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## BUBBLE GUM SKIN

*stretchy, dispensable, and briefly packed with flavour*



An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the postgraduate degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Ayla Corner

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## ***abstract***

I have a textiles-based practice focused on establishing an understanding of contemporary grotesque, my work distorts my own body and the bodies of others as a response to cosmetic surgery reality television. Viewing cosmetic surgery reality television (CSRT) through the lens of the grotesque allows me to better critique the simulacrum of reality that reality television creates, and the regulation and construction of 'legitimate' bodies and identities endorsed by makeover culture.

Humour and absurdity act as key tools within my practice, as satire makes room for critique by breaking open dominant discourses and dualities of entertainment and sacrifice within these forms of highly emotive footage.

This thesis is an exploration and untangling of intersecting theory surrounding the grotesque, cosmetic surgery, makeover culture, and reality television. As well as a documentation of the work made in response to my research and consumption of media.



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<i>abstract</i>	3
<i>acknowledgements</i>	5
<i>introduction</i>	9
<i>aims</i>	11
<i>amplified orifices and the pandemic ooze</i> <i>grotesque bodies, grotesque boundaries</i>	12
<i>bigger, fuller, bouncier - can't take my eyes out of you</i> <i>augmented avians tonight at six</i>	19
<i>20% hotter</i> <i>Diversify your face portfolio</i>	28
<i>ARE you ready? Are YOU ready?</i> <i>corporeal commitments to fairy tale endings</i>	35
<i>conclusion</i>	40
<i>list of figures</i>	41
<i>works cited</i>	42
<i>bibliography</i>	44



## ***introduction***

From memory, my infatuation with bodily transformation began around 6 or 7 years old. Captivated by Marge Simpson, I watched the TV wishing so hard that I had been lucky enough to be born with blue hair.

Fast forward an indeterminate amount of time, I am informed that you don't have to be born with blue hair, *you can just change it*. But not until you're older.

Aged 12 I got my first purple hair dye from the supermarket, a promise on the box said that it would be out in 28 washes. Finally, I was a person that had colourful hair. I was in the Lower School so I wasn't supposed to dye my hair, but my teacher let it slide after I convinced him it would come out.

I went to Taikura Rudolf Steiner School for my entire education, a school with no uniform, and a relatively reasonable dress code. Once you reached the Upper School, you were allowed to paint your nails, and have dyed hair. Once I hit Class 8, I dyed my hair with Fudge Paintbox - Raspberry Beret. For those first years of high school I regularly went between magenta, blueberry purple, and red. At one point they rewrote the school rules to say that only streaks of colour were allowed, so I dip-dyed my hair turquoise, arguing that it was just one long streak. In Class 12 I dyed all my hair dark green, and when that was disputed I said I thought it would be fine because it was the school colours.

These years were pretty ripe with recommendations on how I should be presenting myself. No colourful hair, no visible tattoos, no hairy legs, no ripped jeans. As if the privilege of my middle class whiteness

wouldn't transcend these very minor infringements of feigned social conduct.

Movies like *Princess Diaries*, *Miss Congeniality*, *Mean Girls*, *Freaky Friday*, *House Bunny*, *Devil Wears Prada*, bewitched me. Any film where the makeover was a shaping moment for the protagonist, to succeed in whatever social, moral, romantic, or career dilemma they were facing. At some point along the line though, I became indifferent to the same trope. Someone takes the glasses off of a conventionally attractive white woman, makes her hair smooth and shiny, and with new found self-esteem her problems are solved. Then, she realises she had the answers all along, and she can be happy *even with her glasses on*. The apathy I was growing towards this genre marked my move into watching reality television, I wanted to see real people get transformed. I became fascinated with surgery programmes, *Botched*, *The Swan*, *Extreme Makeover*. I watched people get new noses, sharper faces, bigger boobs, smaller boobs, no boobs, tighter legs, more bum, less bum, thighs getting sucked out and rearranged into the face. Blepharoplasties, metoidioplasties, buccal fat removal, mastopexies, vulvoplasties, enlarging, tucking, reshaping, resurfacing, and lots and lots of lifting.

On Friday's from the age of 14 to 18 I worked at CornEvil. Dressing up in costumes I'd made, distorting my face by making gelatine prosthetics that ran from the top of my forehead to the bottom of my nose. I worked out the front entertaining and scaring customers, I had special pus and blood recipes that coated the inside of my mouth and spewed down my chin, at the end of each night I tore my face off, slapping it onto windscreens or hurling it at anyone still lingering in the car park.

For Gateway at school, I worked at a crematorium. As someone who had seen and touched the dead bodies of several family and friends at that point, I was fascinated by the body with nobody inside it. It

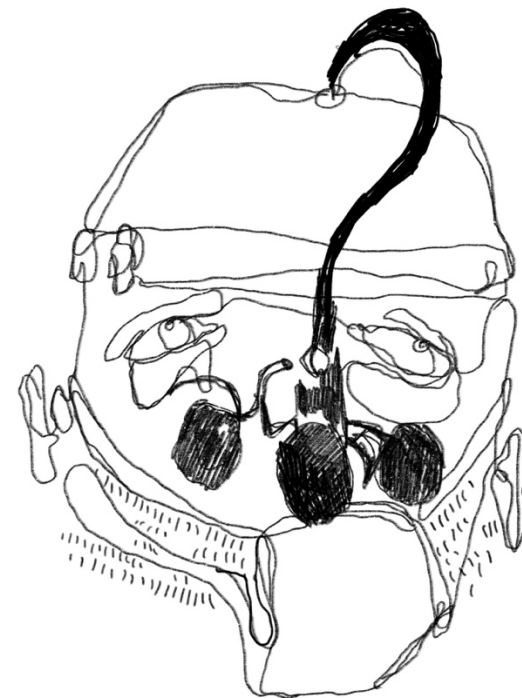


was in the crematorium that I saw my first skeleton. Opening up the mouth of the oven, I saw her lying there, charred and almost entirely intact. I swept Margaret to the back of the oven and into a bucket, taking her bones to the machine that would grind them up into ashes, before she would be taken home to her family. It was around this time I became more aware of the transience of bodies, the mutability of people. I didn't understand why I had to take advice on 'looking more professional' if I was going to end up being swept into a bucket anyway.

During this Masters programme I've been developing my creative practice, centred around the body's capacity for transformation. With a specific focus on elective cosmetic surgery and reality television, I have an interest in the incongruous discourses within these spaces, as well as satirising cultural ideals.

I come from a textiles background centralised on establishing an understanding of contemporary grotesque. Seeing cosmetic surgery reality television (CSRT) through this lens of the grotesque allows me to better critique the simulacrum of reality that reality television creates, and within that, the regulation and construction of 'legitimate' bodies and identities endorsed by makeover culture. Throughout my creative practice I distort my own body and others as a response to the media I consume. This allows me to experience being in a more defined space of transformation, which helps me to navigate through the paradoxes that intersect throughout this topic of identity, consent, agency, entertainment, bodily excess, and transformation. Humour and absurdity act as key tools within these processes and resulting works, highlighting the innate absurdity already present in cosmetic surgery processes, and surrounding narratives. Satire makes room for critique by breaking open dominant discourses and dualities of entertainment and sacrifice within these forms of highly emotive footage.

In this body of work and research I have specifically focused on American reality television, and cosmetic surgery from a Western perspective. My decision to do this is because it accurately reflects the media I've consumed over the years. I have done wider reading on the impact and utilisation of cosmetic surgery outside of Western culture, but have chosen not to discuss it in this thesis as it is a significant topic in and of itself that I don't believe can be wholly captured in this piece of writing.





### ***aims***

My intention in the Masters programme was to develop a deeper understanding of my creative practice. That being the case I did not approach this project with a definitive set of aims or research questions as I did not necessarily come in with a clear-cut topic.

This programme has been an intense space of personal development. As such, this exegesis serves as a way of writing through my research and making practice so I can better negotiate the incongruity inherent within my area of enquiry.

What follows is a laying out of theory, encompassing grotesque principles, cosmetic surgery, and reality television. As well as my documentation of experiential accounts of making, wearing, and watching. My hope is that in doing so I will at least in part be able to untangle, or better understand the conflicting discourses of bodily transformation that I exist within.

***amplified orifices and the pandemic ooze  
grotesque bodies, grotesque boundaries***

*Normalisation is a powerful discourse for control and institutionalisation, for dominant institutions sanction certain forms of 'normalcy', and this always comes at the expense of others, which are constituted by contrast as abnormal, inferior, or even shameful.*

*(Justin Edwards, Rune Graulund, 9)*

The quotidian use of 'grotesque' relegates it to an adjective synonymous with disgust, this however grossly overlooks the historically complex and varied nature of the grotesque itself. Categorically the grotesque is an elusive creature, conjugated by ligaments of humour, nature, the ornamental, carnival, the feminine, abjection, excess. The grotesque can be better understood through its actions as opposed to its thingness, grotesque actions, performed by grotesque bodies. Defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque body is "a body in the act of becoming ... never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body." (317).

As someone with a practice fascinated by human bodies and their capacity for transformation, the role of the grotesque within my research and making is crucial. I exist in a society where bodies are smoothed over, drawn in, flattened out, where toxic positivity sits alongside dominant rhetoric of normalcy declaring who is and is not healthy, whether you're the hot kind of fat, or the cute kind of hairy, the curvy kind of skinny. Grotesque figures subvert and disrupt the categorical integrity of socially constructed hierarchies. This provides me with a lens to view these hierarchies through, and disestablish the duplicitous disconnect between grotesque bodies and 'regular' bodies. As Mary Russo outlines in *The Female Grotesque*, the grotesque does not simply exist in opposition to dominant culture, but rather consumes it wholly and regurgitates it in a rich and writhing

amalgamation of mockery. This situates the grotesque in a space of "multivalent oppositional play ... [the grotesque] refuses to surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class, and in this sense ... can be seen, above all, as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal" (63).

Marked by their constant state of flux, Ellen Bishop explains that grotesque figures embody the ability to deftly highlight the porousness, and fluidity of boundaries. An example of this blurring of boundaries can be seen in the pregnant hag, a key archetype from grotesque imagery and literature, the dying, aging body giving birth to new life (50). This is a requisite muddying of perceived opposites that symbolically suture together the separation between womb and tomb. This ingeneration of the abstract being brought down to the material speaks to a quintessential theme in Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque, that "degradation ... the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin, 19). Fundamentally, the grotesque is deeply rooted in nature, and therefore also shares an innate connection to the feminine, Frances Connelly explains that while not all grotesques are illustrated as women:

*The fundamental attributes of the grotesque (bodied, fertile, earth-bound, changeful) align with those ascribed to the feminine. If the boundaries of the normative are conventional and are drawn around the cultural attributes of the masculine, it is not difficult to see that grotesque creatures threatening these boundaries, any aberrations from the norm, typically bear the attributes of the feminine. (Connelly, 2)*

The grotesque's contextualisation of femininity as a site for subversion is important within my practice due to the nature of the media that informs my work. Cosmetic surgery reality television (CSRT) primarily concerns itself with female bodies - that's not to say

that it isn't also focused on standardising other bodies. Contemporary artist and lecturer Lauren Kalman notes that from a dominant occidental perspective, female bodies are located within the grotesque because they transgress the boundaries, it is preferred they inhabit, primarily through menstruating and aging, but this also extends to birthing, sprouting hair, spilling skin beyond the lines of favoured silhouettes, or indeed our many other excretions (51). If you're not plugged up and expensively moisturised, you're not aspiring towards upward social mobility.

The grotesque body as a site for subversion, married to the CSRT body as a site that is literally opened up like a cabinet to the world, makes for an interesting area of intersecting ideologies. Like the grotesque body, the CSRT is open to the world, visibly in a state of becoming. Both also have an infatuation with protrusions and orifices. The grotesque places immense importance on the body not being separate from the world. Protrusions and orifices are often exaggerated in depictions of grotesque bodies as they mark locations that allow the body to extend out into the world, and the world to flow into the body. The mouth, the genitals, the belly, the nose, the ears, the breasts, the arse, these are boundary blurring locations that "ignore the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences ... and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths" (Bakhtin, 318). In CSRT, these same areas of the body are seen as key markers of identity, and therefore sites ripe with potential for transformation.

This fascination for the transformative capacity of the body was something I wanted to share. In the same way that I'd seen in CSRT, I took apart the body and focused on changing specific parts. I started with the face, this was part of the body that had been marketed to me as being the most transformational, your key communicator to the world. I created masks to be worn and engaged

with by an audience. I was interested in masks as a medium because of the parallels I saw between them and cosmetic surgery. Donald Pollock describes masks as a means of "transforming identity, either through the modification of the representation of identity, or through the temporary - and representational - extinction of identity" (582). This transformation of identity was a powerful tool, and one of the key paradoxical relationships of power within masks that I saw reflected in CSRT. The empowerment or disempowerment of the anonymity granted by masks depended largely on the role being played. The surgeon, masked and anonymous, commits tacitly violent acts on an similarly anonymous body. The postoperative patient, having had their representation of identity transformed, is portrayed as empowered and successful in locating their identity.

The masks that I created were tests. I wanted to use my textile practice to transform the faces of an audience. I believed observing these transformations, watching them play out, and seeing individuals and masks interact with one another would give me valuable insight in how I wanted to take these pieces forward.

I'm not sure why I thought that would work, because I know I personally don't want to participate in *any* audience participation *ever*.

The masks were not worn. The resounding reading of the work was that it was "a bit murderly". And to be fair, standing in a room noticeably colder than the rest of the building, with face parts hung on the wall, next to a table where I decided to line up scalpels, needles, and scissors (a decision that I - at the time - did not fathom as sinister as they were the tools of my trade) this was a relatively sound reading. In not being worn, these masks instead hung, a body in pieces, like a serial killer's trophies mounted on a wall. This was valuable learning for me about audience participation.





Fig. 1. Corner, Ayla. *Untitled*, personal photograph by author, May 2019.



Fig. 2. Corner, Ayla. *Untitled*, personal photograph by author, May 2019.



Fig. 3. Corner, Ayla. *Untitled*, personal photograph by author, May 2019.

I moved into creating this series of oozing videos just after the peak of the Covid 19 pandemic in New Zealand. Vernacular surrounding the virus had left me with circulating thoughts of this living secreting thing, invisibly seeping into my life, and my safe spaces. I had never been more aware of door knobs, light switches, of the width of footpaths. On the days that I did go outside, I would sit on the piece of concrete that juts into the sea at Island Bay. Watching the water breath in and out, hearing it slap up against the rocks, I'd stare into the water and think of all the things slithering around inside it. Once a week I went to the supermarket, wandering around, orbiting others in two meter radiuses, only touching what I was buying. I would come home and wipe my groceries down, just in case.

I created my own contained spaces for things to ooze, constructing these dioramas pieced together from what I had (or leftover boxes from essential items I got delivered). These small spaces where I controlled the secretions assuaged my tension for a time. Being focused on the viscosity of goo, the level of teat projection, ensuring the right sized orifice, this was all a welcome distraction from wiping down my groceries.

The underlying humour of these works, of wobbly teats exuding goo, was reassuring to me. As with many tense or stressful times in my life, humour was a way to respond that helped me navigate through these uneasy spaces, to find some semblance of comfort. These were pieces that I made intuitively, I wanted to share my focus of transformation and the grotesque, moving into video was a natural evolution as it allowed me to showcase the movement and interaction that had been missing in previous work. Moving away from very literal representations and interactions with the body and into a more abstract suggestion I believed would be more beneficial in negating the level of violence being read in my previous work. These works, while performing actions that could be independently perceived as grotesque - excreting, exaggerating, transforming -

were not themselves grotesque. The grotesque emerges from the destabilising of boundaries between known things, it is hard to succinctly capture the grotesque because by definition it largely evades categorisation. This destabilising of boundaries is the element that was missing in this work - and arguably the one previously. I had been so intent on creating work that captured the grotesque in appearance or in function, that in doing so I forgot that the grotesque is a lens that I use to understand or unpack my theoretical lines of enquiry, and is not necessarily an intentional aesthetic end goal.







Fig. 4. Corner, Ayla. "Ooze Works 2." Still from video by author, June 2020,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKpZwCCqbcg&list=PL9JUUEifEwnRoxDpDDXJwo0u0xVbFi2WT&index=3>



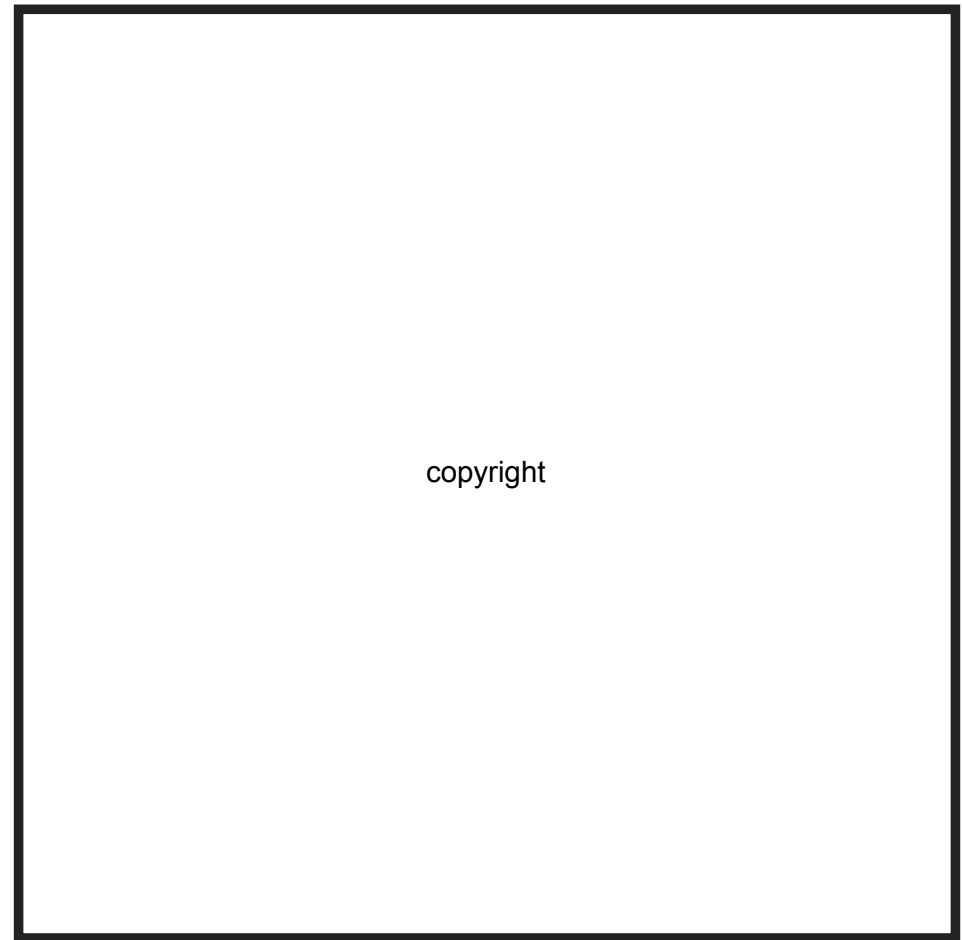
Fig. 5. Corner, Ayla. "Ooze Works 1." Still from video by author, May 2020,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jd3twNy1eH0&list=PL9JUUEifEwnRoxDpDDXJwo0u0xVbFi2WT&index=1>



Adriana Varejão's work *De Tapete em Carne Viva* is a good example of the subtle, uncanny breaching of known boundaries. Varejão uses azulejos - a traditional Portuguese tile - in her work as a way of responding to the colonisation of Brazil, and the genocide of its indigenous people. The visceral flesh rupturing between tiles is symbolic of the body as a site for violence. As Frances Connelly explains, the grotesque "emerges when this visual flux compromises established realities or categories, jumbling their constituent parts and allowing alien things to stick." (8). While Varejão's work inhabits the known spaces of tile and flesh, it is the complication of these two borders from which the grotesque spills forth, this ambiguity is key within grotesque. Often defined as being in opposition to dominant discourse and cultural 'norms', the grotesque can be better understood as existing between boundaries, "like a catalyst, opening the boundaries of two disparate entities." (8). Though the grotesque is hard to pin down categorically, there is a tendency to mix high and low, this subversion is what facilitates critique, and challenges dominant hierarchies.

In an occidental culture that has historically viewed seeing as being synonymous with understanding, far more value has been placed on the optic over the haptic. As stated by Lauren Kalman, that which is bodily, visceral, or carnal has been equated to the anti-intellectual (51). Varejão's *De Tapete em Carne Viva* congeals between the binaries of manmade and organic, architectural and visceral, beautiful and monstrous. It is as uncomfortable as it is captivating, and it is that quality that makes the grotesque a powerful tool for interrogating and unpacking dominant discourse. I locate Varejão's work in the body of the virtual grotesque. The roots of grotesque in carnival, spectacle, active participation in subversion have largely yielded into what is now considered the virtual grotesque. Defined by Frances Connelly, the virtual grotesque allows us to participate indirectly, watching at a safe distance "horror movies, virtual reality games, and myriad other cultural vehicles [that] still serve this

elemental human desire to experience that which lies just beyond us" (17).



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Fig. 6. Adriana Varejão, *Azulejaria "De tapete" em carne viva* ("Carpet-Style" Tilework in Live Flesh), 1999, oil on canvas and polyurethane on aluminium and wooden support, 59 x 74 3/4 x 9 3/4". *ARTFORUM*, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201201/fluid-dynamics-the-art-of-adriana-varejao-29820>

***bigger, fuller, bouncier - can't take my eyes out of you  
augmented avians tonight at six***

*The cosmetic surgery industry mobilises and nourishes a powerful fantasy of embodiment. Concealing the importance of skin as the site of transformation and customisation, this fantasy promises a body that is infinitely transformable and customisable. Within late capitalist postmodern society of the West that value private enterprise and consumer choice, this is a salient fantasy that consists of the desire to eliminate emotional suffering through changing the body, as well as desire for a body that is controllable and impenetrable.*

*(Rachel Johnston Hurt, 141)*

Within the media that informs my research there is a constant buzz between the dubious binaries of 'natural' and 'unnatural' bodies. In an occidental world where beauty is social currency, there is a pervasive level of power in these binaries to empower or shame people into canonical beauty ideals. In the 10 plus years of consuming CSRT and makeover television I have learnt two key things about beauty.

1. You must look 'natural'. 'Natural' beauty is key, it is your most valuable asset. Under no circumstances should you be able to see scars, or any other tells that your beauty - and your youth - are constructed or need maintaining. At all costs, preserve your natural beauty.

2. You should not look natural, the people around you should know that you can afford to look like this. Not only is it a signifier of your wealth, but it also tells people that you are a person who takes pride in your appearance and therefore yourself.

These societal concerns of attaining beauty, and preserving youth stem from religious ascetic consecration of the body. As R. Marie

Griffiths discusses the West's infatuation with "corporeal acts of devotion" (qtd. in Biles, 2) is arguably due to Christianity's belief that "a thin, firm, beautiful body ... [is] the visible reflection of goodness and godliness" (2). This notion that physical appearance is somehow synonymous with moral value is reflected in contemporary makeover culture's attempt to resolve the corruptible body through diet, exercise, anti-aging remedies, cosmetic surgery, and more. But why does society have such an infatuation with improving and maintaining one's image?

Chris Shilling suggests this is in part due to the West's decline in religious authorities having the power to regulate people's bodies. While religious notions of the 'pure body' still permeate the everyday, now more than ever we are seeing a "privatisation of meaning" (2). While historically religion played a large part in people's day-to-day lives, the rise of science has not necessarily equated to a rise in the 'meaning of life'. Individuals are left to establish value and meaning in their own ways, and as such the body has become a locus for establishing identity, and within that, establishing significance in daily life (2). Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund propose that the grotesque and grotesque figures function productively in relation to these ideologies by critiquing the notion that existing in the category of normalcy is somehow synonymous with embodying higher moral or socioethical values. This speaks to the Foucauldian belief that grotesque bodies can fracture essentialist notions of identity (26).

Our cultural obsession with cosmetic surgery and its transformational potential culminates within reality television. While an avid consumer of CSRT, I am also hyper aware of the conflicting discourses tangled up in this media. Kathy Davis describes cosmetic surgery as the "problem and solution, oppression and liberation" (qtd in Jones, 14). While makeover culture sells consumers the potential for a resolved identity - or at least a path to locating it - through the made over body, Brenda Weber notes that this path is really

“salvation through submission” (6). CSRT facilitates a system whereby those whose bodies are excluded from constructed norms are granted emancipation through participating in the systems that denied them valid selfhood in the first place. The end goal of cosmetic surgery is not solely beauty, but rather the “abstract outcomes that beauty can ostensibly purchase; positive self-esteem, confidence, selfhood” (55). This conflation of the made over self with holistic life fulfilment creates fruitful ground for tenuous promises. Reality television creates a simulacrum of reality for both contestants and viewers. In this reality, before-bodies undergoing surgical transformation are assured a resolved identity, and subsequent upward trajectory in career, romance, and social class in their after-bodies. The trouble with this ideological zone is that once contestants move outside of this space and back into the real world, these shaky guarantees of fulfilment don’t necessarily apply. The shame of the before-body is venerated in the after-body, but caution against returning to one’s before-state is reified through subjugating juxtaposed footage of before and after.

This isn’t to say that elective cosmetic procedures are completely devoid of positive effect. Self-esteem is an enormous contributor to wellbeing, and Brenda Weber argues that makeover culture in CSRT puts forth a willingness to “offer subjects either the reclamation or the first time ever experience of me-ness [which] might be one reason to praise it as a positive cultural site that is the locus of identity work” (8). A strong affirmation of self allows one to exist more comfortably within the world, as Kathy Davis notes “cosmetic surgery is necessary in a culture where appearance is important to a person’s happiness and well-being” (6). However in this current landscape of an ocular economy, there is a growing concern among scholars like Kathy Davis, Victoria Pitt-Taylor, Susan Bordo, Brenda Weber, and Meredith Jones that cosmetic surgery is increasingly being framed as a neutral set of technologies. Rather than being an inherently oppressive technology, cosmetic surgery enables individuals to

construct the body and identity that they desire. While individuals have agency in constructing their body with markers of identity, the suggestion that cosmetic surgery is a neutral technology that facilitates empowerment through creation of self also negates the cultural context that has informed the decisions and actions of that agency in the first place.

Navigating the incongruous narratives of CSRT through a grotesque lens highlights its similarities to grotesque ritual spectacle. While CSRT presents some quasi-veneration of beauty, really this form of media takes something imbued in high social value, and debases it within emotive media. Satirising the exclusivity and value of beauty as a social commodity. By exaggerating and destabilising the boundaries of bodies, identity, and entertainment, the abstract position of beauty in social hierarchy is undermined, and brought back down to the material. I have a lot of thoughts tangled up in these spaces. It can be difficult to navigate the dichotomy of cosmetic surgery as an incredibly valuable tool in enabling individuals to construct an outward appearance that they feel fits them, while disagreeing with the oppressive societal constructs that persuade a number of those transformations in the first place.

I created *Bigger Fuller Bouncier* as a response to the conflicting discourses I was trying to negotiate. I was interested in satirising the social value placed on beauty, as well as the body being marketed simultaneously as both resolvable, and infinitely malleable. This work also served as an exploration into bodily limits, after years of consuming cosmetic surgery media and techniques, this work operated as a journey into a play space. My role as textile designer moved into the role of surgeon as I set out to significantly increase the breast size of a chicken. Initially, I was of the opinion that the most natural thing to do would be to implant the breasts of a larger bird into the chicken, as they’d likely follow the same silhouette. However after an in depth conversation with an initially bewildered

but then pretty on board butcher, I concluded that the more logical option would be to custom make a pair of silicone implants to contour the chicken perfectly.

Squatting in the meat aisle of New World, I picked up different chickens, feeling the weight and girth of them in my hand. It was hard to tell the quality of their skin through the cold, wet Pam's bag.

I figured bigger was better, because I could fit more in them.

I carefully shaped clay around the breasts of the first chicken. I needed to recreate the slope of its chest perfectly to ensure that the implants sat naturally. I cast moulds from these clay forms, and filled them carefully with soft silicone, to create the perky rack I was hoping to achieve.

I was surprised at the lack of resistance when making the first cut, like running a scalpel through a wet paper towel, but like, a heavy duty, high end paper towel. And the paper towel is made of meat.

Slippery outsides proved difficult to stretch over the silicone implants that tried to slide out of the incisions I'd made. Thin, slack skin tears easily if pulled too hard, and in the end I found utilising techniques I'd used in textiles were best in completing my operation. Using soft embroidery threads that provided better traction than nylon that tore the delicate dermis, I used a ladder stitch to gently suture the skin closed.

In *The Craft of Surgery* Professor Roger Kneebone, a surgeon, and Joshua Byrne, a tailor, compare the techniques and processes used in surgery and tailoring, discussing how these areas have informed one another and where they intersect. Comparing suturing in surgery to sewing in fashion, Byrne explains that "you need to understand how a material's going to react" (04:00). In Bigger Fuller Bouncier I

had to learn how to work with the materiality of the chicken I was using. I used a straight needle because it offered more control and accuracy than a curved one. A ladder stitch was the most efficient stitch to use to create a smooth, strong seam under the implant, when I used a traditional simple interrupted suture seen in most surgery it didn't offer the support the chicken's skin needed to hold the weight of the implant. I learnt that to hold the implant in place, I had to make a series of small stitches on the lower side of the breast, this anchored the skin to the muscle and pulled it taut. The more I worked with the chickens, the more techniques and materials from my textiles practice fed into refining this procedure.

It's probably worth noting that these techniques worked best because they were very much performed on a dead chicken from the supermarket. I can say without a doubt that these same techniques would not go down well on a living chicken. Not to mention that it would likely be a pretty sizable ethics violation.

After four or five chickens I started to become affronted by my actions, the actions I was performing on another body. I became more aware of the violence I'd been dulled to over years of consumption. The entertainment aspect of CSRT had made me impervious to the actions that one person was committing on another, to the corporeal commitments and sacrifices individuals were willing to make in order to achieve the body that they wanted. I have watched people be sliced round the middle, pulled up like a pair of pants, and stapled back together. Nipples plucked off and popped on the table for later. The skin of noses peeled back to chisel off bumps and then tucked back neatly around the nostrils. My weathered indifference has resulted in me no longer having a perception of what actuates abjection in the people around me.

I did learn how to make a good roast though.

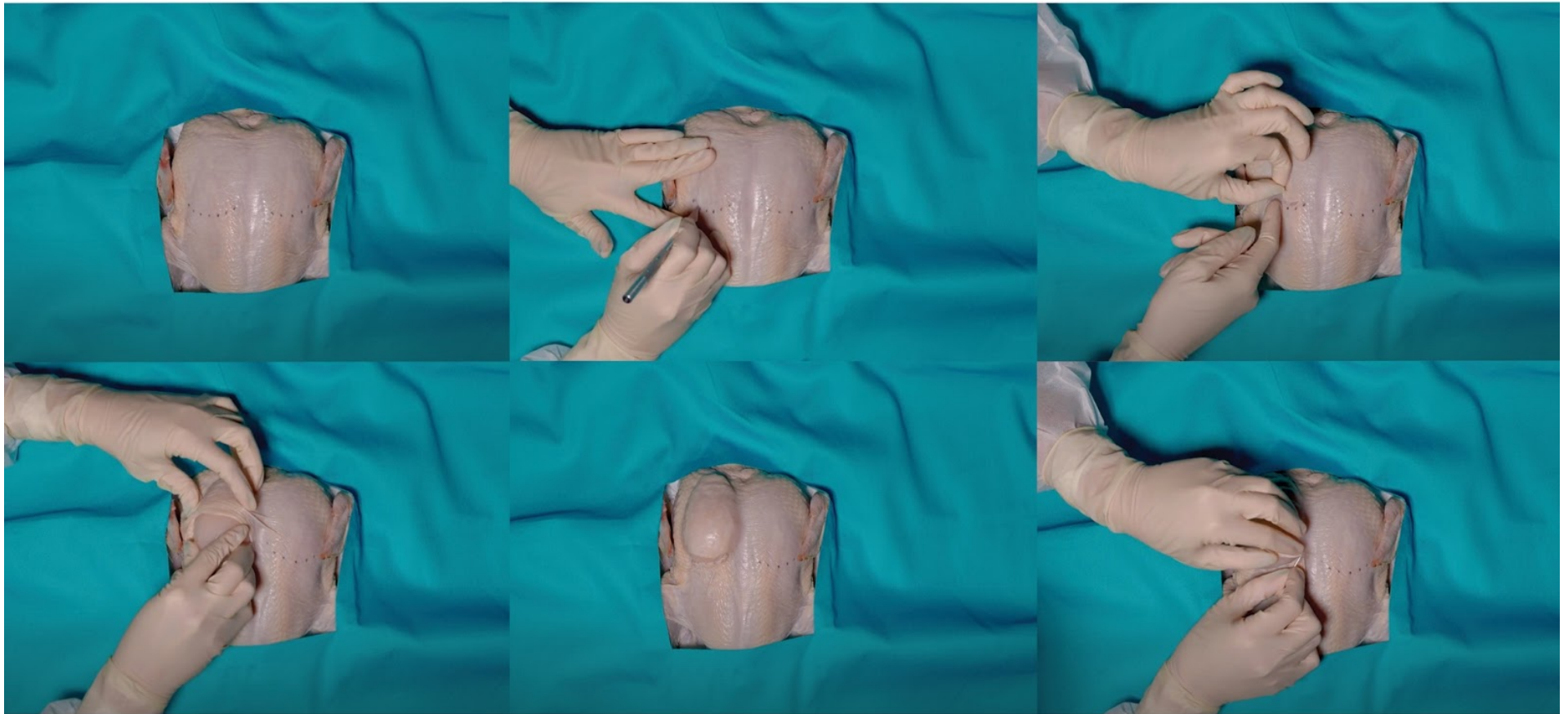


Fig. 7. Corner, Ayla, *"Bigger, Fuller, Bouncier."* Still from video by author, September 2020, <https://vimeo.com/user101480854>.





Fig. 8. Corner, Ayla, *"Bigger, Fuller, Bouncier."* Still from video by author, September 2020, <https://vimeo.com/user101480854>.

Bigger Fuller Bouncier noticeably increased the breast size of a Pam's supermarket chicken. In *Makeover Culture's Dark Side* Meredith Jones describes breasts as a site of "both maternity and eroticism: aspects of womanhood that Western culture almost obsessively disjoins" this duality grants breasts the power to complicate borders through their fracturing of defined boundaries (91). My decision to ascribe the silhouette of human breasts rather than chicken breasts was a comment on the origin of the work's title. 'Bigger, fuller, bouncier' was the phrase used in advertising for the Double Breasted Burger from Nando's, an advertisement where a woman is pictured not being able to see her meal because her sizable breasts are in the way, a sing song voice comes on encouraging us to try "the bigger fuller bouncier, double breasted burger from Nando's" (0:27). By enacting hyperfeminine silhouettes pervasive in marketing and advertising *Bigger Fuller Bouncier* is both complicit in the subjugation of hyperfemininity in the name of entertainment, and subversive in its satirisation of these same spaces. Satire makes room for critique by breaking open dominant discourses and dualities of entertainment and sacrifice within these forms of highly emotive footage.

There was a degree of flippancy read in Bigger Fuller Bouncier, which suggested the work might be seen as undermining the lengths that members of the trans or wider LGBTQIA+ community go to attain certain cosmetic procedures to shape their bodies into what feels right for their identity. While I don't know if it's possible to entirely escape this reading - because I don't know who will see this work and when - I do think it's important to use this space to clarify that this reading doesn't align with my values, or the values of the work. My intention with this work - and really this entire body of work - was to use humour and a level of absurdity to create footage that elicits equal parts entertainment and discomfort in an audience. The humour in the work is key because it functions as an integral tool when engaging with uncomfortable or difficult subjects. I believe that

the body as a site that deserves veneration can be misrepresented as sacrosanctity, while I agree that all bodies deserve love and care, I respect that that looks different for different people. Some people like yoga, some people like having huge silicone butts, sometimes these things overlap, sometimes they change. But ultimately individuals should be granted the agency to educate themselves on their options and freely choose how they wish to craft their identity. *Bigger Fuller Bouncier* blurs the boundaries of beautiful and monstrous, erotic and repellent, factual and emotive, as a way of breaking open dialogue around the weight we place on surgical changes performed on the body, and lightening the loaded judgement we place on the outward corporeal commitments of others.

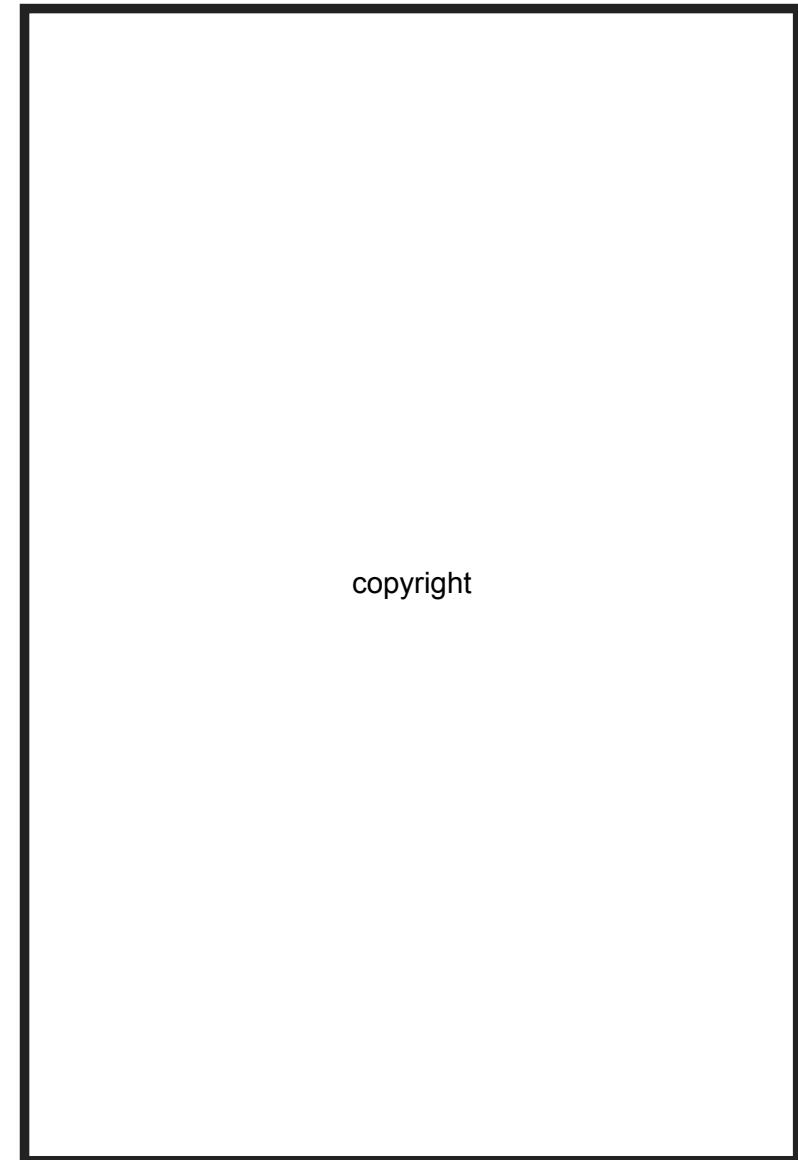
This exploration into the bodily limits of these chickens allowed me to experience transformation in a way that my previous work hadn't. My surgery on these chickens enabled me to truly experience the skin as a site for transformation, and gave me a tacit understanding that skin is not a material capable of limitless customisation and renewal, not without a price. This realisation that the infinitely malleable skin-textile I had been sold over the years was untrue came as my delicate perforations still tore too far the skin around the implants I had made. Rachel Hurst explains that CSRT markets "the skin textile [as] a seductive metaphor. Positioning the decision to undergo cosmetic surgery as a question of fashion" as opposed to a serious medical procedure (141). This marketing strategy minimizes rumblings of medical ethics and consent in these spaces, while cosmetic surgery can be contextualised as fashion or accessory (a position I hold myself), I also worry this contextualisation detracts from the gravity of professionals performing risky surgeries on bodies. These corporeal sacrifices can in part be attributed to the trivial medicalisation of bodies. Using breasts as an example, medicine in the late 20th began to needlessly diagnose breasts, people "with small or big breasts were labelled 'hypomastic' or

'macromastic' respectively, while [people] whose breasts had sagged because of age or breastfeeding were suffering from 'ptosis' (Jones, 92). With the rise of cosmetic surgery came the rise of categories of breasts that could be 'fixed.' This contextualisation of surgery as fashion, paired with the trivial categorisation of breasts has resulted in individuals who are seeking out cosmetic breast surgeries to consider "themselves as consumers rather than patients" (92).

Holding cosmetic surgery as adornment, whilst also opposing the motivations and risks of these practices puts me in a space between discourses that I have a hard time resolving. An important consideration for me personally is remembering that a sizable portion of my body is covered in tattoos, some that I and others love, some that I love that also elicit a "seriously?" from my mum. Whether done by myself on the floor of my room, or by professionals in a studio, there is always a risk involved, of having an allergic reaction to the ink, of it going wrong, of infection. But neither the risk nor the permanence have ever bothered me. They don't outweigh my intrinsic desire for these corporeal adornments. The wholeness I feel from these permanent pledges to myself, and my appearance to the world, negates any risk and any pain I experience to achieve them. In this aspect I can understand the disregard of risk from those who seek a cosmetic surgery body. I think it's possible that my real hang up with this practice is the culture it's built on, rather than its technology and processes.

Really putting the 'theatre' in 'surgical theatre', ORLAN's series of surgical performances facilitated an aestheticisation of her surgical procedures, bringing to the forefront the process between before and after. As Tabitha Goode discusses, this series of performances also subverts "male dominance, not only of gaze, but also of erotic penetration" long seen in the broadcasting of surgical procedures being performed on women's bodies (250), ORLAN's being awake and alert during these procedures shows her as woman as active

participant in her operation, as opposed to the traditional imagery seen in media of passive women, complicit in the opening and taking



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Fig. 9. ORLAN, "Omnipresence ." Close up of a laughing during the 7th Surgery-Performance, New York, 1993, <http://www.orlan.eu/works/performance-2/>.



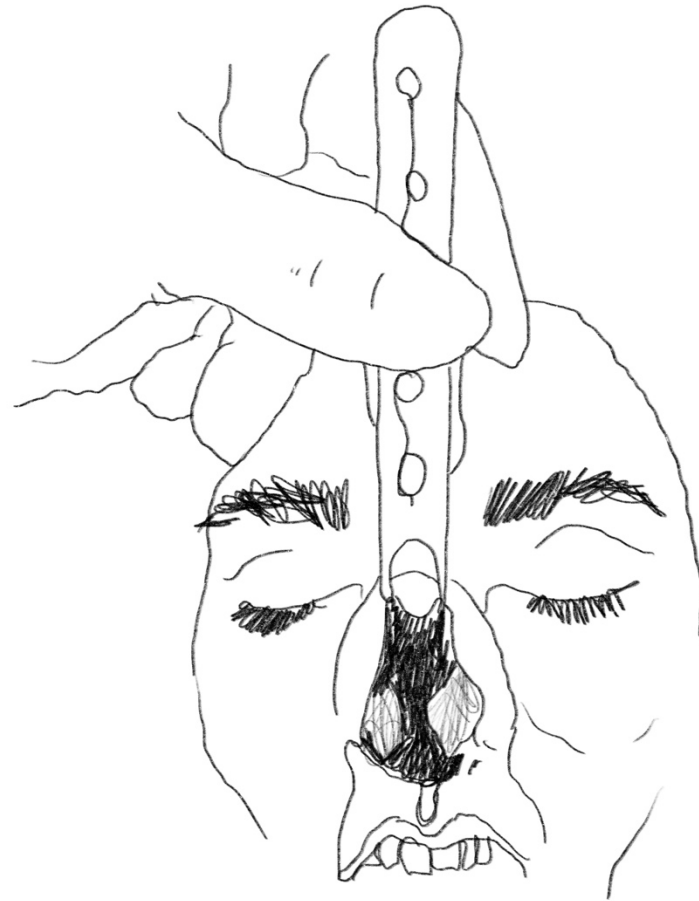
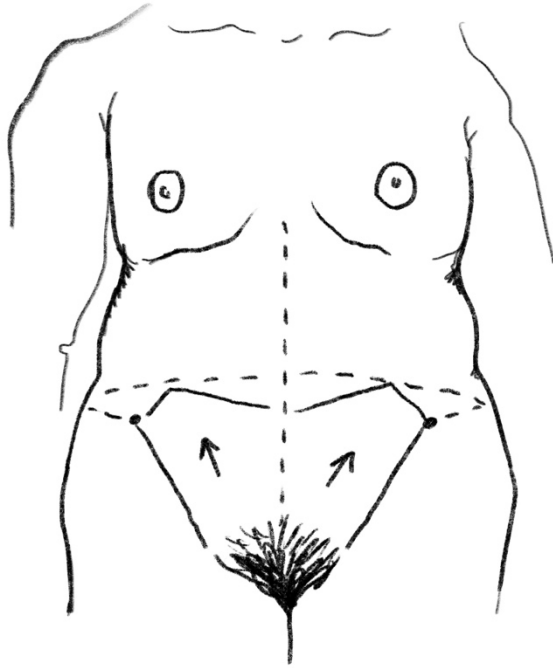
apart of their bodies. ORLAN's utilisation of cosmetic surgery in her performances reinforces the notion that cosmetic surgery can be used to enhance the body outside of the oppressive norms that these technologies typically operate under. In *ORLAN, A Hybrid of Artworks*, ORLAN defines her position on cosmetic surgery through her *Carnal Art Manifesto* thusly:

*Carnal Art is not against cosmetic surgery, but against the standards it carries and which are inscribed particularly over women's skin, but also men's. Carnal Art is feminist, necessarily. Carnal Art is interested in cosmetic surgery, but also in high tech medical and biological techniques that challenge the body's status and pose ethical concerns. (ORLAN, 28)*

ORLAN's participation in her own dissection is so because she is the constructor of her own image, and the architect of the environment that the transformation takes place within. The entertainment facet of the *Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN* embodies what is seen in CSRT, and parallels that of the grotesque. There is a humour and absurdity across both of these areas that focuses on the opening of the body, the combination and satirisation of high and low, the visceral, open human body spilling over in excess. These are elements that I have tried to capture in *Bigger Fuller Bouncier*, and across my creative practice as a whole. I believe that these actions embodied by modes of media are key to drawing and maintaining audience engagement, and in doing so provide an opportunity to critique dominant societal rhetoric surrounding beauty and CSRT.

Linda Nochlin suggests that the body laid down, presented on a horizontal surface marks it as object more so than subject (17). And I would agree that in CSRT there's a distance between the body I watch undergo surgical procedures from the body whose backstory I heard earlier in the show. I can pretty safely assume that I'd be far

more affronted watching someone have these same surgical procedures performed on them while they're awake and standing up. Linda Williams' puts forth an explanation as to why this kind of visceral and sensationalist media is so captivating to viewers. Williams' categorises these "body genres" into melodrama, pornography, and horror movies. Considered the lowest form of media, these genres rely on the body as spectacle, and fixate on corporeal sensation through violence, orgasm, and crying. At the centre of these genres are women, typically situated "in their traditional status under patriarchy - as wives, mothers, abandoned lovers, or in their traditional status as bodily hysteria or excess" (Williams, 4). All of these body genres are reflected in CSRT, and I believe can be attributed to its ongoing success, as well as the criticism it receives. Arguably this criticism is what makes makeover television so successful, people like to watch it *because* it's trash. These shows highlight the victimisation of women, while also actively shaming them under the guise of helping them. They document their empowerment, but this empowerment is through subjugation, and comes at the cost of their privacy, as their transformation is spectacle for an audience. We see all three key markers of body genre in this particular form of media, crying depicted in weepy back stories and women feeling unhappy in themselves, violence in the actions performed on their bodies, which is contextualised as a necessary sacrifice for the resulting ecstasy of the new bodies they are granted, and then back to crying, but this time for a happy ending.



## 20% hotter?

### ***Diversify your face portfolio***

*Neither the psychic self nor physical body are fixed or natural or authentic, but rather continually created or in process. This post-essentialist perspective on the body and self means that we must think of the meanings of bodily practices such as cosmetic surgery as neither strictly internal nor external, but rather as intersubjective.*

*(Victoria Pitts-Taylor, 23)*

I was watching a stranger describe someone to their friend. When describing their face they pushed their index finger across their philtrum and pushed down “she has a mouth like this.”

I wanted a mouth like that.

But like, not forever.

I experimented with different materials, yarn, cotton, velvet sewn into fine strips, fishing line, tape. It was all too chunky, or it lacked structure, or ripped the hair off my face, none of it gave the brash elegance that I was trying to embody.

Wandering aimlessly through Bunnings touching everything, led me to thick rolls of stainless steel wire. Strong, durable, and yielding. I inspected gauges, hunching over rolls out of sight of staff, I bent each one to glean how much force was needed to shape them.

After bringing home a selection I experimented with which among them was easiest to persuade under my cheekbones, across my

philtrum, which of them could give me the quasi-bone structure I'd always secretly desired. Turns out Zenith Tie Wire Coil 18Gx50m held up pretty well.

Shaping up to be the hottest summer accessory, my Bunnings Warehouse filler alternative was coming together well. Lips fuller and cheeks bulging, I sought to constrain and expand other parts of my face. Trying to define my jawline, lifting my nose, pushing it back into my face to level the bump. Yet eyes pulled too far open, and jawline spilling over, it was impossible to wholly contain all the parts I was attempting to smooth over.

20% Hotter functioned primarily as an exploration into transforming my own body. A welcome change after what was frankly a fatiguing number of chicken-based operations. This augmentation of myself and materials, inscribing dominant surgical silhouettes I'd watched for years onto my own face, birthed a monstrous beauty. The obfuscation of my comparatively flat and - what I came to perceive after an hour or so of wearing my adornments - boring, regular face, had captivated me, and bolstered my inability to dismiss cosmetic surgery purely as an oppressive technology for controlling 'non-normative' bodies. This idea of the monstrous beauty was something I wanted to explore further as someone whose work generally oscillates between uncomfortable to watch but still nice to look at. In *Skintight* Meredith Jones notes that “monsters have a special place in the cosmetic surgery world.” People that have ‘gone too far’ with cosmetic surgery procedures are described as monstrous in appearance, and function as “the ‘unnatural’ measuring sticks against which the ‘new natural’ can be measured” (107). Monstrous bodies are intrinsically linked to the grotesque in that they exist between the margins of categorisation and are marked by their hybridity, this gives them a subversive relationship with the boundaries of the body.

An enduring parallel between the grotesque and cosmetic surgery is their infatuation with orifices. My own exaggeration of orifices in *20% Hotter* points to these sites as breaches in the classical reading of the body as a closed border. Mary Douglas states that “any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points” (122). By documenting the exaggerating and destabilising of the orifices of my face there is a deterritorialization of the contextualisation of skin as a closed boundary, this pushes us into a grotesque understanding of the body as open, unfinished, and perpetually in a state of transformation and becoming.

In Laura Mulvey’s discussion of Hollywood cinema she notes that traditionally man has been portrayed as active subject and agent of gaze, whereas woman is depicted as passive subject to be gazed at (58). Mulvey further breaks down the three different acts of ‘looking’ in cinema; the camera looking as it films, the look of the audience watching, and the looks shared between characters, “the conventions of film of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third” with the intention of film to “eliminate” any awareness the audience has of the camera in the first place (68). The complicating of the power dynamics of gaze was important to me in *20% Hotter*, similar to ORLAN’s surgical performances this work was intended to act as a resistance to being seen as a purely docile body, as I actively participated in my own transformation I meet the gaze of the audience, acknowledging the act of being watched and undermining the power dynamics at play.

Focusing on my body being the site for transformation allowed me to focus on my own personal metamorphosed experience, and further ratified my understanding of cosmetic surgery as a type of personal adornment. With this notion of adornment in mind I am inclined to situate cosmetic surgery within the same space as Stephen Seely’s concept of affective fashion. Seely defines affective fashion as a tool

for opening the body and transgressing “privileged Western binaries” and highlights the potentiality of transformative technology as a means to locate a space of “mutual becoming” and metamorphose with the human body and the materials it encounters (251). This line of thought is something that helps me untangle my contested relationship with vague definitions around what connotes a ‘natural’ or ‘unnatural’ body. In daily life, human bodies are engaged in a cyclical model of affect with materials around them, through dress, adornment, objects, nature, technology, surgical intervention, all these interactions and more place the body in a space of whereby constant mutual becoming makes any differentiation between ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ inconsequential (253).

The skin’s function as a marker of identity is that of a communicative surface that is inscribed with and conveys outwardly the inner self. Throughout the course of this project I have come to recognise cosmetic surgery as a type of adornment, this contextualisation has enabled me to better engage with, and understand the value of these elective procedures to individuals participating in them. As Tarryn Handcock explains, “objects beyond bodily boundaries can become incorporated into body-image simply through prolonged placement,” though things like jewellery, clothing, tattoos, piercings, and cosmetic procedures all have varying levels of permanent proximity to the body, all are still significant in their role of establishing identity and “self through visual codes and signs” (7). While this contextualisation of cosmetic surgery as adornment may in part be due to my personal participation in body modification, I believe that taking cosmetic surgery procedures out of the realm of the purely surgical, and into the space of body modification and adornment enables me to gain a better understanding of the practice and the intersubjectivity involved in it. To view cosmetic surgery as adornment is to acknowledge humanity’s corporeal evolution alongside technology. Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo note that as a species we have a history of body modification that goes back 30,000 years, as humans we are



Fig. 10. Corner, Ayla, "20% Hotter." Still from video by author, March 2021, <https://vimeo.com/user101480854>





Fig. 11. Corner, Ayla, "20% Hotter." Still from video by author, March 2021, <https://vimeo.com/user101480854>

considered “the only creatures that steadfastly refuse to let nature alone dictate their appearance ... our capacity for self-modification and adornment is a central and essential feature of our humanity” (297).

When it comes to rhetoric privileging the ‘natural’ body, it’s fair to say that my tolerance is pretty low at this point. As if there can be such a thing as a human body that is unnatural. To attempt to declare a body as unnatural is essentialist, and from my experience most of the time what people are actually offering is an opinion that a body is sullied, or no longer pure, or they’re labelling an individual’s identity as illegitimate. The only possible requisite of a human body as ‘natural’ is that you were born into the world, and even then, if you were hatched out of a big weird egg by scientists I’d still grant you the status of a ‘natural’ body.

While the purist view of the ‘natural’ body finds its foundations in Christianity declaring the clean, uncontaminated body is a signifier of moral purity, this was a view reified in Modernism. As Lauren Kalman explains “minimalism, intellectual purity, health industry, and white male privilege are linked historically, and that link was codified aesthetically throughout the Modernist period” (49). In her body of work *Devices for Filling a Void*, Kalman creates a series of adornments informed by devices used in surgical reconstruction. Contorting the body, her ceramic and metal forms hold open orifices, inhibiting basic actions of breathing and swallowing. While physically filling voids, these forms “also imply a psychological filling of emotional or erotic voids” (56). Kalman has a very deliberate use of craft within her practice. This in part is due to craft’s relationship to the human body. Permeating the everyday through clothing, jewellery, decoration, and domestic items, craft “has been conceptualized as a medium that has remained vital outside of the contemporary art world” (50). Craft’s connection to the feminine is also a key element of Kalman’s work, as someone who’s practice

has been an ongoing critique to the insularity of Modernity, and its historical exclusion of women, assertive performance of the adorned female body in response to these discourses plays a crucial role in Kalman’s practice. Her emphasis on orifices responds to the suggestion of the feminine body as a site of contamination. Given that outward appearance was an ‘obvious’ signifier for inner purity, it became women’s social responsibility to smooth over and seal up the body through clothing, menstrual products, and make-up as a way “to hide the corporeal realities of the body” (50).



Fig. 12. Kalman, Lauren. “*Devices for Filling a Void (12)*”. 2017, Inkjet Print 20x16”



Fig. 13. Kalman, Lauren. "Devices for Filling a Void (4)." 2015, Inkjet Print 20x16"

It is safe to assume that there is a fair amount of tension tied up in feminist theory surrounding cosmetic surgery, and adornment of the body in general. I mean how could there not be. On one hand Professor Virginia Blum argues that the corporeal hyperaestheticism in CSRT has led to women becoming "scalpel slaves" trapped in a cycle of competing and comparing with one another for beauty (107). On the other hand Susan Bordo offers that historically feminist discourse primarily focused on highlighting how oppressive traditional femininity could be and therefore "could not be expected to give much due to the pleasures of shaping and decorating the body or their subversive potential" (193). I agree that in cosmetic surgery and reality television there is a primary focus on the smoothing over and

shaping women's bodies into what is deemed 'desirable'. However, I believe that to understand women who participate in these spaces merely as duped victims incapable of making authentic decisions does a disservice to their agency as individuals, and negates the complex consideration and intersubjectivity involved in undergoing a cosmetic procedure in the first place. I think it's also important to acknowledge cosmetic surgery as an incredible feat of medical technology. Isn't it wild that you can have an entirely different nose, isn't it amazing that someone can have surgery to make it feel as though their body belongs to them, wouldn't it be nice if a myopic standard of beauty didn't shape the mainstream use of these technologies. I do think it's possible to hold all these facets as truth because the complexity of each side is reflective of the reality of the CSRT debate, sometimes it's just hard to navigate their incongruity.

In her interview with Ian Sinclair, Rosalind Gill explains that in today's society the contextualisation of the body as a project to be worked on, paired with an intense focus on social media means that now "the requirement to curate an appealing self is ... a growing social and cultural imperative" (6). No one can escape the celestial all seeing eye that classifies an increasing number of neutral features of the human body as fixable. Recently I found out I had 'violin hips' and as soon as that happened I was met with exercises and procedures on how to fix them. Suddenly I no longer had my Dad's square hips, I had a problem. Herein lies my primary discomfort with makeover culture and its all seeing eye, I resolutely maintain that bodies should just be allowed to freely exist without certain features being coded as good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, hot or not. Within that people should be granted the agency to change themselves accordingly to what feels right to them as their identities change and evolve. As grotesque and living bodies we are constantly in a state of becoming as we change and decay and interact with the world.





possibly a swan?



***ARE you ready? Are YOU ready?***  
***corporeal commitments to fairy tale endings***

*Cinderella could never have crushed her former servitude under anything but the glinting heel of a glass slipper. As time and media have interacted, these charming tales have leapt from gilded book pages to the glossy veneer of women's magazines, and more recently, to the captivating screens serving as the centrepiece of the nuclear families living room.*

*(Nancy Bigelow, Su Holmes, 2)*

The simulacrum of reality I saw in reality television paralleled the themes in fairy tales I'd read as a child, the same fairy tale themes that permeated the media I consumed as a teenager. While I watched makeover shows that focused on the human body like *Botched*, *The Swan*, *I Want A Famous Face*, the act of makeover seeped into countless other spaces, *Pimp my Ride*, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, *My Big Fat Pet Makeover*. As in fairy tales, the before is crucial to the effectiveness of the after in CSRT. It is hard to procure entertainment from a vibrant new after-body if it is not presented in contrast to a dull and stale before. Natalie Bigelow and Su Holmes situate these before-bodies in the realm of Bakhtinian grotesque:

*These 'before' bodies find historical roots in the grotesque body theories of the nineteenth century, as theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin. Unbound as they are by and in social opposition to social hierarchies, these grotesque bodies need to be addressed through a combination of voyeurism and class tensions, offering endless televisual entertainment. (Bigelow and Holmes, 2)*

The characters of makeover shows embody classic fairy tale archetypes. The host or surgeon fills the role of fairy godmother, the contestant is the person or monster that is ripe for transformation, the wicked witch or oppressor of the story is embodied through societal

narratives that deem the participants body unacceptable and their identity invalid. These well-known archetypes create a contemporary entertainment vehicle for a capitalist agenda. CSRT's shaming of normative bodies puts forth the notion that any unhappiness in one's career, romantic life, or social status, can be cured through the acquisition of transformation, "the emphasis on the 'new you' rests heavily on the novelty of purchasing" (Bigelow and Holmes, 4). This reflects a classic capitalist trope that rests the blame of dissatisfaction on individuals for not conforming to constructed societal norms, rather than critiquing the systematically constructed circumstances that bred their unhappiness in the first place.

Vanessa Nunes explains that CSRT can be seen as a contemporary retelling of classic fairy tales, stating that fairy tales "change through time, space, culture, and media ... While viewers are not themselves enacting a role in a fairy tale by watching reality shows, they can use ... the knowledge of fairy tales as a tool to make sense of these programs" (592). Another dominant narrative within CSRT is the idea that transformation acts as a means to locate that which was inside the individual all along, similar to the theme seen in *The Ugly Duckling* - which is also the basis for the CSRT show *The Swan*. In this story we learn the ugly duckling was a swan all along, and with the transformation into swan comes the acceptance of those who previously ostracized him and judged him as ugly. This story of acceptance of self and those around you is kind of undermined by the condition that we'll only achieve this fulfilment if we turn into a swan. Rather than the assurance that we were beautiful all along, and that harmful criticism from others shouldn't impact our outward appearance or self-worth, we instead learn that liberation and acceptance comes through acquiescence. This is where one of my key discomforts with CSRT lies, we're not all serendipitously going to turn into swans, genetically it's just not on the cards. And that's fine, because all bodies deserve care and respect regardless of whether or not they slot into current beauty ideals.

I take issue with the idea that if you work hard enough you and your body can be accepted by others and yourself, it's a flimsy ideology that if you haven't achieved corporeal satisfaction, you're just not trying hard enough. And I just don't buy it. I will acknowledge that self-esteem and self-worth are important assets that help us in navigating through society. They are the tools we take into battle that allow us to tolerate interacting with our friend's friend who made a snarky comment about that jumper we wore that one time, or when we need to do well in job interviews. And I am willing to admit that a positive transformation can give someone the boost of self-esteem they need to assert themselves meaningfully in the world. And I will wholeheartedly agree that cosmetic surgery is a valuable tool for these transformations. However, when it comes to CSRT, there's a wilful ignorance when it comes to acknowledging the circumstances that prompted many of these transformations in the first place.

The dilemma with CSRT enacting fairy tale endings is that they're fairy tale endings. These shows are a curated unreality that has been cut, edited, and stuck together with the purpose of entertaining viewers for an hour or so. Reflecting on this points to one of the key troubles within cosmetic surgery. CSRT lifts cosmetic surgery out of the medical and into the marketable, framing cosmetic surgery as a product that can be sold makes it corruptible. Makeover culture's designation of what constitutes a 'normal' body leads to the over-medicalisation of things like sagging skin or thin lips, which in turn means it is profitable to make people feel as though their body is at fault and in need of improvement. In *Makeover TV* Brenda Weber explains that in the world of CSRT "the body stands as a gateway to the self" (5). This potentially harmful line of thought perpetuated within CSRT feeds into the notion that individual's before-bodies are incapable of possessing valid selfhood, because in makeover culture's "heteronormative economy they are ... so far outside a normative frame that they have no intelligibility as valid subjects" (13).

This first iteration of *ARE You Ready? Are YOU Ready?* was compiled of found footage from the CSRT show *The Swan*. Of all the CSRT I have consumed, *The Swan* was the most intense of them all. First airing in 2004 the show took 'ugly duckling' contestants and transformed them over a three month period. They had a team of nutritionists, therapists, dentists, cosmetic surgeons, and personal trainers, who designed and orchestrated their individual transformations. During the three months they were not allowed to see their appearance at all. At the end of each episode, they entered a room, surrounded by their team, and were shown their reflection for the first time in months. At the end of every season, the contestants participated in The Swan Pageant, and one of them was crowned the winner. Criticised for over-sensationalising cosmetic surgery, and providing contestants with minimal aftercare, *The Swan* was cancelled after two seasons.

The final reveal scenes were so ritualistic in nature, these women were finally seeing their 'new selves' after three months of not being able to see themselves at all. The footage was drawn out, wide panning shots swooped around and above the women, close ups of their faces, their clenched hands, a tall daunting almost yonic curtain signified their rebirth, behind the curtain was the first mirror they'd been allowed to see in months, behind them the voice of the presenter utters, "Are you ready?" I became so fatigued from these same scenes over and over again, that I compiled a number of them together, all these different women, all these same shots, played over and over in a loop, dissolving them all into one. The homogeneity that had been inscribed on all these women made it almost impossible to tell them apart. These reveal scenes were still very brief in comparison to the rest of the show. I believe this can partly be attributed to the entertainment factor in CSRT largely being placed on the process of becoming. Far more time is dedicated to



Fig. 14. Corner, Ayla. "ARE You Ready - First iteration." Still from video by author. January 2021.

watching the build-up, contestants undergo intense surgical procedures, followed by rigorous exercise and diet regimes, all while their faces are bandaged up and healing, Peri Bradley suggests that "dressings, bruising and swellings having taken on a borrowed sense of glamour, to have become a signifier of veiled and potential beauty" (29). This potential beauty, the space of becoming, keeps audiences engaged and invested. The anticipation of fulfilment, our emotional investment in watching the transformational process makes the gratification of seeing the metamorphosed after-body all the more satisfying.

*ARE You Ready? Are YOU Ready?* recreates these looped reveal scenes, the endless build up parodies the anticipation of a counterfeit fairy tale ending that entices millions of people to watch CSRT. In this work I situate myself as both the contestant and host, one waiting to be granted a realised self that can never truly be resolved, the other a quasi-administrator of identity. This work is an embodiment of where I find myself at the end of this journey, caught in an at times fatiguing loop of contested narrative, navigating an ongoing internal dialogue ripe with contradiction. As Peri Bradley states, "we now have the power to narrate our own corporeal presence," and with this power technology will change and evolve, and ideals of beauty will writhe and grow and pullulate (28). I don't know if I'll ever feel wholly disentangled or resolved in this area of discourse, but I am at peace being knee deep in this ambiguity of this space.





Fig. 15. Corner, Ayla. *"ARE You Ready, Are YOU Ready?"* Still from film by author. May 2021.





Fig. 16. Corner, Ayla. *"ARE You Ready, Are YOU Ready?"* Still from film by author. May 2021.

## **Conclusion**

The root of my infatuation with transformation isn't just that I desperately wanted to have blue hair like Marge Simpson, it was that she was the woman with blue hair. When I was younger that was of value for me, and I never felt like I was someone that had a signifier of self, an identifying characteristic, be it physically, socially, or recreationally. As an adult, as a Pākehā, cis-gendered, queer woman, though I've felt in between spaces and in between identities, I am far more comfortable with the flux of myself and my identity.

The most valuable thing I've come away with through this process - somewhat unexpectedly - is an understanding of how makeover culture has impacted me. I have watched thousands of hours of these shows, a fatiguing number of before and after montages, so much so that they've all blended into the same smoothed over but appropriately lumpy body.

I've transformed my own appearance countless times, sometimes as a response to being stressed, directionless, bored, other times because I'm happy, or excited. Transformation has helped to bring me back into my body, or assert control, or make something new. For the most part, it works out and brings me joy

Most of the time it's for myself, other times if I've unwittingly recreated attributes I've seen in people who appear fulfilled socially, or romantically, or in their careers. Sometimes - embarrassingly - it was for men, wearing two bras at 13 to make it look like I had more than half a handful of boob, shaving my body from the neck down at 16, keeping my tummy flat, going to the hairdresser and telling them to keep as much length as possible.

At times, it's fun.

At midnight, standing naked in front of a grubby floor length mirror, staring at my face, not fully recognising myself in the soft lamp light because I got rid of my eyebrows. A global pandemic is happening and this action has brought me at least 3 days of joy, so it was worth it.

I get a tattoo of a saggy, three-titted cat, the pain brings me back to the ground, my on-purpose scab to care for helps me remember to care for the rest of myself.

I leave the house with beautiful turquoise hair, electric in the sun, I change it again and my hair melts because of the damage.

### ***list of figures***

Fig. 1. Corner, Ayla. *Untitled*, personal photograph by author, May 2019.

Fig. 2. Corner, Ayla. *Untitled*, personal photograph by author, May 2019.

Fig. 3. Corner, Ayla. *Untitled*, personal photograph by author, May 2019.

Fig. 4. Corner, Ayla. "Ooze Works 2." Still from video by author, June 2020,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKpZwCCqbcg&list=PL9JUUEifEwnRoxDpDDXJwo0u0xVbFi2WT&index=3>

Fig. 5. Corner, Ayla. "Ooze Works 1." Still from video by author, May 2020,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jd3twNy1eH0&list=PL9JUUEifEwnRoxDpDDXJwo0u0xVbFi2WT&index=1>

Fig. 6. Adriana Varejão, *Azulejaria "De tapete" em carne viva* ("Carpet-Style" Tilework in Live Flesh), 1999, oil on canvas and polyurethane on aluminium and wooden support, 59 x 74 3/4 x 9 3/4". *ARTFORUM*,  
<https://www.artforum.com/print/201201/fluid-dynamics-the-art-of-adriana-varejao-29820>

Fig. 7. Corner, Ayla, "Bigger, Fuller, Bouncier." Still from video by author, September 2020, <https://vimeo.com/user101480854>.

Fig. 8. Corner, Ayla, "Bigger, Fuller, Bouncier." Still from video by author, September 2020, <https://vimeo.com/user101480854>.

Fig. 9. ORLAN, "Omnipresence ." Close up of a laughing during the 7th Surgery-Performance, New York, 1993,  
<http://www.orlan.eu/works/performance-2/>.

Fig. 10. Corner, Ayla, "20% Hotter." Still from video by author, March 2021, <https://vimeo.com/user101480854>

Fig. 11. Corner, Ayla, "20% Hotter." Still from video by author, March 2021, <https://vimeo.com/user101480854>

Fig. 12. Kalman, Lauren. "Devices for Filling a Void (12)". 2017, Inkjet Print 20x16" <https://www.laurenkalman.com/portfolio/devices>,

Fig. 13. Kalman, Lauren. "Devices for Filling a Void (4)." 2015, Inkjet Print 20x16" <https://www.laurenkalman.com/portfolio/devices>.

Fig. 14. Corner, Ayla. "ARE You Ready - First iteration." Still from video by author. January 2021.

Fig. 15. Corner, Ayla. "ARE You Ready, Are YOU Ready?" Still from film by author. May 2021.

Fig. 16. Corner, Ayla. "ARE You Ready, Are YOU Ready?" Still from film by author. May 2021.

All illustrations by author.



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