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FREE BODIES, COVETED STATES OF MIND AT KAISER GALLERY

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Olga Nazarenko, Cacophony, on view in Coveted, at Kaiser Gallery in Tremont

If you are curious as to what the last four to 400 years have felt like living in a feminine and/or female, queer, brown, black, disabled, poor, mentally ill body, art is a place to begin your empathetic and sensuous exploration. Even better,

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if haven't visited [Kaiser Gallery](#) on Professor Avenue in Tremont, founder-curator Tanya Kaiser creates a welcoming, COVID-safe destination; call in advance for an appointment as there you have a few more weeks before the current exhibition, *Coveted* closes on April 4.

The exhibition, curated by Kaiser, includes artists from around the country addressing and subverting the "male gaze," [Laura Mulvey's](#) now canonical theory of 1975. Mulvey frames the act of looking as "scopophilia," the psychological frame through which dominant masculine ideals are reified and projected in film narratives and imagery. Through a psychoanalytic lens, Mulvey interprets the intentions of the gaze and the ways in which it is enacted visually through camera angles and light, which emphasize narrative of violence toward women. Mulvey's theory is manifest in Hitchcock's films of the 1960s, which remain enormously popular as cinematic works of art.^[1]

Kaiser's curatorial spin on scopophilia is nuanced and comes through work by artists from around the country: Stefani Byrd, Dani Clauson, Leiyana Gonzales, Sydney Kleinrock, Megan Lubey, Olga Nazarenko, and Rebecca Poarch. These artists claim their own narratives on the body and put forth perspectives not easily accessible in mainstream culture. The exhibition accomplishes this with less than ten works of art; it is a deep dive into intricately wrought and visceral pieces. One not only sees the bodies depicted by the artists—as torn, mangled, fluid, and fragile corporeal substances, but *feels* them.

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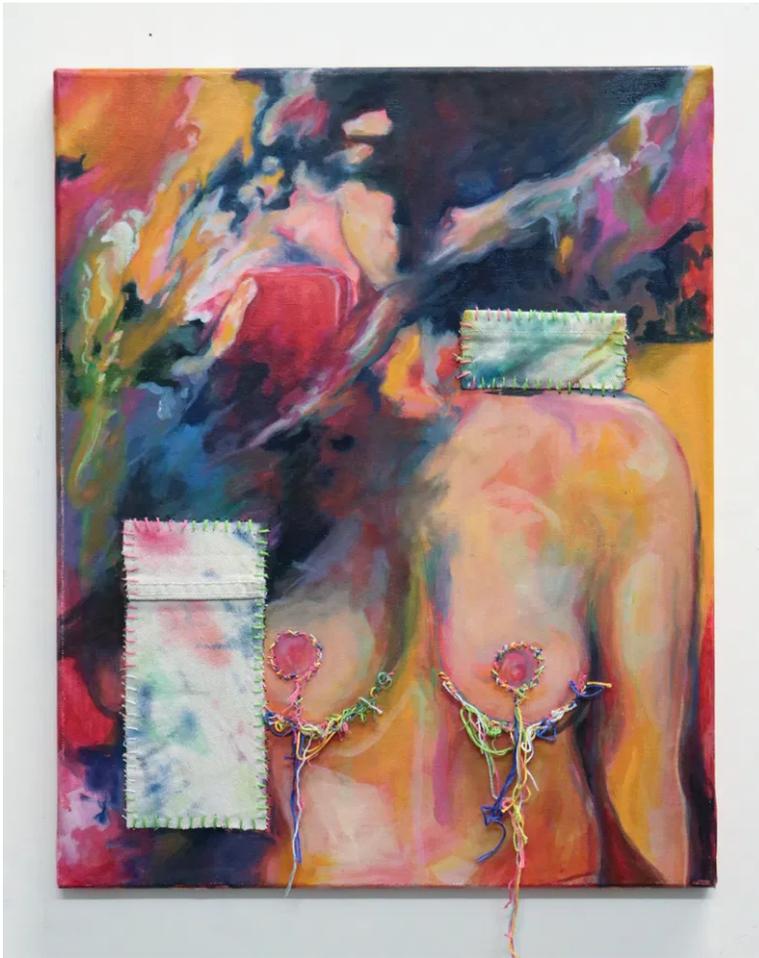
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Clauson, *You're a Warm Memory*, 2020

Clauson's "*You're a Warm Memory*," of 2020 is an intricately wrought hand-built sculpture of ceramic and glaze, which they precariously placed on the edge of a white kitchen-cabinet door. The hollowish form in bone-white glaze looks fragile and weightless, precarious on the door-shelf. The headless figural form is visually stunning and heartbreaking for the narrative it shares. The right hand peels an anonymous left hand off of what is left of the heart. The beauty in this work, which serves as entry point to the exhibition, is that Clausen captures the grace and gore of "breaking up," be it with a lover or a family member. Moreover, the presence of the absence we feel for communities of live bodies combined with Zoom-fatigue, and the absence of those lost to COVID-19 and white supremacist violence in recent years is absolutely palatable in this fragile installation.



Sydney Kleinrock, Body Seams

Sydney Kleinrock and Rebecca Poarch contribute paintings reflecting their experiences with body alterations from surgery. Kleinrock's succinctly painted life-size torso includes literal stitches into the canvas that reference her self-reflection. In the age of filters and selfies, coming to terms with one's own body is a struggle and research tells us that young girls most often see their earliest sexual experiences through the lens of "other," creating a "self-scopophilia." Concurrent with the rise of social media applications in 2011, are incidences of cutting, suicide, and anorexia among young tween and teen girls.[2]



Rebecca Poarch, Body 2

Poarch zooms-in on her "selfie," a nebulous site of surgery, creating a sensuously saturated painting out of what she had around her during recovery. Like the blood one sheds in surgery, the pink pigment saturates the raw fiber on which it is painted. Poarch's "Body 2," serves as documentation of her healing, and as a compelling image for this moment in history, as we absorb and attempt to create new systems after the attack on the Capitol, our collective sense of safety, and our corporeal vulnerabilities amid a pandemic further exposing the racism and classism and entitlement and privilege inherent in our social fabric.



Leiyana Gonzales, Venusian

Leiyana Gonzales' digital photographic collages include self-portraits placing the artists' contemporary curvy, brown body into the canon of Western art history. Both works were created in 2019, and "Venusian" most exemplifies her intention, as she juxtaposes self-created images of her own feminine beauty, which she puts forth "on her own terms." The paradox of her work is, in the context of European art history "Othered" feminine bodies were often socially degraded and fetishized. In the 19th century, Paul Gauguin coveted the visage and the bodies of Tahitian girls and women while finding personal freedom for himself away

from the “social constraints” of France (contemporary social norms aside, Gauguin both painted and had sex with a 13-year-old girl). While this tension around this history is apparent in Gonzales’ work, there is also a reclamation, as the artist celebrates her body as abundant and beautiful and, in 2021—hers. Further underscoring this, these photo collages are not for sale.



Megan Lubey, Time

Megan Lubey’s life-size paintings are disquietingly juxtaposed with the Poarch’s quietly complex painting. Like Poarch, the image is zoomed in, perhaps even in focus, but to utter abstraction. Lubey’s thick “impastic” paintings are a coming to terms with shame around the body and devious or transgressive encounters. The artist adds banal materials, particularly drywall spackle—to make the work monstrously sculptural. Up close you feel Lubey’s gestures—body parts entwined, leaving spaces that look like open wounds that you can’t un-see. A student at the Cleveland Institute of Art, the art critique process is part of the work; “During

painting crits we would hang work on a common wall," she explains. "After we were done, you put spackle in the hole in the wall... Eventually I just started using spackle to thicken the surface."



Olga Nazarenko Cacophony

The fluidity of identity as it intersects with hearts and bodies is a common theme in the film-sound works in the show, by Olga Nazrenko and Stefani Byrd, respectively. Nazrenko's color video work is a 13:33 minute study in, among many things, the body in context to the whole of "nature." Turning the lens on to the flesh of an a nebulously gendered white figure, the artist celebrates the skin, its shapes and colors at once imperfect and bacchanalian-beautiful. Drawing connections between the earthy delights of green grass and textured tree trunks, the video celebrates and reclaims the body and the gaze, rendering it neutral, as the viewer only sees the tattooed white body as gendered-masculine until midway through. This creates connection between the body depicted and the viewer, as the body is revealed as earthy and vulnerable despite masculine identifiers.



Stefani Byrd, True Love

Stefani Byrd's theoretical work references Radiohead's "Ok Computer" album reissue of 2017, which was dedicated to Thom York's former wife, Dr. Rachel Owen, who died of cancer in 2016. An elegy to individuality and the connections and boundaries between brilliant creative thinkers who become partners is at the heart of the work and the song upon which it is based. The image of two eagles mating mid-flight, separating as they must to survive before they smash to the ground, is a study in boundary making and respect between couples, especially those who choose to parent together. The resilient, meditative image of American Bald Eagles coming together, then setting individual paths of creative freedom is an empowering sight. Yet—still, in 2021, we are reminded of the limitation placed on queer bodies, black and brown bodies, feminine bodies, female bodies at the hands of power—how little tolerance and empathy we have still have for fragile bodies and vulnerable minds. *Coveted* offers us a celebration of resilience at a time that feels apocalyptic.

Notes

[1] Mulvey's theory, referred to as "the male gaze," comes from her essay "Visual Pleasure and

Narrative Cinema," Screen, Volume 16, Issue 3, Autumn 1975, Pages 6–18 (published on October 1, 1975). Interested readers can find the text here. Accessed March 16, 2021]).

*[2] This phenomenon is well-documented in Peggy Ornstein's work (see *Girls & Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (New York, New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2017) and in Netflix's documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, 2020.*

Coveted

February 14-April 4, 2021

Kaiser Gallery, 2418 Professor Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44113

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