

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

HASHTAG WHO DO YOU WORSHIP?

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By

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ABSTRACT

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Trash clogs the digital arteries of communication and casts a tarnished patina of filth; human beings relate with one another more than ever before as they bond over mutual misconduct. Users of social media broadcast themselves and rapidly share, which fosters misinformation, compelling them to be the editors of their own content. The images and text in *#WhoDoYouWorship?* depict celebrities glamorizing ghetto culture.¹ I have selected four contemporary icons adored and/or followed by millions; I represent them in internet meme² format and execute the work using traditional painting techniques. The deities represented are Beyoncé, Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington,) Miley Cyrus, and Lena Dunham. Culled from the Internet, this installation is a presentation of what some Internet era adults typically consume and broadcast digitally; it exposes the aspects of being human that are both maintained and relinquished.

Millennial Cultural Entrepreneurs

Today people broadcast themselves and, conversely, learn anything, online, specifically through YouTube - a social media/video-sharing site created in 2005. My generation's need for instant-gratification learning has inspired hundreds of channels on this site aimed at tutorial-based cooking, building, and crafting. This sub-culture led to my origination of the term and work titled *The Millennial Natural Hair Movement*.

I was born in 1987 in Indianapolis, Indiana and am considered to be a "Millennial"; Millennials are those born between 1979 and 1994.³ Born into an interracial family (my father was African-American and my mother Caucasian), we moved around a lot. My parents at their best owned and operated a lucrative business as partners, and at their worst buried their marriage after a divorce. I was 5 years old when my mother announced that she and I would be emigrating from the United States to Nassau, Bahamas without my father. I was 15 years old when we moved back to the United States.

By the time Millennials went to their first grade class in 1986, the Personal Computer (PC) was already five years old and the early Internet was in use. When they entered high school in about 1993, the Internet was two years old, and the White House had just created its first Website (Strauss, Howe 295). Older Millennials weren't entirely raised on the Internet, but they were raised during its initial commercial inception and progression. As a first-wave Millennial, I retain the knowledge of old media with the appreciation and competency of new-digital media. The *Natural Hair Movement* exists amongst African Americans and is cyclical through time. I highlight and differentiate this movement as uniquely separate from the other cultural movements that came before and

those that will follow. This movement is uniquely Millennial due to its origins and the way I stumbled into it.

Having moved to Los Angeles with my husband in the Spring of 2010 from Muncie Indiana, I experienced culture shock and was fearful filling up the gas tank in my neighborhood, let alone drive the freeways to a salon to get my bi-monthly hair relaxer treatment. The move and new job kept me busy enough to forget about my hair until I began noticing two distinct textures growing from my scalp. In a moment of panic, I searched the internet using Google: “What happens when you stop relaxing your hair?,” and thousands of blogs sprung up including YouTube vlogs. I watched tutorials and debates, read comments, researched ingredients to make my own hair products, and I found out where to buy them and how my hair is supposed to behave. I realized at this point that I had been chemically altering my hair since I was 6-7 years old. As a grown woman, I had absolutely no idea what my body was capable of growing without noxious chemicals, and I felt angry; I had lived most of my life in ignorance.

My work *The Millennial Natural Hair Movement* explores a sub-culture/counter-culture on YouTube consisting of vloggers,⁴ mostly African-American women who have rejected the normal process of assimilation according to black beauty standards. This body of work concentrates on the Millennial *Ebony* woman and her hair. Social media and video-based tutorials have influenced many Millennial women to embrace natural representations of their ethnic hair. *The Natural Hair Movement* began with small blogs and eventually progressed to YouTube vlogging. In this format, where audio and video are easily viewed by followers, black women recorded themselves growing out their chemical hair relaxers and opting for a natural lifestyle, sometimes making hair products

at home in their own kitchens. Suddenly I was able, in a voyeuristic way, to make this journey myself. As the movement gained momentum, many young African-American women started their own companies making hair products for newly naturals -- a controversial step when the majority of hair products marketed for African American women are owned and operated by non-black corporations. This controversy is highlighted in Chris Rock's disturbing documentary *Good Hair* from 2009.

Process: Material Matters

The Millennial Natural Hair Movement depicts an expanding and informed counterculture responding to painful trends regarding hair treatments that date back to the early twentieth century. I implicate myself in this trend, having used hair relaxer for seventeen years in an effort to control or mask my blackness. Sodium hydroxide consumed and destroyed my hair and my black identity, but I continued to use it religiously. Who I was biologically was distorted by what I did to myself chemically. Prior to graduate school, I completed my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in drawing at Ball State University in an art department that emphasized rigorous, traditional, media-based assignments. I learned to communicate with materials that were predetermined in overpriced packages and reproduced realism through traditional techniques and materials. In graduate school, stripped of assignments and confines under the guidance of interdisciplinary troublemakers, I started spending time with the hair products I relied on and used them to tell another story.

Creamy Chris (fig. 1) and *PCJ-No Lie* (fig. 2) are the first in a series of hair relaxer paintings in which I used actual consumer-grade, store-bought hair relaxer as paint. From personal use, I knew hair relaxer could cause chemical burns and consequent infections, often leaving scars and resulting in permanent hair loss. An avid printmaker, I attempted a CMYK separation screen print using hair relaxer as ink, the halftone dots destroying or discoloring the paper to create an image. Delving deeper into the chemical makeup of this product, I learned that the sodium hydroxide base was also the base of haze remover, a highly caustic screen image remover for screen-printing. I was only able

to produce one image with this process, as the hair relaxer removed the emulsion from the screen upon second flooding (fig.3). *In Creamy (4) Pack* (fig. 4) and *Relax the Black* (fig. 5), I use corporations' oxymoronic marketing techniques and graphics to reveal the greed, duplicity, and general disregard for individual consumers. In the pieces, the hair relaxer literally destroys itself while metaphorically deconstructing the falsehoods it perpetuates. Artist Mark Bradford discusses his use of permanent-wave end papers in *Strawberry*, 2002 (fig. 6).

You start with the place you think is authentic. So I jumped into it, and I jumped into something that had some currency that I could hold on to. I think it comes from that my mother had a hair salon in all-black Los Angeles, but I grew up in all-white Santa Monica. So it is very natural for me to connect the two. (Semik, Bradford, *Abstraction, From the Inside Out: An Interview With Mark Bradford*).

Using the hair relaxer allowed me to examine myself and gain a deeper understanding of my own artistic tendencies, comparable to Janine Antoni's description of her process here:

I had the idea that I would make a replica of myself in chocolate and in soap, and I would feed myself with my self, and wash myself with my self. Both the licking and the bathing are quite gentle and loving acts, but what's interesting is that I'm slowly erasing myself through the process. So for me it's about that conflict, that love/hate relationship we have with our physical appearance, and the problem I have with looking in the mirror and thinking, "Is that who I am?" (Antoni, *Art 21 Lick and Lather, detail (1993)*).

Just as the substance with its caustic tendencies would burn my scalp and leave the edges of my hair singed in the name of beauty, it burned away the imagery on photographs, prints and paintings. It turned urine-yellow, then orange, and distorted the surface to which it was applied (fig. 7).

Loud Spaces

I spent a great deal of time at two influential exhibitions: the *Lynda Benglis Retrospective* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and *Edward Kienholz: Five Car Stud 1969–1972, Revisited* (fig. 8) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Both exhibits influenced my experimentation with materials and changed my perception of space. Kienholz's installation changed the rules of traditional exhibition space as well as the physiological response of the viewer.

Edward Kienholz's *Five Car Stud* (1969–72) is a powerful work that depicts the hatred many white Americans expressed toward racial minorities and interracial partnerships in the not-too-distant-past; it stands as Kienholz's major civil rights work. In this horrifying life-size tableau, four automobiles and a pickup truck are arranged on a dirt floor in a dark room with their headlights illuminating a shocking scene: a group of white men exacting their gruesome "punishment" on an African American man whom they have discovered drinking with a white woman (Ohrt and McEvilley, *Ed Kienholz / Five Car Stud*).

So many rules are broken in this work. The craftsmanship is not pristine, reflecting the grungy, trashy, and at the time, taboo subject matter. The room where the piece was installed was dark, hot, dry and uncomfortable. The moving mechanisms within the installation made insidious noises as the friction behind the heinous scenes moved on in a sinister cadence. When I first viewed the Lynda Benglis retrospective I was exposed to unadulterated interdisciplinary battles. Benglis utilized unconstrained disciplines throughout her career: video, photography, ceramics, installation, and performance. *Fling, Dribble, and Drip* 1970 (fig. 9) is probably the most iconic Benglis work for me, but beyond the neon colors and the artist's actions of dripping is the collaboration between friction and gravity. I like the idea of the artist consciously cooperating with uncontrollable forces and relinquishing power over the finished product. Somewhat

related to Jackson Pollock's use of the drip, Benglis riffed on and extended the conversation about established ways of working/painting.

Still investigating concerns surrounding *The Millennial Natural Hair Movement*, I wanted to push the advertising and digital component upon which this movement was founded and create notable experiences for the viewer. I studied advertisements used to sell hair relaxers to the black community. When I purchased hair relaxer or, as I called it, "Creamy Crack," I bought brands that used descriptive words like "creamy" or ethnic words like "Africa's Best" (black people are from Africa, right?). Advertisements from old *Ebony* magazines reveal the psychology behind the graphic designers' approaches. Why is showing a bi-racial woman with silky hair on a product marketed to black women with naturally kinky hair important? Why do graphic designers use words like "Skin Whitener" (fig. 10) and "African Pride" (fig. 11) to sell products to black women who alter their appearance?

In the collaborative installation *Dark and Lovely* (fig. 12), graphic designer Logan Bell and I constructed a conversation about consumer obligation and ignorance. The mantra "Sentiment Hinders Function" suggests lingering paradigms in design and culture that are no longer valid. Logan and I agreed that in the past, when the things we purchased or trusted became irrelevant, we continued to cling to them in order to preserve feelings associated with sentimental, and often times, generational traditions. We make reference to the brand *Dark and Lovely*, which is a subsidiary of Soft Sheen Carson that in turn is owned by L'Oréal, a Fortune 500, globally ranked company (Softsheen-Carson: Afro-specific Skincare and Haircare - L'Oréal Group). Through advertising, these corporations use obsolete design standards to sell the same fading ideas. The font family

used in *Dark and Lovely* is Akzidenz Grotesk, the source for the font Helvetica. An accomplished graphic designer, Logan believes a sentimental reliance on this font exists among designers and stifles innovative evolutionary shifts. This font family is often used for legal jargon, as well as in consumer terms and conditions (Felici *The Complete Manual of Typography: A Guide to Setting Perfect Type*). We designed and wrote the announcement for our collaboration to create specific moments with our potential audience: first, a moment of haste to get through our terms and conditions; and second, a pause when/if the viewer actually reads them (fig 13 and 14).

How It Works: The legal agreements set out below govern your use and participation of the “Dark and Lovely” exhibition. To agree to these terms, show up to the opening and/or view the exhibition while it is available for public consumption. If you do not agree to these terms, go fuck yourself and do not show up and/or view the exhibition while it is available for public consumption.

When discussing our use of the expression “go fuck yourself,” we agreed that if corporations actually translated the terms and conditions that most people, including ourselves, sign without reading, they would definitely translate to this candid and brash directive. Often, consumers must agree to a corporation’s terms and conditions if they want to utilize the company’s goods or services. Most of us sign so many of these agreements that the frequency diminishes the importance of “signing.” Often, the terms and conditions are only read when the “agreement” with the corporation sours. For the installation, we painted 1,500 pieces of wood with pigmented hair relaxer and nailed them to the wall (fig. 15). Throughout the design, construction and installation processes, we considered the viewer and used repetition and varied sizes to expose these agreements’ frequency and variation (fig. 16). The sheer number of pieces making up the room design alluded to regularity rooted in tradition. The viewer smells the excessive amounts of hair

relaxer used in this sickeningly sweet, passively aggressive agreement and must visually understand the distorted identity of the model used to sell this agreement.

Digital Arteries

The *Millennial Natural Hair Movement* taught me that social media has become a platform for like-minded individuals to share their experiences; it's a vehicle that generates a wealth of information and collaborative exchange. Contemporarily, artists use this medium to create work that explores this new way of communicating. In 2013, I participated in the *Chloë Flores Facebook Artist Residency*. *Chloë Flores* is an art space and curatorial project that utilizes the user-based, social interface of Facebook as a public space for exhibition and representation—of oneself, of others, and of art (Flores *Chloë Flores Facebook Page*)(fig. 17). The real Chloë Flores is a curator in Los Angeles that gives her “identity” to a different artist each month for a digital “residency.” My residency with Chloë Flores took place during the summer of 2013, which I spent in Nassau, Bahamas, the island of my adolescence (fig. 18) . For the duration of the project, I was either in the hair salon capturing time-lapse stills of hair relaxer applications or with friends, family and strangers discussing/debating black hair (fig. 19). Both my process and experiences were uploaded to the *Chloë Flores Facebook Page*. My identity on the page was separate from the “real” Chloë Flores: one day I was an artist reacting to situations on the island, gathering source material and having experiences; the next, I was a hair guru educating virtual followers on proper curly girl hair care.

The residency on the *Chloë Flores Facebook Page* led to a solo exhibition in The Bahamas in January of 2014 titled *Picky Head* (fig 20). My experience growing up in the Caribbean taught me that the term “Picky Head” is an insult used often amongst Caribbean blacks, meaning someone with ethnic hair or hair that hasn't been processed

chemically to look straight and “white.” This insult haunted me as a child and was the primary reason I insisted on hair relaxers in the first place. The installation consists of four scrolls measuring 36 by 98 inches each. Each scroll contains 1,000 user-submitted “selfies,” unique digital self-portraits of men and women wearing their natural hair out (fig. 21). The images were submitted by users onto Tumblr, a social media site. I converted the images to black and white so the sheer number acted as its own patina. Pounds of hair relaxer were dripped from the ceiling and distorted the images. The words “Picky Head” were offset in large type and spelled out with hair relaxer (fig. 22). My work had come back to the place where my ideas about hair had begun, and I initiated a larger conversation about issues of race and identity with another audience. Many of the women in my *Millennial Natural Hair Movement* shared the exhibition information and subsequent interviews with many other people online. I alerted participants, many of whom were Bahamian, about the exhibition. My online collaboration began to transition into real life.

In the video *Trash Vs. Trash*, I appropriate John Waters’ film stills featuring Divine (fig. 23), as well as contemporary vernacular photographs, illustrations, and urban music -- “Boss Ass Bitch” -- collected from the internet (fig. 24). The images depict proud pregnant teens and celebrities in shocking poses, one generation’s version of Trash Culture.

But what is Trash Culture and how does it fit in with society? Various transformations exist within the culture of trash: artifacts that have transformed from trash to higher forms of artistic culture (The Rolling Stones, Comic Books), and artifacts that have become trash (Britney Spears, The Simpsons). Not all trash exists within the same institutional matrix. Using an image of the bin as an analogy, there is better trash on the surface of the receptacle (Pulp/Hardboiled fiction), as opposed to the juicy remnants at the bottom of the bin (90210, The OC, Glee). And then there is authentic trash (Justin Bieber). All forms of

entertainment and culture have a sizeable chunk of trash, and it is this chunk that, contrary to common perceptions, is an invaluable addition to the wider aspects of society. Without trash, both authentic and cultural types, there would not be a higher culture with which to compare to lower forms of culture (Trash Culture Journal).

John Waters made films with his friends the Dreamlanders⁵ (Irvine, Meet John Waters' Dreamlanders). They exaggerated extremely disgusting acts like eating dog feces and lighting trailers on fire (Waters, *Pink Flamingos*). Waters proudly self-declares his work as trashy and gladly accepts his title as “The Pope of Trash,” but his trash is different from what flows through social media today. When Waters was filming *Pink Flamingos* he was breaking the law, and the showings were frequently raided (Waters, *The Radical Way to Success - If you have rich relatives, be nice to them!*). Now the same things are transmitted and in mainstream media without pause, the same trash but with different reactions. All of John Waters’ movies are self-aware; they always imply a wink and a nod to an obvious display of kitschy trash not meant to be taken seriously. Audiences have become so desensitized that shock value is becoming more difficult to achieve, and bad ideas are rationalized through repetition:

It used to be the way to start out was to make a low-budget exploitation film. Look at Coppola (*Dementia 13*) or Scorsese (*Boxcar Bertha*). But now it’s not so simple. Hollywood has co-opted the slash-and-trash formula, and these days even garbage needs a big budget. It’s not nearly as much fun. A \$10-million version of *The Corpse Grinders* just wouldn’t have the charm of the original. Another problem is that there are few taboos left; once you have freedom there’s no way to attack. Splatter is already old hat. It’s impossible to imagine more gore than the Hollywood remake of *The Thing*, but once you’ve seen it, so what? A glimpse of pubic hair in the old days would guarantee lines around the block, but a spread-eagle Linda Evans in the near future is not impossible to imagine. You can always think of ways to offend (AIDS, sickle-cell anemia, and rape jokes) but this would hardly be daring, only stupid. Maybe the Golden Age of Trash is coming to an end (Waters, 139).

Ghetto is Culture, Not Race

Most of the trash posted on social media and the glorifying of ghetto culture is in the form of a “repost,” someone sharing or reposting another’s content. Suddenly, it is okay to live and be in the ghetto, because everyone is posting about and doing the same things. The eccentricity of the trash and ghetto culture Waters drew inspiration from wasn’t as relatable or sharable. Observing all of this through social media, I sought a definition of ghetto culture based on my own background. Economist Thomas Sowell in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* argues that the black ghetto culture, which is claimed by many academics to be “authentic black culture,” is historically neither authentic nor black in origin. Instead, Sowell argues that the black ghetto culture is in fact a relic of a highly dysfunctional white southern redneck culture, which existed during the antebellum South. This culture came, in turn, from the “cracker culture” of the North Britons and Scots-Irish who migrated from the generally lawless border regions of Britain (Sowell, 439).

I have experienced living amongst ghetto/trash culture from both sides of my ethnicity. While growing up in the Bahamian public school system (primarily Caribbean blacks), I experienced Sowell’s description of ghetto culture:

An aversion to work, proneness to violence, neglect of education, sexual promiscuity, improvidence, drunkenness, lack of entrepreneurship... and a style of religious oratory marked by strident rhetoric, unbridled emotions, and flamboyant imagery (Sowell, 100).

On the white side of my family, alcoholics and teen moms existed, too, often laid-off, living in mobile homes, and subsisting on government assistance. The only catalyst for change I witnessed while living amongst this culture was achievement through hard work.

I recognized this as a way to escape and give back to my hardworking single mother. I think about those who choose to remain in the ghetto, content with mediocrity, the same mediocrity that is rapidly shared online and glamorized by popular culture as race-related and therefore part of a strong history that should be a source of pride. I consider myself lucky enough to have grown up in a culture sensitive to technology, and I was not exposed to social media growing up. The mode of information transfer social media fosters is problematic; it creates an alibi for those unwilling or unable to progress out of the ghetto like I have. Sowell describes the phenomena on page 62 of *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*:

In short, prevailing explanations provide an alibi for those who lag-and an alibi is for many an enormously valuable asset that they are unlikely to give up easily. As Eric Hoffer put it: There are many who find a good alibi far more attractive than an achievement. For an achievement does not settle anything permanently. We still have to prove our worth anew each day: we have to prove that we are as good today as we were yesterday. But when we have a valid alibi for not achieving anything we are fixed, so to speak, for life. However, as he said elsewhere: 'America is the worst place for alibis. Sooner or later the most solid alibi begins to sound hollow.' Those who provide black rednecks with alibis do no favor to them, to other blacks, or to the larger society in which we all live. In American society, achievement is what ultimately brings respect, including self-respect.

#WhoDoYouWorship?

In the installation *#WhoDoYouWorship?*, the audience experiences the blanket of filth, narcissism and gimmicky coercion being peddled through popular culture. Reflecting on three years of graduate school, I see the cyclicity my work has undergone. I entered the program protesting traditional gender roles for women (marriage then children) by using images of nameless women from decades past as my surrogates (fig. 25). I stumbled and fell with process and materiality and have now come full circle using iconic images of women as surrogates representing race, cultural appropriation and popular culture.

In *#WhoDoYouWorship?* these ideas envelop the audience and prompt viewers into moments of self-reflection. The installation occupies a room with 4 walls, each displaying a painting containing 4 different deities. The installation juxtaposes high-class culture with low-class culture. Beyoncé (fig. 26), Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington) (fig. 27), Hanna Horvath (Lena Dunham)(fig. 28) and Miley Cyrus (fig. 29) are each represented in their own painting as deities, suggesting religious paintings from the Renaissance. Conversely, these women from popular culture, both fictional and actual, are painted as Internet memes in the style of the *Keep Calm and Carry On* motivational poster produced by the British government in 1939.⁶ The paintings themselves use traditional techniques, including decoupage and impasto (fig. 30). Each painting is hung slightly higher than the average viewer to encourage a deliberate look upwards. Behind each painting is a decoupage wall designed to represent the dialog of the Internet. The wall is distorted with text from online Internet dialogues about the paintings, which were

also duplicated as Internet memes and circulated online (fig. 31).

American popular culture invades other cultures internationally and is the basis for exploration in my work. Growing up bi-racial with a single white mother amongst Caribbean blacks, I felt compelled to be a certain type of black. In school my friends and foes mimicked American ghetto culture; rap, drugs, teen pregnancy and promiscuity were the norm, and I was frequently bullied to submit. I hid my obsession with '90s bubblegum pop after having rocks thrown at me for sporting a Spice Girls diary in primary school. In the part of the Caribbean where I grew up, whites who did not spend large sums of money as tourists were outsiders. I hid my whiteness to fit in so when all-black girl-bands like Destiny's Child hit the scene and were accepted by the culture I was part of, I embraced them too. After listening to TLC and Lauryn Hill in the late '90s, I fell whole-heartedly into Destiny's Child fandom. Beyoncé wasn't well known then; she was just another member of an ensemble girl group. The trio sang about surviving infidelity-driven relationships and demanding partners with independence and financial stability. Unlike TLC and Lauryn Hill, Destiny's Child showed and celebrated the ghetto culture I lived in, but in a colorful, high pop manner. This allowed me to both participate in what surrounded me and appreciate the music and music videos in another, more private way. None of my friends appreciated the color theory in the "Say My Name" music video and the homemade fashion the band sported, designed and crafted by Beyoncé's mother, Tina Knowles. I looked forward to these elements every time the group appeared on television. I never had to hide their CDs or posters, and from Destiny's Child, Beyoncé became the focus of my teenage obsessions.

The summer Beyoncé left Destiny's Child as a solo act, I had just moved back to

the United States. Having been gone for over a decade, my mother and I didn't exist to the US government, and we discovered that my mother's credit had been highjacked by family members who thought we would never come back. As a result, we accepted welfare and lived in the inner city of Indianapolis. My school had its own day care for teen moms, and my best friend at the time was pregnant with her third child; she was 19 years old and in the 10th grade. I had just turned 16, and, having skipped freshman year due to my transfer, I was suddenly in the American black ghetto. Beyoncé and I were both going through hard and intimidating transitions. I still loved the music and began loving her as an artist.

In my online research, I have challenged those who look up to Beyoncé, including myself, in order to reconcile the conflicting ideas I see in her work. I spent a great deal of my life hiding my true interests and accepting cultural norms because I was bullied or racially confused. Moving back to the U.S., I started critiquing the popular culture I was consuming, and studying art gave me the permission I needed to do that. Beyoncé was part of my childhood, adolescence and adulthood, and I never really thought I could be critical of something I liked. I still think Beyoncé is strategic, hardworking and incredibly talented. But I'm different now, and I think Beyoncé knows her audience is different now, too. I think she's attempting to grow creatively as a mother and self-declared feminist, while at the same time maintaining the ghetto culture idolatry from which she came. I worshipped Beyoncé; I worshipped the idea of Beyoncé with no critical eye. When Beyoncé sang songs asking men if they could pay her bills, if that is what it took to be a feminist, I would have gladly accepted and even simulated her definition, despite having a mother who never relied on a man to cover debts. I think Beyoncé meticulously

strategizes to create for a specific audience while at the same time idolizing herself. She has become so famous that her power overshadows the quality of her work. This is the opinion of a fan: me. Worshipping celebrities compares to the way radical religious fanatics worship their deities: blindly, with no acceptance of possible alternatives.

I survived the ghetto, and now that I'm free of it, the viral nature of social media aids in keeping those still trapped deeply rooted in place. This infectious trash culture sludge is accessorized by wealthy celebrities and deemed "swag," while at the same time circumventing the real problems in the real ghetto: a culture in which today 72.3% of black children are born out of wedlock according to the Center for Disease Control. Economist Walter Williams has pointed out how the culture has changed dramatically as ghetto culture has been celebrated instead of condemned:

What about the decline of the black family? In 1960, only 28 percent of black females between the ages of 15 and 44 were never married. Today, it's 56 percent. In 1940, the illegitimacy rate among blacks was 19 percent, in 1960, 22 percent, and today, it's 70 percent. Some argue that the state of the black family is the result of the legacy of slavery, discrimination and poverty. That has to be nonsense. A study of 1880 family structure in Philadelphia shows that three-quarters of black families were nuclear families, comprised of two parents and children. In New York City in 1925, 85 percent of kin-related black households had two parents (Williams, *Victimhood: Rhetoric or reality?*).

I consider myself lucky to have circumvented the Disney teen show era. We were too poor to afford the Disney channel, so I never watched Miley Cyrus as Hannah Montana. She is the teen star behind Disney's lucrative Hannah Montana franchise and has matured into a serious entertainment draw, averaging a nightly gross box office of \$1.2 million across 57 tour dates (Forbes, 1). All of Miley's Disney fans have grown up, and those privileged enough to have the Disney channel probably grew up safely. Miley Cyrus makes a living appealing to a generation and audience that is somewhat privileged

but at the same time craving reality. Cyrus shows a hyper-polished version of the rough side, ghetto culture and its surface appeal. This persona is not realistic, but it suggests a culture that should be overcome, not idolized. The embellishment of trash culture affirms a way of life that is neither beneficial to those living in it, nor positively sustainable. It marginalizes the true impact living in this culture has on the individual and instead makes it a gimmick capable of being copied by bored suburbanites desperate for excitement. This idea was explored in the movie *Havoc* (2005) in which two affluent suburban girls clash with the Latino gang culture of East LA. The film symbolizes a broader cultural pattern of white suburban youth embracing glamorized, risky behavior (Havoc, *IMDB*). Based on my experience with social media, I see how a culture based on digital representations of identity could come to worship celebrity figures. Protected by the repost, users on social media will use celebrity figures as role models for their opinions, fashion sense and other cultural habits.

New Yorker Lena Dunham is the daughter of Carroll Dunham, a painter, and Laurie Simmons, a designer and photographer. She is the ultimate insider with art critics Jerry Saltz and Roberta Smith as her godparents. Dunham came to the attention of a wider audience with the HBO series *Girls* (2012) created by and starring her while executive produced by Judd Apatow (famous for such films as *Knocked Up*, *Superbad*, *The 40-Year-Old-Virgin* and *Anchorman*) (*IMDB*). *Girls* is a comedy-drama that follows a close group of twenty-somethings living in New York City. *Girls*' comedic sense relies on ironically mocking the millennial generation and its older and younger peers (gen-x and gen-z). Having watched the show specifically for my work, I find most of the characters aren't likeable or relatable. They're extremes of real life, hyperbolizing the

morally bankrupt choices in a world of subjective values and narcissism. Promiscuity, drug abuse, lying, self-destruction and painful relationships are promoted as the norm. I decided to use Dunham's character Hanna Horvath in *Girls* as one of the deities in #WhoDoYouWorship? to open a discussion about the generational stereotypes we worship and the importance of editing one's own content. An older person from the silent generation, would watch the show *Girls* and think 20-somethings of today are high risk and low intelligence. I have friends my age who watch the show religiously and use it as rationalizations for never finding a dream career or for sleeping with each other's exes. I don't think Dunham is malicious in her depiction of the millennial generation, but I wonder how many actually view art with a critical eye. Dunham commented in *Interview Magazine*:

DANES: So you're playing someone in *Girls* who's reminiscent of who you are, but she's still fictionalized. What's that like?

DUNHAM: I play these girls who are close to me, but they're the parts of me that I find the most shameful, or the parts of me that I kind of want to excise. So I sort of distance myself from it. I have the comfort to feel free and un-self-conscious. I sort of go, "These are all the awful parts of me that I don't get to talk about all day. Here she is." (Interview Magazine, 1).

The television show *Scandal*, starring Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope, also rationalizes bad behavior. *Scandal* is a political drama marketed to the semi-educated African American community (Such prominent African American opinion leaders as CNN's Roland Martin and Donna Brazille often promote the show on Twitter, as reported by the *New York Times* in January of 2013) (Vega, *A Show Makes Friends and History*). *Scandal* depicts the classic house-slave-in-love-with-"massa" fantasy:

It reminds people of slavery: Remember when the powerful massa kept his black woman on the side and maybe even loved her, but was always afraid of telling anyone about it? Just like the president in this show, he often kept his wife by his side to keep his relationship respectable in the eyes of the public (*Two Reasons*

Why a lot of Black Men Can't Stand the TV Show "Scandal").

Again, all of the characters are morally bankrupt individuals who are only concerned about their individualistic endeavors. The moral at the end of every episode is that in order to wear the "white hat"⁷ one must adhere to a "by any means necessary" doctrine to obtain a desired outcome, even if it means murder and torture.

Conclusion

People, corporations, trends, and the cult of celebrity contribute to the perpetuation of irrelevant and outdated rituals, from hair manipulation to contemporary TV addiction, from ghetto culture to celebrity worship. My work examines these insidious rituals and their provenance in an attempt to expose and understand them. In my work, I divest these paradigms of their seductive facades and establish a sense of balance between extreme attitudes in order to present the facts, my commentary, and ultimately, my reaction to these discoveries.

In the past, my definitions of ideal beauty and race were unedited; I merely accepted their cultural definitions as truth based on my personal geography. As an artist, I make work and provide commentary about it based on my own experiences rather than on what is forced by outside influences. Being the critic of my own obsessions has become essential in my work; I actively identify and accept the flaws in the things I like while maintaining my own identity. At the end of the day, hair and race shouldn't matter, but they do within a species of imperfect-beings.

Endnotes

¹Ghetto Culture is a variant of Cracker or Redneck Culture as described by Thomas Sowell as: "What the rednecks or crackers brought with them across the ocean was a whole constellation of attitudes, values, and behavior patterns that might have made sense in the world in which they had lived for centuries, but which would prove to be counterproductive in the world to which they were going-and counterproductive to the blacks who would live in their midst for centuries before emerging into freedom and migrating to the great urban centers of the United States, taking with them similar values. The cultural values and social patterns prevalent among Southern whites included an aversion to work," proneness to violence," neglect of education," sexual promiscuity," improvidence," drunkenness," lack of entrepreneurship," reckless searches for excitement," lively music and dance," and a style of religious oratory marked by strident rhetoric, unbridled emotions, and flamboyant imagery." This oratorical style carried over into the political oratory of the region in both the Jim Crow era and the civil rights era, and has continued on into our own times among black politicians, preachers, and activists. Touchy pride, vanity, and boastful self-dramatization were also part of this redneck culture" among people from regions of Britain "where the civilization was the least developed." "They boast and lack self-restraint," Olmsted said, after observing their descendants in the American antebellum South." Thomas Sowell. *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (Kindle Locations 99-106).

²An idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture. ("meme" Merriam-Webster.com).

³Neil Howe and William Strauss, in their book *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, use 1982 as the Millennial start date (67). *The Millennials: Americans under Age 25* uses 1977 as the start date (2).

⁴A vlog (or video blog) is a blog that contains video content. The small, but growing, segment of the blogosphere devoted to vlogs is sometimes referred to as the vlogosphere. Jason Lambertson of Washington, DC and Northern California originated the word "vlog". V + log (blog turned video + log into vlog) ("Vlog" Merriam-Webster.com).

⁵Dreamlanders refers to the cast and crew of regulars whom John Waters has used in his films. The term comes from the name of Waters' production company, Dreamland Productions. Many of the original Dreamlanders were friends of Waters from his native Baltimore, Maryland, regular customers at the Hollywood Bakery and Pete's Hotel, and students from Maryland Institute College of Art. (<http://www.dreamlandnews.com/history/index.shtml>).

⁶Keep Calm and Carry On was a motivational poster produced by the British government in 1939, several months before the beginning of the Second World War, intended to raise the morale of the British public in the aftermath of widely predicted mass air attacks on major cities. (<http://www.keepcalmandcarryon.com/history/>).

⁷1:one who is admirable and honorable, 2: a mark or symbol of goodness <could use a few more guys in white hats — Robert Christgau>.

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Images



(Fig. 1) *Creamy Chris*, 2013. Hair relaxer and oil paint on digital print. 27X17 inches.



(Fig. 2) PCJ No-Lie, 2013. Hair relaxer, oil paint and collage on panel. 24X48 inches.



(Fig. 3) Process Shot: CMYK screen printing attempt with hair relaxer. 2013.



(Fig. 4) *Creamy (4) Pack*, 2013. Hair relaxer on digital print. 24X34 inches.



(Fig. 5) *Relax The Black*, 2014. Hair relaxer and epoxy resin on digital print. 24X72 inches.



(Fig. 5) Detail.



(Fig. 5) Detail.



(Fig. 5) Detail.



(Fig. 5) Detail.



(Fig. 6) Mark Bradford Strawberry, 2002 Collection of Barbara and Bruce Berger Photo: Bruce M. White, 2010.



(Fig. 7) Process Shot: First test of consumer-grade hair relaxer applied to a digital photo proof printout.



(Fig. 8) Edward Kienholz's Five Car Stud (1969-72).



(Fig. 9) "Fling, Dribble and Drip," Life magazine Feb. 27, 1970; credit: Cheim & Read, New York.

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(Fig. 10) Process Shot: Ebony Magazine ads from 1959.

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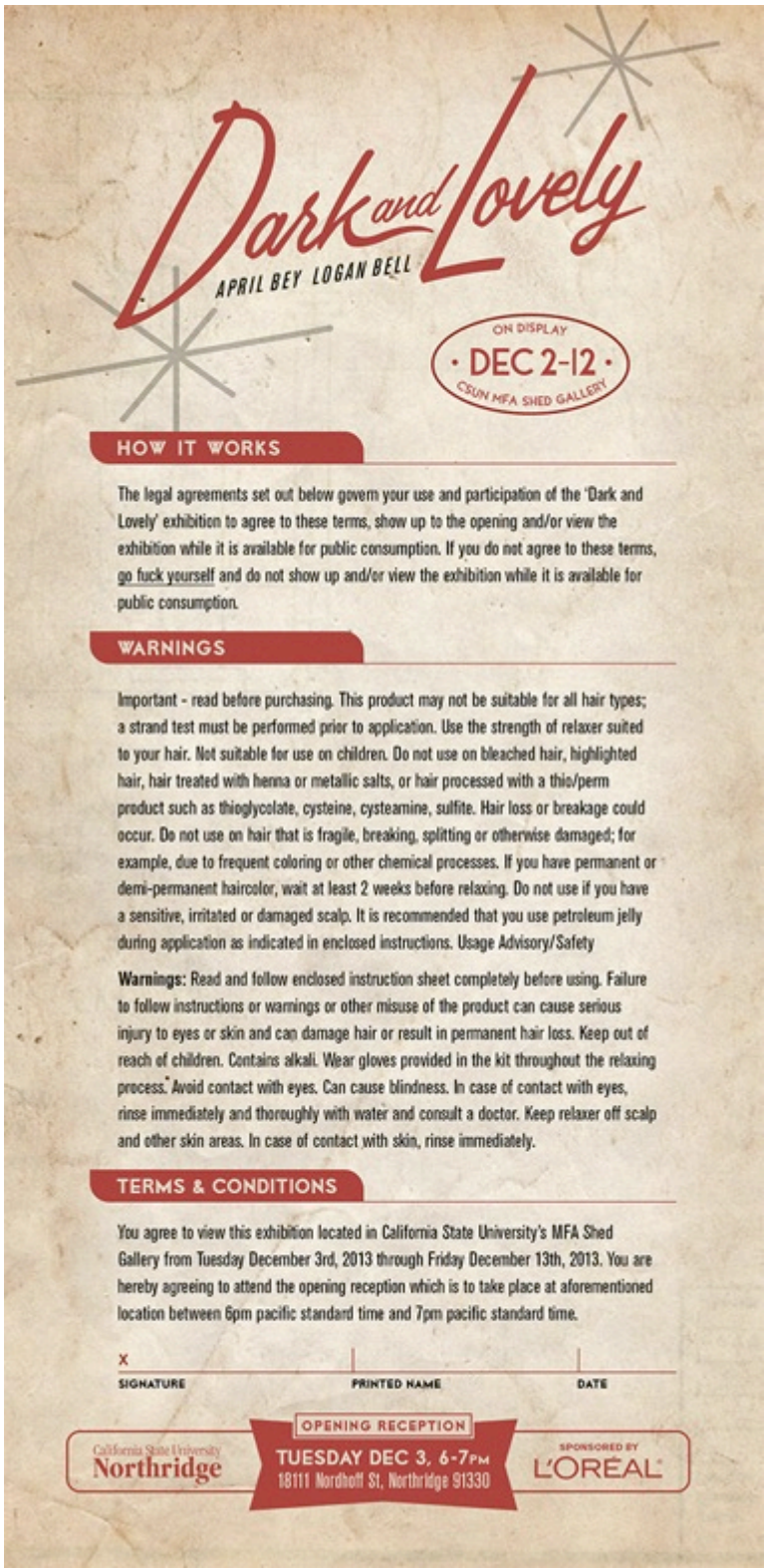
(Fig. 11) Process Shot: Packaging of my preferred hair relaxer brand when I was relaxed.



(Fig. 12) *Dark and Lovely*, 2014. Pigmented hair relaxer on 1,500 pieces of wood. Collaboration with artist Logan Bell. 9X30X9 feet.



(Fig 13) Process Shot: Front view of postcards/announcements for the *Dark and Lovely* collaborative installation.



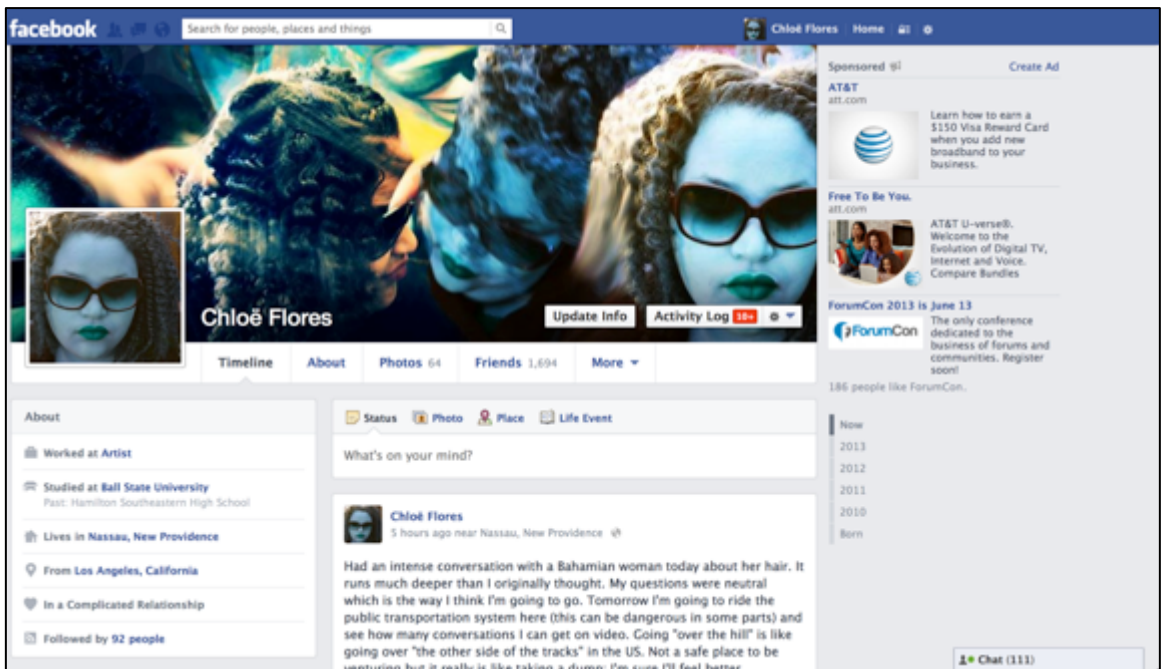
(Fig 14) Process Shot: Back view of postcards/announcements for the *Dark and Lovely* collaborative installation.



(Fig. 15) Detail of *Dark and Lovely*.



(Fig. 16) Detail of *Dark and Lovely*.



(Fig. 17) Process Shot: Front page of the *Chloë Flores Facebook Artist Residency*.



(Fig. 18) Process Shot: Revisiting the home of my childhood in Nassau, Bahamas during *Chloë Facebook Artist Residency*.



(Fig. 19) Process Shot: Documentary photographs of being in the hair salons while on residency in Nassau, Bahamas.



(Fig. 20) *Picky Head*, 2014. Hair relaxer on 4,000 submitted selfies on laser jet prints. 9X12X6 feet.



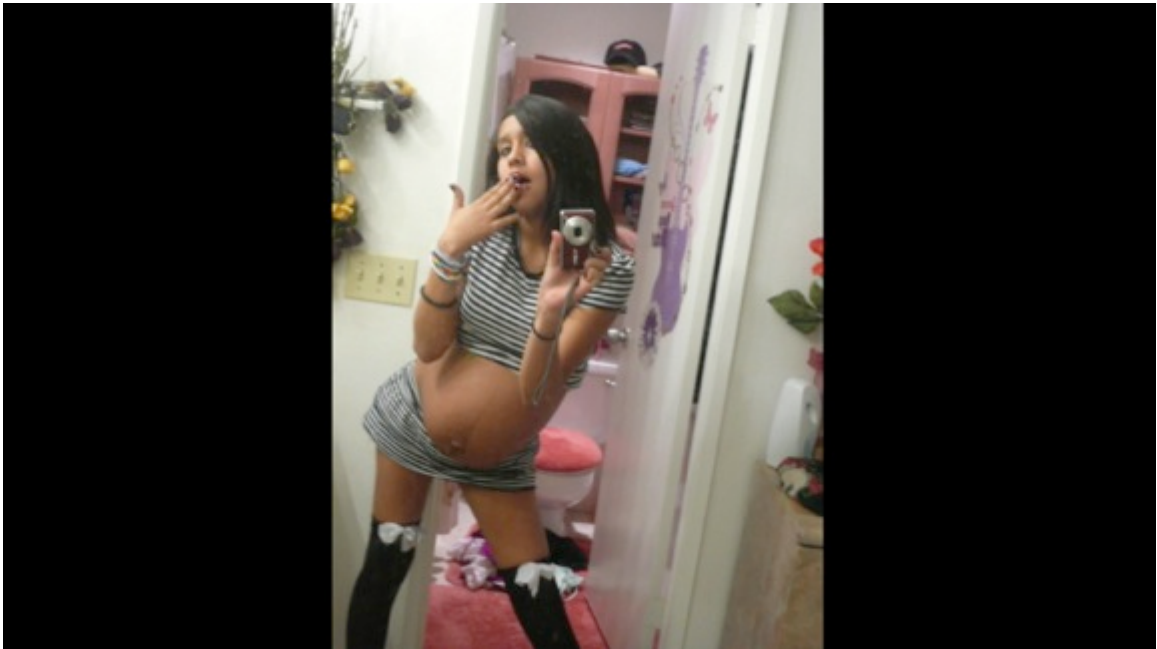
(Fig. 21) Detail of *Picky Head* 2014.



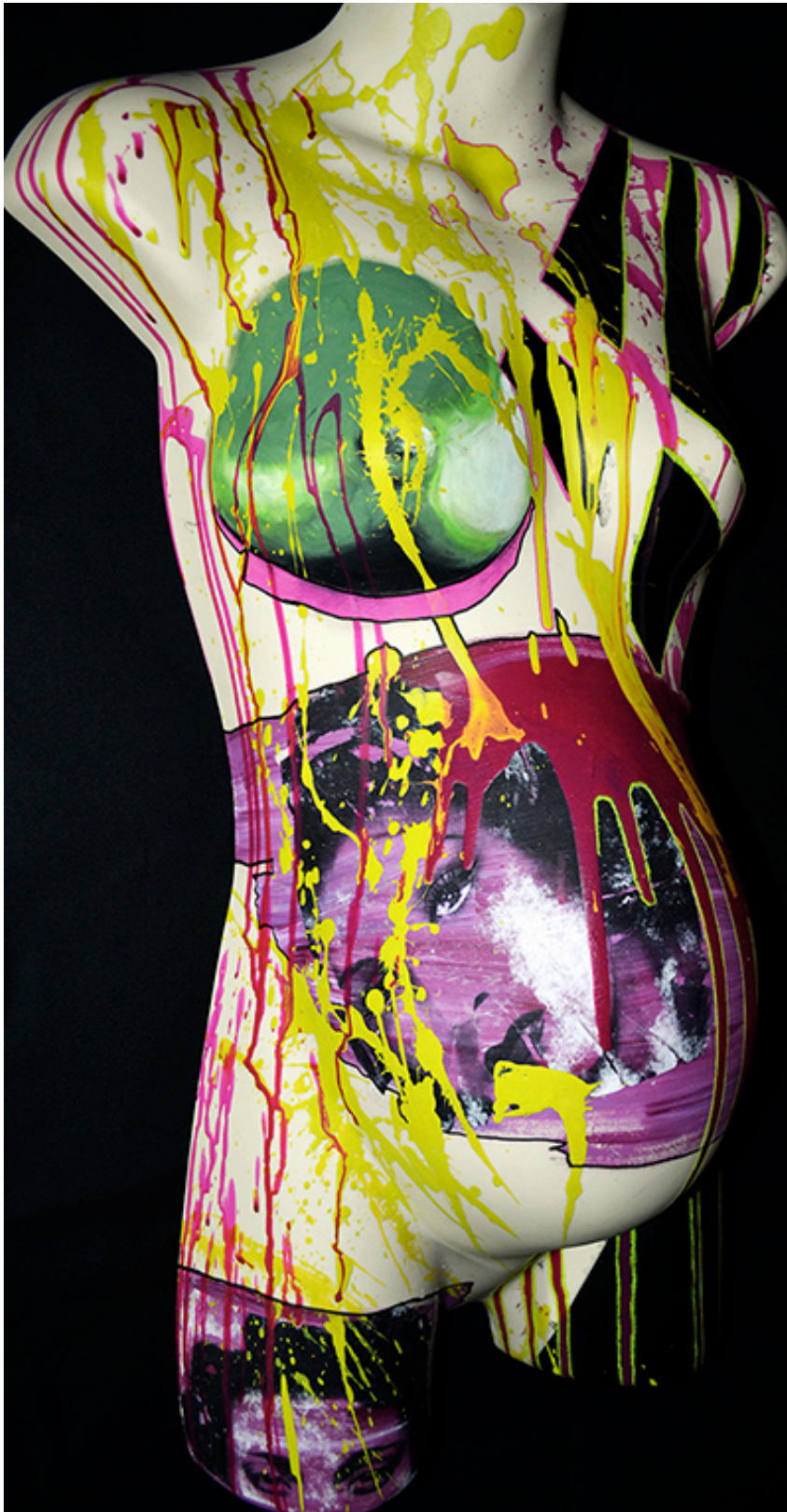
(Fig. 22) Detail of *Picky Head* 2014.



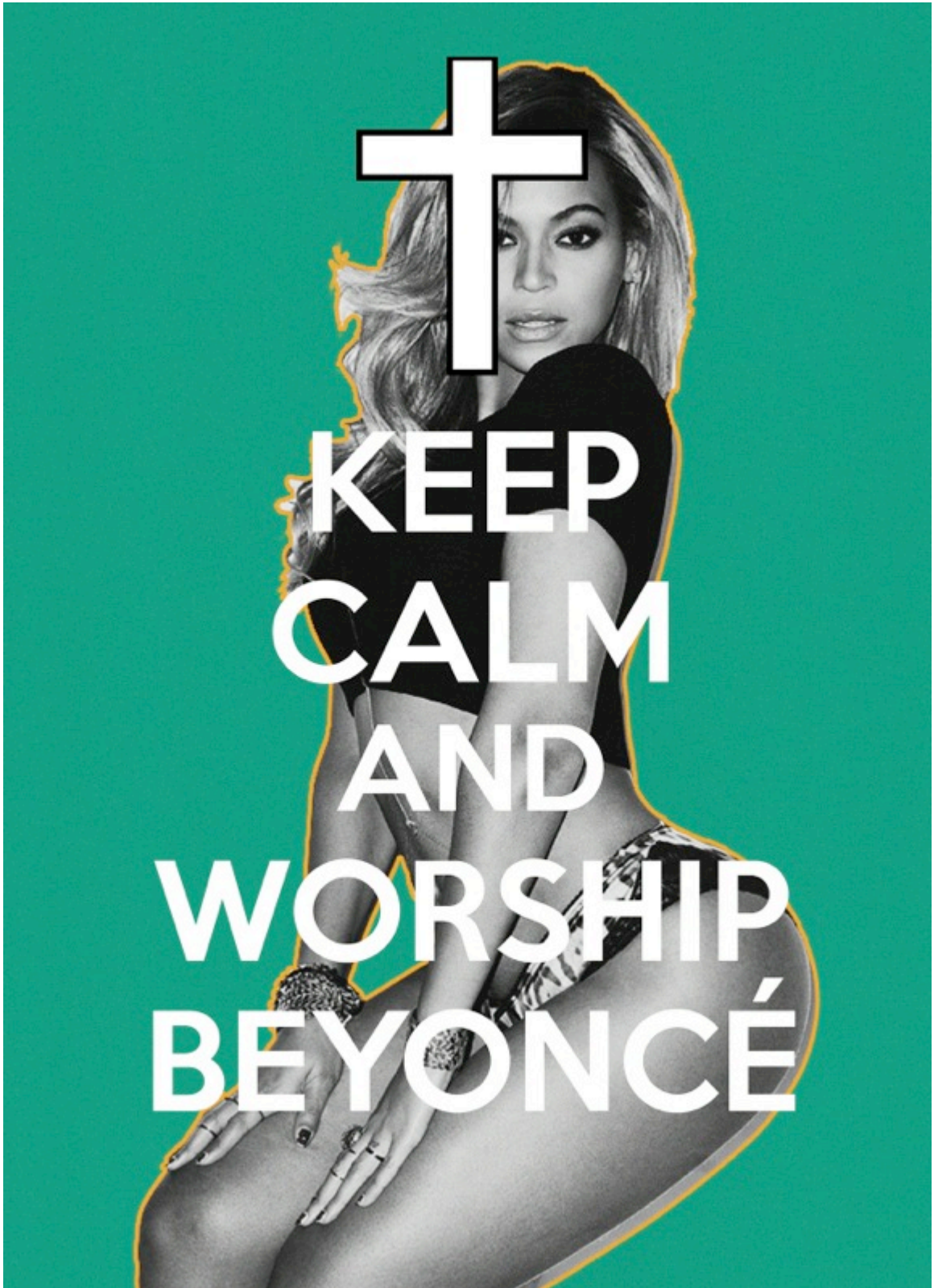
(Fig. 23) Still from *Trash Vs. Trash*, 2013. Video.



(Fig. 24) Still from *Trash Vs. Trash*, 2013. Video.



(Fig. 25) *Modern Maternity I*, 2010. Acrylic ink, decoupage on maternity mannequin.



(Fig. 26) *#WhoDoYouWorship? (Beyoncé the Feminist)*, 2014. Digital maquette. 48X36 inches.



(Fig. 27) #WhoDoYouWorship? (*Washington's White Hat*), 2014. Digital maquette. 48X36 inches.



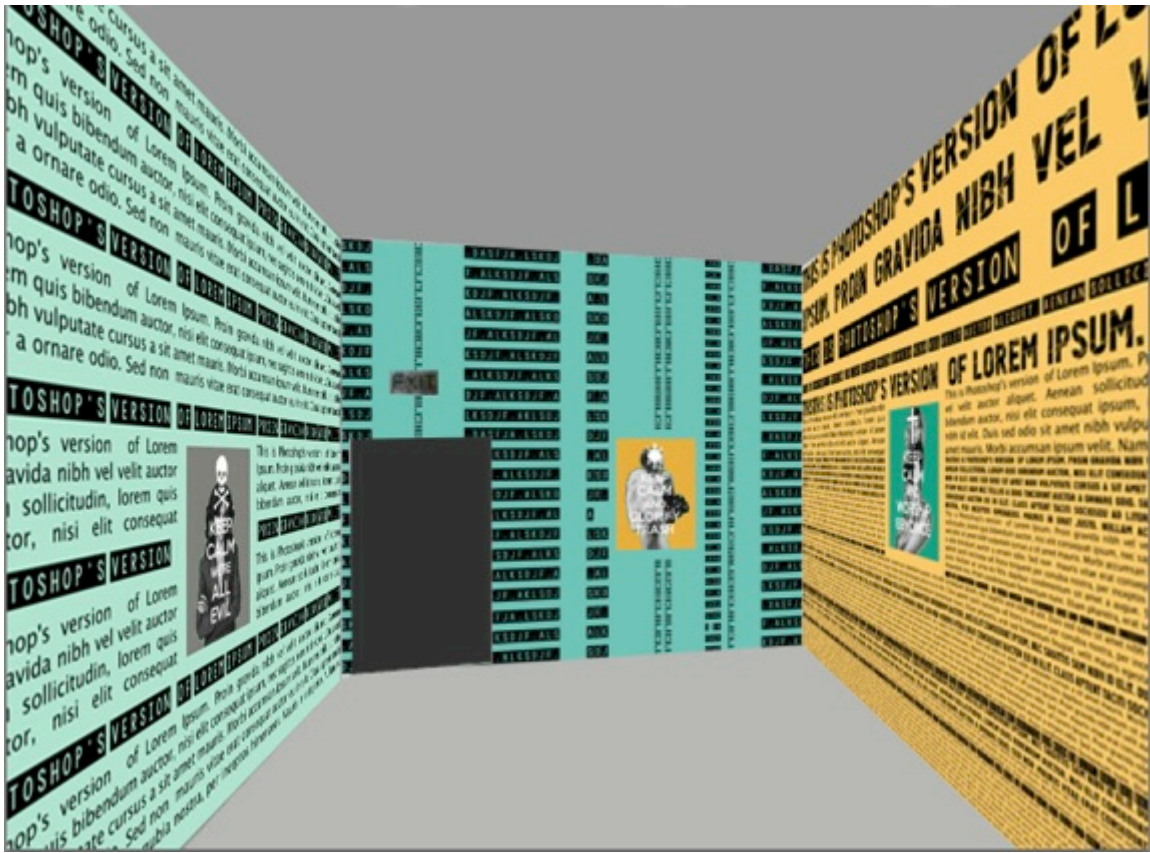
(Fig. 28) #WhoDoYouWorship? (Hannah Horvath's Tits), 2014. Digital maquette. 48X36 inches.



(Fig. 29) *#WhoDoYouWorship? (Hannah Montana's Swag)*, 2014. Digital maquette. 48X36 inches.



(Fig. 30) Process Shot: Constructing (4) 48X36 inch paintings based off of the #WhoDoYouWorship? memes.



(Fig. 31) #WhoDoYouWorship?, 2014. Digital maquette of installation. 14X20 feet.