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On painting pornography – the eye of the beholder

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ABSTRACT

By using my own pornographic stills as a starting point, I produced a series of explicit paintings as part of my PhD practice-based research, the Red Square Series. Using Laura Marks' haptic visuality framework and applying it to my own artistic practice, I set out to explore the pornographic potential of paint as a medium. From the creation of the Red Square Series to their exhibition, haptics have been a guiding principle in my quest to create a static pornographic image. This article explores some haptic qualities and what characterizes them when it comes to paint – and through them, the potential contained in the gaze of the pornographer as both artist and model.

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Model, painter, and beholder

As a painter it is impossible to run away from the materiality of paint – it would be like asking a sex worker to not feel the sweat on their skin, the smell of sex in the room, or the way that a thong uncomfortably burrows itself while you are performing. The weight, unctuousness, density, and opacity of the paint are some of the haptic qualities that drive my creative practice. Given that I am a painter painting myself, I find the notion of the beholder particularly interesting: I am both model and painter, muse and artist, looked at and looking.

When considering the relationship between the painter and model archetypes through a feminist lens there is no denying the conflicting power dynamic at play. Lynda Nead makes this clear in *The Female Nude*: 'The female nude within patriarchy thus signifies that the woman/surface has come under the government of male style' (Nead 2002, 57–58). Aside from being both painter and model, I am painting myself in a way that fulfils some of Martha Nussbaum's criteria for objectification (Nussbaum 1995, 257), such as violability, ownership, and instrumentalization. However, both Nead's rightfully scathing analysis of the patriarchal male painter/female model binary and Nussbaum's limited view of objectification as a net negative fail to account for situations such as mine. It is my brush that is reconfiguring my body which I have posed and moved for the camera under my own art direction.

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Through my artwork I explore a different kind of beholding, one that is by design intimately linked to the person being beheld since we are one and the same. It is not that I deny the commercial intent of the stills that I have based my paintings on: they were originally shot to be sold cheaply online so I could support my artistic practice. But just because I am selling images of myself, it does not follow that I made them with any audience except myself in mind.

Through my years in the sex industry (and I think this holds true for many kinds of content creation), I have come to realize that creating work that pleases myself will eventually lead to economic success. There is a buyer for every fetish, and audiences appreciate a fresh take that is different from what may be thought of as the conventions of pornography: clean and crisp images, thin bodies, and shimmering skin are far from the only thing that audiences are looking for (Carol and Kennedy 1995). I am still a female presenting person working within the constraints of patriarchy and capitalism, but making pornographic work allows me to side-step a good amount of societal expectations of the way that I present my body.

Analysis of a painting experiment: the Red Square Series

I will be focusing my analysis on *Red Square Painting I*, available in the link (<https://artspace.kunstmatrix.com/en/exhibition/12205906/concupiscencia>) that accompanies this article. This painting features a dildo and my mouth in a fellatio-like attitude, and is probably the more successful of all my painting experiments so far. This is mainly due to the contrast between the crisp and the soft applications, which make the phallic form and the tongue particularly 'juicy'. The painting uses a very diagonal composition, and a stark difference between the treatment of the foreground and the background. Both of these techniques generate a certain sense of movement which contrasts with the stillness of the moment captured. In reality, I had to stay very still while shooting the reference image because of the light conditions and the aperture needed to produce that high contrast. It is worth noting that any artistic representation requires (some degree of) artifice, but pornography is one of the areas in which the performance of authenticity is almost a requirement (Ashley 2016).

The use of cadmium red throughout the painting creates a really striking image. Additionally, the shapes in the background are almost fully abstracted and blurred. The shapes in the foreground are also abstracted to a degree thanks to the use of red light, which flattens the skin and eliminates a large amount of volumetric information. The pure lead white of the highlights works on two levels: one, it adds contrast and texture, making the image particularly rich in haptic possibilities; and, two, it works on a semiotic level together with the cadmium red. Both cadmium red and lead white are extremely toxic paints, which makes the whole of the Red Square Series dangerous to paint and to touch (for their first few months, anyway). The toxicity of the paints acts as a symbol, an inside joke even, about how depictions of female sexuality often make it seem dangerous, evoking the cultural legacy of the horror genre (Harrington 2014). The obvious iconic link between the dildo and a penis is also present, but there is also a subtler indexical relationship between dildos and cisgender male insecurities around the use of sex toys in the heterosexual bedroom (Fahs and Swank 2013).

I find that all of the Red Square Series paintings produce images that are more titillating and exciting than those that were painted with a more realistic colour palette – a

certain unctuousness in the application of the paint, a very haptic aspect that was present throughout their execution. Using a certain amount of abstraction (i.e. flattening the shapes through very strong lighting and limiting the colours to almost only a cadmium red light) makes the image feel more tactile and more pornographic, not less.

Painting as a research tool

I made the Red Square Series of paintings for the practice-based part of my PhD research on pornography and aesthetics. As mentioned earlier, they are based on pornographic stills and photographs that I originally took to sell online. Through painting them I aimed to research two things: whether painting pornography is inherently different to painting other themes or genres; and how the haptic possibilities that the painting process itself offers link to the pornographic experience. Based on Laura Marks' (2002) theory of haptics as aesthetic critique, I define 'haptic looking' as a way of looking that relishes the tension between touch as distance, where the eye longs to touch the image and whereby this longing opens up the space for a pornographic experience of the painting. When I talk about the pornographic experience, I am referring to the aesthetic experience that occurs when looking at a piece of media with pornographic intent – whether that is masturbatory or not. Furthermore, I frame this within Laura Kipnis' take on pornography as a cultural and political radiography of the society that produces it (Kipnis 2006).

I was mostly interested in how the volume of the paint on the canvas and the different textural elements came together to create a pornographic painting and my relationship with the images as they developed. I was also interested in the relationship between the abstraction/realism axis and pornography. I found that limiting the colour palette and focusing on abstracting some of the shapes (therefore, moving away from realism and into abstraction) made the paintings seem more pornographic than those painted in a more naturalistic way. I was seeking to find how much transparency (in the semiotic sense, an image that has only one layer) was really required of an image in order for it to provide a haptic pornographic experience: Levinson proposes that pornography needs to be transparent in order to work as pornography (Maes and Levinson 2012, 17–47). However, what I found is that the more abstract Red Square Series produced much more arresting pornographic experiences for myself and the wider audience.

It was through the act of painting that I found that the application of paint is not just about the materiality of the pigment itself, and the way in which different pigments' material qualities interact with one another and with light (what is known as physical colour mixing). The materiality of the solution in which the pigment is suspended is extremely important as well, since it affects the way the paint interacts with the canvas, the brush, and the eye. The materiality of the paint and how this is mediated by the brush will define the haptic qualities of the resulting painting. It is these with the painter's intention in the application that allowed me to create liminal spaces that invite the eye to linger in haptic/pornographic appreciation.

Haptics and pornographic experiences

It was interesting to notice that in the most successful paintings of the series I relied on a certain set of haptic qualities. First and foremost, the textural aspect: there are rugged

valleys in these paintings where one can feel the canvas through the thin application of oil, and its thick, luscious peaks where the paint has been piled up. They take the eye on a lazy, exciting journey through the surface of the painting, which takes me to the second point: caressing as a mode of looking. The relationship between touch and look – a bridge between senses (Marks 2002) – is integral to haptic aesthetics. In my paintings, this is highlighted not just by the subject matter (which is intimate, wants to be touched), but in the way that the texture invites the gaze to traverse the painting itself. Finally, the use of colour: it pushes the image weirdly into the realm of the abstract and the digital, provides the necessary distance for the viewer to project themselves into it, circling back to Kipnis (2006) suggestion of identification operating not at the figurative level, but at a level of design.

It is in the exploration of these liminal spaces which haptic qualities facilitate that I am interested in provoking with my work:

In a haptic relationship our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface [...] we become amoebalike, lacking a centre, changing as the surface to which we cling changes.

We cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting. (Marks 2002, 17)

This melting of the self in an effort to get closer to a work of art gives space for the self to be reconfigured as a result of the haptic experience. This is relevant because the liminal space offered by the haptic experience cannot be explored through a clinical, scholarly eye. It requires a softer gaze, a different 'economy of embodied looking' (Marks 2002, 6) where the viewer is not looking for the punctum and the fulfilling iconographic analysis, but engaging in this near and far dance that is so integral to the erotic. This is the aforementioned 'lazy journey' that I want to take the eye on through my pieces.

Even though I set out to do exactly this, I was still surprised when I would experience research breakthroughs through the process of painting the Red Square Series. New ideas (such as the relationship between brush and paint texture or the importance of the lazy, uncommitted gaze and what stimulates it) were constantly inspired by what I was experiencing while I was painting. Although I have used Marks' framework here to discuss the haptic characteristics of my paintings, most of the concepts and ideas explained in this article were occurring as I was painting. It was afterwards that I was able to organize and develop them in a more academic way.

Painting creates a unique form of embodied knowledge. I believe this is true of anything that we do with our bodies, particularly if we do it repetitively: whether it be pole dancing, knitting, throwing pottery on the wheel, or fucking in front of a camera. The unique embodied knowledge from any of these things can then inspire academic or intellectual discourse. For this article I have transformed my unique embodied knowledge into written knowledge. Although I can never translate exactly the kind of embodied knowledge that I developed through painting, because it is its own kind of knowledge, it keeps inspiring my research and heralding new ways of looking at things.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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