

ME VS. ME VS. ME

by

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Dedicated to my husband Joseph, for supporting me through this long two years, and encouraging me to pursue what I love. Also to my family for their unconditional love and belief in me.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	v
Vita	vi
Thesis	7
Plates	12

ABSTRACT

The thesis exhibition, *me vs. me vs. me*, composes seven large paintings in the TCU Moudy Gallery. The paintings focus on body image and false self-perception. Using manipulation and juxtaposition of pop culture imagery, the paintings draw comparisons between reality and the desire for physical perfection. Vibrant and dynamic, the paintings inform one another throughout the exhibition.

VITA

Michelle A. Brandley was born January 25, 1983 in Landstuhl, Germany. She is the daughter of Max and Barbara Allison. A 2001 graduate of Northwest Christian High School in Phoenix, Arizona, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in art from Hope International University in Fullerton, California.

After receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree, she and her husband moved to Fort Worth, TX, where she became an active participant in the community arts.

In August of 2010 she enrolled for graduate study at Texas Christian University. While working on her Master of Fine Arts, she held a TCU Graduate Assistantship during the years 2010-2011 and 2011-2012. She spent six weeks in the summer of 2011 with the TCU Study Abroad program at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in Budapest.

She is married to Joseph Brandley and they live in Fort Worth, with their big dog, Hoban Washburn.

THESIS

me vs. me vs. me

We live in an image-driven society in which we are constantly bombarded with ideas about what we should look like. I manipulate pop culture imagery with my paintings to focus on this problem. In the same way a magazine, a billboard, or a television ad can tell you how you should look, I use imagery to point at the inner turmoil we face as a result of the media's narrow and problematic expectations. I am utilizing extremes—over-exaggerations, for example, *The Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman* from the 1958 film, to demonstrate false self-perception in relationship to real context.

Body image and false self-perception are the major themes running through this exhibition. Having struggled with weight problems and dieting since I was as young as eight years old, the work is very personally driven. It comes from the experiences I have encountered in relationships and social interactions which relate to a false belief that I must look a certain way and that being thin fosters respectability. I am painting the dichotomy between the desire for a physical perfection in appearance and the false perception of reality. Contrasts exist within the work: what I want, versus what I think I am, versus what I really am, hence, the title of the exhibition, *me. vs. me vs. me.*

The work I had made before entering the MFA program focused strongly on the obsession with food—the desire to eat in contrast with the desire to have a perfect body. I found my new surroundings at TCU to be a huge influence. A subsequent body of work started my second year in the program from the realization that every girl I passed by on campus looked the same—little clones running around in the same outfits and with the same long blonde hair. I felt such a significant contrast between them and me. I was the black sheep with nowhere to hide or

shrink into the background. The more I found myself feeling this way, the more I found other individuals with similar awarenesses. So the idea of repeating the same image of one of these perfect girls across the surface of a painting is where this work started. The first painting in this series took flight using the same image of a campus girl, repeated uniformly across the picture plane (*Goliath*, Plate 1).

This was a good start, but there was still something missing from the equation. I wanted to combine several images even though they perhaps seemed disconnected, or did not make sense together at first glance. The realization came that they did not have to be arranged in a closed, three-dimensional space, but rather the images could be flat and juxtaposed right on top of one another in the same plane, almost like stickers. That is how *The Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman* arrived in the work (*Goliath*, Plate 1). The image of this woman has carried significant weight with me for a long time. Since I first saw the movie poster, I have directly identified with the image of a giant woman stomping through freeway stacks and leaving a pathway of destruction behind her. It is about the idea of taking up space and the false, overly exaggerated perception of your own size, and feeling a need to stay out of the way lest you do something embarrassing, knock something over, break something, spill something, or cause a ruckus. Yet, you cannot really do much about it if you are the 50 Ft. Woman charging through the room. That is why I layered her on top of the images of the girls. She almost completely overtakes the clones. She covers them, she blocks them. She blocks the viewer's vision and she has no place to hide. The 50 Ft. Woman echos the act and feeling of taking up space.

Locating the 50 Ft. Woman directly over the repeating figures provided a gateway to the rest of the series. It opened up a new way of organizing images to draw the comparisons I intended to construct. Also, past work began informing the present. Last year, I explored ways I

could create an experience with food that referenced fat. I baked a cake shaped into a large fatty rump roast, covered it in fondant icing and airbrushed it with food coloring to look like fresh, raw meat. While mixing the batter for the cake, I found an incredibly delicious and seductive image in the way the icing fell off of the beater when lifted. An “Ah-ha!” moment like that needed capturing. The batter was documented using photography, not knowing at the time how it would later be incorporated into future pieces.

In *Have Your Cake and Eat It Too* (Plate 2), the batter is in some parts rendered as a whole and in some places broken up and appearing out of nowhere. It is abstracted. Only some dripping parts and reflections on the bowl are visible. The legs jut inward from the right side of the frame and cut right across the batter becoming flesh over flesh. In *Trunks* (Plate 3), the dripping batter just peeks out from behind the legs and the top of the frame, hardly identifiable, but creating a downward motion that pushes against the horizontal orientation of the legs. In discovering this new method for juxtaposing the imagery, I thought, why do the legs need to be right side up? What if they came from all different directions on the canvas? Compositionally, this opened up possibilities for several variations using the same images. In both *Have Your Cake and Eat It Too* and *Trunks* (Plates 2 and 3), the legs are horizontal, forcing the viewer to second guess, to turn their heads, and look at the image in a different way.

Although the thesis exhibition did not have any meat paintings, it is important to note the influence that working with meat had in that first year of exploration. It allowed a way to relate paint and color to fat. Making the cake provided for the image of the dripping batter which recurs in the paintings (Plates 1, 2, 3 and 6). Whether or not the viewer identifies the element as dripping batter, the color and quality exudes a sense of lusciousness, a fleshliness, and a sensuality, which is the desired affect.

In some ways I feel that I have come full circle in my work. My explorations with the batter led me to revisit the idea of consumption. In *Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman 2!* (Plate 4), the image of my own open mouth, indulging in the chocolate, has been altered and cropped. The image is duplicated and combined with the 50 Ft. Woman in a system that generates a circular movement around the whole canvas. This painting is more sexually charged than the others, offering the cropped image of the 50 Ft. Woman, her mouth, and the open mouths eating the chocolate. At once its sending two opposing messages. Eating is sexy, but eating will make you a giant. The circular movement reinforces this trap.

Reflecting more on the effective use of metaphor, unnecessary imagery was removed or manipulated differently. I found that the full figure was not necessary, and chose to render just the legs (Plates 2, 3, 5, and 7). As a metaphor for perfection, the legs are sexy, shapely, and tan. They speak for themselves without the full figure.

The elephant also became a significant part of the work. I was looking for another way to describe taking up space and feeling gigantic. So much of my imagery comes out of personal experience. I am a personality and experience driven artist. The idea to use elephants as a component came from taking a group body-pump class at the TCU gym. At one point in the workout we were instructed to balance on an exercise ball and do pushups. I felt ridiculous. I felt like a circus elephant doing a balancing act. Research began for the ways it could enter the work, and the elephant appeared as photographic rendering (Plates 3, 5, and 6), and even just in form and shape (*Showgirls*, Plate 7). In other cases, an elephant is hidden behind other images and becomes harder to immediately identify. In *Trunks Are For Elephants* (Plate 5), a vintage circus elephant stands on his head revealed through three sets of repeating legs. This painting is about the idea of performance, and the attempt to be something you are not. The circus elephant here

acts as a metaphor for looking and acting a certain way in order to be accepted. But, no matter how good the performance, the attention is on the imperfection. In this painting the elephant gracefully stands on its head, but the glowing legs take center stage.

Two elephants drinking water make an appearance in *Batter Up* (Plate 6), intersected by a drizzling pink substance that echos the dripping water from the elephant's mouth. At the same time he appears to stare the viewer right in the eye.

Approaching the elephants in this way allows the paintings to be less literal than my earlier work. For instance, in *Showgirls* (Plate 7) the silhouette of two elephants facing each other are repeated in layers and abstracted. The repeating legs appear upside down this time and are partially painted in the same silhouette as the elephants. In this case the elephants and the legs are beginning to meld more into each other. They each cover a little of the other. As the most recent painting in the series, it tends to push into new territory. The elephants here appear more abstracted than in previous work.

The luscious legs and pink batter repeat across the gallery with the paintings of the 50 Ft. Woman and the series of elephants. Each canvas is a different window into the difficulties of consumption and perfection. The colors in each painting relate to each other across the space and they stand out, vibrant and dynamic. The paintings have life to them. Not one is just like the other, yet they work together in a complimentary fashion. They speak across the room, and inform one another.

PLATES

Plate 1



Goliath, 2012
oil on canvas, 60 x 84 inches

Plate 2



Have Your Cake and Eat It Too, 2012
oil on canvas, 31 x 75 inches

Plate 3



Trunks, 2012
oil on canvas, 27 x 34 inches

Plate 4



Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman 2!, 2012
oil on canvas, 45 x 55 inches

Plate 5



Trunks Are For Elephants, 2012
oil on canvas, 30 x 42 inches

Plate 6



Batter Up, 2012
oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

Plate 7



Showgirls, 2012
oil on canvas, 60 x 84 inches