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A Certain Kind of Woman

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A CERTAIN KIND OF WOMAN

by

Emily Wiethorn

A Thesis

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Major: Studio Art

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A CERTAIN KIND OF WOMAN

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University of Nebraska—Lincoln, 2018

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Our patriarchal Western culture has long dictated how women should behave. We are repeatedly put in our place, told how to present ourselves, and instructed to keep our voices down. There is also immense pressure on women to perform for the public. Whether this is the feeling that we must be “presentable” when we leave the house each day, or when we tailor our personalities in public in an attempt to be more socially amenable, we conform.

As a young girl, my mother provided guidance on how a woman should conduct herself. I then spent my early years hidden beneath those well-intentioned disguises. As instructed, I always made sure I appeared happy and complacent, the way I was taught a woman should act and in turn, I concealed much of my personality. I gladly accepted these parameters hoping that I would be desirable to society, and thus happier with myself. Yet, I discovered an intense weariness that consumed me after years of putting on disguises each day, trying to make myself perfect, likable. Like many other women, my journey has thus been fraught with crossroads: to speak up and risk being labeled “the bitch,” to fight back and risk harm, to tell my story and risk disbelief. It is exhausting to peel yourself open like an onion only to discover how fragile and meaningless significant parts of your existence have been. Like other women, I learned to perform my crafted feminine identity, and now I’m learning how to dismantle and understand it

My research examines the internal conflicts inherent in notions of femininity and the performative nature of the feminine. Examining the matrilineal lines within my family and the influence of the media and advertising on the development of a woman’s identity provide a conceptual foundation for this body of work. This philosophical, intellectual, and emotional

exploration has culminated in a collection of photographs that address notions of learned feminine identity, and the way in which women present themselves to the world. My photographs begin with a blank canvas, and then elements are added within the frame. Societal pressures have often left me without a sense of autonomy, but constructing these images has allowed me to reclaim my sense of agency. The resulting photographs are simultaneously striking and discomfiting.

Through the use of self-portraiture, a "hall of mirrors" effect takes hold, making it difficult to distinguish between truth and illusion, as I am both subject and maker. By confronting the disguises that have become part of my feminine identity, I am exposing and scrutinizing my secrets. I experience a powerful reclamation when working alone — I confront the viewer, the camera, and ultimately myself in an attempt to uncover and assert my identity underneath years of impersonations. I am a conflicted construct of both the rejection and acceptance of society's definition of femininity. Hidden behind expected social roles, our inner identity can become lost. Through this work, I have explored what happens when our masks become so convincing that we no longer recognize ourselves.

Flat, even lighting techniques historically used in fashion and commercial photography cause the fabric patterns of various surfaces to blend seamlessly together, creating a kind of camouflage. This treatment echoes my own experience growing up. I often wanted to blend in, and only now do I understand the impact that an imposed silence has on women. The color palette and fabric choices are based on memories of my mother's house and the clothing from her closet. Her influence is paramount to my understanding of feminine identity, and thus she is intertwined with each image in both obvious and subtle ways. Many women take on the role of decorator within their home, and my mother was no exception. Ingrained in my memory are meticulously decorated rooms filled with pastel colors and floral embellishments that declared our home a comfortable and inviting space for women. It was as if I believe all of these ornate floral patterns made her feel like our home was inviting and

picturesque; that if she could present the perfect facade everything else in our lives would fall into place.

Raised primarily by her grandmother, my mother's sense of femininity had an already antiquated quality that colored our relationship. Her understanding of feminine identity comes from an era that she never experienced firsthand. Thus, even my sense of femininity is stuck in another decade as a result. Many of the ideas and experiences I talk about within my work (including the out-of-date patterns) come from a different time period because those ideals and standards feel most familiar. The ability to decorate our homes and our bodies helps us to construct our version of femininity, giving us a false sense of control.

A precariously pinned garment, a violently ripped sleeve: such disruptions reflect my complicated relationship with femininity. My concern as an artist is finding my voice beneath a lifetime of reticence. Throughout the art-making process, I have examined my connections to the society surrounding me and paid particular attention to the interpersonal relationships I have cultivated with the women in my life. I have studied society's influence on my mother, and how she taught me what it meant to be a woman.

My journey of self-examination as an adult, like that of so many others, has led me to question the impact of our parents on our adult identities. In *A Certain Kind of Woman*, I address the societal expectations of women within Western culture through examining the relationship between mother and daughter, which is never simple. I have always been uniquely concerned with finding my voice as a woman within society, and I use photography as a means to be heard.

The effect of outside influences on our lives growing up such as the tv shows we watch, the magazines we buy, the commercials we see, and the influence of our parents all shape our adult identities in ways we may not realize. This show is about examining those influences and dissecting our personalities to understand what made us. *A Certain Kind of Woman* is about finding the way out of the hall of mirrors and examining and asserting one's identity. At the heart of this series is a universal exploration of how our identities are shaped

as we age and the internalized beliefs that make up our self. Through examining my relationship with my mother through a feminist lens, I am able to understand the patriarchal society we live in and the still strongly held beliefs of womanhood that continue to shape our society. My hope is for viewers to begin to question their own formative relationships throughout their lives, and to question those truths in a way that can help them realize that their identities are complicated and constructed from many different ideas and experiences.









