

Multiplying The Body: Gender Performance Remembered and Reconstructed

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my loving husband Robert, for supporting me in all my endeavors and helping me fulfill my dreams, and to my children Gabriella, Elyse and Robert, for their endless inspiration.

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ABSTRACT

MULTIPLYING THE BODY: GENDER PERFORMANCE REMEMBERED AND RECONSTRUCTED

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Our identities and gestures are transferred from our cultural memory. Photography, movies, and more recently, virtual reality, are cultural and social markers that juxtapose the "ideal image of self" with the self as experienced in everyday interactions. How do we make sense of gesture, expression, dress, and body language? If what we see gives mixed or ambiguous information about a person's gender, how do we respond? What implications (effects) does ambiguous gender or indeterminate gender performance have on others? To what extent do we judge others based on our perceptions of their sexual identity and orientation?

Multiplying The Body approaches the body as a remembered experience. Our identities and gestures are transferred from our cultural memory. What implications or cultural changes are transforming our ideals of "self" and gender identity? Are cyberspace, real-time animation, computer games, Second Life, motion graphics, and our access to

cosmetic beautification adding to our ability to reconstruct images of ourselves? What is the cultural impact of seeing ourselves in virtual environments? How are Millennials and Digital Natives changing the way we see, live, and express identity? I believe that virtual experience has a long-lasting impact on the viewer. Can virtual worlds offer a place to try on ambiguous identity that isn't judged by others? I have always been interested in how our surroundings affect our behavior, our identity, and how we interact with others. We are always categorizing: instinctively we look for clues to help us categorize people at a glance as male, female, single, married, straight, gay. I am interested in capturing those experiences that go unacknowledged in our daily lives: the moments when we question what we think we know, and perhaps realize that we can 'see' differently.

FOREWORD

We presume a world in which gender is simple and binary, and how very problematic that binary has become! Susan Serafin invites us to examine our lived experience of gender in the age of sex reassignment surgery, hormone therapies, gender-bending personal performance, and the seemingly limitless possibilities for gender slippage in virtual realities like Second Life and social networking sites.

Serafin's project began with a puzzle—a test her husband brought home from a training session at work. The test presented images of “men” and “women,” only some of whom had been born into their apparent gender. What are the gestures, Serafin wondered, that signal “male” or “female”? What does it mean to “feel” like a woman when you were born into the body of a man? Why does gender ambiguity in a complete stranger make us uncomfortable—even angry? Does experimenting with gender performance in virtual reality make any of this less confusing, more acceptable?

Serafin's work allows us to both contemplate and occupy this ambiguous territory. Her video installations play back our collective unconscious, the unexamined images of gender performance that swirl around us in popular culture. Her stunning photopolymer plate prints abstract the language of gesture and skin. Can we assign gender to these

images? Do we gain or lose if we succeed? Finally, Serafin's ingenious interactive installation invites us to literally "try on" gender performance via her prosthetic jackets. Serafin mobilizes the power of art to turn questions into perceptual experiences, to help us explore aspects of human experience for which we have no language.

Lynne M. Constantine

Assistant Professor, Art and Visual Technology

1. THE BODY AS NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION: MEDIUM AND MEANING

What if we were to reach, what if we were to approach here (for one does not arrive at this as one would at a determined location) the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating? The relationship would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise; beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond bisexuality as well, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing. As I dream of saving the chance that this question offers I would like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminable number of blended voices, this mobile of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each “individual,” whether he be classified as “man” or as “woman” according to the criteria of usage.

- Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . : interviews, 1974-1994*

What does it feel like to be a girl or a boy? How does one feel masculine or feminine?

Unconsciously we organize and categorize individuals based on binary terms, as male or female. All other cultural cues based on gender or sexuality derive from these two social semiotics. We seek these cues or semiotics (codes) as signals to define how we communicate or interpret body language. Social and cultural codes help us engage and interact with individuals or situations based on our perceptions. It is the performative act of body movements that I am interested in, the expression of the body, as an expression of identity. Appearance and decorative indicators such as hair and clothing, body language, and gestural expressions, are representational markers that categorize gender and sexuality. When body language is ambiguous, our cultural memories offer simplistic ideologies for assigning gender. Sexuality is culturally defined and simply propagated and categorized into male, female, straight, or gay. Pre-inscribed narratives define what it is to be feminine or masculine. Institutionalized systems and definitions confine our lived realities. Those who do not fit these simplistic social vocabularies may feel marginalized by them.

Why is it culturally embedded into our subconscious to presume gender or sexuality based on external cues, which may not reflect or may limit the inner essence of one's lived reality? Is society so closed and uncomfortable that we are unable to reach beyond these binary constraints? The constraints of binary identities offer no other language for the expressions of one's identity. Mothers are categorized as feminine, while fathers are masculine, or strive to be viewed as masculine. It isn't socially acceptable to be a

feminine male or a masculine woman. Binary definitions of masculinity and femininity limit the complexity of identity. Do we lack the ability to interpret blended identities? To what extent do we judge others based on our perceptions of their sexual identity and orientation? Judith Butler states in *Gender Trouble* that when we perceive gender on the basis of cultural observations, the body is transferred into a position of uncertainty:

The moment in which one's staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question...the reality of gender is also put into crisis. (Butler 9)



Figure 1. Prosthesis Gallery 123

As the mother of three children, I have had many opportunities to observe young adults as they negotiate the unfamiliarity of the social terrain. I became interested in their limited awareness of cultural cues. Adolescents challenge compliance and conformity; and in doing so, they hold out the possibility of changing the way society defines gender based on body language and expression. The uncertainty of their bodily performance and their willingness to experiment with their bodies challenges ideological views. The betrayal of our own bodies, the awkwardness and transformation of self, is a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. The body has not adjusted to expansive growth cycles and to puberty. The first time a young man wears a suit and tie, or a young woman

dresses for a formal occasion, body language betrays them. The difficulty of looping the knot in the tie or of walking in high heels is symbolic of a metaphorical awkwardness of trying to fit into societal ideals of propriety:

There are many sex cues that are neither anatomical nor physiological but presentational. Acquired cues as arm-body distances or eye opening and closing men and women serve the purpose of marking the sex of the person and the social expectations for that sex. These postural and movement cues can be interpreted within the context of other personal-identification signals, as well as within the structure of the situation in which they occur. Gender cues, according to this view, carry social information and serve to regulate much social interaction. (Epstein 90)

As children develop, however, the possibilities for challenging social codes wane, and their desire for social acceptance results in a lack of sympathy or understanding for those whose gender expression or body language is outside the cultural model. Non-verbal cultural cues of masculinity and femininity are successfully imposed on adolescents based on parental desires of social acceptance. These desires communicate, and impose an awareness of social conformity. Because parents want their children to be accepted socially, they question how their children express themselves. I encountered numerous conversations among parents discussing the gender or sexual orientation of other people's

children. I wondered what a child's relational experiences would be without parental pressures of conformity. If a child overhears a parents commenting that one of their peers is gay or questioning that friend's gender identity, that child assumes that being asexual does not conform to social norms.

Adolescents observe their peers' behavior patterns and mimic what they view on television, movies, and YouTube. Observed behavior patterns are projected on one's own outward development and body language. Adolescence is a time when, as Butler terms it, the reality of gender is put into crisis. If a boy feels feminine internally, and shows his masculinity externally, he fits in with the social norms because he will be seen as strong, although he feels internally conflicted. The same is true for a young woman who feels masculine internally and expresses herself as demure and soft. It can be dangerous for adolescents when androgynous internal identities are exposed through external expressions. It isn't verbally-communicated exclusion that takes place, but a social excommunication that is placed on the individual. The adolescent's body language betrays him or her, therefore demanding alterations in behavior for social acceptance.

2. CHARTING GENDER

During this period when I was observing the gendered behavior of adolescents, my husband was asked to attend a meeting to discuss a co-worker who was in the process of gender reassignment. At the meeting, the co-worker's attorney, physiologist and medical doctor explained the process by which Greg would become Gretchen. Then the entire group was given a chart containing photographs of 16 people and was asked to guess which figures had gone through gender reassignment. He was asked to mark "male" or "female" under each photograph. When the group completed the task of assigning gender, they were given the correct answers.

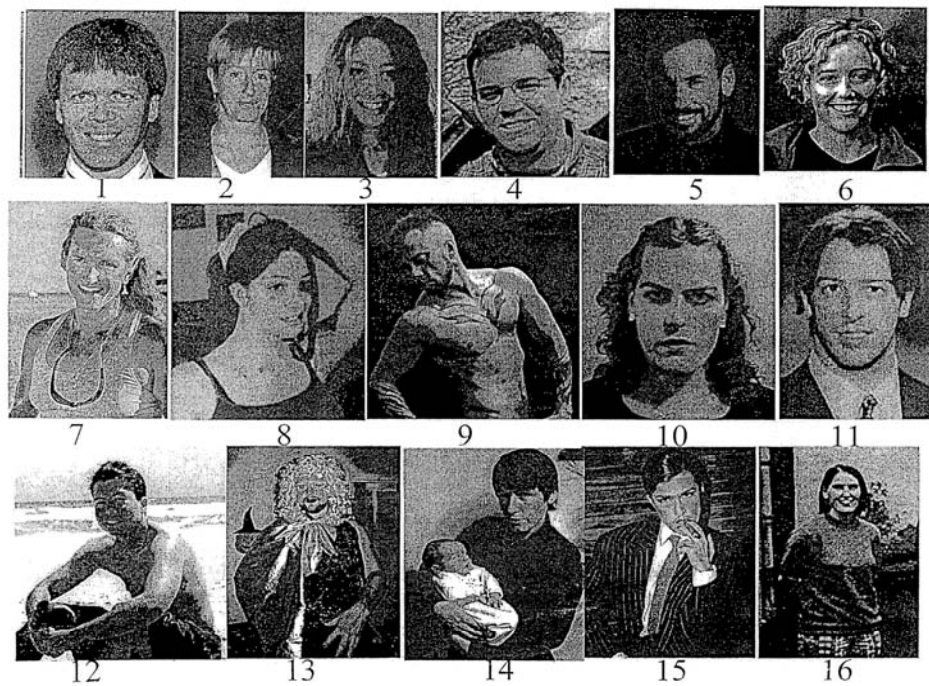


Figure 2. Chart from Workshop

Upon viewing the chart, I became interested in how the issues of gender ambiguity and of anatomical versus presentational performance were key to visual identifiers. When we haven't formed solid gender schemas, as with adolescents, there's still the possibility of exploration in gender roles. Yet as we age, the awareness of "self" and of one's identity becomes powered by external structure. What is it that makes society so uncomfortable that they must always determine if someone is male or female? Why do we need to know the sexual orientation of strangers or question their gender? Is it that we remain so

uncomfortable with our own bodies that we observe and question those around us, yet our own gender expressions and behaviors are unexamined? The social construct of offering only binary definitions of “gender,” and not multiplying the terms of gender, dictate unquestioned institutional vocabularies for defining gender. How does one question one’s own expression of gender in a culture that withholds the ability to transform or multiply the meaning of “gender”?

3. PHOTOGRAPHY: THE FRAGMENTED BODY

In our desire to assign gender to those we perceive as androgynous or gender-ambiguous, we draw on cultural imagery, which is formed by direct experiences and by our memories of representations of gender. Photography and film are the great repositories of cultural imagery: they capture gender performances and generate memories that feed the cultural imaginary. Photography offers a context in which society makes sense of the body. There is never complete “truth” of the image reflected back to the audience, only a slice of spatial perception. That dichotomy of presence-absence in photography and film results in the phenomenological experience of the body as fragmented. Through photography we search for recognition; but it is recognition based on a moment, a point, that connects and divides our visual history. It is in the instant, the momentary point of seeing that we seek to define gender and human recognition:

A constellation of forces all line up to a decisively momentary point or punctum that floods over with a universal meaning for photography—the meaning of simple human recognition—but it is a meaning that passes in a flash. (Noland and Ness 79)

The ambiguous body “that passes in a flash,” is brushed aside unconsciously as we categorize gender. In *Multiplying the Body*, I chose to use photography as a means to capture a moment “that passes in a flash,” a gesture that renders the body fragmented and obscure to the viewer. The plates were the first visual element of my show; they drew immediate attention because of their size and placement in the gallery.



Figure 3. Photopolymer Prints Gallery 123

The figure in the photopolymer plates is a woman, yet because she is fragmented (both in the theoretical sense of photography's presence-absence, and in the literal way I framed the shots), it is difficult to tell her gender. By multiplying the imagery of the body via the sequence of plates, her fragmented image becomes whole and recognizable. Photography, film and video build a cascading progression of historical memory and cultural identifiers.

To emphasize the photographs' performative dimensions, I wanted to print them on a medium that could offer translucency. The photopolymer plates could be printed in a large and linear format, close to the size of body. The plates are complex and difficult to print, especially at large scale. Although they can be difficult to work with, polymer plates are non-toxic, less harmful to the environment, and offer a limited edition run on the press. Each plate can be printed between twenty-five and forty times. The plates require extensive rubbing and wiping in developing and printing. Since the plates are so sensitive, I chose to develop the prints with Brian Garner, a Master Printmaker out of Baltimore Maryland, and to print them with Helen Frederick at Pyramid Atlantic. The plates and the prints became metaphors for the body. The rubbing and sensitivity of the plates, along with the printing of Japanese paper, which was raw, organic, and transformative, were similar to the issues of the body's expression, its skin, and the identity or memory it carries.

4. PROTHESIS: THE AMBIGIOUS BODY

Although I felt the photopolymer plates were successful in representing the way we perceive the body, in *Multiplying the Body* I also wanted to make it possible for people to experience their own bodily representations in a new way. Thus I decided to create a prosthesis, or rather five prosthetic bodies, as a second visual element of my show. Centrally displayed in the gallery, juxtaposed between video clips and prints, these bodies were created for the audience to “try on” gender performance. The prosthetic is a symbolic reference to the skin, offering viewers the opportunity to interact and reconstruct the body. The prosthetic skin becomes the conduit between art and the audience, a means of drawing attention to the subconscious experiences of recreating identity:

Skin's autobiographies are as layered as the skin itself. Into the skin, they intercalate, not simply memory, but memory as it is fictionalized and fabricated in the unconscious. Indeed, that the skin is a surface for the investment of the unconscious memory, a truth, of which is not conscious. Until they remind us of it. (Prosser 67)

Does the skin remember gender performance? If the skin remembers trauma, then would the skin remember desires, virtual or real experiences, and repetitive action of the body? All of us reconstruct our identities when we dress, create Facebook accounts, share video, photographs, websites or any other identifiable markers created for public consumption. It is through the medium of skin, the container of the rest of the body, that fantasy can possibly materialize:

Largely a process of manipulating the surface tissue of the body, sexual reassignment realigns, and reassigns, resexes the skin. The differences between cancer treatment and transexuality is illuminating, for as cancer-treated skin remembers the trauma that actually happened. Transsexual skin remembers the fantasy that ought to have happened, Unconscious investment, a body's memory or fantasy that failed to materialize.
(Prosser 54)



Figure 4. Male Body Casting



Figure 5. Female Body Casting



Figure 6. Close-up Male Prosthesis



Figure 7. Female Prosthesis

The five prostheses were placed not just as objects in the gallery, but as a sensory experience. The audience members could ‘try on’ male for female torsos and temporally explore or transform their identities. The concept of exploring faux identities is multi-layered and challenges visual perception and even the very concept of “identity.” Computer gaming, avatars, Facebook and cyberspace are other contemporary arenas for exploring and reconstructing identity. What is our relation to others if we wear a prosthetic device, augment the body with cosmetic surgery, or reconstruct the body in virtual realms? Do we lose the authenticity of self or the memory of our experiences? Personal experiences determine our views on gender. Identities, skin, memory, self-consciousness, cultural and social structures are memories that are worn externally and felt internally.

In *Multiplying the Body*, I was purposeful in the juxtaposition of materiality and image and in choosing the materials I would use to represent the body. The Japanese paper on which the photopolymer plates were printed is a metaphor for skin, and a commentary on the natural rawness and imperfection of the body. The silicone rubber of the prosthesis represents the transformed or reconstructed body. By blurring the distinction between the materiality of the body and its representations, *Multiplying the Body* enacts my central question: Can we be multiplied and live beyond gender schematics?



Figure 8. Trying on the Prosthetic

5. FILM ARCHIVE: GENDER PERFORMED AND REMEMBERED

As I worked on the concept for *Multiplying the Body*, I began to realize the importance of film as an archive of gender performance. By selecting film clips from familiar and unfamiliar films, I drew attention to the way we perceive and remember the fragmented, abstracted body in the moving image. By fragmenting and slowing down these film clips, and by focusing on such subjects as body adornment, hair removal, ambiguous dress, men dancing, role-playing, and gesture, I ask the viewer to define what it is to be masculine or feminine. The clips pose many important questions about the ways we use signifiers to identify people as gendered, and why certain signifiers are perceived as inherently gendered.

I began to explore and look for films that offered women androgynous roles. There is a limited number of films that offer actresses roles that employ comedy as a vessel for discussing androgyny. Why is humor associated with gay or ambiguous gender for male characters, and not female characters? Film projects on the body and builds a sense of cultural realities or norms for social behavior:

In her book *Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Laura Marks draws on phenomenology and Deleuzian theory to explore embodied model of cinematic spectatorship. Marks calls 'haptic vitality' the relationship (between) of present, absent, and remembered bodies and places in the category of "intercultural cinema"; a group of films and videos which interrogate the political issues of displacement and hybridity. (Ahmed and Stacey 6)

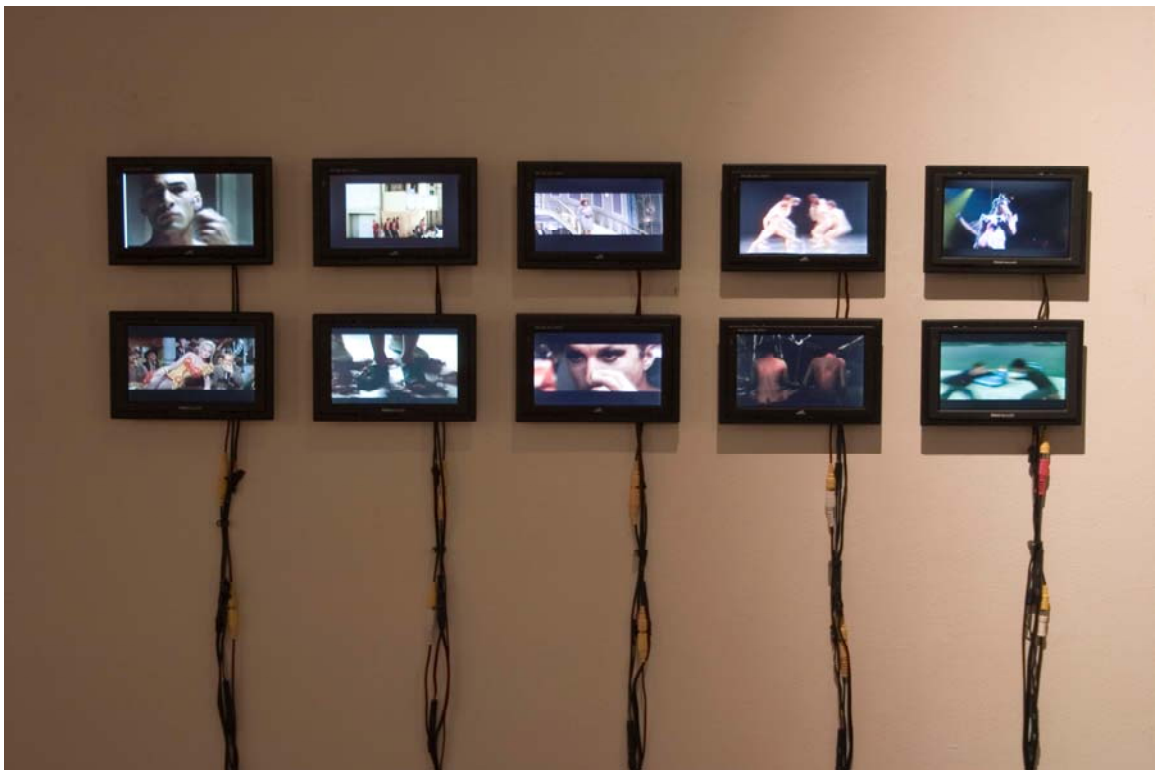


Figure 9. Video Installation B, Gallery 123

6. MEANING IN THE MULTIPLE

Multiplying the Body depended for its success on the juxtaposed elements of photograph, prosthesis, and film. Within the installation, the three elements acted as multiples, disrupting the ordinarily easy dichotomies of male and female. The multiple media echo the layering and multiplicity that is a fundamental theme of the work.

In one sense, the transparent prosthetic body is a metonym for the whole of the work. The transparency of the fragmented body as represented in this piece signifies the liquidity of the body in movement. If the ego is integrated into the skin and its memory, such movement and expression is remembered and reconstructed.



Figure 10. Clear Prosthesis

In the final analysis, the transparent prosthesis asks the central question of the show: Can our bodily performances contain and express multiplicities that go beyond gender?

Possibly: with the experiences and the challenges placed on lived realities through virtual realities, we may become more aware of the body's need to be expressive and fluid, without social and cultural constraints.



Figure 11.
Brian Garner Developing Photopolymer Plates



Figure 12. Developed Photopolymer Plates



Figure 13. Printing with Helen Frederick at Pyramid Atlantic



Figure 14. Pulling Print with Helen Frederick at Pyramid Atlantic



Figure 15. Casting Male Model



Figure 16. Cast Mold with Smooth On Dragon Skin



Figure 17. Prosthesis Gallery 123



Figure 18. Artist Talk, *Multiplying The Body*, Opening Reception, Gallery 123



Figure 19. *Multiplying The Body*, Opening Reception, Lynne M. Constantine



Figure 20. *Multiplying The Body*, Opening Reception



Figure 21. Close-up Photopolymer Prints



Figure 22. Close-up Photopolymer Prints



Figure 23. *Multiplying The Body* Opening Reception, Gallery 123

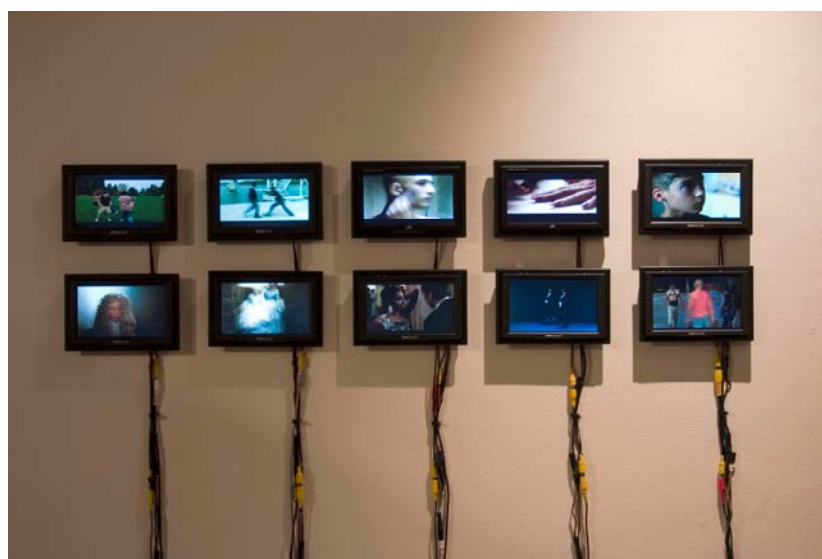


Figure 24. Video Installation A, Gallery 123

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Susan Serafin graduated from East Bay High School, Riverview, Florida, in 1989. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from George Mason University in 2004. She received her Master of Fine Arts in Art and Visual Technology with a concentration in InterArts from George Mason University in 2009. She has exhibited numerous galleries in the surrounding D.C. Metropolitan Area.