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## Say Luv: Reimagining the Black Female Body

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Say Luv: Reimagining the Black Female Body

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Master of Fine Arts Thesis  
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Historical photographs, illustrations, and sculptures constitute the dehumanized, sexualized, and desired visual representation of black women. I am drawn to conversations surrounding black femininity, and how the male gaze continues to oppress black women. Words such as loud, difficult, and bitch have been applied to us through the media, the rap industry, and reality television. Through sculpture and performance, I am attempting to disrupt the projection and influence of male subjectivity onto the black female body. Exploring these ideas through self-portraiture, I reject the mis-representation of our bodies by expanding the visual reimagination of black women.

In the following essay, I work toward this understanding as I share my thoughts and experiences growing up in a patriarchal society where black women continue to struggle against the influence of white supremacy, internalized racism and lateral oppression

### **Ass Everywhere: The Mis-Representation of the Black Female Body**

Visual production, images, documentation and science have been used to construct myths surrounding the black female body. In this section, I focus on Saartjie Baartman, known as *the Hottentot Venus*, in Western art. She was exploited for her buttocks, which reflects my interest nearly two centuries later. Lisa Gail Collins argues in *The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past*, that the experiments, and drawings of Georges Cuvier and his illustrators rendered Saartjie Baartman's body as inferior and abnormal while using her body as a visual personification of myth:

Baartman, a young Khoisan woman from Southern Africa, was exhibited in Europe between 1810 to 1815 and was abused as a visual personification of myth: the myth of

African difference and inferiority. Europeans paid to see Saartjie Baartman, advertised as “the Hottentot Venus,” because they wanted to witness-ostensibly through the fact that her large, protruding buttocks-a woman who was thought to embody “the essential black,” the lowest rank on the great chain of being. (Lisa Gail Collins 12).



Fig. 1. Saartjie Baartman, *Hottentot Venus*, displayed on plinth: Artist unknown, *La belle Hottentote*, date unknown. Cartoon. France. “Historic Retrievals”, *The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past*, 2002, p. 14.

Looking at this history, I use my own body to subvert power dynamics imposed on black women like Saartjie Baartman through systems of white supremacy. In my performance, *Kiss My Ass* (2019) I reference and react to the history of oppression that is tied to black women. Barbara Thompson states in *Black Womanhood: Icons and Ideologies of the African Body* that “One cannot create a new and unfettered visual language about the black female body without first decolonizing, diversifying, and rewriting its history.” (Thompson 20-21). I agree with Thompson

that in order to reimagine black womanhood we must first decolonize our bodies through our experiences to create an image of the black female body, and much of my work directly attempts this through performative acts. In an act of decolonization grounded in thinking such as Thompson's, I wore headphones so that I would not be distracted by the audience, approached the figure bound with hemp rope and hooked it to its pulley. I also reversed typical dynamics of power inherent to traditional art objects and the gaze of the viewer. In my work it is impossible for the viewer to look down on the figure. Before raising the figure, I turned it around so that the buttocks face the viewer. After I raised and placed the figure onto the pedestal, I stood on two cinder blocks and used a small handsaw to cut the rope away from the figure. Cutting the rope away allowed the figure to become unbound, but the evidence of the rope acknowledged the oppressive history.



Figure 2. Turning the ass towards the audience. Jer'Lisa Devezin, *Kiss My Ass*, 2019. Performance. SMU Pollock Gallery, Dallas, TX. Photo:Christian Vasquez

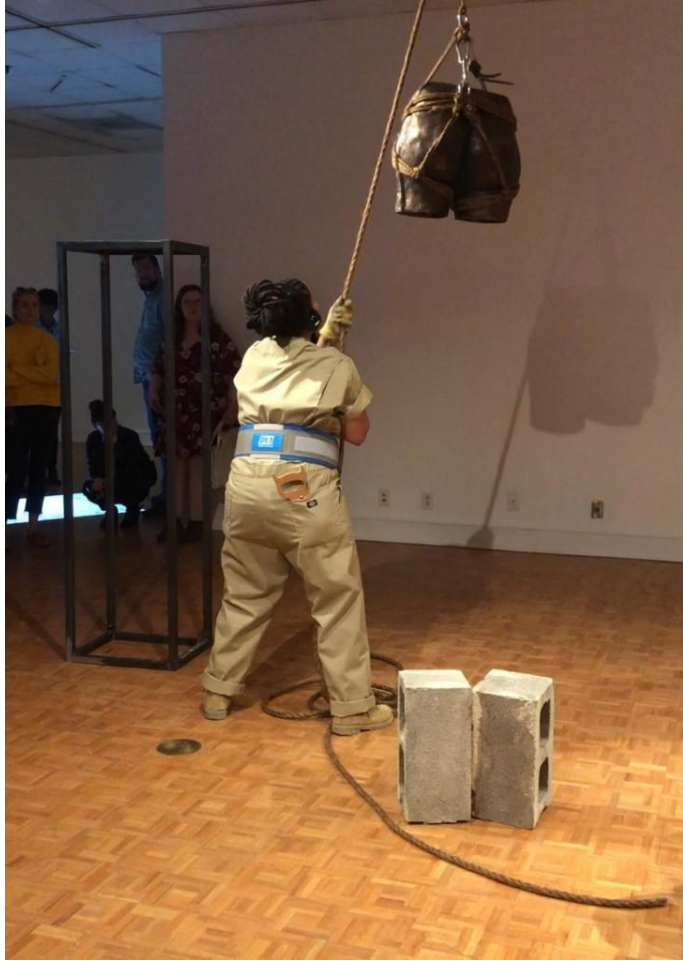


Fig. 2.1. Lifting the Ass. Devezin, Jer'Lisa, *Kiss My Ass*, 2019. Performance. Dallas, TX.  
Photo: Christian Vasquez



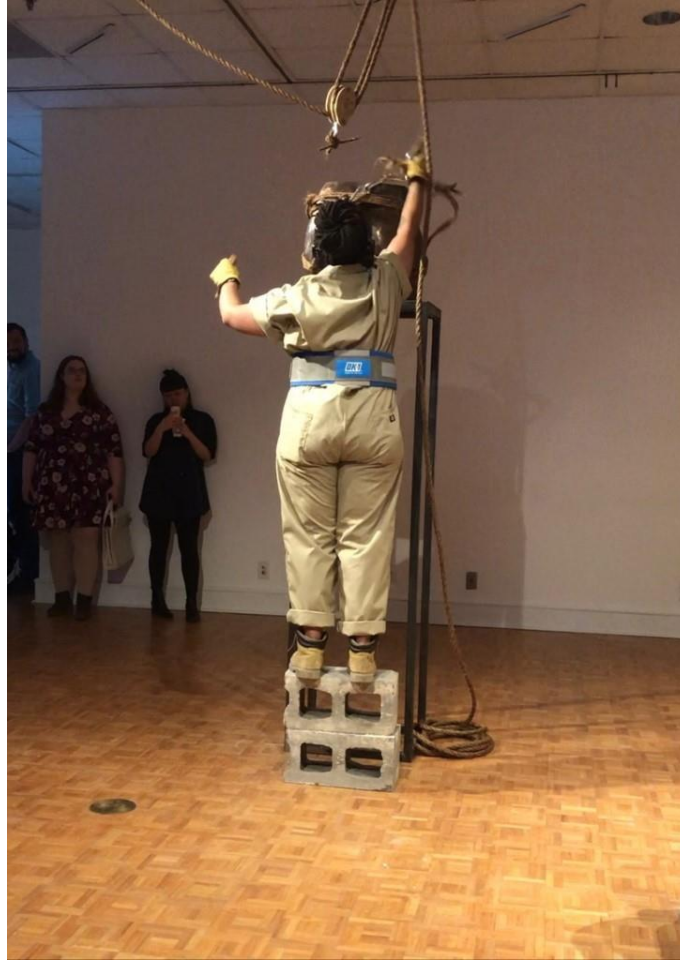


Fig. 2.2. Cutting the rope away from the ass, Jer'Lisa Devezin. *Kiss My Ass*, 2019. Performance. Dallas, TX. Photo credit: Christian Vasquez

### **The invisible body vs. the visible body**

The historical representation of black women in Western art lacks empowering images of the black female body. *The Thinker* by Rodin and the *Venus of de Milo* by Alexandros of Antioch inspired me to think about our representation through sculpture. Edmonia Lewis sculpted a marble figure group in 1867 titled *Forever Free* to commemorate the abolishment of slavery. The male figure stands tall and the female figure is kneeling in prayer and praise at his side. Lewis's choice of marble is indicative of her neo classical approach to insert the black female body into sculpture,

while perhaps skewing the race of these two figures which places this work within the culture of dissemblance among black women. Darlene Clark Hine argues that “Black women in the United States created a 'culture of dissemblance', a politics of silence, evasion, and displacement, in an attempt to protect themselves from sexual violation”. (48) Lisa Gail Collins also argues that Lewis purposely made the woman smaller than her husband with childlike underdeveloped features. This was to specifically prevent white men from preying on the free, sexually available black female body. Growing up during a time when black women embraced their bodies and blackness, my intentions for this work is to reject the culture of dissemblance. I often rebelled against my mother and grandmothers’ ideas and constructions of girlhood/womanhood. Unlike Lewis whom is a Neoclassical sculptor, I am working to reinsert the black female body to stand on its own.

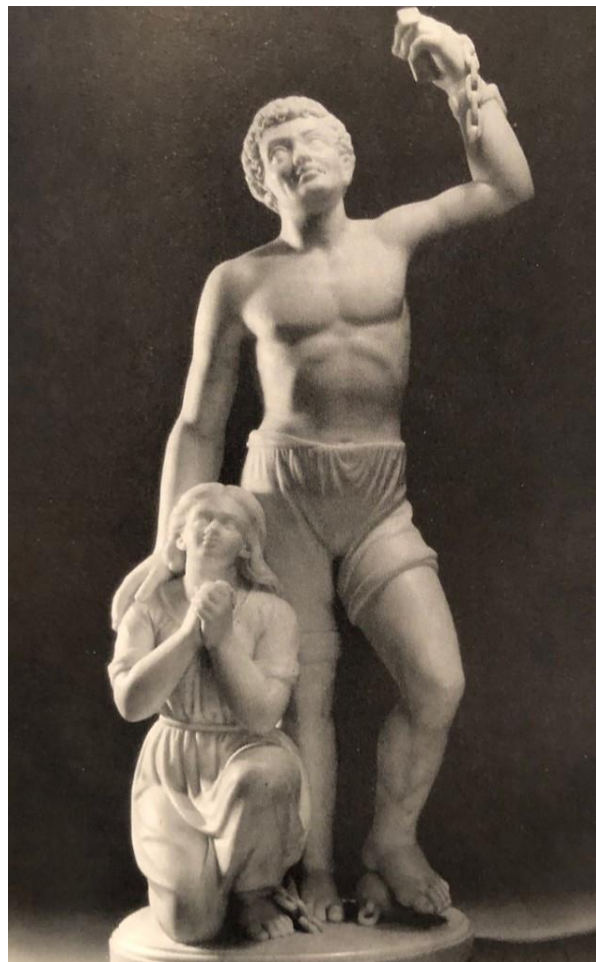


Fig. 3. Edmonia Lewis, *Forever Free*, 1867. Marble. “Economies of the Flesh”, *The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past*, 2002, p. 49

In my community, we are rejecting and resisting forms of oppression that further suppress and silence our bodies. Being told how to dress, what to do and what not to do silenced my voice and confidence which created a barrier between me and my sexuality in order to adapt to what was acceptable in society. Today black women are at a turning point in terms of politics concerning the silencing of our bodies. Figures such as Josephine Baker (Paris' “Black Venus”), Lil Kim, Trina, Queen Latifah, Beyoncé, Nikki Minaj, and Cardi B, have been influencing black women and women of color to empower ourselves by using our sexual and feminine power to assert our voices as black women. Our representation within popular culture is not only under the subjectivity of white men, but this also applies to black men. In the year 2000, rapper Nelly released a track called “Tip Drill”:

“I said it must be ya ass cuz it ain’t ya face, I need a tip drill, I need a tip drill.”

“It ain’t no fun unless we all getting some, I need a tip drill, I need a tip drill.”

This song invokes the continuing fetishization and objectification of black women’s bodies. My generation is more aggressive and open to revealing and making statements with our bodies. We are more concerned with our voices being heard, and we are less conservative than our parents’ generation. I have always been insecure with my curvy body because I always admired the masculine physique which I don’t have. Coming out as a lesbian at the age of 15 I began struggling with my identity. I created nicknames and alter egos as avenues to explore my identity. Existing through these phases of identity, I became interested in the exploration to embrace my femininity. Through self-portraiture I have begun to explore my lesbian experience. Exercising the right to do whatever, whenever, and however, I toggle between presenting my

body clothed and unclothed which enables me to use my body as a disruption to the viewer through my presence and how my body functions within the space. A video work titled, *If it were easy, everyone would do it*, I am nude repeating the act of spinning at a skating rink. This work is an iteration of the act of repetition and inhabiting new spaces. I decided to show my body nude because I am interested in using the nude black female body as a vehicle to represent and explore the complexities of black female sexuality. Even though there was no end goal for this act, the work was activated through the act of falling, getting up, and trying again. This work recalled themes of struggle, perseverance, and identity. During the production of this work I went through a point where I relinquished my power to the “other” by allowing a subjective gaze onto my body other than my own. This iteration was about struggle and repetition, while celebrating the acceptance of my body.

### **The black female buttocks**

New Orleans shows its African and Caribbean influence through language, culture, and especially dance. The ass functions as a way to express or release oneself through bounce dancing and shaking. However, it is not my intention to damn my culture for creating multiple generations of women who find release and joy through ass shaking. Shaking in bounce culture started as innocent, expressive, and communal. As time shifted bounce culture became more popular in the LGBTQ community and overly sexualized. Even though in most cases the ass is fetishized within the culture, women have the authority to allow their bodies to be touched or not. Bounce culture influenced my decision to specifically explore the black female buttocks. I am using the buttocks as a representation of the black female body and using it in a way to reject the white constructions of black womanhood. I made the decision to use viscous materials such as bronze, clay, and cement

to reiterate this figure because my impulses led me to materials that are considered of high value in art to begin discussing the empowerment of the black female body.



Fig.4 Resting. Jer'Lisa Devezin, *Kiss My Ass*, 2019. Performance. Dallas, TX. Photo credit: Christian Vasquez



Fig. 4.1 Unbound. Jer'Lisa Devezin, *Kiss My Ass*, 2019. Performance. Dallas, TX. Photo credit: Christian Vasquez

### **#Black Girl Magic**

Cashawn Thompson began using the hashtag #blackgirlmagic in 2013. The #bgm movement peaked on social media which rendered black women and beautiful and empowered which elevates the black female body from oppressive ties. Audre Lorde addresses a similar magic and power in her essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power": "We must not confuse the Erotic power with the pornographic. We must not suppress the erotic power more than it has been." After a long history of oppression, we are now raising our voices louder than ever by becoming positive role models for the younger generations after us to become empowered, transcendent, and transformative. Growing up in a verbally and at times physically abusive home, I didn't grow up

with much confidence. I always put myself at the service of others, conforming to another's expectations and standards of womanhood. This suppressed my voice even more. Audre Lorde's erotic power is not sexual power, instead it is an assertive power, that reminds me of the #blackgirlmagic movement. "Our ideas of power were built from sexualized male gazes which boxed us in as sexualized and inferior." (Lorde). Releasing the power of the erotic means to not conform to white standards of beauty and to break through the boundaries of male oppression. Feminine power leaves no room for silence, denial, or suppression, but enables us to raise our voices to reclaim the representation of our bodies in a patriarchal society.

### **Double time**

What does it mean to be black, to be a woman, and to be lesbian? It's like having a double life if you are not "out". There is already the problem of how we carry ourselves so that we blend into society, but to be lesbian adds an extra layer of complexity. Audre Lorde states: "There is no black lesbian history without white lesbian history, and there is no black lesbian history without black women's history, there is no black women's history without black history. As we identify who we are, we begin the journey to use this power. It is what empowerment is all about."

In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, which addresses the overlapping issues of race, gender, and sexuality among black women and women of color. In the ninth grade, I told my friends that I was lesbian. Just as fast as I could tell them is how long it took them to end our friendship. My parents tried to "protect" me from anyone queer in fear that this would be my fate and their shame. The more my mom tried to shelter me from the lesbian lifestyle, the more I rebelled against her. I always felt the desire to be with women. A bronze work titled *Stud and Fem* addresses these identities/personas.





Fig. 5. Jer'Lisa Devezin, Stud and Fem. Bronze. 2017 Photo credit: Ciara Elle Bryant

*Four the hard way* is a reaction to this problem as I address the dual and transformative nature of black lesbian women. After sculpting *Kiss my ass* (2019), I created another figure. This time I doubled the ass, signifying the fusing of two bodies leaving the figure ambiguous of its genders. To compare the two, the first figure (the bronze ass) is very gender specific, and in figure 6 you will see that this figure grouping is not.





Fig. 6. Jer'Lisa Devezin, *4 the hard way*. Ceramic. 2019 Photo credit: Christian Vasquez

### **Reimagining the black female body**

As I began to recall the work by Renée Stout, Simone Leigh, and Kara Walker, I began working to expand on the representation and the reimagination of the black female body. My work encompasses the complexities of black female sexuality and works to disrupt the male gaze. My intention for this research is to elevate and extend the visual representation of black women. Today black women are taking different approaches to how we represent our bodies. It is through the influence of social media, reality television, and the music industry that shape how black women

are represented in our culture. In order to reverse this oppression, we must continue to recreate and reimagine ourselves through our own experiences and subjectivity. In figures 7-7.2 are artworks by the artist I listed above that have influenced me to move in this direction. In *Fetish #2*, Renée Stout reiterates herself as *nkisi nkondi* power figure. The *nkisi* figure is used by the Kongo people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a representation of human figures used in ritualistic practices. Kara Walker, in *Subtlety*, represents the black female body in sugar. In *Brick House*, Simone Leigh creates works that expands on the experiences of black womanhood and the black female body.

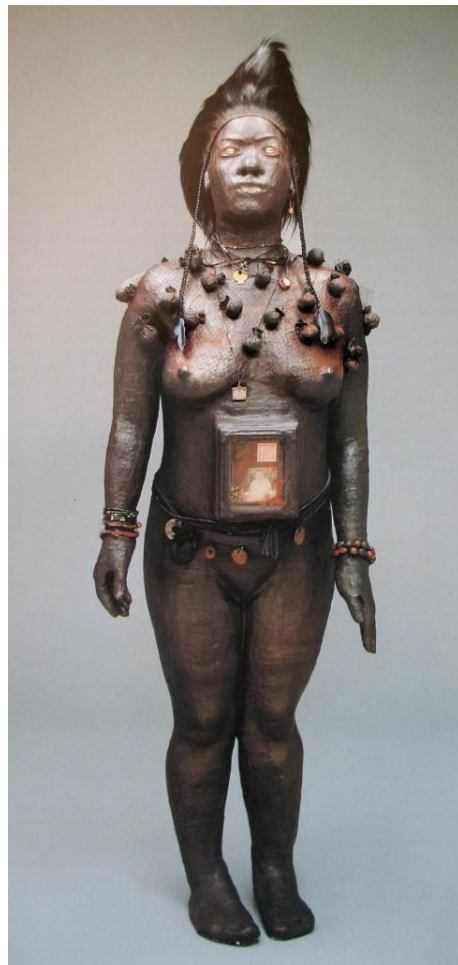


Fig. 7 Renée Stout, Fetish #2, Mixed Media. 1988.



Fig. 7.1 Kara Walker, Subtlety. Sugar, Foam. 2014



Fig 7.2 Simone Leigh, Brick House. Bronze. 2019.

These artworks influenced the scale and function of my work. I am currently exploring my work as transformative sculpture by casting the figure repeatedly to create modular, joined figures. Figures 7.3 and 7.4 are the first iterations. I am working on a larger scale and joining these modular figures. Figure 7.5 is the first iteration where I am beginning to stack the doubles.





Fig. 7.3 Jer'Lisa Devezin, Affirmative Action. Ceramic. 2018. Photo credit: Ciara Elle Bryant



Fig. 7.4 Jer'Lisa Devezin, *Shawties Stacked*. 2018. Ceramic. Photo credit: Ciara Elle Bryant

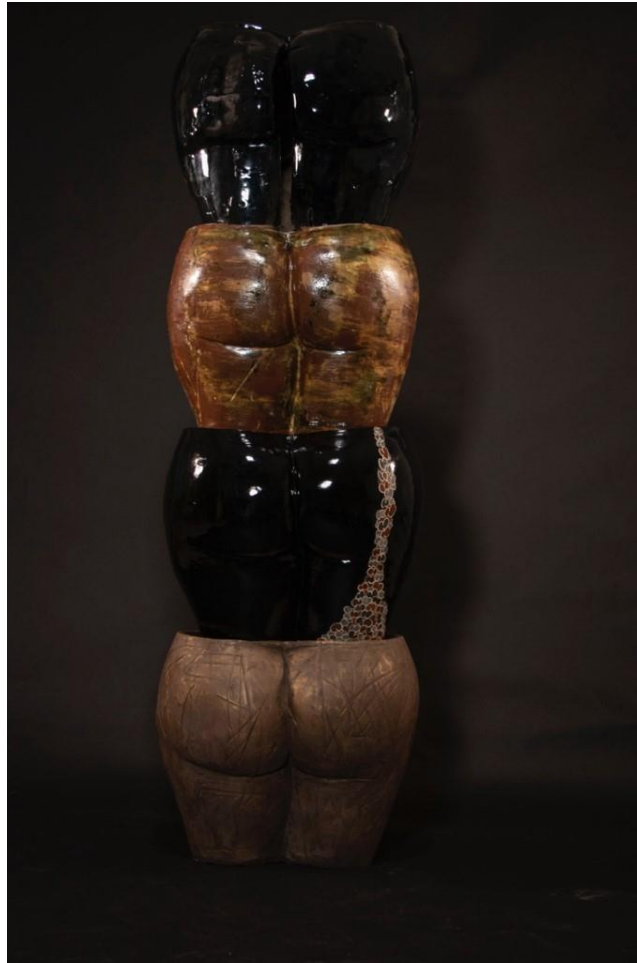


Fig.7.5 Jer'Lisa Devezin, *Transformer*, Ceramic. 2019 Photo credit: Ciara Elle Bryant

## **Conclusion**

As I continue to work through my experience with the black female body, I am looking to further my research and exploration in black female sexuality and womanhood. Throughout the next iterations I will continue to question how black women can continue to further expand the way in which we are perceived in our society. As a result of the information I have collected thus far, my work is not resolved. I am still questioning if the influence of white supremacy continues to be upheld within black communities. Moving forward, my exploration of materials and scale will

continue to vary as I am looking to disrupt the gaze of the viewer. As this conversation of the black female body is expanded upon through other contemporary artist, I plan for my work to become in dialogue with these works so that the visual representation can show our progress.

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