Skin is My Krustle (Pink Marble)* at Chapman University’s Guggenheim Gallery. Anchored through an exploration of identity and the means by which we project selfhood and thereby shape our environments, the works question what it means to make work as a woman, rather than “like” a woman. The five videos confront essentialist notions of women’s work headlong and agitate the resulting complicated stew. In doing so, as with *I Love Dick*, the artists strategically unsettle dusty gender binaries, then revel in the disruption.

The viewer is prompted to enter the exhibition in a fluid state with Carmen Argote’s installation, *Everything is in its place, but everything is everywhere* from *Alex’s Room* (2016). Investigations of identity, the construction of self, and how subjectivity molds the

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 15.
spaces we inhabit pervade the work. Tracing the artist’s sister as she describes fantastic realms in vivid detail, casts off cumbersome clothing, and morphs into numerous personas, the subject’s interior thoughts and personal dialogue are front and center. She thoughtfully combs through numerous clear plastic bins in a cramped apartment space, seemingly re-discovering and habitually organizing plentiful small treasures. The precious plastic objects that fill Alejandra’s (Alex’s) living space spill into the exhibition space in theatrical tableaux and administer the viewer’s entry.

When Alejandra pauses to primp and ponder her reflection in an assumed reflective surface out of the camera’s frame, and repeatedly recovers and models peculiar masks crafted by her sister, the social construct of the vain woman is turned on its head. What evolves in Argote’s work is a theatre of identity that scrutinizes what it means to be female. Aply conjuring reflections on home—“We feel at home in our skin,” “Home is where the heart is,” “My home is my castle”—the performance of selves eloquently argues against a fixed state, evoking the early twentieth century gender bending photographer Claude Cahun’s affirmation, “Underneath this mask, another mask. I will never finish removing all these faces.”

At the center of the exhibition’s viewing space and serving as conceptual root to its themes, is Lynda Benglis’ Female Sensibility (1973). The groundbreaking, sparsely edited work ruminates on two striking women, the artist and her friend Marilyn Lenkowsky, as they methodically explore each other’s faces with curious fingertips, then with languid licks and searching kisses. The subjects’ loving exchanges are layered against a stream of background dialogues recorded from various AM radio channels that are full of sexist remarks, gendered clichés, and outright misogyny. The elongated gestures and intimate navigation of the partner’s form occurs within a closely cropped frame. Too close, in fact, to contain the women’s moving bodies. This easy slippage, combined with the audio’s sharp attack, betrays language that is incapable of containing their insistently feeling bodies.

Unusual for its day, the imagery of lesbian sexual desire introduced an interest in erotica and pornography by the artist that aimed to express a feminist/lesbian/female gaze, or at least, was prompted by an interest in whether such could be composed. That the audio in Benglis’ work immediately contradicts its imagery testifies to the tension that is crafted within the video space. The women seem at once narcissistically unaware of the sound, yet coolly cognizant of the viewer’s gaze. The work ends abruptly and without resolution, ultimately a refusal to determine a conclusion. Thus, having built a space outside the margins and full of potential, the work slips through and around the grasp of patriarchal order.


Where Benglis’ work ambiguously suggests ironies at play, Jennifer Sullivan’s *Soliloquy* (2015) makes cogent parody of the male gaze. A kitschy dating ad featuring a woman wearing a bathing suit printed with Picasso’s *Girl Before a Mirror* (1913) looks outward, and sometimes reads, as she seemingly imagines a second self who enthusiastically explains that she is “looking for love.” Through a flirtations listing of her own “good” qualities, the artist directly interrogates the white heteronormative gaze. Like Benglis’ subjects, Sullivan’s woman/women are acutely aware of the camera’s gaze and their behavior enacts a coy disruption of the classic space of viewership.

As a phone number linking the viewer to the artist’s voicemail dances gayly across the frame, the woman seeking a partner spryly declares, “I’m looking for that someone special to share my life with.” Then asks, “Could it be you?” In the context of *My Skin is My Krustle (Pink Marble)*, the work ponders the very possibility of knowing one’s self while referencing the anxiety embedded in contemporary dating platforms that extensively employ personality tests aiming to clearly define the subject. Presented with multiple versions of Jennifer Sullivan, notions of the “real,” “true,” and “authentic” self are unhinged.

Young Joon Kwak’s *Makeup Play* (2014) also relishes freely in the field that Benglis’ *Female Sensibility* opens, while queering the stage. At the start, bodies entirely dressed in black body suits are barely distinguishable from the black background. Their forms are without code, with the exception of long synthetic wigs. As dance hall lights flicker and glow, Kwak’s subjects physically manifest through connection and the tactile substantiation of the partner. Deftly handled, creamy, puffy paint is smeared, splashed, and layered to build subjects who are entirely unapologetic as they emerge and gleefully celebrate in their transformation. Never static, these activated subjects writhe and gesticulate through a glowing goopy heaving of selfhood.

Kwak relates the giddy abandon of *Makeup Play* to a selfhood once denied and forbidden. Performing as their drag alter ego Xina Xurner (“Like Tina Turner with the t’s pushed over,” as the artist explains) Kwak claims a feminine space that continually shifts and pivots. Within this space, the proverbial mirror floats and flexes along the perimeter, making the field transitive-able to take a direct object-as object/subject is determinedly caroused. As in *I Love Dick*, a tangible sense of freedom is captured in the joyous, raucous declaration of a self whose issue is unfixed.

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6 The work is a portrait of Picasso’s young mistress, Marie-Thérèse Walter.

7 Jennifer Sullivan’s *Window Kitty*, (2015) is featured on the exhibition marketing materials, but is not included in the exhibition. Seen in a window, pawing, licking, and grooming herself in a feline manner, the work further extends remarks on subjectivity explored in *Soliloquy*.

8 Young Joon Kwak in discussion with the author on September 25, 2016.

9 Ibid.
The viewer’s experience of My Skin is My Krustle (Pink Marble) may be likened to a kind of wafting to the center, then a floating out. From the core, we emerge at delightful complications in Lila De Magalhaes', To Call My Own (2015). A converted garage rental unit is seemingly on offer, and at moments, appears to serve as a stand-in for womanhood. As with each of the works in the exhibition, To Call My Own presents paired subjects—in this case, a subject in the midst of splitting amidst various flickering domestic scenes.

Whiteness conscientiously washes over every surface portrayed in De Magalhaes’ video-balloons, a swimming pool, the exterior garage, marble cake batter (from which the exhibition receives its parenthetical subtitle), the projection of a solar eclipse, a stocking being pulled over a foot, and more. References to bodies of water also seep into the one-sided dialogue, often as indicators of wealth. With seductive caution, the salesman entices, “I don’t show this to anybody” in reference to the rental(?) and describes attributes of the living space “that I think could really work for you.” Tension mounts as he persistently builds to a punch line, only to be edited out by the artist. He seems to sense this beyond the frame, and asks, “What do you want?”

At erratic points, the viewer also slips through the frame, becoming the subjects’ partner and focus of the gaze. No longer in the cramped, tightly compressed space of Benglis’ television frame, but nonetheless claustrophobic and anxious, De Magalhaes questions what it means to have “A place to call my own”/“A Room of One’s Own,”¹⁰ and where the authentic self might reside.

That the works in My Skin is My Krustle (Pink Marble) are video works, is no small point. As with other women artists of the 1960s and 70s, Lynda Benglis embraced the media, at least in part, because it had not yet been claimed the domain of male artists.¹¹ Decades later, artists identifying with and exploring feminine sensibilities continue to investigate the messy interior self through video, and performances of selfhood that blur reality and fiction. As evidenced in the works on view, video presents a svelte vehicle for defying enculturation and hegemonic prescriptions.

When questioned on the productivity of organizing an exhibition with the intent of showcasing works by artists identifying as women in which her own work was included, Lila De Magalhaes cut quick to the chase, acutely articulating the persistent conundrum that Eileen Myles finds so insidious in western storytelling,

A friend asked me recently what I thought about the term ‘female artist’ but I certainly don’t make it my agenda to make work about women. That being said, I make work about things that personally interest me and I happen to

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be female. I’m really drawn to things that are seen as feminine because, for me, they seem to be a little scarier, more uncomfortable and sensual.\textsuperscript{12}

The artist, connecting with Julia Kristeva’s theories on abjection,\textsuperscript{13} describes a cultural linkage between femaleness, female desire, and the female body that is threaded through the video works included in \textit{My Skin is My Krustle (Pink Marble)}.

The observation is astute, as abjection lingers at the surface of the video performances of selfhood in \textit{My Skin is My Krustle (Pink Marble)}. Kristeva defined the abject as being anything that violates the binary of me/not me. The woman’s menses, birthing, lactation, and emotion signify that real, vulnerable, lacking, leaking body that must be controlled and contained. The abject threatens selfhood because it acknowledges the body in perpetual danger.\textsuperscript{14} Rather than flee, works in \textit{My Skin is My Krustle (Pink Marble)} linger in the discomfiting spaces of identity. Like Chris Kraus, the tinges of loneliness, unkempt bodily play, angsty hoarding, and drunken dances hint at self-discovery and bubbling desire. Most importantly, the insistent exploration of the abject firmly declares selfhood and presentness—a state that so many subjects have longed for.

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\item \textsuperscript{12} Sacha Waldron, “Lila de Magalhaes: Lions, Mermaids and Tall Tales,” \textit{The Skinny} (June 1, 2016), http://www.theskinny.co.uk/art/interviews/lila-de-magalhaes-tall-tales.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
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