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Painting a Unique Perspective About Violence in Contemporary Visual Arts

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Abstract

My Distinction Thesis essay considers how the bodies of works of contemporary visual artists Judy Chicago, Marc Quinn, Kara Walker, and myself could be considered violent and/or graphic. Each artist works in a different medium, bringing their own unique perspective to these illustrations. When analyzing these artists, I found it imperative to consider the aestheticization of violent visual art, and how these artists challenge our traditional idea of what ‘fine art’ is. Particularly, what draws the viewer to look at this art and consider it beautiful or ugly? Also, having a clear definition of what violent and/or graphic art is helpful when making analyses or comparisons between these artists. In this thesis, I have included my personal views as an artist and a scholar, as well as discussion of my own artwork. I reflected on my own opinions and inferences, along with research from various scholars in the art historical field, to develop my conclusion. Since this is a complex topic that can further be expounded, I plan to continue this research in my graduate studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this Distinction thesis to my grandparents: John J. Gallagher, Maridel Gallagher, Coleman Connolly, and Mary Ellen Connolly. I wish you all were here to celebrate with me.
Introduction

As long as humans have existed, it could be said that violence has existed alongside us. Cave paintings of prehistoric warfare from societies with undocumented histories show death and hunting scenes between men and animals. Thousands of years later, contemporary visual artists continue to work with this theme of violent and/or graphic art. These artists often encounter a double-edged sword when their art is viewed since their bodies of work may be considered explicit or confrontational by a broad audience. Their motives in illustrating violence vary as well; for example, some may choose to depict violent art to spread awareness or educate about an issue they believe is important, whereas others may decide to use this opportunity to create shock value. Also, when one analyzes contemporary violent art, it is important to keep in mind the aestheticization of violence, or the beautification of violence, which can drastically change the interpretation of an artwork. As a contemporary visual artist who works with charcoal and oil paint, I feel it is important to understand each artist’s technique and style in illustrating violent/graphic art. Specifically, I reflected on how contemporary artists Judy Chicago, Marc Quinn, and Kara Walker, bodies of works could be considered violent and/or graphic. Furthermore, I described how I illustrate violence in my artworks and where I fit within the contemporary art period.

The Aestheticization of Violence in Visual Art

In order to understand violence’s role in contemporary visual art, it is important to first acknowledge the aestheticization of violence. In short, the aestheticization of violence is the illustration of violence in a meaningful and dramatic way. One of the books I heavily relied on when writing this thesis is Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others, in which she
hypothesizes about humans’ fascination with violence in art, precisely war photography. She writes:

[...] [T]here is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of a real horror. Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it—say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken—or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be. In each instance, the gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards.¹

In my opinion, Sontag is right about the fact that one is naturally drawn to depictions of suffering, like blood and organs outside of the body, the same way one looks at a car crash on the highway: with fascination and horror because what they are seeing is abnormal to their everyday environment. As Sontag wrote, one may be thought of as a coward if they cannot stomach a violent image; conversely, one is seen as brave if they can tolerate the situation and do something about it. She also notes that one is naturally compassionate when viewing violent imagery, stating, “Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers”.² Compassion is what compels people to help others that are in terrible situations. I agree with the fact that if compassion is not used promptly, one’s desire to help someone else may fade.

Furthermore, it could be inferred that violence itself is beautified so that it appears glamorous or realistic. For example, Robert Capa’s The Falling Soldier (1936, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, U.S.A.), taken during the Spanish Civil War, could be seen as a

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¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 42.
beautiful war photograph because he captured the instant a Republican soldier was shot in the middle of his chest on the battlefield [fig. 1]. This photograph is caught in between two moments, after the soldier has been shot yet before he has fallen to the ground. The soldier is on one knee, his gun in his right hand. By dying in such a gruesome manner, it shows his dedication and his sacrifice to his country.

Regarding murder in art, University of Georgia Comparative Literature Professor Joel Black goes so far as to propose that “[...] [I]f murder can be experienced aesthetically, the murderer can in turn be regarded as a kind of artist—a performance artist or anti-artist whose specialty is not creation but destruction”.³ This confirms the idea that murder, as well as other forms of violence against oneself or another person, if performed or imitated a certain way, could potentially be considered art by a wider audience. Similarly, Black’s statement is applicable when thinking of The Falling Soldier. Viewers of this photograph may consider the man who shot the unnamed soldier as an anti-hero, destroying the enemy so that his country stays safe.

Both Sontag and Black raise important questions about one’s right to view violent art and their role in accepting its aestheticization. It would be simple if the answer was that humans are naturally curious and deserve to see the violence. However, I feel it is much more complex than that. It is plausible that one enjoys viewing violent art since they are not intimately related to it. In fact, Sontag implies that “[...] the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked. [...] There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching”.⁴ Not only is she suggesting that one is drawn to violent depictions in art because one puts it on the same pedestal

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⁴ Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 41.
as a naked body, she also suggests that one enjoys the power of being able to look at disturbing imagery without having a negative reaction. By doing so, it demonstrates that one is able to detach themselves mentally from the pain the subject is experiencing. It is intriguing that some audiences think violence against a human, whether portrayed through photography or another medium, could be thought of as more grotesque or inappropriate than the image of the naked body. I would infer that one justifies viewing this type of art only when it fits their parameters of what they define violent art to be.

Again, The Falling Soldier could be thought of as aesthetically pleasing because of its composition and the fact that there is no visible wound. If there were to be any blood, the photograph’s meaning could be compromised and thought of as ugly or negative that Capa would document such an intimate moment of life and death. Hence, this aestheticization is subject to each viewer’s interpretation based on their own opinions and experiences. In my view, if one is able to relate to a photograph such as Capa’s on an intimate level, then they may consider it to be an important moment of war photography. On the other hand, one could process it as ‘just another’ war photograph and view it as neither a part of high- or low-culture art.

**The Definition of Violent and/or Graphic Art**

Another critical subject to understand is the definition of violent and/or graphic art. Personally, I would define violent and/or graphic artwork as any artwork that depicts violence—mental, physical, or emotional—against one’s body or mind. The term ‘graphic’ may imply that the artwork is intended for audiences over a certain age or deals with subjects that may make some viewers uncomfortable. These depictions can be naturalistic, abstract, or somewhere in between; these representations of violence can also vary in degree depending on the artist’s technique and medium. Along with this, the type of violent art—whether or not it relates to a
current social or political issue, for example—is dependent on the artist. Furthermore, violent art challenges one’s traditional perception of fine art. In my opinion, fine art is art that throughout history has been classified by scholars as aesthetically and appropriately beautiful (example, Michelangelo’s *David*). Hence, artworks that illustrate painful or unpleasant scenes can potentially be more difficult for audiences to understand since beautiful or pleasing art has been generally classified as fitting within certain design parameters like subject matter, technique/medium, and significance.

**Judy Chicago (1939-Present)**

Now that one has a solid foundation about what violent and/or graphic art is, it is time to look at Judy Chicago’s work. She was the first artist I chose for this thesis because of her deep roots with feminism in the 1970s. Throughout history, women have been fighting for equal political and social rights in every corner of the world, so it is no surprise that this ideology soon mixed with art. Born in 1939, Chicago has spent much of her career creating artworks that bring awareness to the feminist movement and women's issues concerning sex, reproduction, and diversity.

One of the first pieces I learned of hers is *Red Flag* (1971, Museum of Menstruation, Washington D.C., U.S.A.) when it was mentioned in an essay by Maryse Holder titled *Another Cuntree: At Last, a Mainstream Female Art Movement*, featured in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology* [fig. 2]. In sum, Holder’s essay is about “analyzing and interpreting the significance of female sexuality as a ground of freedom”. This is critical when regarding the works of Chicago and other women artists since the female body has largely been sexually objectified

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throughout the history of art. Arguably, it is only in recent history, say within the last century, that the female body has been illustrated as being in control of her own desires, and that other feminist women artists like Chicago are taking on this responsibility.

In the lithograph Red Flag, Chicago interprets female sexuality and fertility through the removal of a tampon. Tampons are a feminine product and generally associated with menstruation and blood. With this piece, not only is Chicago acknowledging female sexuality through menstruation, but demonstrating the naturalness of fertility. The artist gives us a close-up view of a woman removing her tampon, the tampon swiftly removed from the subject’s vagina. As any woman knows, the process of doing this can be messy and bloody. Though the simple act of removing a tampon is nothing out of the ordinary, the angle that Chicago presents this makes us feel uncomfortable. We can almost imagine the awkward feeling as something used to plug an orifice is pulled out, perhaps roughly, from the woman’s body. Additionally, Chicago does not shy away from the amount of blood on the tampon; the string is covered in it, implying that the woman’s hand will be, too, after she fully removes it from herself. Through creating this work, Chicago is not afraid to confront the stigma surrounding menstruation, nor the fact that women are in charge of their fertility—choosing who they want to have sex with and whether or not they want to use some form of birth control. We do not know the subject’s age, which suggests that this depiction could be of any woman. The term ‘red flag’ itself means that there is danger or a problem, so it is plausible that Chicago is asking if there is a problem with women having menstruation or being in touch with their sexuality. This work could also imply to the viewer that a woman on her period is trouble herself.

Another artwork by Chicago is a later piece, The Dinner Party (1974-1979, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, U.S.A.) which explores feminism through the lens of thirty-nine
women, both real and mythical, whose genitalia are reimagined through multiple mediums, like clay and paint, on individual dinner plates [fig. 3]. She features the names of 999 other inspirational women on the table cloth or floor covering which are sewn into the piece. Each plate is uniquely designed for each woman and complete with silverware, though they share similar qualities of butterfly or vulvar forms. The installation itself is triangle-shaped, referencing the triangular geometric shape of the vulva. One plate I found striking is the plate dedicated to Virginia Woolf [fig. 4]. Her plate features seeds sprouting from the middle of three-dimensional flower petals. The seeds are rosy pink and the petals are pink and green. These shapes allude to the vulva as well as the idea of 'deflowering' a woman by taking her virginity. Because of Woolf's strong presence in English literature, it could be inferred that this plate also relates to the budding, or growth, of her and her writings as a feminist. It is reasonable that the vulva belonging to this Virginia is becoming in tune with her sexuality.

In Lolette Kuby's review of The Dinner Party installation in Cleveland, Ohio, she suggests: "Had a man, or men, created The Dinner Party, women would rightfully have been infuriated. They would have boycotted and picketed. [...] How then to interpret [it as anything but] sexual self-hatred, obsessive, narcissistic self-reflection at a primitive level?". This passage proposes that if a male or group of males had created this artwork, it most likely would have been viewed as another art piece objectifying women’s sexuality, completely changing the political meaning that Chicago intended. The idea of The Dinner Party as being 'sexual self-hatred' or 'narcissistic', as Kuby writes, is interesting to contemplate because the woman's body, repeatedly sexualized throughout history in one form or another, could begin loathing themselves

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7 Kuby, “The Hoodwinking of the Women’s Movement”, 127.
for being born with certain genitalia. Although this work may not be violent in the sense that it is showing blood or bodily harm, its content is graphic since Chicago bluntly illustrates the vulva through various mediums, textures, and colors. She forces her audience to confront the powerful impact these women have had throughout history and re-evaluate the unfair representations of them in male-dominated historical analysis. These two graphic artworks make the viewer acknowledge feminine sexuality, reproduction, and women’s rights regarding these two issues.

**Marc Quinn (1964-Present)**

When I first heard of Marc Quinn in my contemporary Art History class this fall (2017), I was fascinated with his sculptures. Specifically, I was drawn to his *The Complete Marbles* series (1999-2005, various locations), which consists of life-size marble statues of people with varying disabilities. Not only did I find these pieces interesting because of their representation of a minority group, they intrigued me because he turned something, such as a missing limb, that we might think is ugly or deformed into something beautiful. Many of these statues are missing at least one limb; whether it is because the subject was born without an arm or a leg, or was hurt in an accident, each work tells their own unique story. Quinn makes multiple references to classical Greek sculpture with his use of real marble, serene facial expressions, and intimate moments his subjects are in.

For example, the sculpture *Alison Lapper and Parys* (2000, location unknown) depicts a mother, Alison, and her baby son, Parys [fig. 5]. Though she has no arms, Alison sits upright confidently with a small smile on her face while her son sits in her lap, supporting himself against her stomach. Despite the unfortunate circumstances, both mother and son are happy, contradicting the popular opinion of disabled people being unable to have fulfilled lives or reach milestones of having a spouse or a family. After another work by Quinn which featured Alison,
Alison Lapper (2005, location unknown) was displayed in Trafalgar Square on top of a podium, the artist received a lot of public backlash because passerby thought this statue was grotesque [fig. 6]. In his own words, Quinn was quoted in the Recent Sculptures Catalogue at the Groninger Museum in 2006, stating, "Marble is the material used to commemorate heroes, and these people seem to me to be a new kind of hero—people who instead of conquering the outside world have conquered their own inner world and gone on to live fulfilled lives. To me, they celebrate the diversity of humanity". With his artwork, he has provided a different perspective about the tribulations that disabled people have. The fact that he chose to create these statues in marble and not in a different medium is important because it shows that he regards these people as true heroes for what they struggle with; instead of sulking about their situation, they reach out for help if they need it and do not let their unfortunate circumstances dictate their lives. He raises important questions with this series, such as how classical Greek sculpture, which are often busts and dismembered figures, are proudly displayed in museums and praised whereas these artworks, with the same if not more craftsmanship, are looked down upon. He also makes us consider how these sculptures depict inspirational stories and offers a bridge to cross for those who are less informed about physical disabilities, so that they can become more informed or aware of the invisible and visible difficulties that people like Alison deal with daily.

Quinn's self-portrait series could also be considered graphic. Since 1991, he has been creating enormous casts of his face with pints of his own blood [fig. 7]. Not only must this medium, if you could call if that, be challenging to work with, it surely must also smell! These are amazing and uncomfortable sculptures to view since Quinn uses materials from his own body. The process itself to collect enough blood must take months to complete. In my opinion, it

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8 Rod Mengham, *Marc Quinn: Recent Werk = Recent Sculpture* (Groningen: Rotterdamm, 2006).
could be inferred that he inflicts violence onto himself by draining himself of blood, which is a viable resource we all need to survive on.

In a video produced by the company Illuminations Media, Quinn discusses the motivations for his Self series. Regarding his ‘blood sculptures’, he asks, “When the blood leaves your body, when does it stop becoming you?” This question is especially interesting when we think of it in the context of his self-portraits since he has removed blood from his body, yet it is still physically contained to him in a vessel he created that realistically represents him. If one looks closely, one can see the shape of his eyelashes, wrinkles, and imperfections of his skin; he left no details to the imagination. Also, in some of these portraits the blood is more pronounced, which reminds me of blood pouring down his face. Through creating these sculptures, Quinn has had to learn how to control their temperatures so that they do not deteriorate, another way that he could ‘lose’ his blood if his method stopped working. The act of him pouring blood into a cast of his face is intriguing as well since he is combining mediums. In my opinion, his body of work raises questions about our acceptance of people who look or act different than us, along with taking resources from one’s own body to use it in an art piece. His body of work, similar to Chicago’s, is more graphic than violent; though I believe he works with darker subject matter, such as addiction, which inspired his self-portrait series. Nevertheless, he creates some thought-provoking sculptures that aid us in thinking about our bodies and the treatment of them.

Kara Walker (1969-Present)

I could not write about violence in contemporary visual art without including Kara Walker. I also learned about her in my contemporary art history class. Her tenacity to illustrate violent and graphic themes such as sex, rape, and murder in her art intrigued me. Born in 1969 in California, the artist grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, where she was exposed to leftovers of the Civil War. As an African American woman, Walker confronts her ancestors’ history of mistreatment head-on in her larger than life paper silhouette cut-out drawings, as well as her identity, which is complicated by these factors. In these works, which illustrate torture and assault, amongst other terrible actions that were done against African American slaves during the Civil War, she forces the viewer to recognize the omnipresent fact that these behaviors, or similar behaviors, still continue today across the country.

Various articles and books I have come across about the artist contain valuable information and analysis, such as Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw’s Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker. In the introduction, Shaw describes viewing Walker’s 1997 exhibition, Upon My Many Masters, at the San Francisco Museum of Art, writing:

I, too, was stunned by the graphic nature of the piece, its violence and its hard-core sexual content, the way that it seemed to attack the clichés and stereotypes about plantation life that have become a part of the popular understanding of the past. It was a moment of communal visuality in which the act of viewing within the space of the gallery became a spectacular spectacle, […] in which museum patrons watched other museum patrons watching them back.10

The artwork Shaw described is *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995, Private Collection), in which there are myriad violent acts occurring [fig. 8]. On the left side of the piece, a child leaves piles of excrement on the ground as he walks away from the sexual assault happening to another child. The same man performing this assault is also murdering a baby with a sword, while the man depicting Uncle Tom has his fist angrily raised at the sky. Eva has her axe raised above her head, about to swing it down onto a third child as two women watch from the side, perhaps too shocked or frightened to intervene. Contextually, Shaw’s reaction and the reactions of those around her in the gallery is completely understandable since this content is graphic and was probably not anticipated by the museum-goers.

Furthermore, Shaw is right about the fact that the written and oral histories of slavery and plantation life are often glossed over to mask the plantation owners’ horrific crimes of beatings, rapes, and lynching of slaves. Reading about the fellow museum-goers looking back and forth at each other in disbelief brings to mind the expression ‘stunned into silence’, as I can only imagine the sudden quietness that fell over the gallery as everyone tried to figure out what exactly they were seeing and what to make of it. The magnitude of this piece is further heightened by the life-size scale of it and Walker’s distinct choice of solely working with black paper on an opaque surface.

Another example of violence in Walker’s art is an earlier piece, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b’tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A.). The title of this piece references Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936), a novel about the life of a southern belle on a plantation during the Civil War as she grows up witnessing slavery from a privileged Caucasian perspective. However, the title of this drawing is as close as the two pieces get in
comparison since Walker presents her own illustration of slavery to the audience. On the drawing’s left side, a man and woman, possibly the slave owner and his wife, tenderly kiss as a child grabs a chicken by its neck. Next to him, a woman sits on the ground, her finger pointed at the child to scold him or her. On top of a small hill, two children participate in fellatio as another child hops from foot to foot at the base of the hill. On the far right, a man and woman are again present, though they appear to be intertwined in some strange sexual or physical attack [fig. 9]. This blunt illustration of murder, sex, and personal violation as seen in The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven is startling for its sheer abrasiveness.

In both works, Walker presents a visual representation of slavery and disregards the notion of slavery not having any negative consequences far into the present day, leaving each viewer to question what their role and responsibility is in the history of slavery. I believe that the greater purpose of Walker’s art is to acknowledge the racist behaviors that exist today, along with how this history can affect those in the African American community. I would conclude that she creates larger-than-life works so that the viewer is overwhelmed with the seriousness of the violent acts and is compelled to recognize their role in it as executor or victim.

Myself (1996-Present)

As an artist, I have personally tried to create artworks that deal with the topic of violence. In spring semester 2017, I completed an independent study in painting, one of my two Studio Art concentrations. I originally was not sure what I wanted to paint, but after hearing about the two assaults that happened on Otterbein’s campus in the fall of 2016, I was motivated to use my painting talents to bring awareness to end violence against women in our community.

In my study, I created six large-scale oil paintings and used reference photos for my subjects. I have found these paintings to be more relevant in the last few months than I thought,
particularly concerning the multitude of celebrities and news journalists that have been accused of sexual assault or misconduct. The #MeToo hashtag started a worldwide movement of men and women coming forward to share their stories about assault or harassment in the workplace and/or at home. As a domestic violence survivor, my independent study took on even more significance because I knew what it felt like to be in a painful situation. In my paintings, I also wanted to express the power of the healing process. Another motivation of mine was my desire to help others who are in a similar situation.

One painting of mine is titled Self Portrait (2017, Dublin, OH). I consider this piece my ‘fifteen seconds of fame’ since it was exhibited this past summer at The Ohio State Fair Fine Arts Exhibition from July to August 2017 [fig. 10]. I am very proud of this painting for two main reasons. The first is that it was the first painting I created for my independent study, so it holds a special place in my heart. The second reason is that it was seen by a much larger audience in a broader context, thereby spreading my message to all who viewed it. I was so excited for this piece to be displayed because it was chosen over 2,000 other artworks submitted to the exhibition.

As I stated previously, I used reference photos for my paintings. The original reference photo I found for this painting was in black and white, but I wanted to add some color and ‘life’ to the piece. In my version, you can clearly see the subject, a woman, trying to cover her bare chest with her hands. She struggles to do so because there are four red hands invading her personal space, grabbing her by the neck and pulling at her hands to establish control over her. I made the decision to paint these four hands in red because I believe the color red symbolizes power and dominance, and to imply that this touching is unwarranted by the woman. The viewer does not know the identity of the woman nor the identities of her assailters. I chose to keep this
anonymity to suggest that this type of situation can happen to anyone, although the woman’s blonde hair, light skin, and the painting’s title reflects that this has happened to me. Also, I chose to paint all the images in my independent study on top of a black gesso background since it was a technique I had not tried before and because I wanted to use the black paint to create underlying shadows. The black background helps display the layering of paint since I had to put lightness on top of darkness, a complete contrast to how I usually paint by adding color to white canvas. I had difficulty deciding when I was done completing this painting since I am a perfectionist and always think I can change or add something here or there to get the results I want. However, I am glad I left this painting how it is like my professor told me to, awkward blue armpit and all, because I have realized that these changes signify my growth as an artist and an individual. I was a bit surprised that this painting was chosen for the exhibition because it revolves around a topic that is not family friendly, yet I soon realized that the jurors looked beyond the message I was trying to send and truly saw it for what it was, a good painting.

With my new drawing series, We Too, which was exhibited at my Senior Art Exhibition (April 2-6, 2018), I continued to develop this theme of works that centered around women [fig. 11]. I chose to create drawings because I had not drawn in a long time and because I wanted to try a different medium, charcoal. Like my painting series, this series was inspired by a photography series by Chantal Barlow, an artist whose grandmother was killed by her husband in a domestic violence attack. Barlow photographed thirty-six women wearing blue, her grandmother’s favorite color, to represent the years of her grandmother’s life. The women are all wearing some shade of blue and are smiling. I found these photographs to be incredibly empowering and sobering because they depict women of every shape, size, and color. The viewer is reminded that this type of situation can happen to anyone, even someone they know,
and their happy faces encourage the viewer that help is possible. With my *We Too* series, I chose to use the color red on each woman’s lips to represent their strength for admitting what happened to them and that they have acknowledged it. Their smiles, like Barlow’s subjects, signify their acceptance of what happened.

Furthermore, both painting and drawing series were inspired by the photojournalists Donna Ferrato (specifically her *Elisabeth* portraits) and Sara Naomi Lewkowicz, who worked together at one point on a series about domestic violence. I was also inspired by the #MeToo movement—in fact, the series title is a play on words about that movement. Over the past few months, the #MeToo movement has spread across the world. By standing up and speaking out against violence, survivors are no longer alone, they are unified by their experiences. I believe that as survivors, we have the power and the voice to enact change. Historically, I am proud to fit in with the contemporary art movement. By depicting violence in my artwork, I am acknowledging that the mistreatment of women happens every day and will continue to until we put a stop to it. Above all, I want my art to start a conversation about ending violence against women and cause my audience to critically reflect on their decisions and what they can do to help change the status quo for the better.

**My Artist Statement (Spring 2018)**

I enjoy creating works that transport the viewer to a specific moment in time, either in a real or imaginary landscape. When one first views my art, one might notice color. I believe that color is its own medium and can drastically affect an artwork’s interpretation, mood, and/or meaning. For my landscape series, I was challenged to invert traditional colors found in nature, which was at first difficult for me. For example, painting the tree trunk purple and the bright leaves orange in *A Walk in the Park* was challenging because I had to put colors next to each
other that are not found next to each other in nature. These inverted colors are intended to evoke feelings of serenity.

Emotion also has primacy in my paintings. Art has always been a form of therapy for me. I feel that I sometimes express myself better through art than words. One example is the painting *Self Portrait*. The four red hands are invading the woman’s space, their touch clearly unwanted. Through creating this work, it aided me in understanding my feelings about a similar situation.

Finally, social justice is central to my work. Specifically, I have spent the past year creating works that bring awareness to violence against women. The past few months following the “MeToo” hashtag movement has encouraged me to continue making art that is centered around this theme. In my opinion, the best way to bring this awareness is through working large-scale. Since I am very detail-oriented, I can include as many details as needed to physically give a voice to my subjects that may not have one. I feel that these smaller details influence the finality of the piece and allow the viewer to understand the magnitude of the issue, as well as recognize their own experiences.

I feel that I will find true success as an artist if I am able to spark change and/or conversations in my community about topics often brushed under the rug.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, myself, Kara Walker, Marc Quinn, and Judy Chicago produce artworks that may be considered violent and/or graphic. In my opinion, we find art that is not as traditionally visually pleasing, whether in color choice or subject matter, as outrageous, a total disrespect to revered artists like Monet or Picasso because this type of art makes us think, feel, and reflect. It could be suggested that we are afraid of this art since it provides a voice to those who may not
otherwise have one. Undoubtedly, Judy Chicago, Marc Quinn, and Kara Walker challenge this traditional definition of what art is through their depictions of violent and/or graphic art.

Both Chicago and Quinn create art that could be considered more controversial or graphic than violent. Chicago’s body of work is concerned with feminism and female sexuality while Quinn’s is centered around the expression of the self. On the other hand, Walker and I’s bodies of work are more violent and graphic. While I do not choose to thoroughly illustrate graphic scenes as much as Walker does, I believe we both enjoy making works that cause our audience to reflect on violence in their own lives or the past events of our country. Also, we choose specific colors to create a theme or emotion, similar to Quinn’s use of bright red blood for his self-portrait sculptures.

In my opinion, the aestheticization of violence in visual art is crucial in understanding why artists like the four of us choose to depict violence. Sontag, as well as other scholars, craft a relevant argument in describing why we may find pleasure in viewing violent visual art. I believe that the role of violence in contemporary visual art is to two-fold: to give audiences a visual representation of something that happened in our past and to make sure that it does not become forgotten or happen again. For example, Walker’s art reflects her ancestor’s history, whereas my art reflects my personal experience with violence.

As artists, we must learn how to deal with negative feedback. Violent and/or graphic art can easily fall into the label of being too explicit or controversial because this type of art presents the sometimes-ugly side of life. This ugly side is not typically spoken about because it reflects our true human nature: that bad people exist and that they do bad things. The downside of being an artist who depicts violence is that our message may not be received clearly by our audience or in worst-case scenario, it can be considered offensive. Labels are worrisome because it forces
one to fit into a certain category, automatically presenting that person with a bias. Overall, I conclude that the role of violence in visual art is to discuss issues or events that people brush off as less serious. Compassion is an important emotion for viewers to have when gazing upon this type of art. I do not believe artists that illustrate sensitive subject matter do it maliciously; instead, I think this art is created so that conversations and action can ignite in our society, uniquely painting one’s perspective of violent and/or graphic art.
Bibliography


Figures

Fig. 1
The Falling Soldier
Robert Capa
1936
Gelatin silver print
9 3/4”x13 3/8”
Metropolitan Museum of
Art, New York, NY, U.S.A.

Fig. 2
Red Flag
Judy Chicago
1971
Photolithograph
20”x24”
Museum of Menstruation,
Washington D.C., U.S.A.
Fig. 3
The Dinner Party
Judy Chicago
1974-1979
Ceramic, textile, porcelain
576” x 576”
Brooklyn Museum,
Brooklyn, NY, U.S.A.

Fig. 4
The Dinner Party
(Virginia Woolf Place Setting)
Judy Chicago
1974-1979
Ceramic, textile, porcelain
576” x 576”
Brooklyn Museum,
Brooklyn, NY, U.S.A.
Fig. 5
Alison Lapper and Parys
Marc Quinn
2000
Marble and plinth
33”x17”x24”
Location unknown

Fig. 6
Alison Lapper Pregnant
Marc Quinn
2005
Marble and plinth
140”x71”x102”
Location unknown
Fig. 7
Self
Marc Quinn
1991
Blood (artist’s), stainless steel, Perspex and refrigeration equipment
82”x25”x25”
Location unknown

Fig. 8
The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven
Kara Walker
1995
Cut paper on wall
15’0”x35’0”
Private Collection, U.S.A.
Fig. 9
Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b’tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart
Kara Walker
1994
Cut paper on wall
13’0”x50’0”
Museum of Modern Art, New York, U.S.A.

Fig. 10
Self Portrait
Catherine M. Gallagher
Oil paint on canvas
30”x24”
Dublin, OH, U.S.A.

Fig. 11
#1 (We Too Series)
Catherine M. Gallagher
Charcoal and colored pencil on paper
22”x28”
Dublin, OH, U.S.A.