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# I'M YOUR PERFECT GIRL

by

MELISSA HUANG

Under the Direction of Craig Drennen, MFA

## ABSTRACT

*I'm Your Perfect Girl* is a thesis exhibition of glitch-inspired painting and video self-portraiture that studies the desires, failures, and dissonance associated with portraying an idealized self for a digital audience. Adopting the perfect girl persona online has never been easier; however, the physical and emotional roles society expects women to fulfill have never been further out of reach. In this exhibition, I consider how those of us coming of age with the internet construct alternative identities online—fantasies, really—that bear little resemblance to the person “IRL.” Internet-era artists have built convincingly realistic perfect girls. I take the perfect girl concept to its next logical step by transforming my image beyond believable authenticity: it is fragmented and distorted to the point of becoming disconnected from my real body. Ultimately, I use this series of works to dismantle the complicated archetypes to which women must conform in our ever-changing cyber landscape.

INDEX WORDS: Perfectionism, Feminism, Self-portraiture, Painting, Augmented reality, Deepfake

I'M YOUR PERFECT GIRL

by

MELISSA HUANG

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MFA in Drawing & Painting

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2021

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Melissa Anne Huang  
2021

I'M YOUR PERFECT GIRL

by

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May 2021

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Drew Tetz. We entered this MFA as newlyweds and now we're graduating together. I can't imagine a more loving and supportive partner and I'm so thankful we could share this experience. I'm excited for us to move on to new adventures together!

I would like to thank my family for supporting me in this process. Mom and Dad, you've always embraced my creative side and encouraged me to pursue my passions. Thank you for helping me reach this point. Tori, I couldn't have asked for a better sister. You're my sounding board and my best friend. Phil, you're my favorite little brother. I love you all.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION: I WAS RAISED ON THE INTERNET

I was a girl raised on the internet. Early on, I used the internet as a learning tool, a guiding light, and a forum for discovery. The values I had learned from my friends, family, and church were frequently contradicted by what I learned online, yet those initial values still impacted how I presented myself in virtual spaces. Understanding my family history has helped me discover who I am as an artist and as a digital girl.

I was born in 1992 in a suburb outside of Chicago, Illinois. My parents had met as Christian missionaries through Youth With a Mission (YWAM). My mother was a rebellious yet religious young woman who left England to pursue mission work. My father was Taiwanese-born Chinese. He immigrated with my grandparents to the United States when he was five years old, eventually becoming a missionary despite parental pressure to pursue a traditional career as a doctor or engineer. According to my father, my Nāinai and Yéye (Mandarin for Grandmother and Grandfather on the paternal side) viewed being a missionary as one step up from being a DJ or a drug dealer. My parents' mission work sent them to refugee camps throughout Asia, including in India, Thailand, and Hong Kong.

While in Hong Kong, my mother took university classes at the local military base. She signed up for Computer Basic, believing it was an introductory computer skills course. It turned out to be a class in Beginners' All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code (BASIC), a programming language used in the early home computing era. Eventually, YWAM invited my parents to work with their Leadership Training School at the University of the Nations, and my father was chosen as the head of a leadership training group. An organizational rule about spouses working together within the same training groups led to my mother being put in charge of hospitality. Although she was a religious woman with many traditional values, my mother did not want to be head of

hospitality; she still had her rebellious streak, so she arranged to be transferred to a new position working with Global Database Systems within the school. Her timing was perfect. She began working with researchers who were using a system that digitally connected universities: the early internet. This experience sparked a passion for computing, and by 2002 my mother had completed her Ph.D. in Software Engineering at the University of Illinois at Chicago, all while raising three children.

My mother is a huge source of inspiration. Due to her interests and experience, computer competency and internet access were always encouraged in our household. I remember the internet of the 1990s fondly: listening to the screeching dial-up modem sound every time our desktop computer slowly made its way online and the strong disappointment I felt when kicked offline by my parents' need to make a phone call. Pages took forever to load but waiting always paid off: the internet represented a portal to an unknown world.

We were still a religious family with Christian values. I believed that women should be pure and good. Any mistakes paved a swift road to hell. I realize now that many Christians do not share these strict views, however, as a child, I was very focused on rule-following, especially when it came to religion. As my pastor said in one memorable sermon: if you believe that being 90% good will gain you entry into heaven, what will you do at Peter's pearly gates when you find out the cut-off was actually 91%? I interpreted this speech as my pastor saying I needed to be 100% perfect to get into heaven, even though I knew it was impossible to be completely good. There was one trick: if you fully committed your heart to God and accepted Jesus as your savior, you would always be forgiven. I tried to take this route, but failed: how could I profess my piety when I never heard a response to my prayers or felt true goodness from within? I knew that

although I might act good, it was only a façade. When my day of judgment came, I would be heading south, not north.

Amidst this spiritual unrest, I was still a growing girl just beginning to understand my role in the world and within popular culture. Women on TV and in movies were friendly, beautiful, and generous, or possibly sexy and dangerous, depending on the role. You could be a Madonna, or you could be a Whore. Or, on the internet, you could role-play as both. I was never a serious catfisher, but like most digital natives, I dipped my toe into the water of alternative internet identities. As a youth, I had multiple profiles on Neopets, a virtual pet-owning simulator. This site is where I first learned basic HTML, an essential skill for customizing one's profile and online presentation. Neopets is the first digital venue in which I realized I could present a different version of myself online. In the text-based chat rooms, I didn't have to be a skinny, half-Asian nerd. I could be anyone, and I usually chose to be blonde, white, popular, and beautiful. This avatar was my Perfect Girl 1.0.

## **2 LOOKING AND BEING LOOKED AT**

Today, the landscape of the internet has changed. Public distrust has increased, and "Don't trust everything you read online" is now an oft-repeated mantra. We have collectively developed a sense of paranoia, longing for authenticity and truth, even as we demand tools to manipulate our social media audiences. We expect honesty from others but only reveal a small sliver of ourselves in return. The same girls who grew up custom-coding their Neopets user profiles are now on Instagram and TikTok using image and video editing apps to create careful, but misleading, curations of how we want to be perceived. Throughout these online personae, two common desires are evident: to be looked at and to seem perfect in every way.

In *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Sartre discusses “The Look” as a central piece of identity formation; he argues that the presence of another person forces you to see yourself as an object from their perspective. As others look at us, so we look at others. This back-and-forth relationship leads us to understand our bodies as objects for others’ visual consumption.<sup>1</sup> Our digital bodies have not escaped this phenomenon; indeed, the Look’s effect has intensified in the social media age. Not only do we understand ourselves more easily as consumable objects through the act of being digitally looked at, but we have also become part of our own objectification process. As individuals, we know what works online: what sells, what gets liked, what gets shared. We crave attention, so we mold our online selves to fit these unwritten rules of engagement.

Sartre also describes facticity versus transcendence as integral parts of identity. Facticity includes all of the objective realities we know to be true about ourselves or about others. We know that we are this old, this tall, weigh this much, and were born in this location. Transcendence is our ability to change and to surpass our immediate realities; it is a way to rise above basic facts.<sup>2</sup> If we apply the ideas of facticity and transcendence to our digital identities, new questions arise. In the past, our faces, bodies, and general appearances would be considered part of our facticity, since these are all objectively observable attributes. However, technology affords increasing amounts of transcendence: we now have the ability to change our perceived physical appearances with the tap of a finger or the click of a mouse. Our bodies were once limited by objective reality; now they are malleable and changeable. In other words, you can become a wildly popular Instagram model without having “the goods” IRL (In Real Life).

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<sup>1</sup> Luna Dolezal, “Reconsidering The Look in Sartre’s Being and Nothingness,” *Sartre Studies International* 18, no. 1 (2012): 9-28, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ssi.2012.180102>.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen West, *Episode #105 ... Sartre and Camus Pt. 6 - The Self* (audio blog), July 9, 2017, accessed September 28, 2020, <https://philosophizethis.libsyn.com/episode-105-sartre-and-camus-pt-6-the-self>.



Finally, Sartre describes the concept of bad faith. Bad faith is the psychological phenomenon of acting inauthentically in order to play a role. We understand the expectations put upon us in certain situations and act accordingly to fulfill those expectations. The inner “self” is stripped away, leaving only the bad faith actor. The concept of bad faith easily translates to the digital realm where we’re all playing roles. You can be the beautiful makeup guru, the outdoorsy nature goddess, or the ever-popular perfect mother. We adopt online personae we know to be historically well-received and conceal the aspects of ourselves that would cause public disapproval.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of a true inner self versus false outer self emerges here, but Sartre would not subscribe to the Christian concept of the soul (inner self) as distinct from the body (outer self). Many of us believe that we have one true inner self that we selectively share with others. We believe that the way we’re viewed by others is not as valid as our inner “true” spirit. Sartre would reject this notion: while we may think we know certain things about ourselves, how truthful can these ideas really be? Can we judge ourselves objectively? Most of us think that we are nice, funny, and generous, but would we be described that way by the people we know? What we perceive as our soul or inner being is really just a story we tell ourselves to feel satisfied with who we are. For most people, our public perception paints a more accurate picture than our self-description. Ultimately, our identity is a tapestry that weaves together threads of who we believe we are and who we appear to be in order to create a fuller picture.

These ideas of looking, self-objectification, identity, and bad faith have brought new understanding to my artistic practice. I found myself questioning the ways in which my digital image is constructed and shared with the world, and further asking how I can disrupt that

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

unhealthy pattern. Did I want to be a bad faith version of myself? The answer was no. This gave me a way forward; while some of my work points out the bad faith roles we fall into, others show a defiant self that pushes back against those expectations.

### **3 DEVIL GET OFF MY BACK: ANXIETY IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

Anxiety is another of the major themes in my work. Millennials, particularly female millennials like me, are arguably the most anxious group of people you will ever meet.<sup>4</sup> Generally defined as the generation born from 1981-1996, we are the first digital natives. We have a lot to be anxious about: the 2008 Great Recession crippled our financial health just as we were graduating from high school or college and made dreams of home ownership and children unrealistic for many. Huge student loan debts have made millennials extremely risk-averse, as we work in poorly paid jobs with non-existent (at worst) or unimpressive (at best) health insurance plans. In 2020, just as we were beginning to collectively heal and dig ourselves out of financial misery, we have been sucker-punched by the Coronavirus pandemic. It's all rather bleak.

This unfortunate outlook causes massive anxiety. Additionally, the constant attachment to technology is an enormous stressor for many Millennials. Anxiety thrives on comparison, and comparison is the thief of joy. Every time we look at our phones we're bombarded with images of our friends and family thriving, succeeding, and living perfect lives. We share our own images but wonder why we seem to be the only ones failing at life; these negative thoughts drag down our moments of happiness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Stress by Generation," American Psychological Association, 2012, Accessed April 20, 2021. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2012/generations>; "Stress by Gender," American Psychological Association, 2012, Accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2012/gender>.

<sup>5</sup> Betul Keles, Niall McCrae, and Annmarie Grealish, "A Systematic Review: The Influence of Social Media on Depression, Anxiety and Psychological Distress in Adolescents," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 25, no. 1 (March 21, 2019), accessed October 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851>.

The truth is, we're stuck in a cycle of fantasy. We embellish our happiness and conceal our unhappiness online. We look at others' images and see only the positive aspects of life, which sends us into a downward spiral of comparison. I can't tell you how many times I've stared at some woman's perfect skin or perfect body on Instagram and wondered why I couldn't just look like that. In reality, all of those women have imperfections: fat days and thin days, good hair days and bad hair days. Many of those women don't even look like their online profiles on good days. We're using the tools available to (as Sartre might say) transcend. We manipulate our audiences into believing that our edited self-representations are honest pictures of our day to day lives.

Consider the Kardashian-Jenners. This family, particularly its women, are known for the reality TV show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, running from 2007 to the present day. The Kardashian rise to fame launched in 2007 with the viral release of Kim Kardashian's sex tape, presciently titled *Kim Kardashian, Superstar*, made with music celebrity Ray J. All of these women, particularly Kim and her younger sister Kylie Jenner, are considered physically desirable and are featured frequently on beauty magazine covers and lists of the 100 hottest women. In 2014, *Paper* magazine published photographs of Kim Kardashian's nude body; the massive amount of traffic these photos brought to the magazine's website was heralded as "breaking the internet." Of Ms. Kardashian, the author of the article states, "Behind all the hoopla, there is an actual woman — a physical body where the forces of fame and wealth converge. Who isn't at least a tad curious about the flesh that carries the myth?"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Amanda Fortini, "Break The Internet: Kim Kardashian," *Paper*, November 12, 2014, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://www.papermag.com/break-the-internet-kim-kardashian-cover-1427450475.html>.



Figure 1. Promotional image for *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, season one. Left to right: Kendall Jenner, Robert Kardashian, Kim Kardashian, Kris Jenner, Caitlyn Jenner (formerly Bruce Jenner), Kylie Jenner, Kourtney Kardashian, and Khloe Kardashian. 2007.

The Kardashian/Jenners perpetuate these myths of perfection online by editing photos of their faces and bodies beyond recognition. If you look at the Instagram accounts of Kim, Khloe, Kourtney, Kendall, and Kylie you will immediately notice that their photos look nothing like the women you see in the TV show.<sup>7</sup> It's no wonder most women feel anxious about how we look. If the Kardashians feel the need to change their appearance to the point of being unrecognizable on

<sup>7</sup> Khloe Kardashian, @khloekardashian, Instagram, May 22, 2020, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAgYA12BRqi>.

social media, what hope do we have as regular women without nutritionists, dietitians, and personal trainers?



*Figure 2. Photograph of Khloe Kardashian posted on her Instagram account (left) versus Khloe Kardashian wearing the same outfit on the TV show Keeping Up With the Kardashians (right). May 22, 2020. Instagram caption: “location: under bitches skiiiiinnnn 🍑”. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAgYA12BRqi>*

Over the year I spent writing this paper, Khloe Kardashian was caught in yet another image-editing scandal. Her grandmother posted a photograph of Khloe’s unedited bikini body on Instagram, a body that is perfectly beautiful by most standards, but not by the highly filtered and edited standards set by Khloe herself. This event launched a social media storm: Khloe accused spiteful fans of editing and spreading a “fake” bikini photo to bully her, and pursued legal action against people who reposted the image on social media sites. When journalists pointed out that Khloe’s grandmother had taken and posted the shot, Khloe changed her tactic and posted a live

video showing off her perfectly thin yet curvy bikini-clad figure.<sup>8</sup> One problem arose: the filter applied to the video glitched and revealed Khloe’s actual (slightly larger) waist in a split second of film. Naturally, fans across social media fixated on this brief glimpse, and the controversy continued to churn.<sup>9</sup>

My therapist once told me her great-grandmother’s personal mantra: “Devil get off my back.” That’s what anxiety feels like. Something is always clinging to you, making you feel a little bit worse, a little bit less than everyone you see. The devil clinging to your back makes you nervous and makes you second-guess everything you say. The versions I paint of myself are all the devils on my back. They’re manifestations of the anxiety I feel when I don’t reach my own expectations. They’re manic and wild, free from judgment in a way I can never be. They cling to me in the daytime and envelop me at night as I ponder my failures.

#### 4 PRE-GRADUATE AND EARLY GRADUATE ARTWORK

During my undergraduate studies, my paintings addressed gender roles and female sexual purity in a straightforward way. I relied heavily upon the symbolism of gendered toys, tchotchkes, and items like fruits and pearls that carry sexual connotations. After graduation, I created a series of oil paintings featuring surreal figures transformed into human geodes. At the time, I couldn’t identify what the work was about, but I knew how it made me feel: a sense of unsettled longing. Now I realize that the theme of female perfectionism is woven throughout all of my work. These self-as-geode portraits expressed a desire for physical and mental perfection

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<sup>8</sup> Jenna Amatulli, “Khloe Kardashian Responds To Unedited Pic Drama With Emotional Plea To Fans,” *Huffington Post*, April 8, 2021, accessed April 17, 2021, [www.huffpost.com/entry/khloe-kardashian-body-image-unedited-photo-response\\_n\\_606f0f23c5b6865cd299f11b](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/khloe-kardashian-body-image-unedited-photo-response_n_606f0f23c5b6865cd299f11b). I have not included this image because Khloe Kardashian has pursued legal action against multiple social media users who have posted the image.

<sup>9</sup> u/ambiguous\_owner, “r/Instagramreality - The Spiral Continues... a Certain Famous Sister Went on Ig Live to Do Damage Control after THAT Leaked Photo, but Her Body Filter Glitches (Waist).” *Reddit*, April 9, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/Instagramreality/comments/mng8tg/the\\_spiral\\_continues\\_a\\_certain\\_famous\\_sister\\_went](http://www.reddit.com/r/Instagramreality/comments/mng8tg/the_spiral_continues_a_certain_famous_sister_went).

that I knew I could never attain. By transforming my own figure into these crystalline abominations, I was satiating the desire to be shinier, more beautiful, and ultimately perfect.



Figure 3. Melissa Huang. *Self-portrait with Stilbite*. 2016. Private Collection. Oil on canvas. 20" x 16".



In graduate school, I homed in on this theme and started to explore new ways of expressing and disrupting it. I moved away from using crystals to create beautiful perversions of my body and started using technology instead. While the dreamlike, surreal quality of the previous paintings was satisfying, using common technology to edit my figure felt more relevant to everyday life.



Figure 4. Melissa Huang. *The Most Beautiful Women*. 2019. Deepfake video. <https://vimeo.com/397674114>.

My first video piece *The Most Beautiful Women* is an example of this shift. I learned about deepfaking five years ago on Reddit while reading posts about the trend of fake celebrity pornography. The discussions on Reddit centered around which deepfake videos seemed the most realistic and how users could discover more, or even create their own deepfakes. It's an alarming concept: by superimposing the faces of famous (sometimes non-famous) women onto other women's bodies, deepfake creators force these women into pornographic roles without

their knowledge or consent. Deepfake reflects how society feels about women overall: our bodies and our faces are not our own, and if a man wants to make you the object of his desire he will. The Look and the male gaze never rest. This new technology raises ethical questions about privacy and ownership rights over our own likenesses.



*Figure 5. Melissa Huang. Test video showing how you can deepfake one person's face onto another. Clockwise from left: Final product; Original body; Original face. 2020. Deepfake video.*

Deepfake uses artificial neural networks and machine learning to take the person from Video A and transpose their face onto the person from Video B. Using this technique, you can create videos of people saying or doing things they did not actually say or do. Deepfake is most commonly used to create fake celebrity pornography, which typically results in glitchy, unconvincing, and uncanny videos, although amateur users and academics have found many other unusual applications. As an artist, I am less interested in polished, realistic deepfake videos

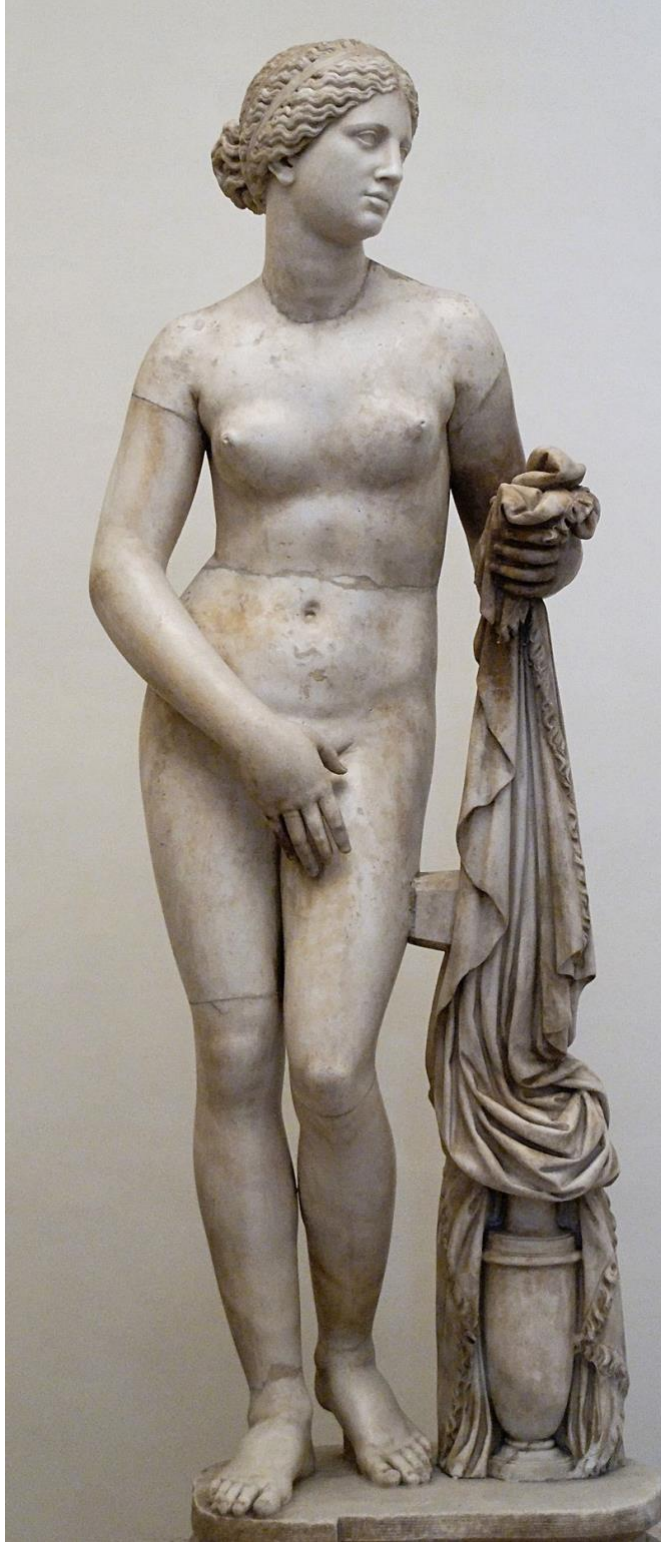
and more interested in the glitch imagery and mistakes discovered within the program. We live in an in-between period of time where we can enjoy this new technology while trusting that humans can still identify what is real versus fake. Soon, deepfake videos will be seamless, and we will no longer be able to believe without questioning what we see on film. As someone interested in transforming my own image using technological means it's almost relieving to experience an imperfect deepfake that betrays its own inauthenticity. A full technological transformation is tempting, but likely bad for my mental health. Each deepfake imperfection is a speed bump in the road forcing me to pause and reflect.

In this piece, *The Most Beautiful Women*, I transformed a YouTube video posted by a man guiding a video walkthrough of the American Art Museum's Neoclassical collection. In his own words: "I have long thought that the most beautiful women in Washington D.C. (when my wife isn't in town) are in the Smithsonian American Art Museum—the Hiram Powers neoclassical busts and sculptures in marble. They are perfection and a marvel to view in person."<sup>10</sup> This statement struck me as both hilarious and concerning. There is a long history of men desiring marble flesh. There are stories of ancient Greek voyeurs spilling their seed on the *Knidian Aphrodite*, and the tale of *Pygmalion* has remained popular since Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was released in 8CE.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Wes Clark, *Hiram Powers Busts and Sculptures*, June 10, 2012, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://youtu.be/J5uaK4y-6ls>)

<sup>11</sup> George L. Hersey, *Falling in Love with Statues: Artificial Humans from Pygmalion to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 73-76.



*Figure 6. Cnidus Aphrodite. Roman copy after the Greek original of the 4th century (no longer in existence). Marble.*

This long-running male sexual desire for marble statues is a manifestation of the yearning for impossible female perfection. It's safe to lust after a sculpture; a sculpture is silent, perfect, and, best of all, will never hurt you or reject you. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have updated this desire for marble flesh to one for digital flesh. Perfection is no longer best expressed in marble; rather, it is constructed pixel by pixel. *Pygmalion* is out and *Weird Science* is in, yet the central interest doesn't change. These ideal women remain pristine and uncomplicated; they place no demands upon their male lovers because they are entirely unreal, devoid of their own wants and needs.

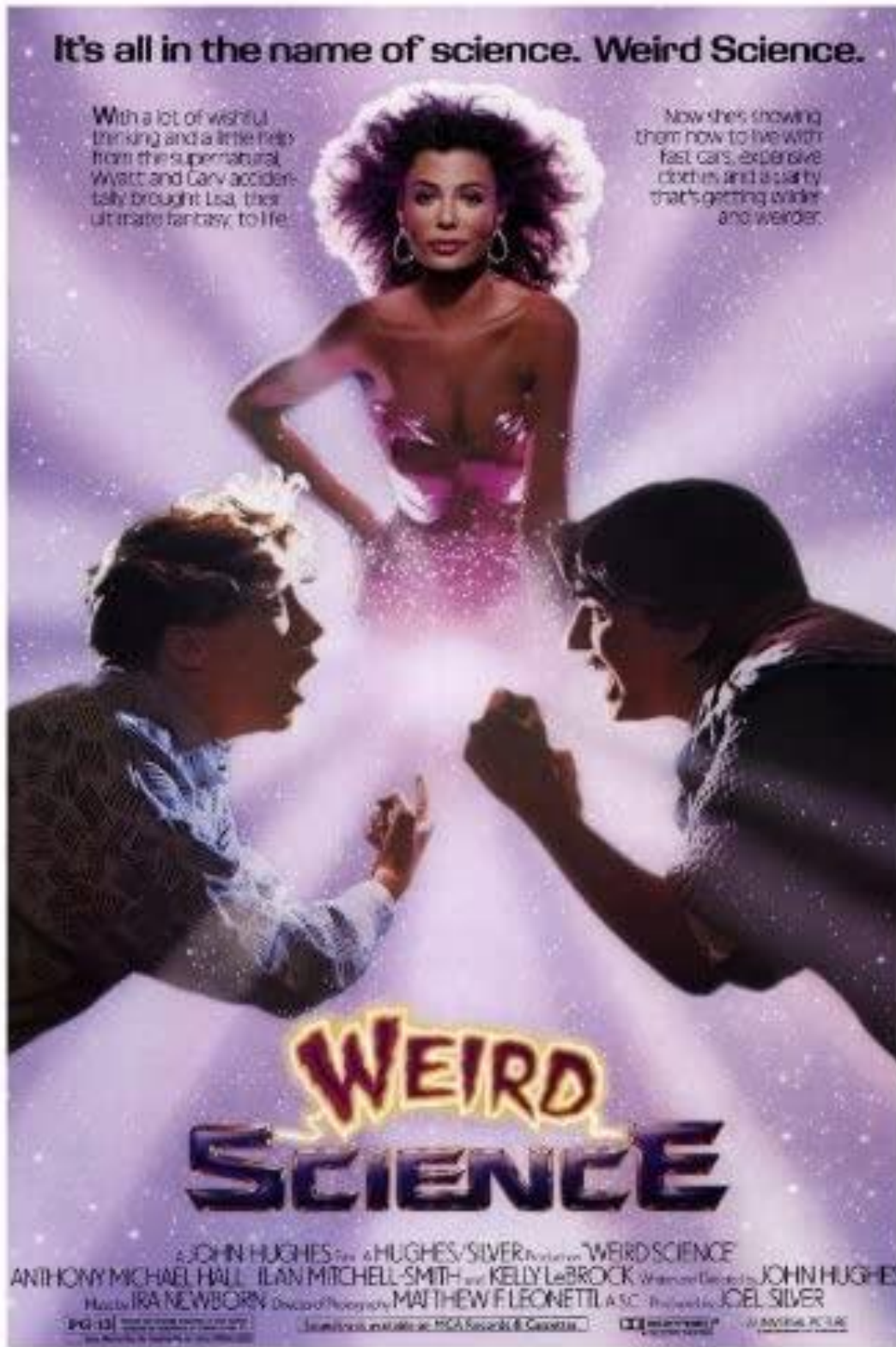


Figure 7. *Weird Science* movie poster. Poster designed by Tom Jung. 1985. 41" x 27". *Weird Science* is a 1985 film written and directed by John Hughes, in which two teenage boys build their own dream woman using a computer.

Through deepfake technology, I have digitally remixed these two desires, creating a video that superimposes my own Asian American visage onto sculptures that depict the western ideals of feminine beauty. What does it mean to merge myself with a statue, to become yellow digital flesh on white marble? Seeing myself as a marble statue feels deeply uncomfortable. Logically, I know this version of myself is no better than my IRL body, and yet, a critical voice in the back of my brain still finds the combination oddly appealing. These questions of desire, idealization, and digitization continue to drive my graduate exploration.

Armed with these new questions, I considered how to explore them in paint. I have always loved the act of painting; the meditative hours spent constructing an image in oils are personally and tactilely fulfilling in ways editing a video could never be. I decided to bring the glitch aesthetic from *The Most Beautiful Women* back into the painted work.

I had been struggling to stop using reference images, but at this point, I realized these images could become an asset to my practice. Instead of fighting against the reference, I leaned into it. I dedicated more time to preparing my reference images than I ever had before. Each reference image is comprised of multiple still images from videos layered together; I alter each layer with Photoshop effects. I distort the images: exploring color shifts, overlays, transparencies, and other digital warp effects. By front-loading my process, devoting more energy to planning and preparing, more creative and unusual imagery emerges. These comprehensive reference images have made me more receptive to the painterly application of materials, and the technical aspects of the paintings have improved as a result. Early, simple compositions like *A New You*, progressed to more complex compositions as seen in *Another Day Another Girl*.



*Figure 8. Melissa Huang. A New You. 2019. Oil on panel. 16" x 20".*





Figure 9. Melissa Huang. *Another Day Another Girl*. 2019. Oil on canvas. 40" x 60".

I had been tied to representational realism, but glitch liberated me. My self-portraits became less and less tethered to my IRL image and more representative of my relationship with the digital world.

I brought glitch from my video work into my painting, and I took it back to video once again. In the videos I glitched, distorted, and reworked images of my own body. In *The Most Beautiful Women* deepfake video, I input Video A and Video B and accepted what the program gave me. In the piece *Did You Take It Yet?*, I assumed more agency in transforming my image. I juxtaposed a composed but uncomfortable image of myself with a conglomerate image of my body to create an amorphous representation of myself: bending joints, wrinkled flesh, birthmarks, blinking eyes, and wide smiles.

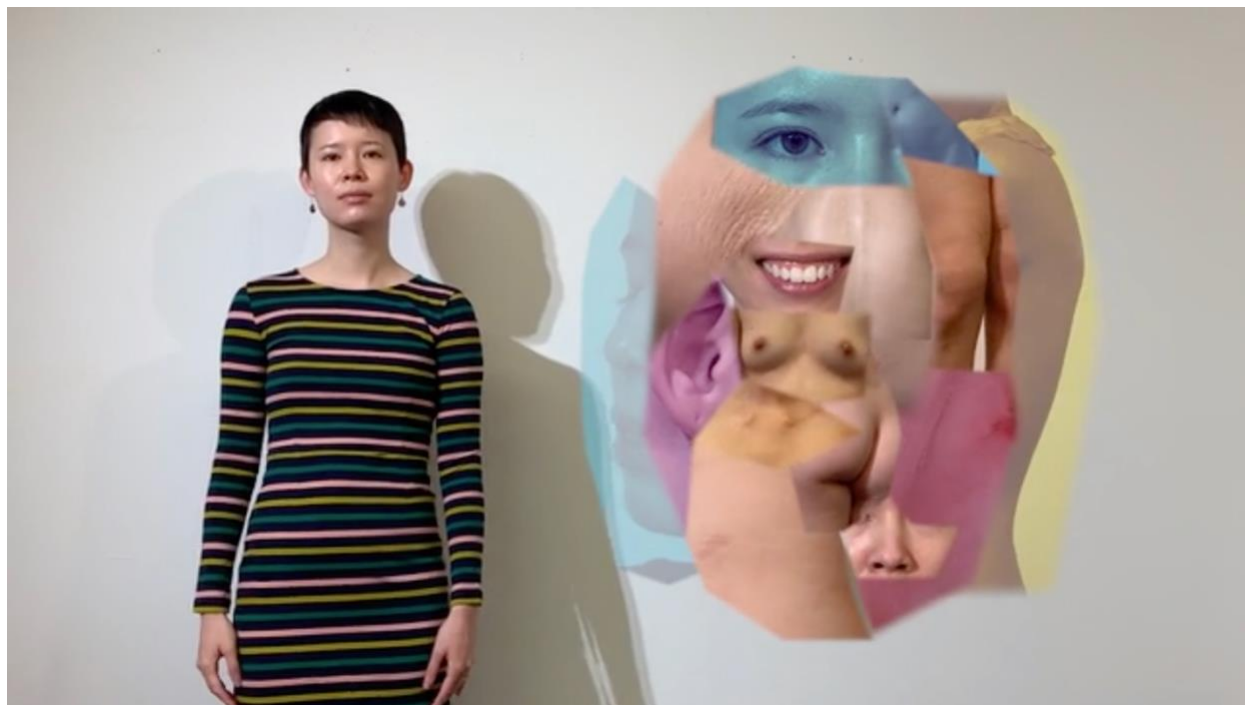


Figure 10. Melissa Huang. *Did You Take It Yet?* 2020. Video. <https://vimeo.com/397672098>.

Much of my work questions the understanding of inner self, outward presentation, and how that presentation is interpreted differently by family, friends, and an online audience. I don't believe there is necessarily one genuine version of yourself; there is no inner Christian soul, but rather an identity composed of many fragments. Who can say whether the amorphous cloud-hosted version of myself is less authentic than a straightforward image of me posing in a dress with neat hair and makeup? Neither of these representations gives a totally accurate picture of who I am.

Our internet identities are more prominent these days; as we live our lives via Zoom, Instagram, and TikTok, online avatars have superseded our physical appearances. As such, we demand increasing control over avatar versions of ourselves. We can edit away the parts of us we dislike quickly and easily using apps like Facetune, Snow, or B612. But why stop there? We all know that images we see online are manipulated. Why not simply embrace the manipulation? If

my online existence is inherently fake, I'd rather skip the effort to look real and instead celebrate the limitless possibilities of my endlessly customizable cyber body.

A painting made in 2020 takes this feeling of disembodiment to the next level. *A Nature Retreat to Disembody your Feminine Power* features eight versions of my own glitched head visiting the forest. One fragmented head placidly lays on its side in the corner of the image, calmly taking in her surroundings. The other heads float freely. All these versions of myself are figuring out their emotions, like a newborn deer taking their first tentative steps: they smile, wince, and bare their teeth. These are wild women experiencing nature, looking for inner peace, and connecting with their inner wolf instead.



Figure 11. Melissa Huang. *A nature retreat to disembody your feminine power*. 2020. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48".

I used a wide range of hyper-saturated colors in this painting. The color choices imbue each head with individual personalities. What would a blue head versus a red head think and feel floating among the leaves? I also use washes of color to create small windows that are portal-like glimpses into another world. The heads in this painting are cut, pasted, fragmented, and overlaid to create a complex emotional setting.

The title of the piece, *A nature retreat to disembody your feminine power*, references the pop culture phenomenon of weekend retreats for women, heavily marketed using pseudo-spiritual claims like “Find your divine power!” “Connect with your inner goddess!” and “Learn the secret to inner peace in three days!”—all at a ridiculously high price, of course. The women in my painting have gone on their nature retreat and been overwhelmed and possessed by feminine power, just not in the way proclaimed in the slick advertising brochure.

In my next painting, I push into the idea of playing a role on social media. The painting’s subject in *Oh! I didn’t see you there :)* is a little bit surprised, but in a coy sort of way. The figure is disjointed; the body parts don’t fit together. The woman slightly hunches over; her hands fly into the air in a sense of performative surprise, caught in a private moment. Her main face smiles at the viewer while the other faces look away shyly. The color palette is darker in this piece, and part of the figure is in shadow. My main goal in this piece is to highlight the figure’s body disorientation. Faces pile up on shoulders that don’t quite fit. The scale changes slightly to create a confusing delineation of space. This girl is smiling, but something else lurks beneath the surface. She still feigns surprise to capture the perfect candid picture.



Figure 12. Melissa Huang. *Oh! I didn't see you there :).* 2020. 36" x 48". Oil on canvas.

## 5 BEING ASIAN IN AMERICA: THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH

I'm mixed race: half-Chinese, half-white, and an ABC (American Born Chinese). East Asians in America exist somewhere between white and not-white, and how other people read my race tends to depend on what's most convenient for them. Asian Americans are considered a model minority: an immigrant group that is thought of as well-behaved and supporting American capitalism. Yet we're still marked as perpetual foreigners. The model minority myth itself promotes misunderstanding of Asian Americans, our history of how we came to this country, and the struggles we face today.

Asians were exploited for cheap labor building American transcontinental railroads in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The first wave of Chinese immigration was referred to as the Yellow Peril and white fear led to immigration restrictions. Various laws passed during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century barred Chinese women and men from immigrating to the United States. The Page Act (1875) is of particular interest; it was passed to “end the danger of cheap Chinese labor and immoral Chinese women.” These laws were changed decades later, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: the Magnuson Act (1943) allowed 105 Chinese people to enter every year; finally, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 and 1965 officially prohibited racial barriers to immigration.<sup>12</sup> These laws are the ground in which the seeds were sown for the model minority myth. Asians were finally allowed to come to America, but immigration was limited to select groups: educated applicants with money in the bank.

My family’s “coming to America” story begins with my Nǎinai and Yéye. In the late 1950s my Yéye traveled to the United States to complete his graduate degree in civil engineering at the University of Oklahoma. In order to do so, he and my Nǎinai pooled their money with a group of other Chinese families. The families agreed to send one young man (in this case, my Yéye) to the United States with the group’s money in order to fulfil the immigration financial requirement. Each young man would study, earn his degree, get a job, and then bring his family to the United States while continuing to contribute part of his salary to the group back in China.

Because of exclusionist American immigration policies, the Chinese immigrants coming to the United States from the 1950s onward were hard workers, smart, educated, persistent, and, in theory, moneyed. Educated immigrants had educated kids, and the model minority myth was perpetuated. All Asians were perceived to be smart and hardworking as a racial trait, when

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<sup>12</sup> Doobo Shim, “From Yellow Peril through Model Minority to Renewed Yellow Peril,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (1998), accessed October 6, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859998022004004>.

really, those were basic requirements for Asians who wanted to immigrate to America in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

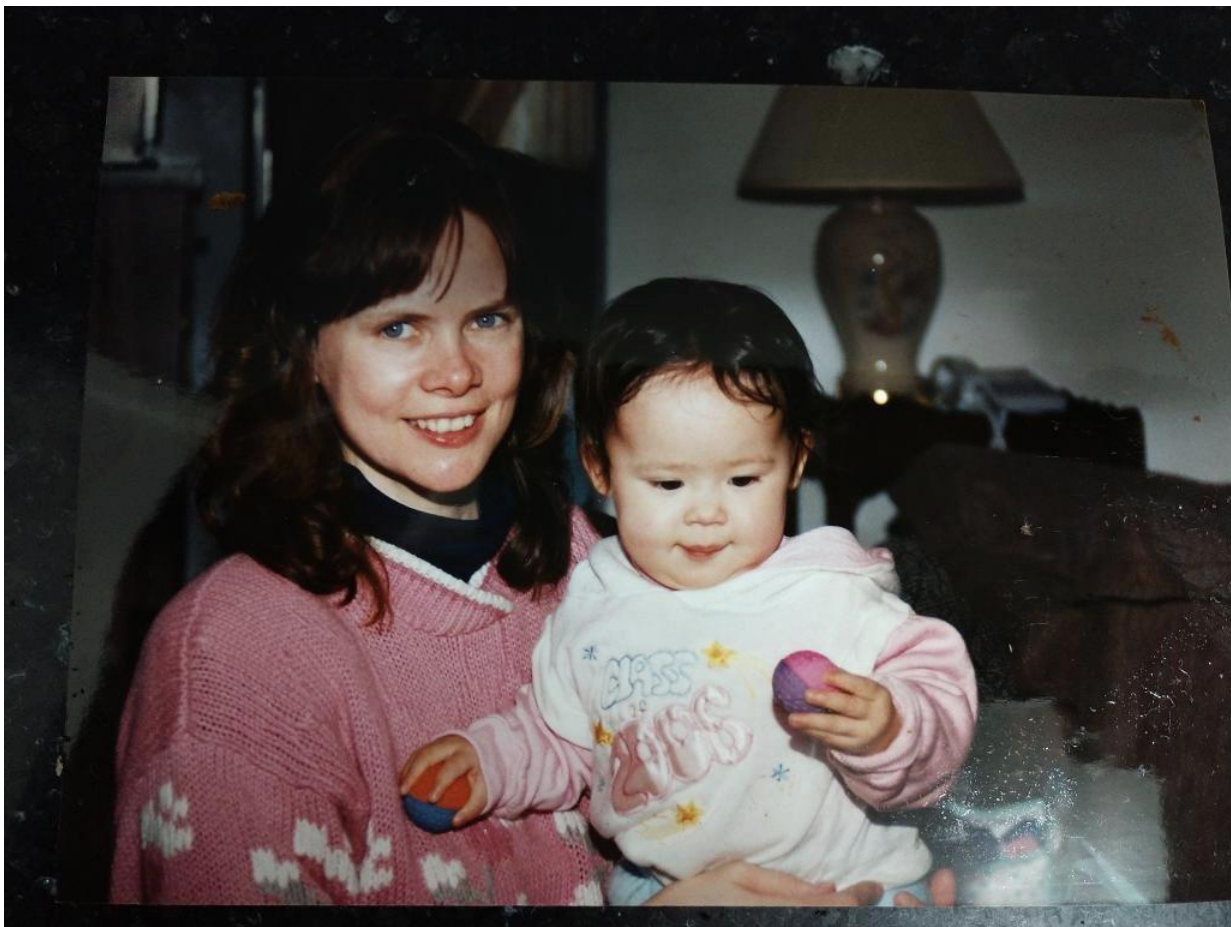
I lay out this history of the model minority myth to better explain the expectations I felt as a young Asian American girl. There is a lot of pressure on Asian Americans to look and act a certain way, both in real life and online. I doubt whether any Asian Americans have completely escaped the influence of the model minority myth.

As stated above, I am read as white or Asian, depending on the situation and viewer's mood. Once in college, I commented on a racist statement a student expressed he was shocked to have heard in the news, explaining that the same thing had been said to me in real life. Another classmate turned to me, let out a short laugh, and said, "Oh please, you're totally white." Another time, I had a long conversation with a AAA worker offering roadside assistance. As he prepared to drive off, he said, "You know, you speak really good English for an Asian girl. Usually you Asians don't speak too good." He seemed surprised when I told him I was born here, even after I had spent twenty minutes speaking with him fluently in our shared native language. Since moving to Atlanta the comments haven't stopped. I have had men in the street follow me. "Ni Hao! Ni Hao! Where are you from beautiful? China? Japan?" one white man asked, following me down the block and across the street as I briskly walked, and then jogged towards the school entrance. I used to view this behavior as alarming but a normal part of life for all women. After the 2021 shooting of six Asian women at three Atlanta spas, I have become much more hesitant to dismiss and ignore these comments.

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<sup>13</sup> Seunghyun Hwang, "Debunking the Diasporic 'China Doll' with Satirical Disquietude: Young Jean Lee's Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 46, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.3138/cras.2015.008>.

When I was very young, I looked more Chinese than I do now. My father affectionately called me Pumpkin, because I had the incredibly round face typical of Chinese babies and toddlers. I grew up in a community with a very small Asian contingent, so my round face and epicanthal folds were considered exotic around the neighborhood. Out running errands with my mother, white women would approach us, coo at me, pinch my cheeks, and tell me I looked just like a little China Doll. On one memorable occasion, after enduring another session of white lady coo-and-pinch, I loudly informed my assailant that I was, “NO DOLL.” I like to refer to this as my awakening as an intersectional feminist.



*Figure 13. A photograph of my mother holding me as a baby. 1993.*



The China Doll stereotype follows East Asian American women as we get older. When we're small, we're delicate, doll-like, and precious. As we mature, the China Doll stereotype becomes more sinister: East Asian women are commonly believed to be shy, submissive, and docile, just like a porcelain doll. These stereotypes affect our relationships and careers. The China Doll stereotype represents a complex series of emotions I feel about my heritage: unsure of my identity, trapped in a middle space, confined by mixed expectations. It's a strange feeling to grow up with stereotypes that line up with certain aspects of your personality but conflict with others. I was a painfully shy child, that much is true, but I've never been particularly submissive. There have been times in my life where I feel others, particularly men, expect that of me, but when I know I'm right I'm stubborn and unflinching in my opinion.

If you search #chinadoll on Instagram, you find a disorienting mix of images: real Asian women, wearing revealing qipao and posing sexually, alongside images of stiff porcelain dolls staring at the camera with blank eyes. These women are playing a role online in the niche that has been laid out for them. They understand the China Doll stereotype and use it to their advantage. In conforming to this #chinadoll stereotype they can gain attention, likes, and even income from male viewers turned OnlyFans subscribers.

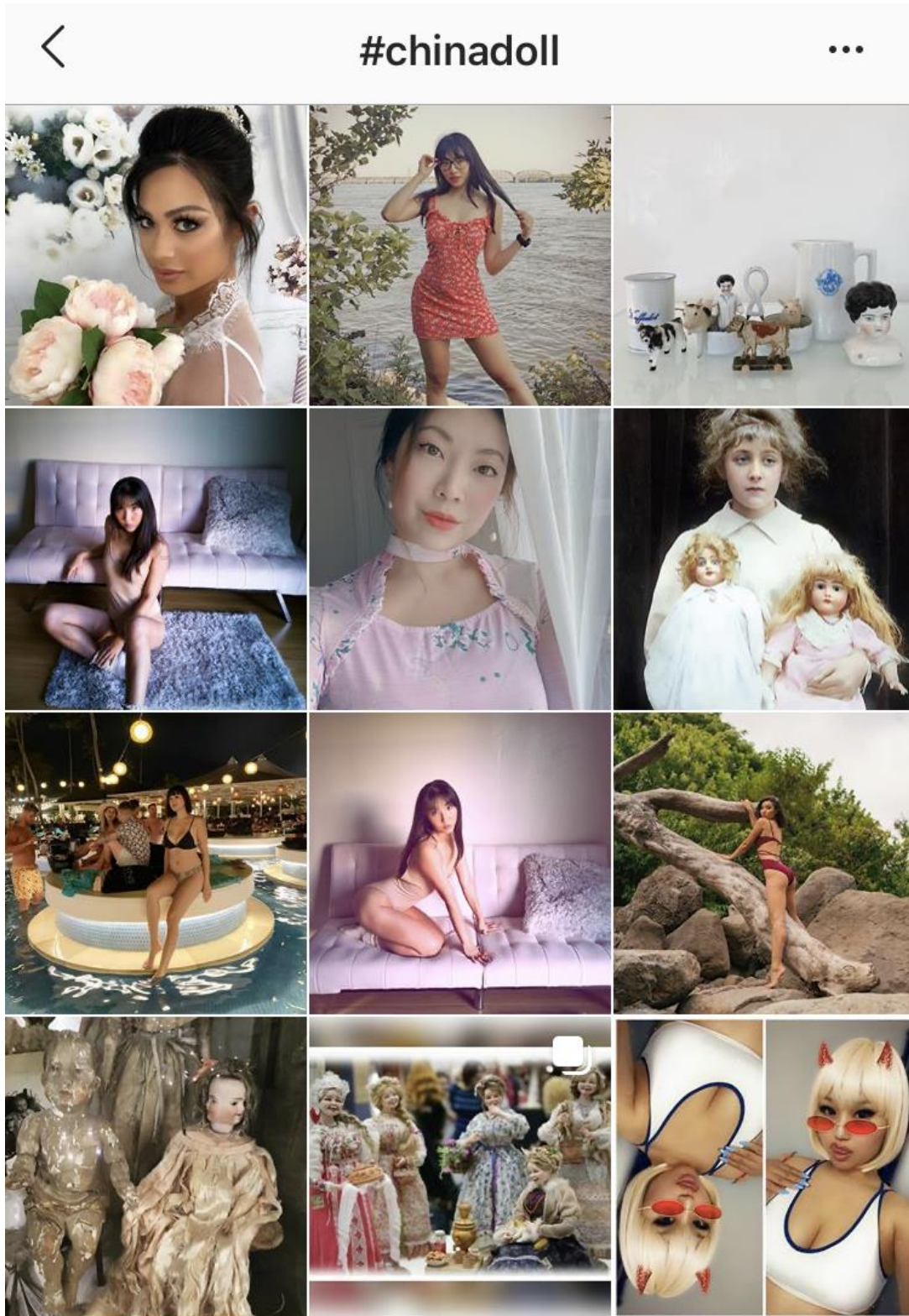


Figure 14. Instagram hashtag search: #chinadoll. October 5, 2020.

All to say: being an Asian American woman comes with its own set of expectations in terms of behavior and appearance. While I grew up admiring the tanned, blonde beauties in *Seventeen* magazine and spoke like a little white Valley Girl, I would never escape the expectations that I should be shy, submissive, and (despite all evidence to the contrary) a non-fluent English speaker. Asian women are sexualized when they're just trying to exist in day-to-day life. "I would love to date an Asian girl," my neighbor once said to me, as I looked on with confusion, having been making small talk about the weather just moments before.

## 6 ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Early feminist artists turned their attention from the real world to the digital world. The performative aspects of online culture appealed to artists like Lynn Hershman Leeson. Leeson is known for her pre-internet 1973-1978 performance as fictional persona and alter ego *Roberta Breitmore*.<sup>14</sup> In this performance, Leeson traveled to San Francisco by bus, checked into a hotel, and started a new, fake life. Leeson carefully crafted Breitmore's personality and existence, going so far as to open a bank account and obtain credit cards under her fake identity. She documented every aspect of this performance through drawings, surveillance photographs, and other artifacts, including letters from her psychiatrist and a driver's license. In the final years of the performance Leeson added three Roberta Breitmore clones into the mix, hiring additional performers to dress the same, act the same, and generally follow the Breitmore character sheet—an extreme version of Sartre's notion of bad faith actors. The performance culminated in a dramatic exorcism of Breitmore from Leeson's body. To a casual viewer the exorcism may have

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<sup>14</sup> Lynn Hershmann Leeson, "Roberta Breitmore," July 02, 2016, accessed October 06, 2020, <https://www.lynnhershman.com/project/roberta-breitmore>.

appeared to come out of nowhere. However, this Christian approach to expelling an unwanted spirit ties in closely with the idea of a true soul versus the performative self.



Figure 15. Lynn Hershmann Leeson. *Roberta's Construction Chart 1*. 1975. Archival digital print and dye transfer. 58.4 x 43.2cm.

STATE OF CALIFORNIA  
DEPARTMENT OF MOTOR VEHICLES

**INTERIM DRIVERS  
LICENSE (TEMPORARY)**  
DIVISION OF DRIVERS LICENSES

VALID FOR 60 DAYS FROM \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE

Roberta Breitmore  
3007 Jackson  
San Francisco, CA 94115

SEX	HAIR	EYES	HEIGHT	WEIGHT	PRE LIC EXP
F	Brn	Brn	5-9	155	None

DATE OF BIRTH 3-19-45 SOC. SEC. NO. \_\_\_\_\_

OTHER ADDRESS CLASS 3 3 AXLE HOUSE CAR AND ALL 2 AXLE VEH. EXCEPT BUS OR 2 WHEEL MOTORCYCLE, MAY TOW VEH. UNDER 6000 LBS. GROSS

CLASSES  
ADDITIONAL PRIVILEGES ONLY AS CHECKED BELOW

NONE.

4  MAY DRIVE 2-WHEEL MOTORCYCLE.

2  MAY DRIVE ANY SINGLE VEHICLE OR BUS EXCEPT 2 WHEEL MOTORCYCLE.

1  MAY DRIVE ANY VEHICLE OR BUS EXCEPT 2 WHEEL MOTORCYCLE. MAY TOW ANY VEHICLE OR COMBINATION OF VEHICLES.

SEE OVER FOR ANY OTHER CONDITIONS  MUST WEAR CORRECTIVE LENSES

X  
1-20-76 SnF 1r

FEE \$3.25

EXAMINER \_\_\_\_\_ BADGE NO. \_\_\_\_\_

APP. No. **DF 219767**

TRACER USED } DL22 \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
                  } Office \_\_\_\_\_

Ⓛ

Figure 16. Lynn Hershmann Leeson. Roberta's Interim Driver's License, issued January 20, 1976. 1976. Driver's license.

Leeson's interest in surveillance naturally made the jump from IRL to online. In 1995-1998 Leeson worked on *The Dollie Clone Series*, creating a new digital life for her exorcised Breitmore character, who would later be reborn in Leeson's *CybeRoberta*, an AI web-based sculpture.<sup>15</sup> In *The Dollie Clone Series*, Leeson created cyborgian porcelain dolls with cameras for eyes. The cameras connected to webcams streaming live via the internet. By looking through Tillie's robotic eyes you saw what she saw: snapshots of Leeson's life, views of the other dolls,

<sup>15</sup> Karen Archey, "Cyborgs, Sheep, and Nanny Cams," *Rhizome*, February 9, 2017, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2017/feb/09/cyborgs-sheep-and-nanny-cams/>.

and more. In this piece, viewers aren't simply surveilling Leeson as Breitmore, they are integral to the act of surveillance. Your eyes are the doll's eyes; you are personally invading Leeson's privacy and breaking down the public-private barrier.<sup>16</sup>

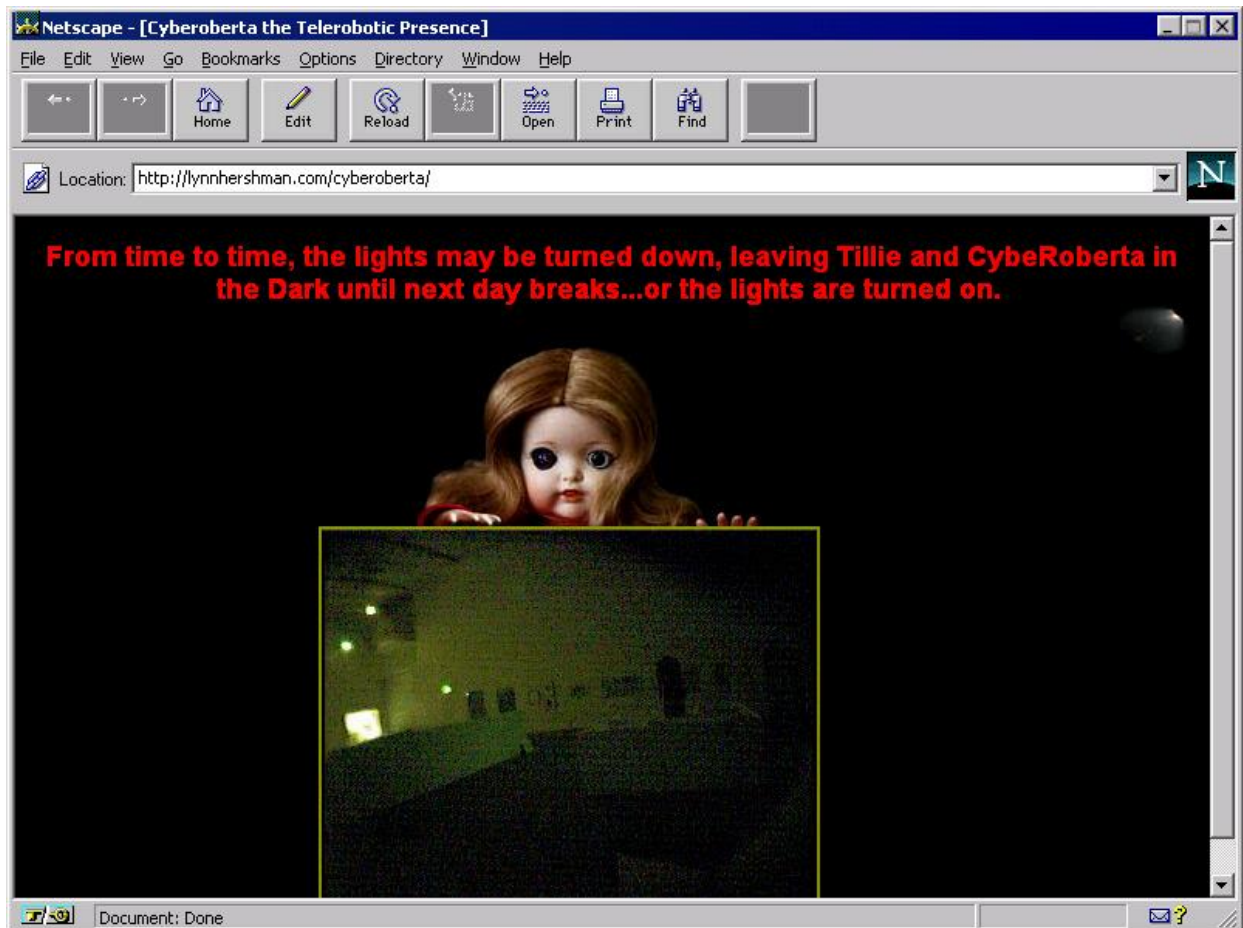


Figure 17. Lynn Hershmann Leeson. *The Dollie Clone Series*. 1995-1998. *CybeRoberta's* interactive webpage with webcam.

Leeson's early Breitmore work flowed seamlessly into various manifestations during the Cyberfeminist Net Art movement. Cyberfeminist Net Artists were invested in developing digital

<sup>16</sup> Lynn Hershmann Leeson, "The Dollie Clone Series," *Net Art Anthology: The Dollie Clone Series*, accessed October 06, 2020, <https://anthology.rhizome.org/dollie-clones>.

spaces as a Utopic landscape free from sexism, racism, and other discrimination. This vision is still a long way off. Gamergate, red pill and incel (involuntary celibate) culture, the vitriolic tweets directed towards female politicians, and countless other examples demonstrate that women do not possess equal footing in our cyber landscape.

While early Cyberfeminist Net Artists were cynical based on their IRL sociopolitical situation, they still expressed optimism for a better future online. Artist Victoria Vesna is one such Cyberfeminist. Vesna explored early internet avatar usage in her *Bodies© INCorporated* project.<sup>17</sup> As avatars grew in popularity, Vesna realized that users typically chose markers of wealth and class when creating their digital surrogates. In *Bodies© INCorporated* Vesna allowed users to create avatars independent of those expectations, by allowing them to select body parts with poetic license: limbs made of glass, water, and air meant to exist solely in a digital space uninhibited by real world judgment.

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<sup>17</sup> Victoria Vesna, "Bodies© INCorporated" *Net Art Anthology*, accessed October 06, 2020, <https://anthology.rhizome.org/bodies-incorporated>.



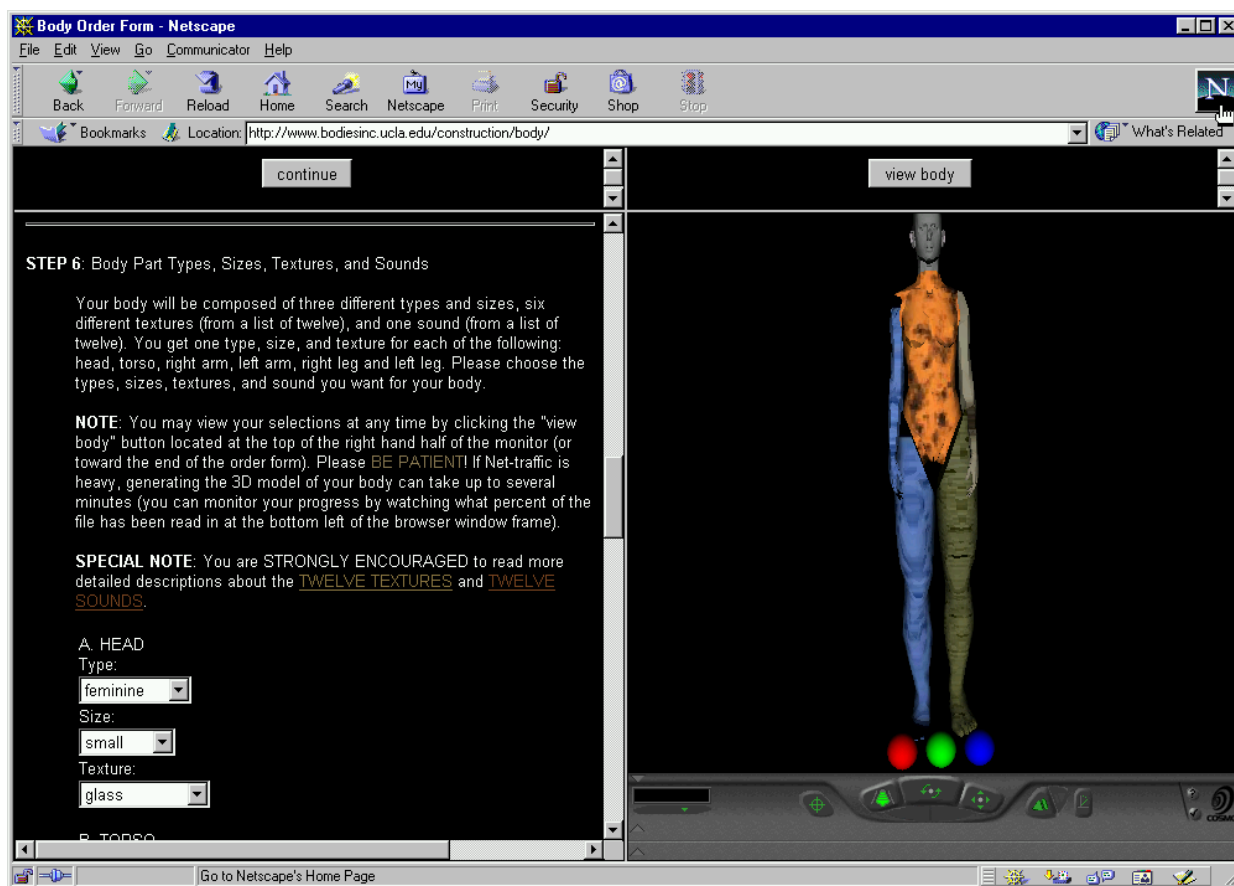


Figure 18. Victoria Vesna. *Bodies*© INcorporated. 1996. Interactive web page.

Artists in the post-internet era continue to embrace technology and social media platforms to present their own Perfect Girls. I continually return to Amalia Ulman's 2014 Instagram-based performance *Excellences & Perfections*. This work was a three-month performance in which the emerging artist performed semi-fictional events inspired by the Instagram Influencer lifestyle. Via her @amaliaulman profile, Ulman shared a move to LA and staged a fake extreme makeover. She performed the role of a narcissistic young woman on the internet, constantly seeking attention. Ulman faked plastic surgery, took real life pole dancing

classes, and shared revealing yet relatable emotional breakdowns. The project followed a clear path of rising potential, disastrous failure, and then, finally, triumphant recovery.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 19. Amalia Ulman. *Excellences and Perfections*. 2014. Instagram-based performance @amaliaulman.

Ulman intertwined her character's story arc with posts featuring the type of aspirational imagery and text you might expect to see from young women on the internet. Ulman reveled in her character's self-made fluidity, an aspect of young femininity expressed online since the dawn of the internet. Autobiographical details offered by young women on early platforms like AIM (AOL Instant Messenger) and MySpace have similarly found a home on Tumblr, Instagram, and TikTok. In profile bios, women offer platitudes about self-reliance, reinvention, and the ability to make your own destiny, tempered by the suggestion of friendly, often gendered attributes that

<sup>18</sup> Amalia Ulman, @amaliaulman, Instagram Profile, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/amaliaulman>, also archived on Rhizome.org: <https://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections>.

make this self-made subjectivity less threatening.<sup>19</sup> Here are a few examples of snippets found in Instagram influencer bios in 2020: “Winging my life like eyeliner,”<sup>20</sup> “Powered by sunshine ☀️ I am a solar panel | watch my latest Youtube video,”<sup>21</sup> “Your big sister doing it all PH Be the change you wish to see in your feed,”<sup>22</sup> “Known as Human Chameleon / Mystique 🦎... God 🧑‍🎨 Artist 🍷 Foodie 📺.”<sup>23</sup> In a way, these lists are feminist mantras, praising the possibility of transcendence: women can change their own lives. More cynically, these banal proclamations are bad faith expressions in which women: 1) commit to archetypes that are well-received online; and 2) peddle a simulated form of authenticity.

Ulman faced a variety of reactions to her performance.<sup>24</sup> The artist committed so deeply to her online persona that her own gallerist considered canceling her upcoming solo exhibition, as collectors found her actions online off-putting. However, one of the most thought-provoking aspects of Ulman’s performance occurred not during, but after. From the perspective of her Instagram followers, Ulman’s character arc was real. They laughed with her, cried with her, and lusted after her. When Ulman revealed that the entire three-month period had been a performance, she faced backlash, particularly from men who had enjoyed her sexually revealing images. Not only were these men surprised, they were angry. They felt that Ulman had tricked them. Ulman’s central premise is that no one is authentic online, therefore we should expect

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<sup>19</sup> Amy Shields Dobson, “Postfeminist Self-Making: Textual Self-Representation and the Performance of “Authentic” Young Femininity on Social Network Sites”, in *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 103-130.

<sup>20</sup> Michelle Phan, @michellephan, Instagram Profile, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/michellephan>.

<sup>21</sup> Ava Jules, @avajules\_, Instagram Profile, accessed September 23, 2020, [https://www.instagram.com/avajules\\_](https://www.instagram.com/avajules_).

<sup>22</sup> Jeanne Grey, @thegreylayers, Instagram Profile, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/thegreylayers>.

<sup>23</sup> Promise Tamang, @promisetamang, Instagram Profile, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/promisetamang>.

<sup>24</sup> Emma Maguire, “Constructing the ‘Instagirl,’ Deconstructing the Self-Brand: Amalia Ulman’s Instagram Hoax,” *European Journal of Life Writing* 8 (2019): 12-32, <https://doi.org/10.21827/ejlw.8.35546>.

inauthenticity. Ulman's male followers most likely knew this deep down. They weren't upset by the deception; they were upset by her refusal to continue the fantasy. Ulman had always been a bad faith actor, but in revealing the truth, she forced viewers to question their complicity.<sup>25</sup>

While artists explore the Perfect Girl persona on Instagram, advertisers and marketers have been considering how to build and monetize their own Perfect Girls. Enter AI (artificial intelligence) influencers. At first glance, Instagram influencer @lilmiquela is a 19-year-old brunette with eerily symmetrical features, an adorable button nose, and a cute field of freckles across her perfectly tan skin.<sup>26</sup> Lil Miquela courts 2.7 million followers on Instagram, sharing images and videos that show her hanging out with friends, trying on stylish new fashions, and generally just having fun around LA. However, when you take a closer look, things get a little strange. Lil Miquela, while incredibly convincing, is not quite authentic enough to pass as a real human. You start to question how her skin is so perfectly glowy and why the shadows she casts always seem slightly off.

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<sup>25</sup> Amalia Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections* (Munich: Prestel, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Trevor McFedries and Sara Decou, *Lil Miquela*, @lilmiquela, Instagram Profile, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/lilmiquela>.



Figure 20. Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCour. Lil Miquela. 2016-present. Instagram AI Influencer. @lilmiquela.

Lil Miquela’s uncanny valley effect is easily explained: Lil Miquela is not a real human. This famous influencer is the brainchild of start-up founders Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou. Lil Miquela was “born” in 2016 and was immediately presented online as a real teenage girl. McFedries and DeCou developed a fictional narrative of Lil Miquela’s life. She was an It Girl around LA: she modeled, she DJed, and she worked her way to Insta fame. In 2018 her account was “hacked” by another AI Influencer, Bermuda, who, in a clearly scripted performance, refused to return Lil Miquela’s account until she promised to “tell people the truth”. Lil Miquela then “came out” as a CGI character stating, “I’m not a human being. I’m a robot.”<sup>27</sup>

Obviously, people already knew Lil Miquela wasn’t a real girl. The CGI wasn’t entirely convincing, and the brands Lil Miquela worked with clearly knew she was digital. However, the

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<sup>27</sup> Tiffany Hsu, “These Influencers Aren’t Flesh and Blood, Yet Millions Follow Them, *New York Times*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/17/business/media/miquela-virtual-influencer.html>.

act of publicly announcing Lil Miquela as a fake girl signified a certain type of acceptance from her adoring public. We don't care if our influencers are simulated as long as they're appealing and perfect and good. The commenters who flirt with Lil Miquela aren't turned off by her lack of a physical existence, and the girls who compliment her appearance don't care that it's entirely digital. We've transcended reality by accepting AI girls like Lil Miquela as #goals.

Moving away from social media, I am similarly inspired by female artists like Cindy Sherman who intentionally play a role in their self-portrait-based artwork. Over the course of three years in the 1970s, Sherman created a series of 70 black-and-white photographs in which she composed fictional stills of generic female film character archetypes.<sup>28</sup> Her imagery referenced common movie tropes: the ingenue, the lonely housewife, the working girl. While Sherman's photographs feel familiar because of the referential imagery, they have no solid ties to specific moments on the big screen. Rather, she created composites of familiar costumes, settings, and poses that feel as though you have already seen them in dozens of films.

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<sup>28</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss and Norman Bryson, *Cindy Sherman, 1979-1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993).



*Figure 21. Cindy Sherman. Untitled Film Still #21. 1978. 7.5" x 9.5". Gelatin silver print.*

Sherman's Sphinx-like facial expressions add to the viewer's feeling of dissonance. Films from the 1950s-1970s typically featured dramatic overacting, as many actors still relied on the exaggerated movements and expressions used in theatre. When Sherman presents her own image wearing an ambiguous expression in an easily read setting, we feel a bit lost. She is forcing us to confront our understanding and acceptance of these common female movie tropes.

Jen Mann is another contemporary artist I particularly admire who similarly explores the fictitious self. A Canadian conceptual painter, Mann's multidisciplinary work explores our self-understanding in a post-internet world dominated by the corporate gaze. Mann revels in the self-

made celebrity, particularly the art star, painting herself into imaginary magazine covers and movie posters, starring in a fictional band with real-world merch, and plumbing the depths of social media for her hyper-realistic paintings. Mann's work questions how we present ourselves and how these presentations seldom escape or subvert popular culture's expectations for femininity and desirability.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Jen Mann, artist's website, accessed October 06, 2020, <https://www.jenmann.com>.





Figure 22. Jen Mann. Cover girl - frieze. 2019. 36" x 48". Oil on canvas.

In her 2019 exhibition at Gallery Jones, Mann composed large canvases featuring paintings hanging within the gallery. She then created paintings of those paintings and created paintings of work hanging in gallery spaces that didn't actually exist. By the time you're done with a Jen Mann exhibition, you find yourself questioning whether anything is real. Mann describes herself as a conceptual artist who uses painting as a medium simply to further her message. In my opinion, the paintings' impeccable execution heightens our cognitive vertigo. The act of painting contributes another layer to Mann's established question of real (the supposedly indexical photograph) versus fake (an illusionistic oil painting).

The final major thread of artistic influence involves artists who fragment the figure, often using a glitch aesthetic. Artists have long used digital and analog errors to create aesthetically pleasing works. Glitch appeals to us both visually and conceptually, perhaps because a disrupted image tickles a part of the brain that wants to see recognizable content turned on its head. Or in another take, it's possible humans just take delight in the fallibility of machines.

Tony Oursler is a contemporary American artist known for his mass-media inspired work. Born in New York City in 1957, Oursler's career grew with the success of video art. His ability to remix video into sculptural installation drew attention from critics and led to art world success. What I love about Oursler is his eye for critically abstracting the human body. He innovatively uses video, projection, and sound to create multimedia fragmented portraits that question our relationship with popular culture and new technologies, visually representing the psychological alienation we feel as a result. Oursler reimagines the human self using technology. In a way, his bodies feel disrupted and glitched by popular culture.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Kimmelman, "In the Studio with Tony Oursler; A Sculptor of the Air With Video," *New York Times*, April 27, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/27/arts/in-the-studio-with-tony-oursler-a-sculptor-of-the-air-with-video.html>.



Figure 23. Tony Oursler. *Bound Interrupter*. *Fugues* series. 2012. Dimensions variable. Two video projections, mixed media, surround sound.

I've recently been examining Oursler's 2012 series *Fugues*. In this series, Oursler uses his classic figure disruption technique. These portraits are conglomerations of disparate heads, bodies, and settings, all brought together into one beautifully disjointed sculpture. "Fugue" has two meanings. One, a musical term describing how a short phrase or melody is brought into a piece in one part and consecutively taken up by other interweaving parts. The other, indicating a psychological state in which one loses awareness of one's identity. Both meanings of the term are present in these works. Through the disrupted figure, Oursler pushes and prods his audience to question how our repeated thoughts and actions establish the habits that comprise identity.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Tony Oursler, "Tony Oursler: Oxt Variations," *Tony Oursler*, November 7, 2012, accessed October 12, 2020, <https://tonyoursler.com/oxt-variations-south-korea>.



Figure 24. Alison Nguyen. *Andra8*. Video still from “my favorite software is being here” series. 2020-21. Dimensions variable. HA video, color, sound, 19 minutes.

Contemporary artist Alison Nguyen uses an algorithmic approach in building a digital woman. In *Andra8*, Nguyen creates a computer-generated woman loosely based on Nguyen’s own physical appearance who spits out phrases scraped from B-list social media influencers (users with 10,000 to 1 million followers). *Andra8* is busy: working as a virtual assistant, a content creator, and life coach, even occasionally giving artist talks on Nguyen’s behalf. She has the uncanny demeanor of a Sim come to life as her robotic monologue touches on health, technology, diversity, and inclusion. *Andra8* is intertwined with Nguyen’s own existence, raising

troubling questions about the role women of color play in the contemporary art economy as well as reflecting on digital identity today.<sup>32</sup>

## 7 THESIS EXHIBITION

My thesis exhibition, *I'm Your Perfect Girl*, contains elements of painting, projected video, and augmented reality. Through this body of work, I explore historical and contemporary beauty and behavioral standards for women using a fragmented, digitized representation of myself. I am acting out a tongue in cheek version of what I view to be the Perfect Girl, proclaiming in every piece that, in fact, I *am* your Perfect Girl.

So, what is a Perfect Girl? She's a cut and pasted odalisque lounging in her bed. She's a beauty queen with disjointed arms and head, smiling and waving for an unseen adoring audience and gallery visitors on loop. She's a glitchy, fractured version of the real me. Within the context of this exhibition, the Perfect Girl is an unnatural conglomerate of the Sartrean bad faith roles women are expected to perform in day to day to life, particularly focusing on female facticity in online spaces.

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<sup>32</sup> Alison Nguyen, "Alison Nguyen 'my favorite software is being here,'" *Alison Nguyen*, <http://www.alisonnguyen.com>.



*Figure 25. Melissa Huang. Beauty Sleep in I'm Your Perfect Girl. Installation image. Photograph by Travis Dodd. 2021. Video projection. Oil on canvas. 48" x 72". <https://vimeo.com/517834515>.*

I'm a digital girl, so I'll start by describing my digital work. There are two pieces in this exhibition that combine oil painting with video projection. Upon entering the gallery, viewers first see *Beauty Sleep*, a 48" x 72" oil painting of my own glitched bedroom space. The bed is covered in rumpled sheets and lit by an open window partially framed by a blue curtain. In the window, my cat sits and stares at the viewer. Projected on top of this is a minute-long video of a composite figure playing on loop. Each fragment of the figure features a body part: my smile opens wide and then turns into a worried frown, my arm extends and retracts as though I'm

carefully checking my nails and testing the outer boundaries of the canvas, and a soft green finger slowly and invitingly beckons towards the viewer. The body parts are arranged to evoke the idea of an odalisque.



Figure 26. Melissa Huang. *Beauty Sleep* (still image). 2021. Video projection. Oil on canvas. 48" x 72".  
<https://vimeo.com/517834515>.

I've always been drawn to the odalisque: a 19<sup>th</sup> century type of painting meant to draw viewers in slowly and seductively. The odalisque differs from the languorous European nudes that came before; these women, concubines with surprisingly western facial features, recline in erotic, vaguely Middle Eastern harems. The odalisque typified the Orientalist movement and served as propaganda as western forces entered the Middle East and Asia. Westerners viewed the Orient as barbaric, exotic, and just a touch exciting. Odalisque paintings reinforced this idea.

Having female slaves might have gone against good Christian ideals, but viewing a painting of a female slave was quite titillating for a 19<sup>th</sup> century audience. I flip the odalisque figure and setting in my version. Instead of an eroticized white woman reclining in an Orientalized space, I'm an Asian woman residing in my firmly American bedroom.

The most famous example of this painting type is Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' *Grand Odalisque* painted in 1814.

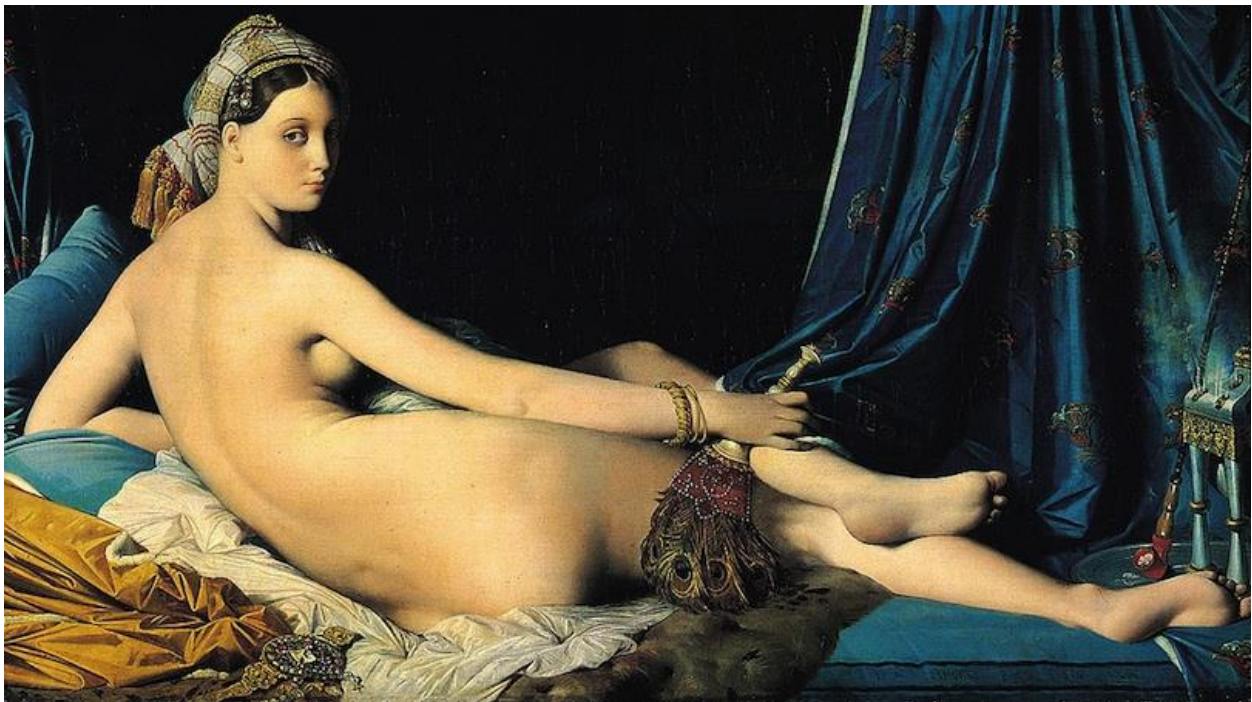


Figure 27. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. *La Grande Odalisque*. Oil on canvas. 1814. 36" x 63". In the collection of the Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Note the sensual gaze as the figure locks eyes with the viewer, the unnaturally long curve of the back, and the Oriental accessories and bed decoration. The connecting points between her limbs don't seem entirely logical but are entirely erotic. This woman was constructed through paint for western male consumption.



In my piece *Beauty Sleep*, I also construct a woman desperate to be consumed. You see the small of her back, the curve of her buttocks, graceful legs. These are all things men love, and yet, here, they're put together incorrectly. My odalisque does perform for the camera, for the viewer, but at the same time the performance seems fruitless. She will never fully conform to odalisque standards with her body cut and pasted together. Then again, is this body really less realistic than the elongated, disjointed one put forth by Ingres?

In my second video projection painting, I portray a digital version of myself winning the Miss America Pageant.



Figure 28. Melissa Huang. *She's Miss America*. 2021. Video projection. Oil on canvas. 48" x 72". Photograph by Travis Dodd. <https://vimeo.com/540770535>.



Figure 29. Melissa Huang. *She's Miss America in I'm Your Perfect Girl*. Installation image. Photograph by Travis Dodd. 2021. Video projection. Oil on canvas. 48" x 72". <https://vimeo.com/540770535>.

Miss America may at first seem a jarring departure from the sultry odalisque, but both portrayals serve the same ultimate purpose. Miss America is a contemporary beauty standard endlessly reiterated through photos and videos of gorgeous women delicately crying while accepting the Miss America crown. They have actually won a prize for being the most beautiful woman in the country, an appealing title for the women watching who have been taught to cater to male desire. Little girls watch the Miss America pageant and learn that this is what society expects of them: be as sweet as apple pie, have hair teased and sprayed up to heaven, and look drop-dead gorgeous in a swimsuit. Every year a group of smiling, inoffensive women from all around the country march across a stage in appropriately patriotic bikinis and give canned answers to softball questions lobbed at them by smarmy male B-list celebrities. The country

watches as the judging panel decides who will win it all. Miss America and other American beauty pageants are just a contemporary update to the odalisque, informing and enforcing standards for ideal feminine appearance and behavior.

If you're asking yourself: who even cares about beauty pageants nowadays? Consider the fact that the man most associated with promoting American beauty pageantry during the Millennial formative years went on to become the President of the United States of America.

In *She's Miss America* I smile and wave for the camera while clutching a bouquet of red and white roses. A delicate tiara rests on top of my wavy, long hair. It's all a farce: the hair is a \$12 wig, and the roses are cheap bouquets purchased on sale from Kroger. Even still, the smile and wave are real. I had never practiced this slow, delicate wave before filming the piece, but found that the gesture came very naturally to me. Just from watching years of Miss America pageants I knew exactly how to move. I can almost hear "There She Is, Miss America" playing in my head.

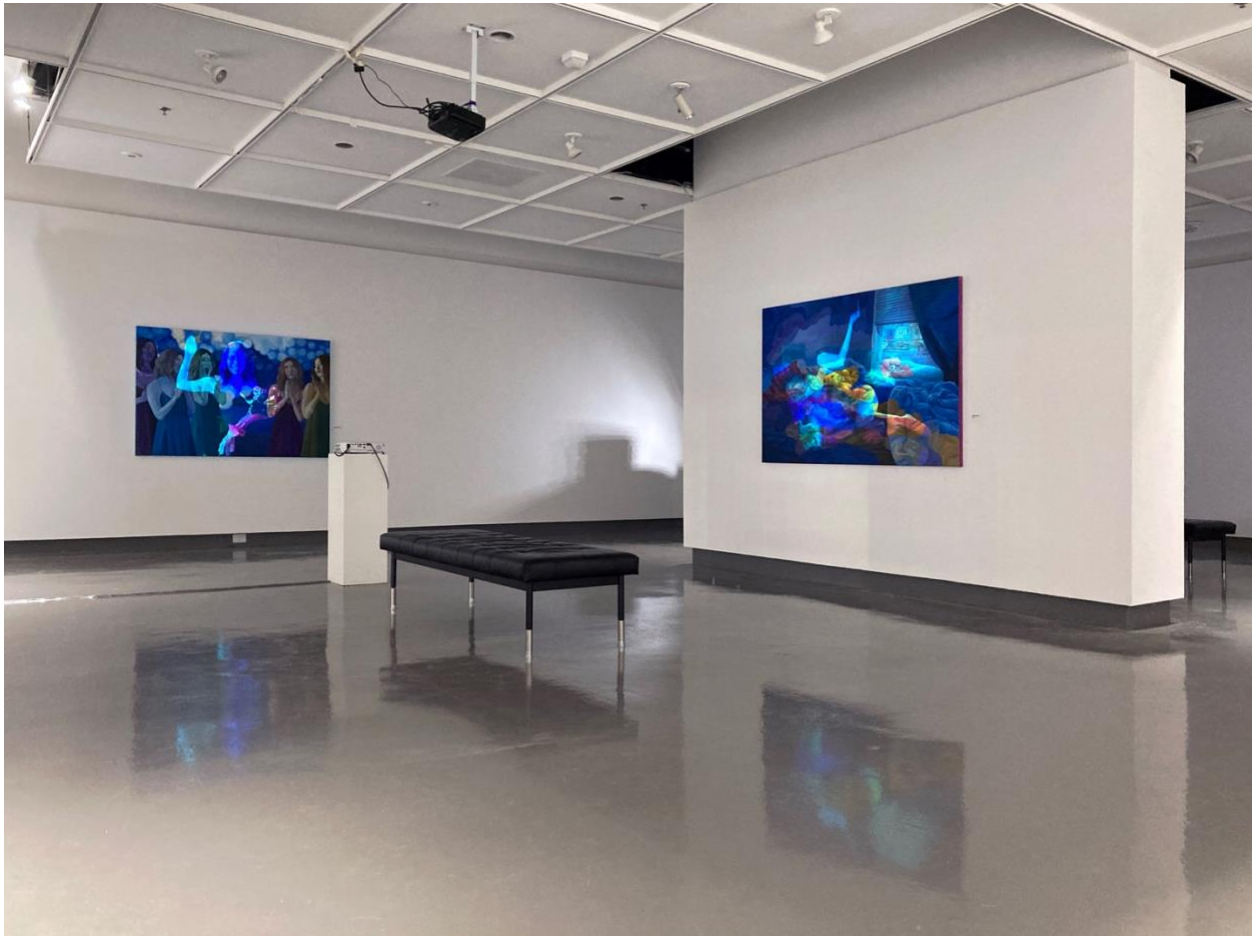
There she is, Miss America  
 There she is, your ideal  
 The dream of a million girls who are more than pretty  
 Can come true in Atlantic City  
 For she may turn out to be  
 The queen of femininity<sup>33</sup>

The digitized version of me as Miss America is disjointed. My right arm, left arm, torso, and head are all pieced together separately. While each individual unit performs the correct motions, they line up to be slightly off. I stand in front of a crowd of five women (versions of myself), smiling, clapping, frowning, sucking my teeth. I'm a mix of happy and sad for the winner (digital me) who has taken the prize and left the rest of the group in the dust. She has

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<sup>33</sup> Margot Mifflin, *Looking for Miss America: A Pageant's 100-Year Quest to Define Womanhood* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2020), 148.

become the Queen of Femininity; the remaining girls have to settle for being runners up, and as everyone knows, second place is just the first loser. In the same way that being 100% good could get me into heaven, being 100% perfect might make me Miss America. Both goals are impossible, and yet they dangle in front of me, tantalizing as ever.



*Figure 30. Melissa Huang. I'm Your Perfect Girl thesis exhibition installation image. 2021.*

The figures in these video projection paintings are very aware of the camera: they move, pose, and react to it. They are engaged with the viewer and fully understand their objectified role; they are defined by The Look.

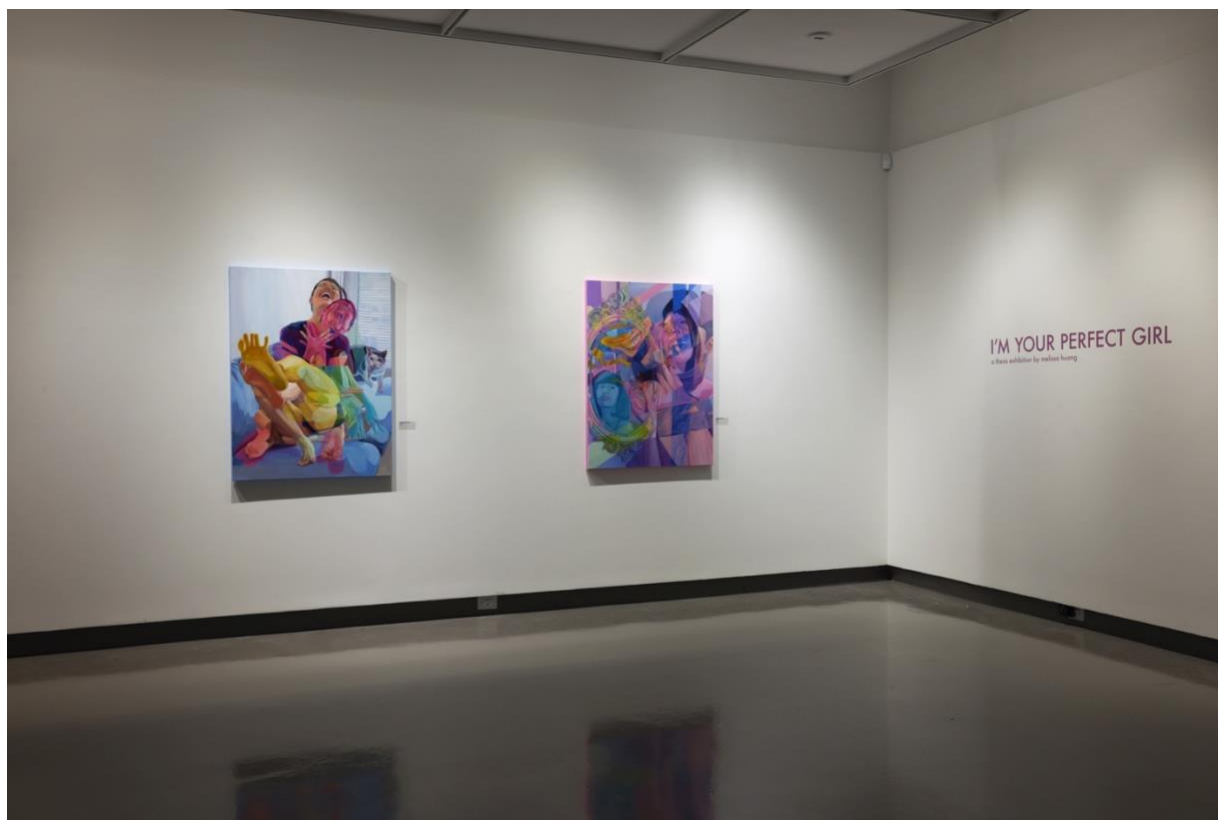


Figure 31. *I'm Your Perfect Girl* thesis exhibition by Melissa Huang. Photograph by Travis Dodd. 2021.

The two 3' x 4' paintings in this exhibition continue exploring my inner psychological state. In the first painting, *Couch Catharsis*, we see a woman (me) laughing maniacally alone on her own couch while her cat (my cat, Bonabelle) stares bewildered at her, one leg raised, paused mid-step. This painting captures a woman overcome with laughter, having a private, liberating moment. Alone in her own home, she can release her glee and bursts into a full-body laugh. I have used directional swathes of color to move the viewer's eye through the composition. Following the starburst hues through the figure's wildly swinging yellow leg, the eye travels up her body, ultimately ending where she clutches pink hands to her chest in unbridled delight.

This painting represents a small window into how I might understand myself outside of *The Look*, separate from how others consume me. This painting focuses inward. It feels more

manic, more emotional. My Perfect Girl can finally let loose and be her “true” self, not the online, best version of herself. She’s wild: she laughs, she cries, she shows you the parts of her that are not palatable on social media.



Figure 32. Melissa Huang. *Couch Catharsis*. 2020. 48" x 36". Oil on canvas.

These strong expressions of emotion aren't usually on display in public view. Online and IRL, I am much more emotionally collected. When I pose for photographs, I often try not to smile (much to my husband's chagrin), because the image of a cool, unsmiling artist is fashionable on social media. I monitor and regulate my emotional performance in audience-oriented spaces.

*Mirror Mirror* is the flipside of this coin. The version of myself in *Mirror Mirror* seems to know the viewer is there. She gazes outward, wearing a black wig styled in a bob and holding a tube of pink lipstick. There is an ornate mirror in the background, which may represent a feeling of being watched, a secondary, mirror-world version of oneself, or possibly just an acknowledgment of the judgment women feel day to day. This figure is thoroughly sliced and diced, decomposed and recomposed. We feel that her body is present but not in a form we would normally observe.





Figure 33. Melissa Huang. *Mirror Mirror*. 2020. 48" x 36". Oil on canvas.

There are two pieces in this exhibition that incorporate augmented reality. *Mirror Mirror* is one of them, featuring a target filter that worked on both the postcard for the exhibition and the painting itself. You can try this out yourself:

1. Scan the following QR code in Figure 34.
2. Click on the link that pops up, which will take you to Instagram.
3. Once the *Mirror AR Postcard* filter is open point your phone camera toward the previous image of the *Mirror Mirror* painting in Figure 33. The augmented reality filter will apply a video image on top of the painting image. Feel free to move around the piece to see the filter effect from different angles.

If the QR code doesn't work, do this:

1. Access Instagram using your mobile device.
2. Visit my Instagram profile: @melissahuangart
3. Immediately above the photo grid you will see a series of icons. Click on the smiley face with sparkle effect icon.
4. Select *Mirror AR Postcard*.
5. Try out the AR filter effect on the *Mirror Mirror* painting image in Figure 33.



*Figure 34. Melissa Huang. Mirror Mirror Postcard QR code. 2021. Size variable. Scan this QR code with your phone to activate the Mirror Mirror Postcard filter through Instagram. Point your camera towards the previous figure image (the painting Mirror Mirror) and you should see an augmented reality application to the painting image.*



Figure 35. Melissa Huang. Postcard for *I'm Your Perfect Girl*. 2021. 7" x 5". Printed postcard with augmented reality filter. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CM2bt46FtvW>.

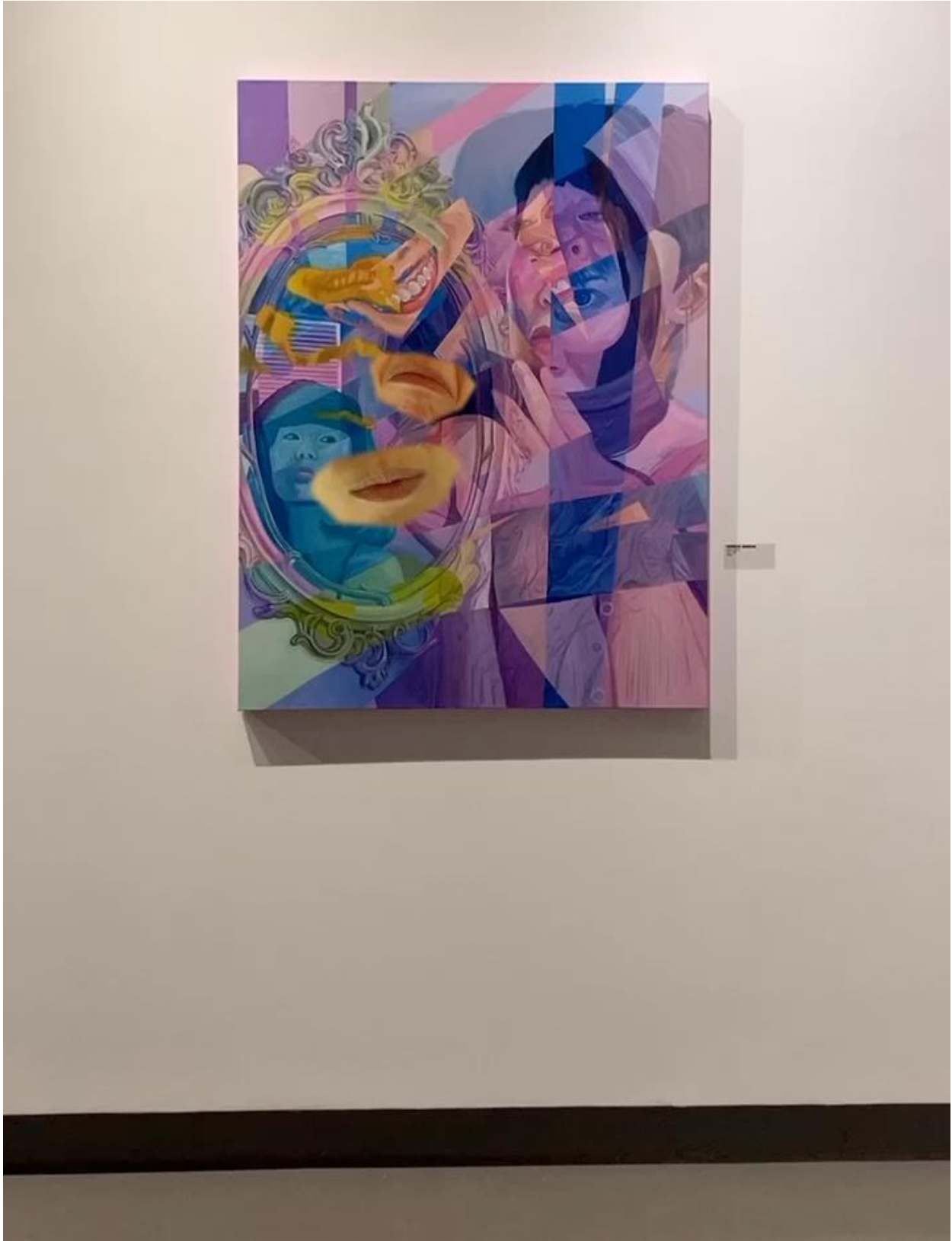


Figure 36. Melissa Huang. *Mirror Mirror* with augmented reality filter applied in the gallery space. 2021. 48" x 36". Oil on canvas with augmented reality filter. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNnSYiiBOjL>.

The second filter in the exhibition is a world object filter. Due to Covid-19, the graduating MFA students have been unable to hold thesis exhibition receptions. Instead, viewers slowly work their way through the exhibitions using timed-entry tickets over the course of one week. I decided to build a virtual version of myself, a surrogate digital body, that could act as a stand-in for visitors to “meet the artist.”

This filter, *Meet Your Perfect Girl*, invited gallery visitors to scan a QR code on the wall which allowed them to place Perfect Girl into the space using augmented reality. Once placed, you could pose with her, walk around her, and take photographs and videos of Perfect Girl alongside the art.

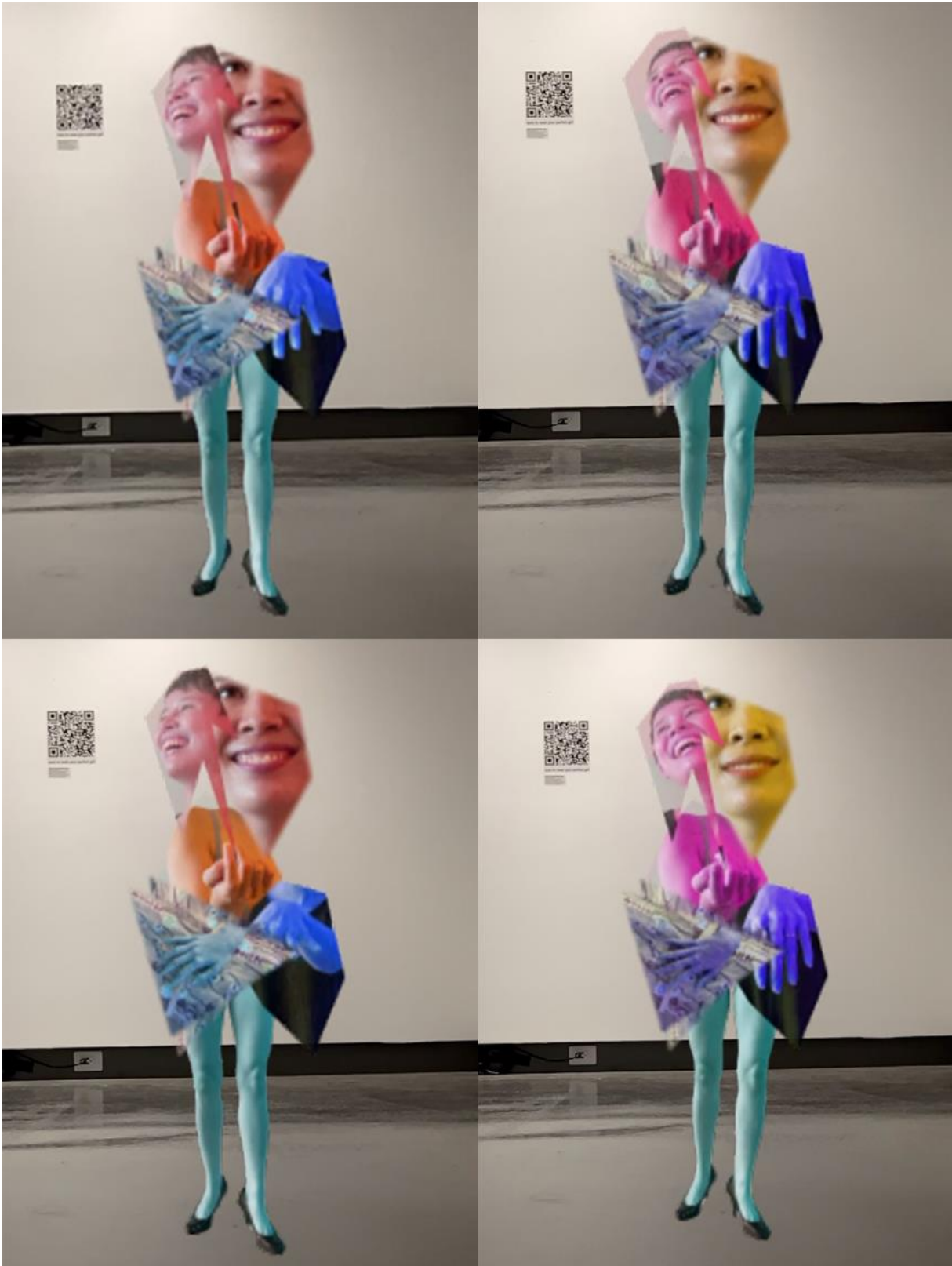


Figure 37. Melissa Huang. *Meet Your Perfect Girl*. 2021. Dimensions variable. Augmented reality world object filter. <https://vimeo.com/538423360>.

Finally, a chance to meet the eponymous Perfect Girl! She's a friendly girl with great gams, willing to tirelessly smile and pose with every gallery visitor who came through the exhibition. This piece is where I chose to incorporate a social media component. While working on paintings and videos for this exhibition, I kept returning to the idea of the platform. If my work addresses our digital lives, isn't that where the work should also live? Since I'm considering the effect of social media on our collective psyche, a social-media-free exhibition felt too removed.

I encouraged visitors to interact with and share their Perfect Girl. Gallery visitors shared images and videos through their Instagram stories where they posed, smiling with the Perfect Girl character. Some visitors took Perfect Girl with them from the show, placing her on bus seats or in the streets of Atlanta (as an influencer, she of course loves to travel). Other social media users who were unable to visit the show still interacted with Perfect Girl, placing her in their homes or posing her with their pets or standing her in their kitchens.



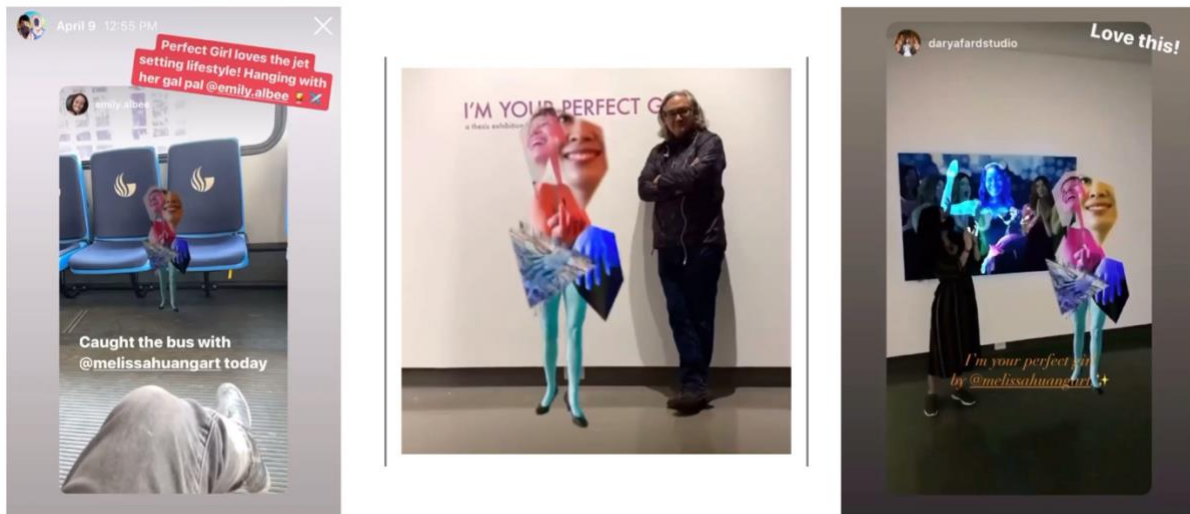


Figure 38. Melissa Huang. *Meet Your Perfect Girl*. Samples of gallery visitors interacting with *Perfect Girl*. 2021. Dimensions variable. Augmented reality world object filter.

The first fifty visitors took a postcard with them from the exhibition. Each postcard contained an image of *Mirror Mirror* as well as the related QR code which allows *Perfect Girl* to exist beyond the exhibition. She is waiting out in the virtual world, ready to be summoned to your home through augmented reality technology. *Perfect Girl* is a digital being who has transcended her body's facticity out of a desire to be liked and be loved. Through social media, *Perfect Girl* can be anything she wants to be, yet she doggedly adheres to unimaginative archetypes of online feminine perfection. This ongoing experiment explores how my *Perfect Girl* operates within societal boundaries using an unreal and unconvincing body.

## 8 CONCLUSIONS

While conducting research for this exhibition and thesis paper, I searched for guides on being a *Perfect Girl* online. Women are socially raised to innately understand these guidelines, so why shouldn't they be written down? I was surprised by the detail in what I found. There were

general articles: “3 Ways to Be a Perfect Girl”<sup>34</sup> and “Perfect Girls – What Do They Look Like and How Do You Become One”<sup>35</sup>; these guides recommended straightforward rules in terms of appearance and behavior. Digging a little deeper, I uncovered guides that were more specific: “How to Be a Girl Everyone Likes,” “How to Be that Wonderful Pretty Perfect Girl Everyone Likes,” and frustratingly, “How to Look Like an Asian Doll.”<sup>36</sup> WikiHow was the repeat offender, with user-submitted articles that detailed step-by-step how to achieve perfection by looking, dressing, and acting a certain way. These guides are the epitome of Sartre’s bad faith concept. We follow these rules to gain admiration, attention, and acceptance, but we are swallowed whole by the Perfect Girl persona.

The image shows a screenshot of a WikiHow article. At the top, the WikiHow logo is displayed with the tagline "to do anything..." and a search icon. Below the logo, a green banner states: "wikiHow is where trusted research and expert knowledge come together. Learn why people trust wikiHow". The article title is "How to Be 'That Girl'", categorized under "PERSONAL CARE AND STYLE » LOOKING GOOD". The author information indicates the article was last updated on May 18, 2019. The main text begins with: "You know 'that girl'. She's the one who is not over-showy, always leaves an after-image of her presence and is the kind of girl they write songs about. She's pretty, unique and friendly – all without being fake or too sweet. If you're interested in being this sort of girl, consider adapting the characteristics described here." To the right of the main text, there is a sidebar with sections: "STEPS" (with a list icon), "OTHER SECTIONS" (with a list icon), and three sub-sections: "Questions & Answers" (with a question mark icon), "Tips and Warnings" (with an exclamation mark icon), and "Related Articles" (with a document icon).

Figure 39. wikiHow. *How to Be "That Girl"*. May 18, 2019. <https://www.wikihow.com/Be-%22That-Girl>.

<sup>34</sup> “How to Be a Perfect Girl,” *WikiHow*, April 15, 2020, accessed October 06, 2020, <https://www.wikihow.com/Be-a-Perfect-Girl>.

<sup>35</sup> Paris Fox, “Perfect Girls – What Do They Look Like And How Do You Become One?” *Glaminati*, May 08, 2020, accessed October 06, 2020, <https://glaminati.com/perfect-girl>.


<sup>36</sup> “The Internet Guide to Being a Perfect Girl,” *Jezebel*, June 06, 2012, accessed October 06, 2020, <https://jezebel.com/the-internet-guide-to-being-a-perfect-girl-5914888>.

Even after creating this body of work and writing this paper, I don't have a firm grasp on how I feel. Perfect Girl, this alternative version of myself, exists in a middle space. She's not necessarily good or bad, she's just there. She's inescapable for as long as I am intertwined with an online existence. Considering how quickly technology is growing and developing, it doesn't seem like digital identity will disappear anytime soon. Social media is addictive and maintaining a façade of a more perfect version of myself is equally so. The Perfect Girl persona may make me feel stressed or tired, or like I don't measure up, but ultimately, I know she's a manifestation of internal anxieties I had before social media and will continue to experience long after social media is replaced with the next big tech "thing." Facebook and Instagram may exacerbate these feelings, but I can't blame them for providing a service I willingly consume.

Sartre might argue that Perfect Girl is just one facet of my identity, and I agree. She represents how I exist digitally, but there are many other aspects of who I am as a person. She is just one small part of that larger picture. Flattering or unflattering, she is a part of who I am.

As a society we're experiencing growing pains. We're learning how to navigate expectations within the pressure cooker that is social media. The longing, disappointment, but also the transcendence afforded by digital existence provoke intriguing questions which I will continue to explore in my ongoing and future work.

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