

THE LEATHER DIARIES: THE RISE AND FALL OF ROCKET QUEEN

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A THESIS SUPPORT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTERS IN APPLIED ARTS

in

Visual Arts

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2016

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ABSTRACT

In the midst of doing my Master's degree, I created an alternate persona for myself. She belongs to a tribe of edgy women, and explores various aspects of self in relation to past and present narratives of fandom. Fandom is a subculture of fans that share a common interest, in this case heavy metal. Since 2014, I've framed my alternate identity in the art world. For this paper and my art and graduate work she is *Rocket Queen [ET]*. Her desire to relive becoming *Youth Gone Wild*¹ is a desperate attempt to escape the inevitable: mortality. Rocket Queen and *Rocket Queen [ET]*- my persona name- is a fantasy character acting in a type of large social drama or my own rock drama where we can witness the rise and fall of rebellious women. *Rocket Queen [ET]* takes her adventures through a series of art making in the form of rock posters stapled up around the city of Calgary, Alberta as interventions, installations using concert lights and leather reconfigured to appear in the tradition of objects/wall paintings. My aim is to understand and disrupt gender expectations and to signify homologous and heterogeneous characteristics, while aestheticizing and fetishizing the coded material of heavy metal culture. Leather remains a powerful masculine signifier in heavy metal and is prominent in my artwork. It carries with it a history of objectification and sex along with other meanings and histories.

In my thesis project I explore the predominately male subculture as "other" and from the perspective of a female, a fan, someone engaging the genre not in London but in the Canadian prairies, and as an artist. My media comprise paintings, mock paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, theatrical lights, paper posters, civic interventions and gallery installations. I am identifying with this subculture and its feelings of empowerment and freedom, while simultaneously being isolated from its core as a player.

¹ Skid Row, *Youth Gone Wild*, 1989.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I thank my Joseph, Anna and Evelyn. Thanks to my supervisor Landon Mackenzie and my fellow graduates, faculty and staff of Emily Carr University of Art and Design and I extend a special note of thanks to Kimberly Phillips, Kathleen Ritter, M. Simon Levin, Aaron Peck, John Cussans, Bruce Grenville, Mimi Gellman, Mark Neufeld and Chris Jones. Lastly, thanks to Zab, Janice, Judy, Jamie, Ro and Michelle – Rocket Queens Forever.

DEDICATION

To All the Rocket Queens

She lays out her leather pants carefully on the bed, with just enough room to place the black Metallica shirt above the waist. She walks over to the stereo to turn up Motley Crue as loud as possible, but not so loud the landlord will bang on the floor. She leans into the mirror and holds her breath as she drags a solid black line along her eyelid. She grabs her hot pink lipstick and purses her lips into a kiss. Dancing back to the bedroom to coolly slide into her leather pants. “She’s got looks to kill,” she growls, as she leans back, sticking her tongue out, making devil horns with her fingers.

Rocket Queen [ET], 1999

(Composed in a basement suite on 16th Avenue in Calgary)

1 INTRODUCTION

Cultural theorist Dick Hebdige, in his cult classic “*Subculture: The meaning of style*”, writes that music offers an “escape—from class, from sex, from personality, from obvious commitment—into a fantasy past or a science-fiction future” (Hebdige 61). Music creates imaginary spaces to escape reality, to *be* someone else and to *feel* something else but gender remains inescapable.

Heavy metal was, and is, this transient space for me. It was when I was an adolescent teenage girl, and still is for me as middle aged woman—a mother, wife, teacher and artist. However, this temporary illusion does not come to me without conflict, transgression and contradictions. In the heavy metal illusion, men and women drift between their gender identities, often at the cost of objectification. Wading into this ‘dangerous’ discourse is much like entering

a “mosh pit”² with hopes of rising to the top despite the risk of being trampled to death at a stadium concert.

In *Poster Poles*, 2015, I designed multiple print portraits of a postured *Rocket Queen [ET]* using performance, photography and printing. These 11 x 17 inch prints were plastered alongside “real” rock concert posters aimed at street level audiences passing by, and heavy metal consumers in my downtown hometown. I also created eight-foot high cylindrical sculptures engaging past and present, real and imagined, actual and symbolic. Plastered with rock posters, they simulated concert announcement pasted-up lampposts and telephone poles found in urban settings.

Leather tableaux / Leather Diaries, another series, I homogenize “used” leather articles of clothing by sewing them into black monochromatic leather paintings. Rather than using paint and canvas, the leather compositions are wrapped around typical painter’s wooden stretcher bars and are intended to be shown on institutional gallery walls as “paintings”.

1.1 Music

Music has inspired many people to imagine alternate personas, alter egos and fictitious characters. In the 1970s, shock rocker Vincent Furnier materialized into the superstar Alice Cooper. American hard rock band KISS enhanced their success by creating comic-book personas for each band member.³ Other rock examples include American guitarist Brian Carroll known

² The mosh pit is the area on the floor in front of the stage where the audience can lift each other up to surf the hands of standing listeners.

³ The Starchild (Paul Stanley), The Demon (Gene Simmons), The Spaceman or Space Ace (Ace Frehley) and The Catman (Peter Criss).

professionally as Buckethead, Brian Hugh Warner as industrial metal lead vocalist in Marilyn Manson and American band Slipknot.

As women in Western culture, we are habituated to the idea of dress up and role-playing. A woman might exercise many identities in a single day: wife, mother, teacher, nurse, counselor, chef and coach, as I do. However, the role of “rock star” or “bad girl” is not a usual or conditioned character for women to play. Legends like Annie Lennox, Patti Smith, Madonna and Joan Jett have powerful identities that are rare in all music subcultures, and especially in heavy metal.

As documented in this paper and in the artwork, I create my own alternate persona in this unconventional space within heavy metal. Through the rise and fall of my alternate identity, *Rocket Queen [ET]*, I explore and research heavy metal like my own rock drama⁴. My fictional character has enabled me to explore gender, identity, transgressions, objectification and misogyny in the bricolage of heavy metal and she is only getting started.

Heavy metal has been a part of my life since adolescence, and a new part of my adulthood for the past few years as I reconstruct my relationship to it using the lens and tools of art and critical discussion to understand my complicated relationship to this subculture. I listen to metal when I am driving, cooking, running and creating things in my studio. For twenty years and counting I’ve attend roughly five heavy metal concerts a year, and more if money allows. I wear my old concert t-shirts in my off hours. For leisure I read heavy metal biographies.

Historically heavy metal’s introductory appearance as a term came in 1869 when the first Periodic Table of Elements was published. Literally the term heavy metal was used by writer William Burroughs in his 1959 novel *Naked Lunch* and two years later in *The Soft Machine* to

⁴ Inspired by David Bowie and his creation of an alter ego Ziggy Stardust in *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* album.

describe his character Uranian Willy as “the Heavy Metal Kid” (Turman and Wiederhorn 1). In 1968 the musician Steppenwolf wrote ‘heavy metal thunder’ in his song ‘Born to Be Wild’ to describe the speed of a motorcycle on the highway. During this same time, English metal band Black Sabbath was being called ‘heavy metal’ because of its overarching metallic sound. It’s an ominous sound that is aggressively loud and distorted with electric guitars. Such musical noise is often preformed with a virtuoso guitarist and flamboyant lead singer dressed (in) head to toe in black leather. The culture thrives on live performances that are often accompanied by an elaborate stage display of tombstones, fireworks, cannons, zombie mascots, rollercoaster drum kits, dancers, and laser lights. The demographic is largely made up of white, working class males and a sprinkling of ‘beautiful’ women. The dress code for musicians and fans includes black, leather, long hair and excessive metal studs. Other typical and ‘tough’ attributes are motorcycle imagery, skulls and Satanic references. Glam metal is a sub-subculture where the tough dress code is enhanced with feminine attributes like lace, spandex, obvious face make up, high heel shoes or boots, excessive jewelry and colours of black, red and metal studs.

For this project I reference popular heavy metal bands, such as Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, ACDC, Poison, Motley Crue, Black Sabbath, Alice Cooper, Metallica and Guns N’ Roses. These bands have had large international commercial success, ample radio airplay, heavy rotation on MTV and have maintained a cult like following for forty years since the mid-1970s⁵. These are the groups I had the most access to while growing up in a small town in the Canadian prairies, partly through the availability through television of MTV’s ‘Head Bangers Ball’.

⁵ The black metal (death metal) subculture is quite different from the British and glam metal scenes. It is more underground and a lot less commercial than the bands I am most referencing and therefore it is not the subject of this thesis.

Using this genre of music as research for my art became an obvious choice because of my obsession, but was no less challenging. On one level, I found the work inspiring because it was like channeling a waterfall, and yet it was difficult for me to look deeply at something with a completely different, and critical lens at the risk of losing my innocence. Now I immersed myself in heavy metal culture not only from the perspective of a fan, but as an aging woman, academic and artist. It took conscious effort for me to stop ‘moshing’ in the mosh-pit and really see where I had placed myself. I did not particularly like everything I saw. It was here that my persona *Rocket Queen [ET]* was born, in the belly of the (studio) mosh-pit.

1.2 The Mosh Pit

The (studio) mosh-pit is a feminist space for me to create my art and define my practice as an artist; a separate world of making, mess and a different kind of associative logic. I identify with contemporary feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti’s figuration of the nomadic subject. I feel that I too am in a constant state of “in-process” and “becoming” (Braidotti 1), unsteady and not fixed to one role. Like a nomad, *Rocket Queen [ET]* does not seek a home, but rather moves fluidly from place to place, gathering understanding during the voyage. My practice insists on this flexible transformation by allowing for multiple and varied expression. The mosh-pit serves as a metaphor for my constant mental movement, ‘seething in the pit of sweat’. Perceiving it as a mental space, as well as a physical one accommodates the idea that I can choose to remove myself from the mosh-pit and seek refuge and reflection while sitting in the stands and returning to my other identity roles.

2 THE RISE OF ROCKET QUEEN

Handwriting as drawing led me to heavy metal as my artistic subject of the past three years (2013-2016). While working in my studio, listening to a local rock radio station, I was moved by the music of ACDC. I painted the lyrics to *Back in Black* as I rocked wildly around the room (Fig. 1).

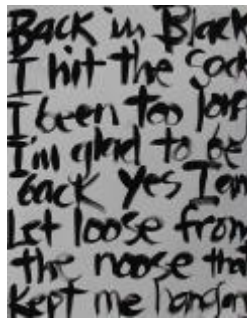


Fig. 1. Erin Tysowski, *Back in Black*, 2013.
India ink on paper, 20 x 26 inches.

I enjoyed this action work so much I painted the lyrics for more songs as they came on the radio onto new surfaces. This turned into a series of works on various papers. I even enrolled in private classes with a local Chinese calligrapher in Calgary to further understand the relationship between body, brush and ink traditions. Later, I moved from paper to canvas and painted a concrete poem like the back of an album jacket; my text associations of heavy metal. (Fig.2).



Fig. 2. Erin Tysowski, *Metal*, 2014.
Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches.

I began to pull out all my heavy metal concert t-shirts to look again at their meaning. With dozens of them, I began photographing in my studio. Then, going a step further I wore them while performing the ritual of “head banging,” which for the uninitiated is where one’s head is swung dizzyingly back and forth in a conforming action (Fig.3) to the beat.

With these photographs of that ritual now on my desktop computer, I had a revelation: I saw a Rock Queen; not mother, high school art teacher or middle class housewife. I saw a powerful, strong, fierce and sexy woman in that gesture that signified oblivion, movement, ritual and empowerment. I saw the other (more) real me.



Fig. 3. Erin Tysowski, *Head Bangers*, 2014.
Digital photographs on papers, various sizes.

On the computer I began to use PhotoShop with my paintings, drawings, handwriting, risoprints and photographs transforming them into rock posters, setting in motion questions about musical history, categories and fandom. I questioned my own role and resistance. I started reflecting on who started the genre? What is labeled as true heavy metal music? How do white “grown up” women like me still fit into this (white male) subculture?

In my exploration of books, films and questioning of other heavy metal fans, I obtained inconsistent answers. Many were based on personal preference, opinion, loose factual

In an alternate diagram, the historical timeline of heavy metal is best expressed through sound, as a type of chronological mix tape (Appendix 2). To understand the history is to hear it. I organized heavy metal albums that were significant to me chronologically. Though there is no substitute for the phenomena of emersion in full-on concert sound and spectacle, I begin with David Bowie (1969) and Jimi Hendrix (1972).

Fans use popular culture to “resist the pressure of their social position and [to] construct new identities for themselves” (Grossberg 582). I see that I had created an identity or persona rooted in my past investments in heavy metal. I appropriated the name *Rocket Queen [ET]* and willingly share this name with other females from heavy metal.

2.1 The Origin

The name *Rocket Queen* seems to first appear as the title of a song by Guns N’ Roses.⁶ The song contains audio sound of Adriana Smith, a young woman in the rock scene, having sex with Axl Rose, the notorious leader of the band. This song quickly became the most infamous track on Guns N’ Roses’ debut album *Appetite for Destruction* in 1987. The lyrics are about a heroin using sex worker (“junkie prostitute”) who was Axl’s love interest, and how he was going to start a band with her called *Rocket Queen*.

I chose to adopt the name of *Rocket Queen* as my alter ego for a few reasons. I like, *Queen* as a term of esteemed power and respect, similar to *goddess*, to parallel heavy metal artists who are well-known as Rock Gods (Elvis, Michael Jackson, Ozzy Osborne, Eddie Van Halen). I like its reference to drag and its slippery gender framing. Further I want to

⁶ Alternately in 1972 Elton John wrote the song ‘Rocket Man’, however this had no relationship to Axl’s lyrics.

acknowledge the artist Adriana Smith who regretted her recorded sex act with Rose for it compromised her permanently, casting her in an unfair and destructive moral context. In my version I aim to reframe this.



Fig. 5. Erin Tysowski, *Rocket Queen* poster installation, 2015.
17th Avenue SW, Calgary, Alberta.

2.2 Fandom and the Middle Age Groupie

My research into heavy metal has made me extremely self-conscious of my gender and female identity as a longtime participant and *very* obsessed fan. I can drop into the subculture from my other life, and return to my disguise as nice suburban housewife, supermom and high school teacher. I am interested in studying my male-centered subculture characterized by misogyny, sexism and transgression, and paradoxically find metal sexually and gender empowering. Vancouver artist Steven Shearer scrutinizes his own masculinity by re-examining male head bangers of the 80's. He paints androgynous longhaired males depicting their insecurities and vulnerabilities in heavy metal culture. I have yet to find a female as the subject in his metal genre paintings. Is this because we were present but invisible?

The generic role of a woman in heavy metal is often presented as a passive and one-dimensional groupie (Weinstein, 67) who looks cute and has “*looks to kill*” (Motley Crue, 1984). *Groupie* is not synonymous with empowerment, rather it is associated with labels such as slut, whore, easy, loose, one-night stand, “dumb blonde chick” or “plaster casters”⁷. A groupie does anything to get backstage or somewhere even more intimate with a member of the band and this brings her power. In an iconic documentary of heavy metal, “*The Decline of Western Civilization Part II: The Metal Years*,” groupies are even referred to as the “fleas and ticks of Rock n’ Roll.” Yet in the same film, Steven Tyler of soft metal band Aerosmith says he loves groupies. He defines them as his alter ego, reflecting the love of being in a band and loving the music. Societal expectations mean that women are often caught in this dilemma of being wanting

⁷ Cynthia Plaster Caster is an American artist and former “groupie” who creates plaster casts of famous rock musicians erect penises.

to be wanted and objectified for their beauty/body. Metal bands conform to this idea by writing love songs just to attract women to their concerts to disrupt the almost all-male crowd.

Jacqueline Warwick in her book "Girl Groups, Girl Culture," explains the difficult position of women in metal and other male subcultures.

...girls find themselves caught in a double bind: choosing to participate in the musical discourse of important male culture limits them to the subject position of groupie or perhaps honorary male, but subscribing to an identifying girl-centered music earns them contempt for embracing mainstream fluff (Warwick 5).

She argues that sex and sex identity are important issues in music and the differences of gender can be explained in stereotypical traits found in the music. Warwick agreed with Susan McClary's controversial definitions that masculine music can be defined as aggressive, rhythmically energetic, created with instruments such as brass, percussion, low strings, distorted electric guitar and feminine music is soft, melodic, made by instruments such as flute, harp, acoustic guitar.⁸ By McClary's definition, heavy metal bands are stereotypically masculine and classical, while soft music is feminine. To attract female fans to heavy metal, bands had to include ballads, love songs or acoustic guitar music in their playlist. Many glam and pop metal bands wrote love songs. However, regardless of how soft or heavy the music sounded, the lyrics and song titles encouraged sexism and objectification.⁹

One way of handling the sexism, misogyny and objectification is to take Weinstein's perspective that "seemingly the best [interpretation of this behavior is] that women do it to make fun of the sexism while embodying it" (Weinstein, 69). In *Poster Poles*, 2015, *Rocket Queen*

⁸ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: music, gender & sexuality*.

⁹ "Sticky Sweet" (Motley Crue, 1989), "Talk Dirty to Me" (Poison, 1986), "Cherry Pie" (Warrant, 1990), "Let's Put the X in Sex" (KISS, 1988), and "Slip of the Lip" (Ratt, 1986).

[ET] creates posters making fun of sex and gender in rock and roll (Fig.6). These poster poles were part of my installation in an exhibition called “Mixed Tape” held at Emily Carr University in 2015. The *Poster Poles* began as an exploration of *Rocket Queen*’s as a band, lead singer or metal head, and **not** in the role of groupie. The posters fictitiously highlight upcoming performances, outdoor concerts, fantasy bands and lost or found clothing items.



Fig. 6. Erin Tysowski, *Rocket Queen*, 2015.
Installation in Concourse Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver. Photo:
Ross Kelly. Used with permission.

My work *Not with the Band*, 2015 is a play on the book cover for a notorious rock groupie named Pamela des Barres for her book “I’m with the Band” (Fig.7).



Fig. 7. Erin Tysowski, *Not with the Band*, 2015.
Digital print, 11 x 17 inches.

A simple adjustment such as heavy black eyeliner and leather pants are strong signifiers for a certain type of girl. A type of girl who contrasts with a high school teacher or mother. A type of girl who is reckless, rebellious and will “Rock N’ Roll All Night.” My persona *Rocket Queen [ET]* is more than a one-dimensional character; she embodies an “imaginative space in which you can reaffirm your sexual identity or stretch and sometimes escape its limits altogether” (xi Reynolds).

Gender tourism or “venturing where the grass seems greener, taking a walk on the wild side, or simply leaving your everyday self behind” (xi Reynolds), encompasses more than just the space of groupie. In my case study, a once-shy teenager, then school teacher, can glimpse ferocity by participating or engaging in the music and subculture of metal rock bands such as Metallica or Motorhead. Ordinary small town housewives can transform into heavy metal queens like Lita Fords and Joan Jett. A woman might also be a fan, enthusiastically devoted to something because it matters, because they are invested in something that they love even when it seems contradictory.

I made the *Poster Poles* (Fig. 5, 6, 7) and the suite of artwork called *Leather Tableaux / Leather Diaries*, 2015-2016 to challenge *Rocket Queen* to be seen beyond gender, labels and

history, to reveal a space of homogeneous fandom and a space where women can be imaginary rock stars.

2.3 Fetish Culture and Sex in Heavy Metal

Fetish is defined as “an object or bodily part whose real or fantasied presence is psychologically necessary for sexual gratification and that is an object of fixation to the extent that it may interfere with complete sexual expression” (Mariam-Webster). Black (and red) leather is a common type of material for a fetish that references the masculine power of the uniform in bikers, gang members, cowboys, policemen and military personnel.

In the late 1970s, fetish-inspired fashions entered mainstream clothing, and led to the “bad boy” look of the male rock model. In 1978, Rob Halford, lead singer from the British band Judas Priest, started wearing head to toe leather on stage to perform his music. His style was borrowed from biker gangs and gay S & M scenes. Heavy metal was gaining momentum as a powerful music genre, and many bands like Alice Cooper, KISS, and Motley Crue, adhered to the black leather dress code.

Fetishism is much more common in men than women (Steele 22). Sex was a prominent part of heavy metal in the form of the songs, stage performances, dress code, lyrics and backstage culture, but there was no space for women other than an object of desire and exploitation. Gene Simmons of KISS and Bret Michaels of Poison, publicly bragged about the many women they have had sex with while on tour ¹⁰. Bret Michael’s three-season reality TV

¹⁰ Motley Crue: *The Dirt- Confessions of the World’s Most Notorious Rock Band*.

series, *Rock of Love* advertised that the rock star was “looking for love”. However, he was also looking for a groupie revival to make him feel young again and kick start his aging career. Though as much as women are wanted to join the “tough guy” club, they seemed never to be perceived as the “tough girls”, even when dressed in head to toe black leather.

3 ADVENTURES OF ROCKET QUEEN

3.1 Leather Tableaux / The Leather Diaries

My Leather Tableaux / The Leather Diaries are intended to speak to relationships among heavy metal cultural signifiers through their look and feel. The signifier of loud, fast, intense rock music signifying angry freedom gives heavy metal meaning ¹¹. The physical form of leather on the wooden stretchers reference painting and encourage the viewer to question why leather? Why stitching? Some of the artwork appears to be quiet and elegant, and others are more aggressive, distorted, and sexy to raise possibilities or ask questions of gender and identity.

The first time I used leather as a material, I used my own leather pants as part of my first *Poster Poles* installation in 2015. I also photographed my leather pants and leather bra as part of series of fictitious industry look-alike rock posters that I stapled among real posters along 17th Avenue in downtown Calgary.

¹¹ Mimi Gellman, Canadian artist, from an email, September 2016.



Fig. 8. Erin Tysowski, *Poster Poles*, 2014.
Inkjet on paper, 11 x 17 inches.

During a photo-shoot, rather unconsciously, I placed the leather pants under a large photo of myself head banging. I felt energy emitting from the leather pants when I paired them with a photograph on the wall. The pants seemed to breathe life into the static image.



Fig. 9. Erin Tysowski, *Head banging, On a Wall in My House*, 2015.
Digital photograph, 36 x 58 inches.

The first exhibition where I used leather pants as part of an art object was my solo exhibition “Trespassing into the Mosh Pit,” at the Little Gallery, University of Calgary in 2015. On a long wall, I situated the pants underneath three black and white digital photographs clipped to white plastic clothes hangers (Fig. 10). I intended for viewers to consider interchanging the positions of the photographs over the static leather pants. I also rented LED stage lighting bars and placed them at the bottom of each wall (instead of the traditional gallery lighting above). Under *Switch*, those lights pulsed to mimic the rhythm and colours of concert lighting at a heavy metal performance.



Fig. 10. Erin Tysowski, *Switch*, 2015.
Installation, The Little Gallery, University of Calgary.

Later at Emily Carr University in 2015, I exhibited my leather pants as part of an installation of *Rocket Queen* in a group show held in the Concourse Gallery. Positioning the photograph off-center from the pants I wanted to see if it enhanced the head-banging action.



Fig. 11. Erin Tysowski, *Rocket Queen*, 2015.
Installation in Concourse Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver. Photo: Ross Kelly. Used with permission.

A fellow artist suggested that I make use of my own leather clothing by creating “paintings” from the material. I began to search my closet and storage space for leather that I had worn to heavy metal concerts in Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, Saskatoon, Vancouver and Las Vegas over a period of the last twenty years. I took out seams and cutting the articles into two-dimensional shapes, I still needed more leather to complete large canvases. I scoured the city of Calgary, looking in every used clothing store for men’s and women’s leather clothing. I also purchased a second hand sewing machine to sew my first leather pieces.

The first work, *Uniform*, 2015 was roughly sewn. Inconsistent stitching meant the leather could not be stretched tight, and it hung loosely on the stretcher bars, creating creases in the surface.



Fig. 12. Erin Tysowski, *Uniform*, 2015.
Leather on wooden frame, 36 x 36 inches. Photo: Steve Dutcheschen Photography Inc. Used with permission.

The leather pants are literal placing the emphasis on the “hole” created at the crotch of the pants (Fig. 12). The sexual reference created at this intersection was intended to remark on the fetishism of leather and sex. The stance of the pants reflects the gesture of *Rocket Queen[ET]*’s earlier installation of leather pants, where legs are positioned in a gesture recalling the coded heavy metal head banging, air guitar and calls up ACDC’s international anthem “...for those about to rock, we salute you”. This position of the pants very closely mimics the Rock N’ Roll stance seen by male lead singers on stage or on heavy metal album covers ¹². The crotch being an often loaded masculine gesture of power, especially in an industry that aims to fulfill sexual desires and fantasies. The crotch is a repeated motif in paintings *Imposter*, and *Zipper*s. The

¹² Rolling Stones “Sticky Fingers”, 1971 and Motley Crue “Too Fast for Love”, 1981.

sexual reference and tension created at this intersection was the beginning of my thoughts about the fetishism of leather and sex, and the relationship between the two subcultures. In *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture*, Deena Weinstein writes, “tight leather pants on a man does not signify the same thing as tight leather pants... on a woman” (68). I agree that a female leather crotch carries a different power than a male crotch does.

In fabricating the work, the technical issues I encountered led me to quickly realize the sewing machine I had purchased and my lack of expertise, was not sufficient to tackle leather to get what I want. I wanted the pieces to be flawless so I found Antoinetta Giacomini, (Tony), a seventy five year-old, retired seamstress who agreed to work with me as a studio assistant and teach me how to sew leather.

As an artist identifying as a “painter” since Art College, collaboration was not part of my creative process, nor was hiring a studio assistant, nor any form of co-making. To work collaboratively with Tony, I needed to embrace her advice on how to trace patterns, pin, sew and to plan the material before even considering the sewing machine – difficult feats to overcome. My impromptu and impulsive nature, and my training and approach to other past media and projects needed revision. The slow, methodical approach was painful for me. As someone trained as a painter, art for me had been messy and forgiving; sewing is neither. Leather is not forgiving, and if a hole is made in the surface it cannot be repaired to look invisible. Limitations imposed by sewing with the machine further dictate aspects of the finished design of the piece. It was more than I am used to relinquishing.



Fig. 13. Erin Tysowski, Plan for *Unisex*, pinned to studio wall, 2015.
Leather and pins, 45 x 36 inches.

My second piece, *Unisex*, 2015 (Fig. 14), was created using material from both men's and women's leather pants and jackets, not just women's garments as in the earlier versions. A figurative element that I left intact was the slightly tapered form of the back of a woman's leather jacket. I wanted to sew this shape carefully into the other masculine leather fragments. This small tapered section is noticeably different, yet blends in monochromatically with the rest of the piece. The woman's jacket distorts the clean, symmetrical lines that surround it, much like a woman's influence at a big heavy metal event surrounded by men.

Women are present in heavy metal, but are never fully accepted as equal or able conform to this "all boys club". Dick Hebdige, explains the term "homology" as an organized subcultural style, originating from Paul Willis (1978), that describes the "symbolic fit between values and lifestyles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns" (Hebdige 113). The "extreme orderliness" (113) of heavy metal is created by each subcategory within heavy metal. Part of the homology of heavy metal is that the

performers and dedicated audience members are mostly men. I point to the homology of the genre while exposing subtle differences.

Using only black in these works further accentuates the associations, tropes and codes in common with heavy metal but also a history in painting.¹³ *Unisex*, 2015 references Russian Constructivist Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* made one hundred years earlier in 1915. His black monochromatic paintings address concerns such as "painting as object", anonymity and the challenge to be void of all representation. Moving to the end of the 20th century's Post-Minimalism concerns, *Unisex* moves beyond a representational image to the materiality. It attempts to break down a distinction between painting and sculpture.



Fig. 14. Erin Tysowski, *Unisex*, 2015.
Leather, 36 x 36 inches. Photo: Scott Massey. Used with permission.

My goal in the third leather painting, *Imposter*, 2016 (Fig. 15) is to alter the inherent structure and shape of the leather pieces. For *Imposter*, I sewed the leather clothing to curve and bend and choosing a circular stretcher it contrasts with *Unisex*, where the lines were symmetrical

¹³ The colour black carries its own powerful symbolism and signifiers such as, but not limited to: death, evil, Satan, darkness, depression, witches and night.

and rigid. The square format of the previous two canvases with sharp hard edges echoed the masculine history of monochromatic paintings such as American artist Ad Reinhardt's black paintings of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Lucy Lippard, in her landmark 1976 book *From the Centre: Feminist essay's on Women's Art* states that she is,

“convinced that there are aspects of art by women which are inaccessible to men and that these aspects arise from the fact that a woman's political, biological, and social experience in this society is different from that of a man” (Lippard 143).

She adds that this does not mean men and women cannot share characteristics and sensibilities in their work, but for her in 1975 distinctions can be noted. One “feminine” characteristic Lippard attested too in the mid 1970s was a “central focus” and often-circular form (Lippard 143-44). Lippard wrote these ideas at the rise of Second Wave Feminism and though I have found many examples that contradict her statement, it is useful to test her ideas.



Fig. 15. Erin Tysowski, *Imposter*, 2016.
Synthetic leather, 36 inches in diameter. Photo: Scott Massey. Used with permission.

In addition to altering my approach to the lines and form of *Imposter*, instead of real leather I used “pretend” or faux leather called “Pleather”. I chose these articles of clothing and it was thought-provoking that in all my hunting in stores, I was not able to find one male faux leather article of clothing – new or used. All of the shirts, pants and jackets that were made with Pleather, or synthetic leather are women’s clothing. Often the tags in the clothing were removed, so distinguishing between fake and genuine was even more arduous. Some faux leather clothing manufactured today is convincingly like real leather in touch, look and feel. Under gallery lighting, *Imposter*, 2016 looks convincingly genuine, and acts as a comment on how women are often questioned about their authenticity of sincere and knowledgeable fandom in heavy metal in this male arena. To add to the complexity of this concept, women can feel like the imposters in this all boys club where men are accepted when they are dressing as women (Fig.16).¹⁴



Fig. 16. Erin Tysowski, *Open Up and Say AHH (after Poison, 1988)*, 2016.
Digital photograph, 12.5 x 12.5 inches.

¹⁴ The male effeminate appearance in the rock scene inspired Aerosmith’s song “Dude, Looks Like a Lady” (Aerosmith 1987).

Through the process of allowing and removing various figurative tell-tale elements from my pieces such as pockets, I found that other meanings surface about leather, including an opportunity to imply sexual tension or objectification, gender identity and gender blurring and androgyny. Historical precedents for these works include the art of Nancy Grossman, an American feminist artist who created sculptures of heads with leather in the 1970s. Grossman also made a series of leather collage works (mixed media assemblages) of salvaged metal, wood and leather (Fig.17). Her leather sculptural assemblages reference Abstract Expressionism and materiality, while expressing ideas about gender identity, gender fluidity, sex and power. These issues of gender identity and power with “sculpting” in leather are relevant precedents in my own work.



Fig. 17. Nancy Grossman (b.1940), *Bride*, 1966. Mixed media assemblage, 22 ½” in diameter, signed and dated. Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York, NY. Used with permission.

In my own generation it is useful to discuss Canadian artist Colleen Heslin, when referencing sewing and canvases. Heslin's tableaux explore crossovers among painting, sculpture, fibres and photography. Especially in her early monochromatic works, her use of geometry and organic decisions show close relationships between materiality and the process of making. Heslin's process involved pre-dying her fabrics and focusing on color and illusion and sewing then stretching as one does a painted canvas. Similarly, during my own process of collecting clothing, cutting the seams apart, sewing and then stretching them in the tradition of painting over wooden stretcher frames, I impose a process on the material that adds content or messages in the created work. My medium is wrought with its own inner codes and signifiers even before it is reconstructed to suggest new themes or meaning, as leather is so heavily coded and historic.



Fig. 18. Colleen Heslin, *Tabby Cat*, 2015.
Ink on cotton, 84 x 60 inches. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Used with permission.

In *Zipper*, 2016, I sewed recycled/previously used zippers into the piece. Behind each zipper I incorporated a different piece of fabric as a bit of revealed information. From left to right, I used lace, red leather, metal studs and an unrevealed secret, unknown to the viewer. Each piece of fabric points to various categories in heavy metal: glam metal, British metal and thrash metal. The zippers are open to various degrees to create tension with their sensual gestures, especially the stretched open zipper. Dressing and undressing in leather is sexy and one can imagine sliding into or out of leather pants. The open zippers reference the objectification women face in heavy metal by referencing symbolic vagina or labia.



Fig. 19. Erin Tysowski, *Red Skirt* and *Zipper*, 2016.
Leather, zippers, lace and metal studs, 40 x 32 inches and 36 x 36 inches. Photo: Scott Massey. Used with permission.

In a subsequent work (*Red Skirt*) I began with a “found” red leather skirt. Bands such as Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, RATT, Twisted Sister and Motley Crue all wore uniforms of red and black leather with metal studs (Fig.20). ¹⁵



Fig. 20. Erin Tysowski, *Red Leather Wall*, 2016.
Digital photograph. 24 x 36 inches.

I ordered a pre-fab “motorcycle stud jacket” package with tools to apply metal spikes to the leather and one with heavier spikes too, similar to the look often worn by lead singer Rob Halford in Judas Priest to use in a new work.



Fig. 21. Erin Tysowski, *Fetish and Fashion (after Steele)*, 2016.
Inkjet print on paper, 10 x 14 inches.

¹⁵ Black and red are commonly associated symbolic powers in fetish clothing.

During the 1970s and 1980s, many other bands such as KISS, Alice Cooper, Motley Crue and Metallica took their dress code cues from Judas Priest and leather became the norm among the heavy metal genre. Valerie Steel published her book *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power* in 1996, describing how leather symbolized pain, power, “animalistic and predatory impulses,” and masculinity (Steel 160). Due to its highly sensual connotations in texture and wear, leather is often associated with erotic fashion, and is a style of dress associated with sexual activities like bondage/discipline, dominance/submission (BDSM) and sado/masochism (S & M).

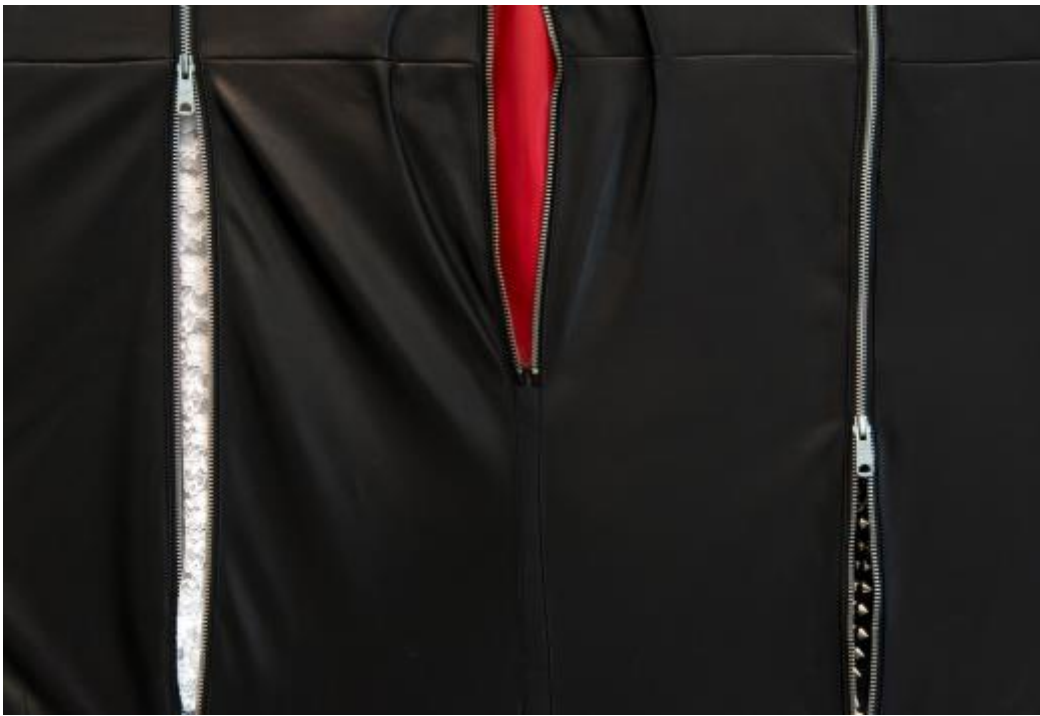


Fig. 22. Erin Tysowski, detail of *Red Skirt*, 2016.
Leather, zippers and metal studs. 40 x 32 inches. Photo: Scott Massey. Used with permission.

My multiple leather pieces offer a bricolage of subcultural elements. Along with heavy metal associations, social contexts include motorcycle gangs, S & M and the fashion industry. I see my *Leather Tableaux* as being of interest for head bangers, “metal heads,” bikers, S & M

enthusiasts, other Rocket Queens and anyone who has a relationship to or loves the feeling of leather.

3.2 Interpretations and Narratives

Historically, leather was made from the hides of animals, worn by all First Nations and Indigenous people on the North American prairie. Does my work point to this knowledge and material history? Do we see the appropriation by European settlers of the old North West? In heavy metal the white male is the biggest demographic that wears leather to metal concerts after the 1980s, but leather has become a fashion material commodified through mass production and commonly worn in day-to-day fashion.

Leather has environmental implications too. From our carbon footprint through the raising and possibly inhuman treatment of animals, the chemicals use for the treatment of the leather, the factories that produce it, pollution related to its transport across the world. Some people will be upset by my work based on the material being used. It provokes other questions and assumptions¹⁶. All these interpretations are real and valuable and I acknowledge them. My intentions stem from my own problematic dialogue with heavy metal culture and the focus of my new work.

There are different types of narratives informing the work, including personal and anonymous. The leather paintings contain both *Rocket Queen's [ET]* personal clothing, worn to heavy metal concerts, and the clothing of strangers who may have used it for the same or other purposes. More subtle and forgotten is the story of the animal who wore the skin first. The life of

¹⁶ Some vegetarians, vegans and animal rights activists.

the cow or lamb isn't the story I (we) like to remember when wearing their skin, nor the colonized history of Indigenous cultures; regard for this lifesaving valuable resource, honor or the relationship between human and animal. In "putting on a new skin"¹⁷, I transform into *Rocket Queen [ET]* while being more aware of the complexity.

Leather holds history, like a vessel or a diary. It cannot simply be cleaned. You can smell the cigarette smoke, sweat, spilt wine, sex acts, perfume and dirt still lingering in the leather. Stains, scratches, rips or scars remain markers of time, of events or happenings. As I deconstruct these jackets, pants, vests and shirts, I think about the stories this material could tell. One thing I know: if *Rocket Queen [ET]* was a band, singer, fan, or groupie, she would, and does, wear black leather.

The leather tableaux is a memorial to all that's metal.

- Rocket Queen [ET], 2016

4 THE FALL OF ROCKET QUEEN

There is no shortage of revival 1980s heavy metal bands touring and performing "final, final" tours. Local cover bands in Calgary such as *Broken Toyz* and *Silly Wrabbit*, continue to cover 1980s glam and pop metal, and can still fill big clubs, bars and casinos with middle aged male and female fans. The demographic of age shows nostalgia for youth and resistance to letting go of one's *matterings*. Band members are also aging but maintain the dress code of

¹⁷ Extracted from a conversation with Mimi Gellman.

youth and the past with wigs, spandex, makeup, knee high boots, and front lace up leather pants.¹⁸

In the audience at these cover band concerts are women who willingly flash their breasts, throw clothes and attempt to climb on stage. This behavior is similar to what occurred during Motley Crue's concert performances (2007-2011) when drummer Tommy Lee pulled out his "Tittie Cam"¹⁹. All ages and body types willingly participate for a moment of glory and escape into something wild, unconventional and irresponsible, before going back to boring working class lives, marriages and jobs. The distance between the past and present grows until the past becomes a fuzzy memory on an old mix tape.

4.1 Reflections on the Masters Graduate Exhibition

There is a fine line balance between planning and leaving space in one's practice for exhibiting or presentation. In the interim exhibition in 2015, I impulsively decided to create a *Poster Pole* upon landing in Vancouver and seeing the many poster lamp poles on the streets. Two free standing floor works *Poster Poles* became the anchors for my presentation. In my final exhibition in 2016, I used finished pieces from my Calgary studio that hung on the gallery wall as elegant tableaux or "paintings" having learned the value in being prepared for an exhibition while still leaving room for last minute decision making.

A new set of concerns arose from the graduation exhibition when the zippers were moved. Contrary to my earlier experience with the white hangers for *Switch* where viewers were

¹⁸ Steel Panther is a Los Angeles glam metal band that has gained ferocious success posing as a 1980's original line up.

¹⁹ The "Tittie Cam" is a slang term used for the moment when a band member takes pictures or records female audience members lifting their shirts and bras, exposing naked breasts.

reluctant to touch, people visiting the Vancouver gallery interacted with the painting *Red Skirt* and *Zippers*. Regardless of a “Please do not Touch” sign between the two pieces which contained zippers I caught people dragging their finger across *Imposter* and *Unisex* to feel the leather and the zippers were often moved. I find this behavior interesting because it appears the materials were so enticing that the audience touched them against the rules. Leather’s association with sex, fetishism, eroticism, and S & M is largely based on touch and the reveal. *Please do not touch* and *please touch me* are binary concerns. I am developing this further in my next body of work. It brings me back to the dualistic role of women in metal—wanting to be wanted and yet not wanting to be objectified for their body.

I have become increasingly interested in playing with the painting paradigm in the sense of exploring what constitutes a painting. Going from one white male subculture (heavy metal) to another. Historically oil painting is a white male dominated discipline. In making space for the female body and transcending gender, *Leather Pin-Up*, 2016 continues an exploration of blurring the boundaries of painting and sculpture while maintaining a strong material presence.



Fig. 23. Erin Tysowski, *Leather Pin-Up*, 2016.
Leather and metal studs, 40 x 32 inches.

4.2 Epilogue

Rocket Queen has always been there; she was never born she was noticed.

Rocket Queen [ET], 2016



Fig. 24. Erin Tysowski, *Black Widow*, 2015.
Mixed media, 36 x 36 inches.

Rocket Queen [ET] is my artistic agency and my alter ego. She was there when I got my first Guns N' Roses tape and I lay on my twin bed in rural Saskatchewan listening with my Walkman, imagining I was Slash shredding a guitar in leather pants while sliding across the stage. She was there when I was eight months pregnant trying to sit through a Skid Row concert shielding the marijuana around me. She was there when I barely squeezed into my black Harley shirt to see Motley Crue in Red Deer, Alberta and had to miss the encore to rush home to breast-feed my infant. I am getting older, and my life is more and more conservative with a family and need to make a living.

My outings, and *Rocket Queen*'s performances are fewer and farther between. She represents my last grasp at youth, danger and sex appeal. When Sebastian Bach sings "Youth Gone Wild" he is singing to my sixteen-year-old self with the bad perm and blue eye shadow, not a forty-year-old high school teacher. My favorite metal bands of the eighties are on their reunion tours and so is *Rocket Queen [ET]*. When Motley Crue stood on stage in November 2014 in Vancouver, saying goodbye to thousands of screaming fans, I was saying good-bye too. What remains is the music and in the words of Vince Neil, "Just take this song, and you'll never feel left all alone, take me to your heart, feel me in your bones" (*Home Sweet Home*, 1985).

Rocket Queen [ET] lives on. She is an artist who can analyze the past and raid that material for her work. She reclaimed the basement to make her mess and be herself before crossing back over to the other. Now she rents a communal studio downtown where art and music are both present. Less innocent perhaps, but both sides of her still co-exist, for now.

She lays out her leather pants carefully on the bed, with just enough room to place the faded black Metallica shirt above the waist. She walks over to the stereo to turn up Motley Crue as loud as possible but not so loud that she wakes the children. She leans into the mirror holding her breathe as she drags black liner around her droopy eyelid. Dancing over to the bedroom, she tugs on the leather pants, barely pulling the zipper to close. She squeezes into the Metallica shirt and yanks it down to cover her belly. She purses her lips and makes the devil horns with her fingers under her chin. "There you are," she whispers, as she stands back, and smiles in the mirror.

Rocket Queen [ET], 2016, from the suburbs of Calgary

APPENDIX 1

Rocket Queen – Guns N' Roses 1987

If I say, I don't need anyone
I can say these things to you
'Cause, I can turn on any one
Just like I turned on you
I've got a tongue like a razor
A sweet switchblade knife
And I can do you favors
But then you'll do whatever I like

Here I am
And you're a rocket queen
I might be a little young
But honey I ain't naive
Here I am
And you're a rocket queen oh yeah
I might be too much
But honey you're a bit obscene

I've seen everything imaginable
Pass before these eyes
I've had everything that's tangible
Honey you'd be surprised
I'm a sexual innuendo
In this burned out paradise
If you turn me on to anything
You better turn me on tonight

Here I am
And you're a rocket queen
I might be a little young
But honey I ain't naive
Here I am
And you're a rocket queen oh yeah
I might be too much
But honey you're a bit obscene

Here I am
And you're a rocket queen
I might be a little young
But honey I ain't naive
Here I am
And you're a rocket queen oh yeah

I might be too much
But honey you're a bit obscene

I see you standin', standin' on your own
It's such a lonely place for you for you to be
If you need a shoulder or if you need a friend
I'll be here standin' until' the bitter end

No one needs the sorrow, no one needs the pain
I hate to see you walkin' out there out in the rain
So don't chastise me or think I, I mean you harm
Of those that take you, leave you strung out
Much too far baby yeah

Don't ever leave me
Say, you'll always be there
All I ever wanted
Was for you to know that I care

APPENDIX 2

Heavy Metal History Playlist and Mattering Maps

Side A:

Power Metal, New Wave of British Heavy Metal, Thrash, Black, Grunge, Nu Metal, New Wave American Heavy Metal

Side B:

Hard Rock, Shock Rock, Glam Metal, Pop Metal, Industrial Metal, Goth Metal, Hard Alternative

SIDE A

Jimi Hendrix-*Hendrix in the West* 1972
Led Zeppelin-*Led Zeppelin* 1969
Black Sabbath - *Black Sabbath* 1969
ACDC - *T.N.T* 1975
Rush - *All the World's a Stage* 1976
Girlschool - *Demolition* 1980
Motörhead - *Ace of Spades* 1980
Judas Priest - *British Steel* 1980
Venom - *Black Metal* 1982
Iron Maiden - *The Number of the Beast* 1982
Metallica - *Ride the Lightning* 1984
Megadeth - *Peace Sells but who's Buying* 1986
Alice in Chains - *Facelift* 1990
Pantera - *Cowboys from Hell* 1990
Soundgarden - *Badmotorfinger* 1991
Nirvana - *Nevermind* 1991
Godsmack - *Godsmack* 1998
System of a Down - *System of a Down* 1998

SIDE B

David Bowie-*Space Oddity* 1969
Alice Cooper - *Billion Dollar Babies* 1973
Aerosmith-*Toys in the Attic* 1975
Van Halen-*Running with the Devil* 1978
Ozzy Osbourne-*Blizzard of Oz* 1980
Motley Crue-*Too Fast for Love* 1981
Poison-*Look What the Cat Dragged In* 1986
Guns N' Roses-*Appetite for Destruction* 1987
Lita Ford-*Lita* 1988
Nine Inch Nails-*Pretty Hate Machine* 1990
Rage Against Machine-*Rage Against the Machine* 1992
Ministry-*Psalm 69: The Way to Succeed and the Way to Suck Eggs* 1992
Type O Negative-*Bloody Kisses* 1993
White Zombie-*Astro Creep: 2000-Songs of Love, Destruction and Other Synthetic Delusions of the ...* 1995

Side A and Side B represent the two main categories of heavy metal, thrash and pop. It is here that one can fully appreciate the musical influences that each album and band had on each other in the ontology of heavy metal.

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