

IDENTISPLOITATION

by Sophia Zanders

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IDENTISPLOITATION
PLAYING WITH THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

By

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I acknowledge that I grew up on the traditional and ancestral unceded land of the Gabrielino and Tongva peoples. I acknowledge that I am an uninvited guest and a settler on the traditional and ancestral unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

I want to thank you, the reader, for choosing to learn more about my thesis project, *Identisplotation*. As you dive deeper into my research and practice, you are welcome to listen to a specially curated playlist of music that influenced this body of work. Read, laugh, listen, enjoy:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/77eWBAvuQGJHayd0sH7AcJ?si=3a1860c50ea94127>

ABSTRACT

Identisploitation explores charged representations of identity in pop culture through painted paper figures, video art, and garments. The complicated public images of historical figures, including the iconic Black performer, Josephine Baker, are investigated, pulled apart, and recontextualized as exaggerated, lifesize paper dolls. Grotesque embodiments of evangelical, conservative American femininity are satirized through character performance in video. Historical costumes and unattainable beauty standards are stretched and sewn into unwearable garments. *Identisploitation* is influenced by the transgressive work of Vaginal Davis, Grace Jones, Bobby Conn and other fearless artists who inhabit the outskirts of the mainstream art world. The concepts of disidentification, the oppositional gaze, camp, and satire provide a critical and (pop) cultural framework, primarily through the texts of bell hooks and José Estéban Muñoz. *Identisploitation* asks these questions: What do pop cultural representations look like recontextualized through a Black feminist lens? How does a garment critique the cultural establishment? This thesis project explores historical representations of race, gender, and sexuality, and their lasting significance into contemporary visual language and pop culture through my particular point of view as a Black femme visual artist.

INTRODUCTION

My name is Sophia Elan Zarders and I am a visual artist, illustrator, and pop culture queen from Long Beach, California. I received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in illustration from California State University, Long Beach, and I have been a professional freelance artist for almost ten years. My work has generally centered figurative painting, drawing, bookmaking and zines, portraiture, and comics. Through this interdisciplinary graduate program, my studio practice has grown exponentially with rigorous research and exploration into unfamiliar media. My graduate thesis, *Identisploitation*, investigates the critical intersections of identity, history, and pop culture through painted paper cutouts, video and clothing experimentations.

I am a mixed race Black femme who grew up on the traditional and ancestral unceded land of the Gabrielino and Tongva peoples, now known as Long Beach, California. My lens is shaped by my point of view as a biracial person who grew up in the United States and often felt on the outskirts of mainstream essentialized notions of Black or white identity. In my youth, I was particularly fond of artists and entertainers who embodied a sort of ambiguity within gender, sexuality and race. My relationship with my identity as a Black femme is richer because of this kinship with figures like Grace Jones, Betty Davis, Josephine Baker, Sylvester, Shirley Bassey, and Vaginal Davis, some of whom reemerged as crucial influences for my thesis work. I refuse to be confined by conformist and commodified ideas of mixed-ness or Blackness or gender fluidity that are shaped by the deeply ingrained restrictions of colonial, patriarchal oppression. Black is beautiful, luminous, radical, resilient, bold, androgynous, proud, ancestral, and the future. “Femme” is a placeholder for my fluid gender as it transforms over time and I welcome it to change daily. Currently at twenty-eight years old, I am actively and enthusiastically embracing ambiguity in my racial background and gender identity, which also informs my formal and conceptual strategies as a visual artist.

As a professional illustrator, my work responds directly to expanding social discourses surrounding queer and trans liberation, racial justice, intersectional feminism, and working class solidarity.

I have had the privilege of collaborating with non-profits, academic institutions, and grassroots organizations to create empowering visual images that inspire political change, including the ACLU, New York Department of Education, and SaveArtSpace. Outside of editorial freelance work, I’ve

built an extensive library of self-published comics and books highlighting underrepresented artists, comedians, filmmakers, and activists; in fact during this MFA program, I finished my first professionally published book, *“You’re Funny For A”: An Illustrated Guide to Trans Comedians, Non-Binary Comics, & Funny Women* with independent publisher Silver Sprocket. My background in illustration is an undercurrent throughout my thesis project, specifically in the painted stylization of the paper doll series and hand drawn props in my video work. However, as I’ve re-entered academia and navigated this interdisciplinary art program, I’ve been challenged to expand my understanding of illustration and forgo the tools I had learned from many years of freelancing. The creative freedom was simultaneously daunting and invigorating, coupled with the recent move to this foreign country and a new independent phase of my life.

Throughout my career, my practice has focused on the human figure in visual art. As an undergraduate student, I honed my skills with traditional figurative oil painting techniques in Florence, Italy, and spent years figure drawing through the illustration program at California State University, Long Beach. While building these technical skills, I began using self-portraiture to investigate representations of Blackness through an art historical, cinematic, and intersectional feminist lens. In 2018, I was an artist-in-residence at Somos Gallery in Berlin and held my first solo show, *Tinsel Angels*, featuring larger than life watercolor figure paintings of myself that pushed my skills as an artist and challenged pop media (mis)representations of Black women. Through these self-portraits, I played with humorous and melodramatic archetypes in film history that are often reserved for white, European actresses, including a jilted lover, a punk rebel, and a melancholic starlet. I view the human figure as a site of empowerment, imagination, and disruption of societal norms. Whether it’s visible or not, the figure is an active presence throughout my graduate work.

I define ***identisploitation*** as the complicated sweet spot converging identity, style, social critique, satire and exaggeration. This collection of graduate work explores these themes through over the top paper figures, campy video experimentations, and stretched symbolic garments. This thesis project is framed by my intersecting identities, background in the illustration and figurative art, and unwavering interests in representation and pop culture. Both this supporting document and my studio practice reflect my maximalist, humorous approach to artmaking. *Identisploitation* pokes fun at the status quo with subversive pizzazz.

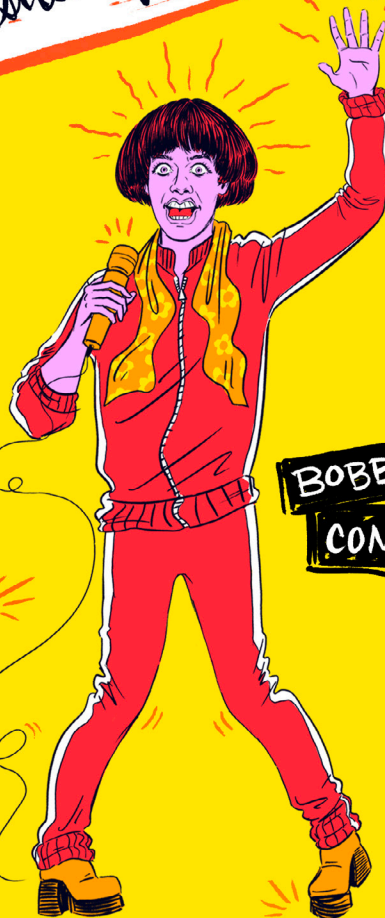
INFLUENCES



VAGINAL
DAVIS



Disidentification!



BOBBY
CONN

GRACE
JONES

Satire!



Camp!

The rebellious Black queer ethos of **Vaginal “Crème” Davis** has been a compass for my current practice in the graduate program. Davis throws high art and lowbrow filth in a glittery blender with her confrontational performance art, campy short films, exaggerated aesthetics, and a devilish sense of humor. She plays in the politically charged intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and performance, often through drag characters that play with her identity as a Black, multiracial intersex person. Vaginal Davis’ performance of these identities can be viewed as “terrorist drag,” or a genre of drag performance that pushes against the status quo of acceptable, establishment-affirming drag.¹ One of her more controversial characters is Clarence, a whiteface parody of a hyper masculine, white supremacist, militia man. This dissonant performance includes original songs that satirize anti-gay ideology and allege a love affair between Clarence and the artist’s own glamazon persona. The impression is so wrong it’s right, dangerous in its proximity to hate yet undercut by Davis’ humorous, over the top approach. I admire her ability to embody and deconstruct power structures with unhinged delight and boundary-pushing drag.

Vaginal Davis often embodies and employs the idea of **disidentification**,² which is an investigation into a subject and all its aspects, including the liberatory, detrimental, and contradictory elements. This concept was theorized by José Esteban Muñoz, who describes the act of disidentifying as to “read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, objects, or subjects that are not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject.” (12) By performing and parodying various archetypes, Davis smartly critiques the dominant ideologies they represent without identifying with or rejecting them. As the character Clarence, her disidentification with white supremacist patriotism makes a humorous spectacle of social critique and subversive drag. As I researched disidentification in my graduate studies, I was struck by how the idea resonated with my practice and pop culture obsessions. As a Black femme media spectator who rarely identifies with cinematic narratives and images, I often disidentify with representations that don’t reflect my lived experience. Beloved writer bell hooks expounds on this idea with the “**oppositional gaze**,”³ or the complex position that audiences of marginalized backgrounds take when consuming media not intended for them. “Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallogentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition [Laura] Mulvey posits of ‘woman as image, man as bearer of the look’ was continually deconstructed.” (hooks, 123) From my historically excluded “oppositional” point of view, I have the opportunity to dissect and

reconstruct mainstream representations, and utilize an artistic strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.

Camp has been a connective strategy between my disidentification with dominant media and subverting its ideology. Susan Sontag popularized the term with her 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,” which she defines as “a vision of the world in terms of style... it is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off’, of things-being-what-they-are-not.” (8) The sensibilities of camp speak to my appreciation of queer aesthetics, humor, gender performance, satire, and “the glorification of ‘character’... a taste of continual incandescence - a person being one, very intense thing.” (Sontag, 21) Camp is “capable of transforming even the most vulgar manifestations of American culture into recuperative moments of radical jouissance.” (Diffrient, 262) This intense appreciation for “vulgarity” can be morally ambivalent depending on the strategy or form that camp takes place. As an exuberant fan of B movies and exploitation films of the 1960s and 70s,⁴ I am no stranger to this wavering line between distasteful humor and harmful stereotypes that is embedded in blaxploitation, hagsploitation, and the like. Often this genre presents a cheap, misogynistic smorgasbord of women behaving badly, but over time these films have garnered an alternative fanbase to their intended straight, male, and white audiences. What was once “an insult to intelligence, and affront to sensibility and an abomination to the eye”⁵ is reappropriated and recontextualized by queer, trans, and BIPOC film fans. The shadows of this genre loom over *Identisploitation*, not only in name but as a visual manifestation of camp in my work. There’s been much recent discourse about camp and its overuse in the cultural lexicon (lest we forget the 2019 Met Gala), so I will not dare to claim that my work is “camp.” Claiming one’s work is camp defeats the purpose (and fun) of the concept! Is my work delightfully distasteful? Perhaps, but that’s for someone else to determine. Instead, I will state that my work is campy, meaning it embodies the aesthetics of camp and is influenced by its cinematic and pop cultural examples.

In traversing through politics of representation and strategies of camp, the transgressive icon of Black artistry, **Grace Jones**, immediately comes to mind. As an awkward Black femme kid, I was fascinated by her unique and radical Blackness that spoke to my fractured and eclectic interests, ambiguously gendered, sexualized, and unplaceable in any time period or location.⁶ As I recontextualize her artistry through a scholarly lens, I’m fascinated and influenced by the way Jones has crafted her stage persona through visual citation, deconstructing identity, and a “fierce stage presence... [destabilizing]

historical relations of power.” (Kershaw, 19) Like Vaginal Davis, Grace Jones employs disidentification to dissect racist stereotypes, neither condemning or assimilating to the problematic visual language. Minstrel imagery and colonial fantasies are costumes in her striking music videos, album art, and stage shows, but the androgynous glamazon embraces the ambiguity in her message to control the power dynamics between her and the audience.⁷ For an iconic live performance in 1978, Jones transformed the Roseland, a beloved New York dance hall, into a concrete jungle with a caged live tiger at center stage.⁸ She sings her disco hit “Do or Die,” snarling at its ferocious (frightened) demeanor, and slinks around the cage in a skintight tiger print catsuit. Suddenly, the lights cut out and the audience shrieks; a spotlight reveals the tiger has disappeared and the glamorous temptress has become the caged beast. The performance and its accompanying promotional photos were met with extreme reactions both in adoration, from her primarily queer, melanated fan base, and disdain from critics who read this as flaunting with primitivism. Through this shocking, unapologetic display of the taboo, Grace Jones “exposed processes of desire, projection, and prejudice... racist and sexist cliches became artificial and unstable.” (Kershaw, 24) Jones tactfully walks this tightrope dance of representation as a Black artist in her electrifying performances on stage and screen.

Another concept explored and implemented in my graduate practice is **satire**, a form of humor that has historically been used by the working class marginalized communities to ridicule the bourgeoisie and oppressive systems. One of my favorite artists who embodies the subversive potential of satire is Chicago “no-wave” musician Bobby Conn, who critiques the collapsing American empire through unconventional humor combining doomsday paranoia and capitalistic worship with disco, experimental soundscapes, and glam rock. In one of the craziest television appearances to grace the beloved public access childrens show,⁹ *Chic-A-Go-Go*, Conn performs his hit single “Never Get Ahead”, a motown inspired song calling for the working class to abstain from servicing their capitalist overlords. His small frame jerks across the stage in a burgundy Adidas sweatsuit, floral ascot, blue eyeshadow, and bowlcut, an odd ensemble that visually translates the contradictions of his music persona. His erratic movements and exaggerated facial expressions add to this persona and the performance is a hilarious mix of camp and satire. Within my graduate practice, my critical strategies of humor and embracing the grotesque are definitely influenced by Bobby Conn’s particular form of satire. These concepts are reflected in my exaggerated, playful aesthetics; it’s a sneaky way to draw viewers in with bright colors and cartoonish visuals while communicating the critical, political message at hand.

ARTWORKS



ANITA & MARY

The visual form of paper dolls has been an exciting development in my current art practice and a fascinating way to work through my ideas about history, politics, identity, and pop culture. It makes complete sense why paper dolls have been my medium of choice, as they combine so many specificities of my practice: illustration, clothing, celebrity, kitsch, play, retro aesthetics, the body and lack thereof. Admittedly, I didn't know much about their history or significance before embarking on this journey toward lifesize, painted paper dolls. My personal relationship to dolls can be traced to a collection of Barbies from the early 1970s that my mom graciously allowed me to play with as a kid. The dolls (Barbie, Midge, Skipper, Ken, etc.) were kept in vibrantly colored Barbie brand cases, worn and discolored from decades of play time, and included the grooviest, retro wardrobe of Day-Glo printed fabrics and teeny tiny plastic shoes. It was through these toys I experimented with gender roles and sexuality, specifically soapy melodramatic social situations that I probably mimicked from television programs. My parents raised me to question the patriarchal, mass-produced images of women, adding to the inner negotiation of my fluid gender identity, attraction toward hyper femme aesthetics and questioning of the critical mainstream ideology toward femininity. As I hit puberty, I became obsessed with dress up games on phishy, malware ridden websites where I could play with hundreds of digital paper dolls.¹⁰ The simple game format used click and drag movements and relied on Adobe Flash software (R.I.P.), and these layered digital images would then be translated into my "fashion" illustrations, comics, and original characters. Dolls have always read as characters to create stories with, and now as an artist, to work through ideology and social hierarchies.

In my first semester, I was looking for patterns in American history to dissect the country's current ultra conservative wave of heightened nationalism, anti-trans rhetoric, and violent fascism. Despite moving abroad for this program, I couldn't help but reflect on The States and its historical dissemination of ideology through mass media and visual culture. My research turned toward the ways notable, conservative women have continuously upheld white supremacy and patriarchal domination, and how their public image fueled those narratives. Anita Bryant and Mary Pickford were selected as my subjects as they represented this exact insidious relationship between exaggerated feminine aesthetics and white supremacist politics. Bryant, a patriotic singer turned anti-gay politician, clawed her way into the limelight in the 1970s as the second wave of feminism waned and the Religious Right rose

to power. Her perfectly buoyant hair and regressive rhetoric to a homophobic blend of evangelicals and conservatives. Mary Pickford represents a slightly different aspect of American history as an icon of the silent movie era, America's sweetheart of a bygone era, and heralded now as a pioneer in entertainment and women's rights. This Canadian-American entertainer and entrepreneur took Hollywood by storm in the 1910s by creating many of the lasting cinematic archetypes for women that reflected the intense nationalism of the time. She successfully crafted herself to represent the ideal white woman and always upheld the American mythology of patriotism and colonial individualism. My research of these figures culminated into the paper doll series *Anita* and *Mary*, "dolling up" their public images as a playful strategy to critique the regressive ideologies they propagated. In a sense, I am disidentifying with these ladies' problematic legacies; I'm fascinated by their public roles as celebrities, entertainers, political figures, and the retro doll-like garments they wore to complete their personae. I am in no way assimilating with their dogma or communicating a nostalgia for the past, nor completely rejecting them. My paper dolls are a way to work through these complicated, disidentifactory feelings toward Bryant and Pickford by daring to exist between appreciation and dismissal.



Fig. 1: Anita Bryant holding a bottle of Coca-Cola. 1960 (circa). State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.
Fig. 2: Mary Pickford, *The Photo-Play Journal*, June 1916. Public domain.

The paper dolls are relatively lifesize acrylic painted paper cutouts. Each doll comes with one scantily clad body, four outfits and a collection of accessories. While the renderings are mostly accurate to the source material (historical photographs, contemporary documentation of the objects), I've employed a specific stylization that favors bodily gesture, exaggeration, and a kitschy quality found in paper dolls. The cutouts were initially pinned to the wall with pushpins but later installations used magnets, allowing the paper figures to float off the gallery wall.

Anita translates the aesthetic of 1960s-70s era paper dolls and plasticine public image of Anita Bryant. Her skin is a saturated coral and her disturbing grin shines pure white, with tangerine heels and pearl earrings painted onto her body. Her pose reflects commonly drawn fashion illustrations of the time, with a comically cinched waist, cocked hips, slender ligaments, and large head. She wears a bouffant auburn wig, cool toned plaid dress, and the Orange Bird cartoon character¹¹ floats above her raised hand. When Bryant became a crusader against LGBTQ rights in the 1970s, she specifically stoked fear in Dade County, Florida and disseminated attack ads to repeal an ordinance prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. Her homophobic rhetoric heavily contributed to the Religious Right political



Fig. 3: Sophia Zarders, *Mary and Anita*, 2021. Acrylic on paper, dimensions variable.

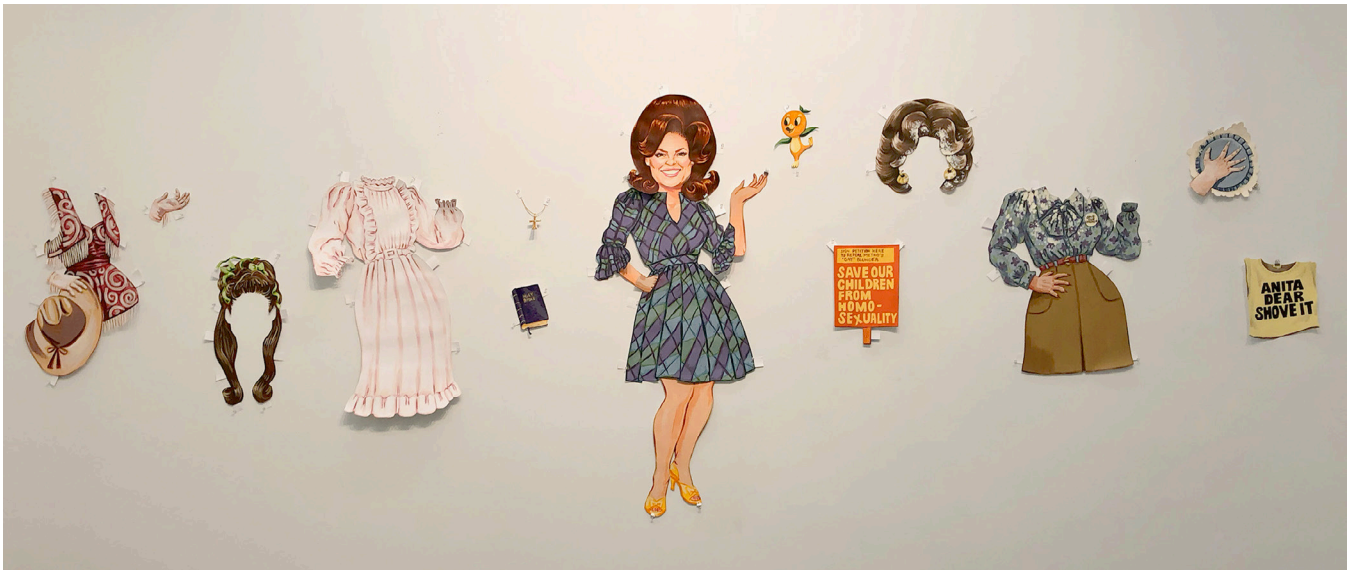


Fig. 4: Sophia Zarders, *Anita*, 2021. Acrylic on paper, dimensions variable.

wave and built upon decades of segregationist talking points to oppress marginalized groups. This led to her notable Save the Children campaign, which is referenced through a protest sign accessory for her paper doll. *Anita*'s other outfits include a high neck, puritan style white dress with prop Bible and cross necklace, an embellished cowgirl romper with fringe gloves and cowboy hat, and a floral pussy bow blouse tucked into a 70s style A-line skirt. This last ensemble refers to the infamous pie incident, where gay activist, Thom L. Higgins, smashed a cream pie into Anita Bryant's face at a press conference in 1977.¹² This direct action created an image of resistance that would be recreated by drag queens for years to come. Her paper doll series includes the iconic pie complete with Higgins' hand attached in the act of throwing, as well as an "Anita Dear, Shove It" tee shirt that was often worn by LGBTQ activists at protests of the time. These images of resistance are not molded to the doll's silhouette to imply a separation between her persona and this anti-Bryant messaging. These props are solely for the benefit of the viewer, as an implied opportunity to play out radical disobedience.

Mary's more elegant, fashionable starlet contrasts against *Anita*'s super 70s crusader. Her body conforms to the desired slender silhouette of the 1910s-20s with a slight contrapposto pose and pale pinkish white skin; short golden finger curls and mauve eyeshadow are painted on with solid white filling her smile. *Mary* wears the symbolic outfit of her greatest success, a long embellished champagne gown with the coveted Academy Award statue.¹³ Her other ensembles include a dark velvet gown wrapped in a fox stole, a ruffled Americana dress from her early acting days with hair extensions, and a feminized



Fig. 5: Sophia Zarders, Closeup of *Anita*, 2021. Acrylic on paper, dimensions variable.

short skirted klan robe, referring to her role in the 1919 film *Heart o' the Hills*. In this movie, she plays a plucky country girl who must defend her family's land from developers in the Appalachian mountains. Besides this glorified portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan, she heralded the infamous propaganda flick *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and remained close friends with D.W. Griffith as founders of United Artists. Unsurprisingly, Mary Pickford is widely recognized as a "feminist icon" for being Hollywood's first starlet and being an entrepreneurial girlboss,¹⁴ despite her very public connections to some of the darkest corners of cinema history.

Contemporary iterations of paper dolls originated as mass produced affordable toys during the Great Depression. Most viewers might associate them with childhood nostalgia and budget-friendly playtime. I'm quite fascinated by one of the most renowned paper doll illustrators, Tom Tierney, who has published over four hundred books since the 1970s. One of his first paper doll books was *Attitude*,¹⁵ a cheeky collection of LGBTQ archetypes complete with fabulous day clothes and kinky fetish wear. Ironically, Tierney's radical queer beginnings in the medium later became a mass produced vehicle for heteronormative desires. In my paper doll research, I also came across the May Stevens painting,



Fig. 6: Sophia Zarders, *Mary*, 2021. Acrylic on paper, dimensions variable.



Fig. 7: Sophia Zarders, Closeup of *Mary*, 2021. Acrylic on paper, dimensions variable.

Big Daddy Paper Doll (1970), which depicts a simplified paper doll of a white man and his bulldog with different outfits representing American imperialist patriarchy, including a policeman, soldier, and executioner. The striking image reflects Stevens' critical views of the Vietnam War and her conservative father, thus illustrating the feminist tenet of "the personal is political." The piece speaks directly to the tension of "play" integral to *Anita* and *Mary*, where the audience is seduced by the aesthetics of the paper doll and implicated in their embedded meanings. Kitsch and irony are also big components of this dynamic in which the retro, cutesy style subverts the potent political message.

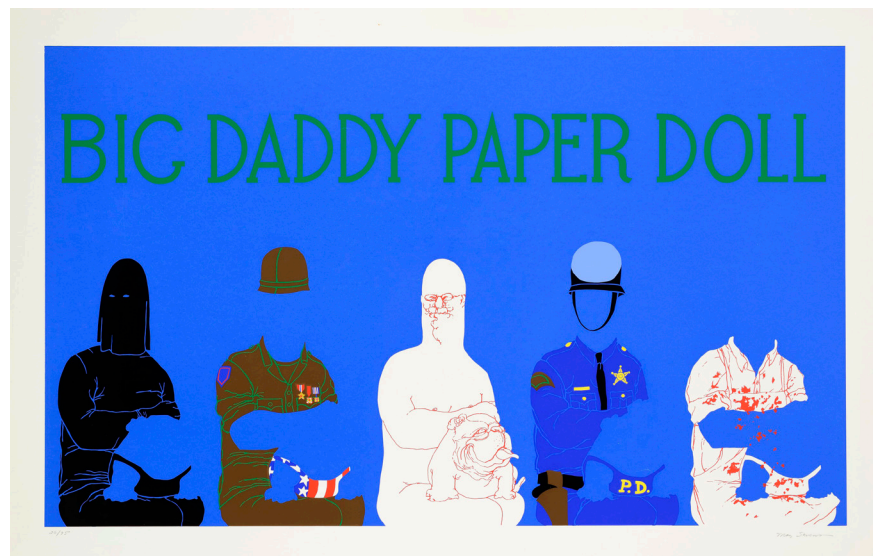


Fig. 8: May Stevens, *Big Daddy Paper Doll*, 1971. Screenprint on paper, edition 20/75, 21 x 35 inches (53.3 x 88.9 cm). Used by permission of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

In workshopping this piece with my peers, several students felt compelled to dress up the "dolls" and urged me to mass produce the design or make the large paintings interactive. Upon first glance at *Anita* and *Mary*, the retro aesthetics of the 70s and 20s are a playful visual dance; vibrant colors, funky patterns, shining jewels and immense detail lull the viewer into feeling sentimental for bygone styles and childhood memories of playing with paper dolls. Initially this desire to "play" with the piece left me feeling uneasy about its impact on audiences; despite the obvious visual signifiers to hate groups, the fun, kitschy aesthetics seemed to overpower the critical messaging. Over time, I learned to read this uncomfortable reality as a strength of the series and I embraced its implication of the viewer; by "playing" with these kitschy toys, the audience acts out the women's contributions to America's white supremacist, patriarchal core.

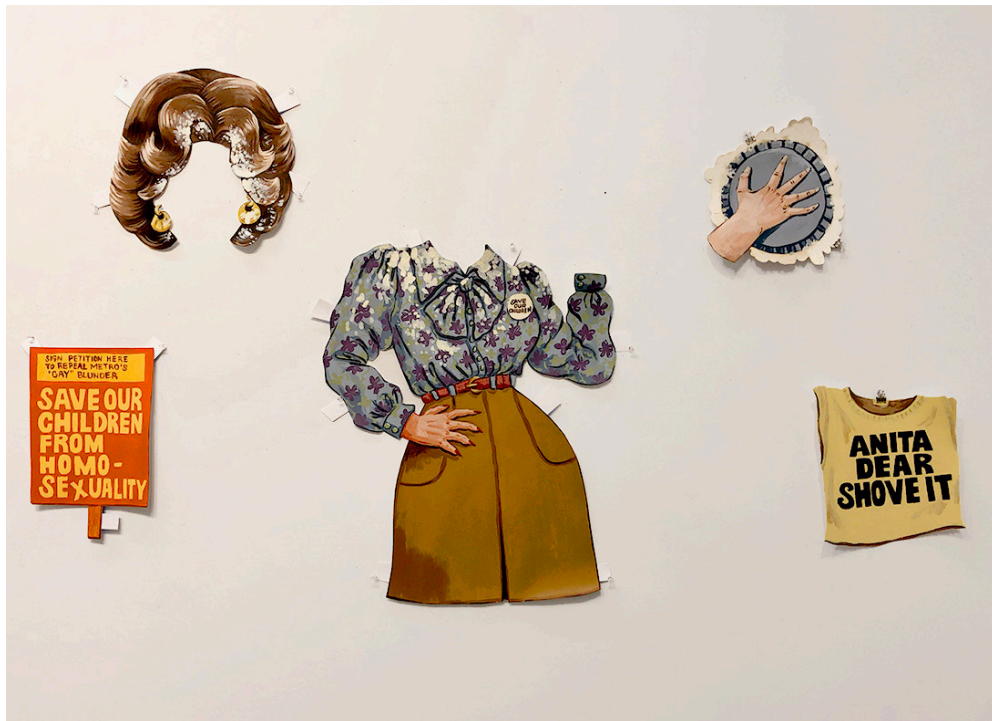
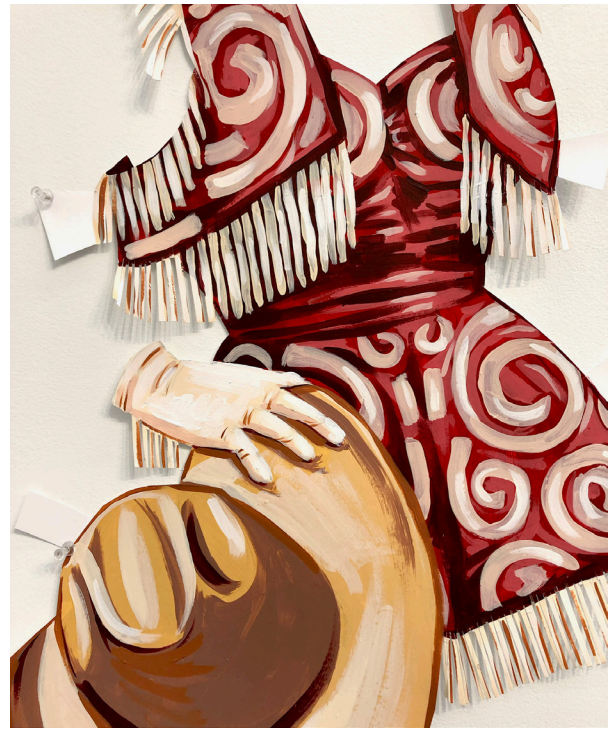


Fig. 9 - 11: Sophia Zarders, Closeups of *Anita* and *Mary*, 2021. Acrylic on paper, dimensions variable.

I've been questioned a few times about my fascination with the past, especially in relation to Bryant and Pickford as subjects for this work. Nostalgia is a phenomenon that I've struggled to come to terms with as a Black femme artist who is drawn toward history and bygone pop culture. In a way, disidentification factors into this inner negotiation, where I'm constantly seduced and repulsed by cinema, fashion, art, music, and celebrities from previous decades. Media from the past tends to be overtly embedded with racist, misogynistic, and queerphobic messaging, because the intended audience rarely catered to marginalized audiences. However, I've cultivated a robust oppositional gaze to these narratives and images that still appeal to my aesthetic sensibilities, because investigating the past is key for my personal and artistic understanding of the present. Maybe this affinity for retro things stems from years of obsessively watching old *Looney Tunes*¹⁶ and playing with my mom's nifty Barbies in my childhood. Or, maybe it mutes my growing anxiety of a likely climate change induced doomsday apocalypse scenario. Regardless, I'm a firm believer that learning the faults of the past can only help to illuminate and fix the social structures of the present.



Fig. 12: Sophia Zarders, *Identisplotation* installation, 2023. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photo: Michael Love.

SKIPPER

The video *Skipper* arose as a character idea during the global racial reckoning of 2020.¹⁷ Feeling overwhelmed and helpless by the evergreen reminder of racist violence, the image of a completely out of control and violently vengeful Black femme in a flamboyant costume kept entering my tired consciousness. As I took lonesome walks in my quarantined neighborhood, I would daydream this imagined heroine jumping on cop cars and chasing Nazis with a chainsaw, and soon I began writing a screenplay about this energizing character. The script was eventually shelved, but as my graduate research focused on political satire, performance, and costume, I was drawn to the persona of Skipper and compelled to embody her in a new light.

Skipper began as ruminations on clothing, politics, and character. Along with reading fascinating articles about historical fashions,¹⁸ I collected a plethora of visual references from vintage sewing patterns to movie costumes to beauty pageant garb to Christian regalia. This process of amateur archiving and crafting a costume mood board helped connect patterns in clothing trends and regressive, conservative waves in American politics. Color, silhouette, texture, and fabric must be read within the greater cultural and political context, such as high neck corseted dresses responding to the 19th century Cult of True Womanhood, or cinched crinoline poodle skirts of the 1950s. In times of intense institutional and social pushback against liberatory movements, mainstream clothing trends mimic those sentiments.¹⁹ Taking these fashion trends and political patterns into consideration, I sketched ideas for a costume to represent these connections.

The costume design combined the cupcake silhouette of a child pageant dress, a purely decorative apron citing a maid uniform, and a hyper feminine color palette.²⁰ The costume base is a short, poofy yellow polka dot dress with puffy sleeves, which was upcycled from a 1960s polyester maxi dress purchased at a Vancouver based vintage shop. I utilized my skills in hand-sewing to hem and alter the garment and repeatedly washed it in my bathtub, in an effort to get rid of that stinky old clothes smell and to repurpose this historical item. I purchased short white gloves from a costume shop, pointing to debutante and minstrel traditions, white knee high socks, and crafted a pink bow headband and tulle bow necklace. The apron was also embroidered with a verse from the Book of Revelations, which would influence part of the dialogue for the video.

After costuming, I developed Skipper's character mannerisms and overall tone for the production design, which were overwhelmingly influenced by my love of campy exploitation flicks and my disidentification with the complicated femme characters that dominate these problematic narratives. In *The Oppositional Gaze*, bell hooks eloquently writes, "Looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallogentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator." (123) Bette Davis' iconic transformation the 1960 flick *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* was a major inspiration for building the mannerisms of Skipper, specifically her exaggerated facial expressions, intense desire to perform the perfect femininity, and messy clownish makeup.²¹ My acting of Skipper's trademark sinister delight is also influenced by Nuotama Bodomo's 2016 short film, *Everybody Dies!*, a fantastic and terrifying, short film that is in conversation with contemporary Afropessimist dialogue.²² Her video imagines a horrifying public access game show hosted by Ripa the (Grim) Reaper, played by Tonya Pinkins, who sentences Black children to the afterlife. The disturbing short film highlights the exhausting, horrifying realities of racist violence in America through campy, horror sensibilities and deep dark satire, and posits that even the mythical grim reaper is tired of ushering Black lives into the abyss.

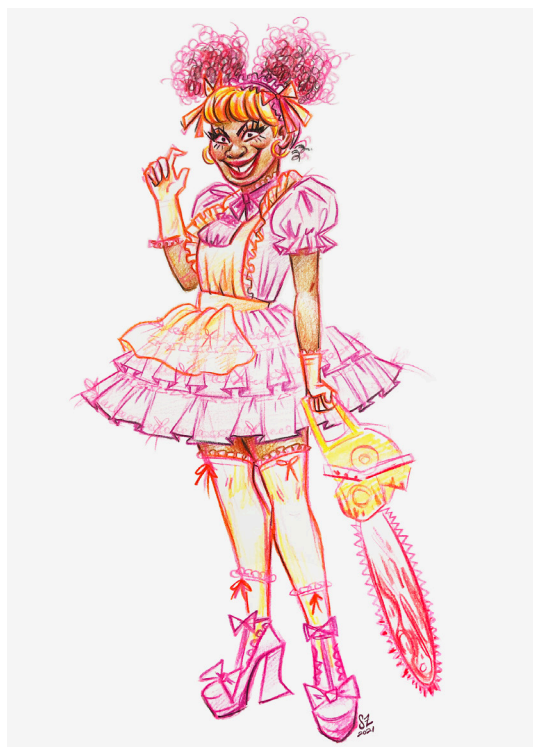


Fig. 13: Artist modeling the original dress for the *Skipper* costume. 2022.

Fig. 14: Sophia Zarders, *Skipper* character design. 2022. Colored pencil on paper.

Lastly, I looked to Bobby Conn and his over the top musical embodiment of an evangelical capitalist Antichrist, in which he makes fun of and reflects the disturbing realities of America's hellish capitalist present with plenty of camp and humor. In a 2008 interview, he says, "I'm just trying to take the music of the day from when I was a kid, which was incredibly flimsy -- the disco and glam rock and all that stuff -- trying to take it back, in a way. Politicize it, and also scramble it up so that it's unsettling." By combining the plasticine qualities of 1970s pop with nightmarish camp, Conn creates an unforgettable experience through his records and stage persona. Since I do not have a background in acting or theater, I reached deep into my lifelong appreciation for movie stars, comedians, drag artists, and other big personalities for guidance into crafting the character of Skipper.

The lowbrow aesthetics of B movies are woven throughout the production design in *Skipper*, due in part to the minimal budget and restricted filming schedule. My studio apartment quickly transformed into the set as I cleared one wall and hung cheap glittery purple fabric on the wall for a backdrop. The entire video was filmed in one day by propping up my iPad on an end table, using one desk lamp as a spotlight, and recording audio with a very simple microphone. This was not my ideal setup for making a short film, but I believe my DIY attitude contributed to my frenetic performance and the overall tone. I edited the video solely on my iPad with Adobe Premiere (Rush) and additional imagery was sourced from the internet; I collected gifs from old commercials, news reels and films that reinforced the outdated image of the ideal American woman, including a brief reference to a propaganda film starring Mary Pickford. My own voice was a major aspect of the sound design, layered over and over again to create a cacophony of high pitched cackling and demonic moaning, as well as a short jingle that bookends the video. The script is divided into two prophecies, first addressing American women and their patriotic duty to affirm the United States through piety, domesticity, purity, and submission. She embodies each of the tenants via different (cheap) wigs and the speech breaks down into a chant with a montage of visuals. The second prophecy alludes to the Biblical concept of the "Whore of Babylon," a doomsday figure mentioned in the Book of Revelations and has been evoked throughout history by several groups (including the Klan) as a symbol for feminine evil and sociological destruction.²³ The "Whore" here represents the contemporary ideological threats to god-fearing America, reinforcing the irony of my Black femme body spewing this rhetoric through transgressive drag. *Skipper* is a jolt of anarchic energy and it pinpoints that feeling of disturbing whimsy that I want to evoke throughout my studio practice.

As much as *Skipper* was a huge step in my exploration of video, the performance aspect was a necessary exorcism for my personal well being. Perhaps it's this familiar feeling of "possession" that's often brought up with musicians and actors, alluding to a lack of control and full body spiritual experience within the performance. I certainly felt possessed in front of the camera, embodying the horrors of the ideal American femininity and working through this ideology with campy drag and humor. There is a strange empowerment in acting out this character built on the harmful, violent verbosity designed to hurt me, a Black femme trying to survive and live authentically in this colonial, patriarchal, capitalist hellscape. Playing this character was as cathartic as it was challenging.



Fig. 15: Sophia Zarders, *Identisplotation* installation, 2023. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.



Fig. 16 - 18: Sophia Zarders. Stills from *Skipper*. 2022. Digital video.
<https://vimeo.com/694631791>

JOSEPHINE

After *Skipper*, I felt compelled to return to paper dolls and my research pointed toward the legendary performer of stage and screen, Josephine Baker. In reading about identity and performance, Baker had been cited in several texts²⁴ as a pivotal cultural figure who crafted her public image and performed a complicated view of race, gender, and sexuality. Since I had spent a good chunk of time excavating the problematic visual language of white womanhood, I wanted to challenge myself by exploring the ambiguity in Baker's artistry. It made perfect sense to take a deep dive into her legacy and how her specificities spoke to historical and contemporary discourses about representation.

Josephine Baker's career in the arts began in the same way as so many other Black artists of her time, in vaudeville productions from St. Louis to New York City. She crafted her signature performance style by combining the exaggerated comedic sensibilities from minstrel traditions, the work ethic and technical skill of the chorus line, and the exhilarating creative energy of the impending Harlem Renaissance. At the beginning of the 1920s, Baker moved to Paris and quickly became a household name from her titillating, exhilarating stage performances that showcased exaggerated depictions of "authentic" Blackness and cultures of the African diaspora. Her embodiment of the Other can be traced to the construction of the "Black Venus" archetype originating to the tragic exploitation of Saartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman who was taken by French colonizers in the 19th century and exhibited as a traveling freak show. This violent colonial exploitation and obsession with Black bodies transformed later into the postwar cultural movement negrophilia, or "négrophilie," in which French artists and theorists fetishized "primitive" notions of Blackness and appropriated African art. Josephine Baker tapped into this national obsession with her wild moves and unfiltered sexuality, dabbling in her vaudeville roots with broad minstrel performance to evoking the hypersexual, Black Venus stereotype of the French colonies. A reimagining of Blackness was brought to the stage night after night through Baker's melanated body, and there is a contemporary discomfort in navigating her complex embodiment of racial caricature.

Josephine Baker's fractured performance of race, gender, and sexuality is dissected in her paper doll, titled *Josephine*. Using the same formal strategies as *Anita* and *Mary*, a paper cutout figure and a collection of costumes, accessories, and props are rendered with acrylic paint on heavyweight paper.



Fig. 18: Josephine Baker by Stanislaus Julian Walery, 1926, gelatin silver print, from the National Portrait Gallery which has explicitly released this digital image under the CC0 license.

Fig. 19: Josephine Baker in banana skirt from the Folies Bergère production "Un Vent de Folie." 1927. Public domain.

Her caramel tinted body is centered in the map of her belongings; she stands with a slight contrapposto, her left arm propped on her hip and her right arm curved over her perfectly coiffed hair. She flashes a bright white void for a cheeky smile, and her hair and makeup evoke the quintessential glamor of the 1920s. The outfits point to Baker's prism of representations: the legendary banana skirt from the stage production *La Revue des Negres*, a feathered costume from the silent film *Zouzou* (1934), a classic tuxedo, and a fur trimmed champagne gown. Beauty products, accessories, and other objects float around the central ensembles, including a blonde wig, top hat, heels, jewelry, Bakeroil and Bakerfix hair products, and her official babydoll. Each of these objects presents its own critical examination into the ways she used racial caricatures to capitalize on the European negrophilia wave, create wealth, and survive in an oppressive, racist society.



Fig. 20: Sophia Zarders. *Josephine*, 2022. Acrylic on paper, dimensions variable.
Installation at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photo: Michael Love.

In addition to the *Josephine* doll, I painted a cartoonish paper cutout portrait of Josephine Baker expanded to a grotesque caricature. Inspired by animation and advertising of the 1920s-30s, her large circular face features giant Kit-Cat clock eyes glancing to the side, a white toothless grin, curly shellacked hair, and shimmering jeweled earrings. The piece speaks directly to Baker's exaggerated public image and her strategic use of caricature to reinforce her iconography. However, this visual is an amalgamation of these representations translated through my illustrative style, and in this way is



Fig. 21: Sophia Zarders. Closeup of *Josephine*, 2022. Acrylic on paper, dimensions variable. Installation at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photo: Michael Love.

conceptually separate from her *Josephine* paper doll. It resonates closest to my personal disidentifactory views toward Baker's artistry, encompassing both my reverence and irreverence. Her transgressive representations of social ideology are beguiling, exhilarating, disturbing and utterly fascinating.



Fig. 22: Sophia Zarders. Untitled (*Josephine*), 2022. Acrylic on paper, 36 x 24 inches.

The complex implications of “playing” with the paper doll are further complicated by the biography of Josephine Baker and the nude representation of her body. This was certainly an uncomfortable decision when I initially designed the piece, wherein I had to consider both the practical necessity of “dressing” her body in the burlesque costumes and the historical implications of displaying a naked Black woman’s body in a public academic institution. Even though I resolved to cover her body in the infamous banana skirt, I thought about my responsibility as a Black femme artist in representing her



Fig. 23 - 24: Sophia Zarders.
Closeups of *Josephine*, 2022.
Acrylic on paper, dimensions
variable. Installation at Emily
Carr University of Art + Design.
Photo: Michael Love.

with as much agency as I could through the flattened visual lens of a paper doll. I hope *Josephine* is successful in this way, though I recognize that the piece will always be complicated by the relationship of the image to the viewer, especially within the environment of an overwhelmingly non-Black audience. Just as Baker had done as a public figure, I had to negotiate this image of her as an empowered Black femme rather than an object of consumption that continued the harmful legacy of the Black Venus stereotype. While the piece was installed for a few weeks in the bustling main hallway on ECUAD's campus, I couldn't help but feel stressed about reactions to the work from students, staff, and faculty, particularly those who might have felt compelled to "play" with *Josephine*. These emotions were of course heightened by my hypervisibility as the only Black student in the MFA program and one of a handful in the entire student body. However, my desire to investigate and critique power structures is a driving motivation in my artistic practice, and these feelings of discomfort and anxiety come with that territory.

As I work through these complicated feelings, I think about Diana Ross' saying, "She was a hot lady, but deep in her thinking. Intelligent woman. I'm fascinated because Josephine, to me, is me, in this time."²⁵ This sentiment rang true when I had the privilege of paying my respects at Baker's crypt deep in the Panthéon in Paris. While visiting family in Europe, we took a brief trip to the city and I made time to



Fig. 25: Sophia Zarders, Studio documentation of *Josephine*, 2022. Acrylic on paper, dimensions variable.

see all of her old haunts, including the lavish restaurant La Coupole and the main neighborhood she lived in, Montparnasse. This journey invigorated my deep connection to Josephine Baker and instilled a haunting feeling as I geographically retraced her path and visually revived her artistic essence. I became a mixed race Black femme following the ghostly footsteps of an iconic mixed race Black femme. (Not to mention we somewhat look alike.) It was exciting to dive deep into the life of someone who fully embraced her racial ambiguity, Black roots, gender fluidity, sexuality, and the art of performance. I truly revere her incredible standing as a fearless Black entertainer who pushed every social boundary. I hope my work depicts Josephine Baker for the multi-faceted person she was, and illuminates the intricacies of her legacy.



Fig. 26: Photograph of the artist at Pl. Josephine Baker in Paris. 2022. Photo: Kerry Zarders.



Fig. 27: Sophia Zarders, Closeup of *Josephine*, 2022. Acrylic on paper, dimensions variable. Installation at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photo: Michael Love.



Fig. 28: Studio documentation of *Josephine*, 2022.

GARMENTS

In the third semester, I felt compelled to play with fabric and sewing as an explorative studio practice. After the paper dolls, I became curious about constructing these painted representations of costumes into physical garments, especially from Josephine Baker's glamorous wardrobe. This material exploration became a big breakthrough in my practice, and I named these new sculptural series *Garments*. I do not prescribe the term "sculpture" or "soft sculpture" to my three dimensional pieces. I view them as "garments", thus situating them within fashion, costume, performance, and pop culture; they are somewhere between clothes, costume, and art. These works pushed my technical handiwork with sewing (mechanical and by hand), clothing construction, and embellishing; I have some sewing experience making Halloween costumes and hemming my personal wardrobe, but I had never used this skill set in my studio practice. The results are a collection of stuffed, flattened, stretched, squished, and overtly campy garments.

The first work from *Garments* is a comically skinny, elongated white gown hung on a tiny, fuzzy coat hanger. The 9 foot long dress floats about a foot off the ground and creates a strange optical experience that emphasizes its exaggerated trumpeted silhouette. Unrealistic beauty standards are stretched to uncomfortable, cartoonish proportions. The imagined body is grotesque and the garment becomes horrifying yet humorous. This sewn object becomes the costume for a historical ghost, haunting contemporary aspirations of beauty with the horrors of the past. My strategy with exaggerating the design was to accentuate the silhouette lengthwise and stretch the implied body underneath, as well as shrink the bodice to create a trumpet shape. After my initial sketch, I scavenged Dressew, my favorite fabric shop in Vancouver, and bought a few meters of cheap polyester silk blend, lace trim, faux fur trim and rhinestones that were labeled "tarnished." With the help of the awesome Soft Shop technicians at ECUAD, I measured and configured the elongated base of the gown, then constructed the garment with a sewing machine and embellishments were handsewn.

Ironically, I actually made a white dress for my high school graduation almost ten years prior to this project. As a student at a Catholic "all girls" high school, I was forced to wear a plain floor length white dress and satin gloves for our graduation ceremony.²⁶ I decided to take sewing classes at my local community college and make a unique dress that reflected my desire to rebel against the institution.

It wasn't until my first installation of this piece that I made the personal connection between that long white dress of my past and this long white dress of my present day studio practice. To commemorate this strange irony, I wore a white dress to the opening celebration for the graduate show.



Fig. 29: Sophia Zarders. Untitled (*Garment*), 2022. Polyester, faux fur, rhinestones, lace, wire. 108 x 18 inches.

While working on the dress, I knew my next *Garment* would be a reinterpretation of Josephine Baker's iconic banana skirt. I sketched the design in my notebook and returned to the fabric store to purchase more tarnished rhinestones, plush stuffing, and upholstery fabrics in shimmering greens, browns, and yellows. Using my skills in hand sewing, I crafted sixteen soft organic objects that evoked bananas, plantains, roots, and other exotic fruits and vegetables, each around nine inches long and two inches thick. These plush forms were sewn to a central flexible wire ring, also encased in fabric and polyester stuffing, mimicking the curve of Baker's scandalous hip movements. The entire garment was embellished with more discounted rhinestones, which shined in all their cheap glory under the gallery lights. Then, I constructed a pillow for the banana skirt to sit on, made of magenta faux fur (same as the dress hanger), plush stuffing, emerald green tassels, and a blue button that caves in the center of the cushion; the rectangular shape measures to around twenty by twenty-two inches and eight inches thick. The cushy object sits on a plinth slightly smaller than it, bringing attention to its peculiar oversized demeanor and relation to the hand-crafted off-gold garment on its Seussian surface. Absurdity atop ridiculousness with a side of playful social critique.



Fig. 30: Sophia Zarders. *Untitled (Garment)*, 2022. Polyester fabric and stuffing, wire, rhinestones, faux fur, tassels, button, dimensions variable. Installation at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photo: Michael Love.



Fig. 31: Sophia Zarders, *Identisplotation* installation, 2023. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photo: Michael Love.

The historical inspiration for both of these *Garments* comes from my expansive digital archive of Josephine Baker images. The banana skirt is perhaps the most well known symbol of her flirtatious performativity of racial caricature and overtly sexual costuming. Despite the racist history of bananas as a French colonial signifier, Baker's activation of this controversial object through her dancing enacts a "queer plasticity and a transferability of the phallus... because of its femme orientation, the [banana skirt] offers a new host of sex and gender potentialities." (Hammer, 166) This garment, a charged symbol of Baker's transgressive performativity, was an obvious choice for my material translation. The dress, on the other hand, is a lesser known stage costume from a musical number titled, "Si j'étais blanche," translating to "If I were white" in French. The promotional photographs²⁷ from this particular performance show Josephine in a blonde finger curled wig, lightened makeup foundation, and an extravagant white fur-trimmed bias cut gown. The costume represents the white feminine ideal, constructed and disseminated by Western colonialism, and embodies the impossible act of her own assimilation in European high society. I knew I had to confront this disturbing imagery and work through the uncomfortable reality of Baker's contradictory relationship with whiteness. I read "Si j'étais blanche" as Josephine working through her oppression as a Black woman in a patriarchal, white supremacist



Fig. 32: Fashion illustration of the "Si j'étais blanche!" costume and sketch of Untitled (*Garment*). 2023.

Fig. 33: Closeup of Untitled (*Garment*), 2022. Polyester, faux fur, rhinestones, lace, wire.

society, as well as a subversive negotiation with a primarily French audience who fetishizes and profits off of her Blackness. On multiple levels, Baker is disidentifying with the white feminine ideal by projecting a desire to assimilate and dressing in the “appropriate” garb, thus reducing whiteness to a stage costume. Both the banana skirt and white gown were fascinating conduits for this new phase of sculptural work and provided a different way to work through my research.

The remaining *Garments* lean more into accessories and props that fit perfectly into my cartoony, campy point of view: a clamshell compact, makeup powder puff, perfume bottle, fuzzy mirror, satin gloves, pumps, and a vinyl record. A few of these pieces incorporated found objects that were transformed to be more absurd, colorful, and strange. For example, the music record and its accompanying sleeve are an actual Anita Bryant record that I found at a local music store’s dollar bin. It felt great to hot glue faux fur, felt, and other fabrics to this record, effectively erasing her appearance and turning the design into a collage of prints, textures, and psychedelic colors. This chance encounter inspired me to use more found objects as a way to materially alter cursed artifacts from pop cultural past and my own vast collection of random garbage. The pumps, for instance, were a dreaded pair of cheap heels I bought for a friend’s wedding a few years ago. I covered them in a floral fabric, glued



Fig. 34: Sophia Zarders, Closeup of Untitled (*Garment*), 2023. Polyester stuffing, faux fur, rhinestones, felt, wire, cotton fabric. Installation at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

more faux fur to the bottoms, and attached a pair of white stuffed socks into their soles. The lumpy, fleshy appendages are decorated with long pink leg hairs and fringe trim at the top. The effect isn't quite gory, but certainly leans horror in contrast with the cutesy, retro color palette. Dollhouse props and vintage beauty products are a throughline for the other objects in this group. An oversized plushy perfume bottle beckons viewers to squish it and funky mirrors seduces the visitor to admire their appearance, even if that reflection is warped. These *Garments* invite the audience to step into the "doll" role and embody cuteness with the grotesque.



Fig. 35: Sophia Zarders, Closeup of Untitled (*Garment*), 2023. Anita Bryant album cover, faux fur, felt, cotton fabric. Installation at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

Fig. 36: Sophia Zarders, Closeup of Untitled (*Garment*), 2023. Heels, polyester stuffing, faux fur, fringe, wire, cotton and polyester fabrics. Installation at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

CONCLUSION

In my final installation for the MFA thesis show, I decided to exhibit selected paper cutouts from *Anita*, *Mary* and *Josephine*, the *Garments* experimentations, and *Skipper*. My intention was to create an overwhelming environment that took over the stark “white cube.” This vibrant, nostalgic collage of flattened cutouts, soft objects, and an absurd video extended to each corner and crevice of the gallery walls. I chose not to display any of the human figures from the paper dolls, so that the specific biographical references embedded in those outfits, accessories, and props would be more ambiguous to a broader audience. The installation, as a culmination of my entire graduate process, challenged my deep attachment to “figurative art” and positioned these garments as vessels of meaning and significance. The viewers, including myself, became the subjects by participating in the installation. This iteration of *Identisplotation* emerged after two years of intense research, studio investigations, and personal catharsis.

As I completed the installation of my graduate work, it occurred to me that the only human figure visible in my thesis project was my own body in *Skipper*. This video had been my most demanding work during the graduate program, and ultimately a giant breakthrough. It was created during a manic moment in my artistic and personal life, and putting myself on display as a campy, satirical character added to that chaos. Like generations of graduate students before me, I had to go through a catharsis by sharing my most vulnerable inner self and allowing others to see that. Though I received positive feedback in my initial presentation in the prior year, I had to push through an anxious fog of self-criticism to feel confident enough to include it in the MFA show. At the end of the exhibition’s run, the strongest reactions I received from the public were responding to *Skipper*. This video acutely reflects the conceptual core of *Identisplotation*, but it also is the most raw expression of these ideas through my own body. Though far from self-portraiture, it’s my most personal piece in a collection of works that often cites the biographies of other people or is aesthetically fixed in the past. *Skipper* completely questioned my stable, comfortable position as a figurative artist. Within the layers of satire in this video was a negotiation between my identity as a Black femme and the embodiment of this disturbing character. Self-portraiture has been a fixture of my practice for many years (as exemplified in the illustrations in this document), but I strayed away from it during the graduate program. The genre has been an expressive way for me to explore my Blackness, gender fluidity, and sexuality by depicting

myself as different characters, which have always been closely tied to my identities. I was in control of these depictions of my biracial Black body. There is a definite lack of control in exhibiting *Skipper* in the gallery space, where my body and intersecting identities are subverted and contorted. In a way it's liberating to enthusiastically act a fool²⁸ in the art institution, even when it feels embarrassing or terrifying to do so. For a moment, my Black femme body took up the space it wanted in this prestigious environment and seduced the public to witness my personal, creative exorcism.

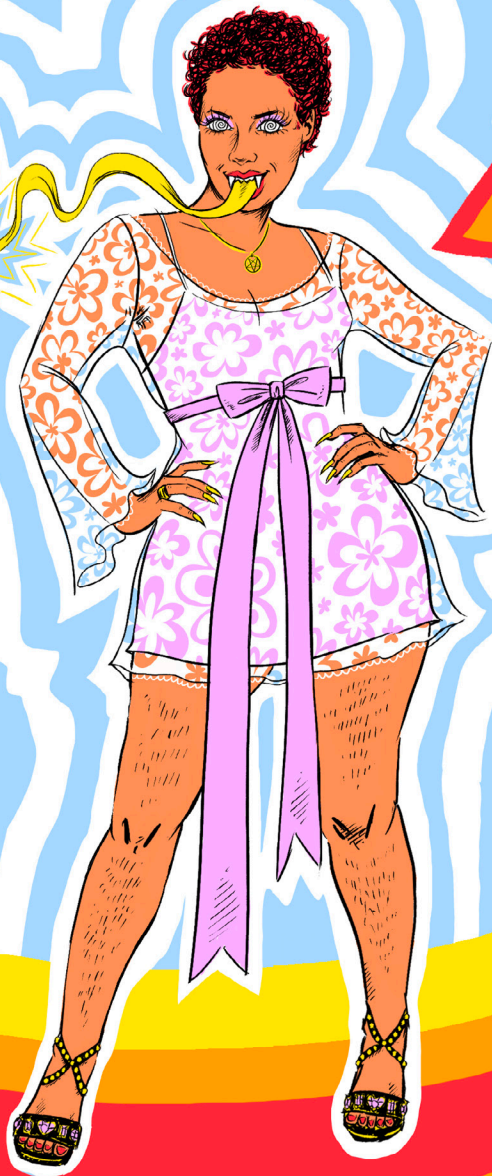
As I finish the MFA program, I must assess my position as an American Black femme living abroad and reflect on the increasingly, outrageously absurd anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric running rampant in the United States. Just in the last few months, the state of Tennessee has passed an anti-drag bill that effectively prohibits the trans community from existing in public places. Of course, this moral panic surrounding drag and queerness is not a new phenomenon (ahem, Anita Bryant), nor is it uniquely American. However, it is a more overt and obvious way to harm generations of trans individuals who deserve to live unapologetically without fear of harm. Across the globe, the LGBTQ+ community is under attack by oppressive governments, regressive public figures, and the dissemination of age-old anti-queer misinformation. The most disturbing part of all the historical context in *Identisplotation* (but especially *Skipper*) is how much it resonates with this contemporary wave of evangelical, patriarchal, colonial conservatism. It has been infuriating and distressing to make political art at this time, and yet I am continuously compelled to channel these feelings into my practice. Artists have a unique ability and responsibility to respond to the ever changing world around them.

I came into this MFA program as an illustrator yearning for artistic growth and self discovery after devoting many years to my professional career in freelance art. Throughout this degree, I've had the opportunity to really sink my teeth into the questions that had always hovered above my work and develop my voice as an interdisciplinary visual artist. I experienced a few breakthroughs in my research and practice, by personifying a wild character, pushing out of my figurative comfort zone, and better understanding my own identity in relation to my art. I'm thankful for the opportunity to grow my practice and come into my own as a visual artist and scholar, and I don't think this work would have emerged the same way at any other art institution. I hope *Identisplotation* speaks to other like-minded nerds who are endlessly fascinated with the intersections between history, identity, pop culture, and garments.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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FIGURES**

NOTES!



GLOSSARY

GLOSSARY

Ambiguity - Neither here nor there. In its most radical form, it can be used to break a falsely prescribed, socially enforced binary (gender, sexuality, etc.) I have learned to embrace ambiguity in my personal life and utilize it as an artistic strategy.

Assimilation - The social and political pressure to fit into a tiny little ideological box that has been pushed by imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, or other dominant structures. It is historically a violent form of oppression that has been used to suppress the vibrant cultures of marginalized communities.

B movie - Cheap thrills on the silver screen. Monsters, rock 'n' roll and cleavage.

Blackness - The magic spark connecting melanated ancestors and descendents from the continent of Africa and its diaspora. Blackness cannot be essentialized, but it is a living, breathing identity that has undeniably influenced every corner of popular culture. Black is beautiful, luminous, radical, resilient, bold, androgynous, proud, ancestral, and the future.

Black Venus - Fetishistic term referring to a beautiful, curvaceous Black femme. This phrase stems from European colonial violence against Africans and the horrifying legacy of human zoos, wherein African people were captive displays for European gawkers. Over time, the term has been reappropriated and reclaimed by notable Black women, including Josephine Baker.

Blaxploitation - Genre of exploitation film primarily completely produced, directed, written, and acted by Black creatives. This genre rose to fame in the 1960s-70s as a fuck you to dominant Black stereotypes in movies, playing on these outdated caricatures and creating their own simultaneously. While these films are narratively and aesthetically absurd, they often reflect very real issues within the Black community with a heavy dose of sex appeal, humor, and violence. Cue the afros, Camaros, funk, drugs, sex, bell bottoms, and pistol-whips.

Bricolage - A collection of random things or images that come together to create an interesting visual dialogue. My apartment is itself a bricolage of postcards, posters, art, and random shit that I have curated over the years. Together they translate the beehive of ideas that is my brain.

Camp - An appreciation for things that are obscene, distasteful, garish, and tacky. Does camp even exist anymore? Is pop culture just a never-ending self-referential loop nowadays? No one's fun anymore! Whatever happened to fun? I'm so bored I could die.

Caricature - An exaggerated representation of a person that leans into the grotesque. This idea is a big influence on my practice, often visually (portrait cutout of Baker) or conceptually (the implied caricature of *Garments*.)

Cult of True Womanhood - A conservative set of morals placed on bourgeois women in the U.S. at the turn of the century. The central philosophy touted piety, purity, domesticity, and submission, which influenced the political satire embedded in *Skipper*. The Cult of True Womanhood has heavily inspired contemporary puritanical, oppressive views toward gender equality, sexuality, and body autonomy. For a deeper dive into this subject, I recommend "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" by Barbara Welter.

Disidentification - The critical space between assimilating and rejecting an image, narrative, or idea that is not intended for you as the audience. This concept was theorized by José Esteban Muñoz in relation to queer artists of color who use drag performance to critique mainstream ideas toward gender politics, racial identity, and popular culture that they are excluded from.

Doll - An malleable, beautiful thing that contains all of the world's pressure to be unattainably perfect. A still, plastic body to dress up, undress, stand, sit, throw, drown, defile, squish, snap, worship and destroy.

Drag - An art form that threatens the porous fabric of gender essentialism, sexual oppression, and wet blanket attitudes of conservative ideology in the United States. Currently banned in Tennessee, but hopefully that idiotic law has been reversed by the time you're reading this.

Exorcism - Supernatural release of negative energy from within the human body. This process has been co-opted by the Catholic Church as a way to push their insidious agenda against Satan, but I aim to reclaim this term through a secular lens. Acting out *Skipper* was a form of exorcism on an intrapersonal and artistic level.

Fetishization - A form of exploitation that labels a differing culture, race, sexuality, identity, etc as the "The Other" and treats it as a sexual fantasy or curious oddity. This stems from Western imperialism and colonialism wherein anything not regulated to stringent European cultures is defined as "exotic" and therefore coveted, appropriated, commodified, etc. White Parisians' obsession with Josephine Baker can be examined as fetishistic.

Figurative Art - The human body represented visually in an artwork. This genre stems from humans' obsession with the question of whether the soul and physical body are separate entities. This question is the undercurrent of all political discourse regarding bodily autonomy, reproductive justice, and transness. Figurative art attempts to capture both the human body and the soul.

Garment - Something between clothing, costume, prop, accessory, and artwork. Outside of fashion or art, yet in conversation with both.

Glamazon - Diva of the ultimate caliber. The embodiment of glamour, attitude, and fashion. Think Grace Jones, Anita Ekberg, Donyale Luna, and Sasha Colby.

Grotesque - Deemed by dominant culture as obscene, disgusting, uncanny, weird, strange, gross. Gives you that icky feeling... or maybe you're into that, you sicko!

Hagsploitation - A sub-genre of exploitation cinema that stars deranged older women with an itch for bloody revenge. This became a popular trend during the 1960s when casting opportunities dwindled for legendary actresses of Hollywood's bygone Golden Era. Popular "psycho biddies" include Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, and currently Mia Goth.

Horror - A way for people of marginalized backgrounds to work through their daily anxieties and fears of existing in this cruel world. Perhaps the queerest film genre, wherein misunderstood monsters and unpopular girls with telekinesis reign supreme.

Humor - Another strategy to survive and make sense of this cruel world. Humor is a connective tissue between all

my thesis work, which is used as a formal and conceptual vehicle to deliver political and social commentary with a wink and a smile.

Irony - Another strategy to survive and make sense of this cruel world. When the optics clash humorously with the message. The juxtaposition of demonic imagery and overtly Evangelical “anti-demon” dialogue points to irony in *Skipper*, which also employs horror and humor. What a coincidence!

Kitsch - Something that is deemed lowbrow, obnoxious, or naïve by so-called cultural tastemakers. *Garments* certainly dips into this aesthetic and celebrates it with bright colors, cheap materials, and playful references.

Minstrel - A form of racial caricature that stems from cartoonishly negative depictions of Black Americans that became popular during the Reconstruction Era. These images and stories permeated American pop culture and were disseminated through theater performance, graphic arts, propaganda, etc.

Negrophilia - A fetishistic obsession with Black people and culture. The term stems from the négrophilie craze in the 1920s, where white Parisians craved “primitive” Black art and appropriated culturally significant aesthetics for their art, music, etc. This cultural phenomenon is very much alive and well in contemporary pop culture, in which Black artists are routinely excluded, fetishized, appropriated, and then erased from the lineage of that art form.

Nostalgia - A wistful (or dangerous) longing for a bygone era. This can be an effective, subversive tool for uncovering and addressing harms of the past. The *Paper Doll* series can make viewers nostalgic for their childhoods, even if the content of those visuals is jarring.

Oppositional Gaze - Theorized by bell hooks, this term refers to a critical gaze toward cinema that is particular to Black women spectators. This idea is key to my relationship with pop culture, wherein I rarely feel reflected or represented in the media I watch, leading me to take in these visuals and stories through a critical, outsider lens.

Satire - Using humor as a strategy to mock the status quo. This was a major component to the storytelling in *Skipper*, wherein my performance style and dialogue are satirical of political leaders of the Religious Right.

Televangelism - Religious (typically Christian) television broadcasting that hinges on spectacle, televisual healing, and money money money. One of the largest televangelist networks, Trinity Broadcasting Network, used to run in a gigantic, garish studio that I would occasionally drive past in Costa Mesa, California. Televangelist icons Tammy Faye Bakker and Jan Crouch were major influences for my character mannerisms in *Skipper*.

Terrorist Drag - A subgenre of drag performance that is very confrontational and a big middle finger to social norms. This genre was theorized by José Esteban Muñoz in reference to the transgressive performance art of Vaginal Davis. Does *Skipper* fall into terrorist drag? Perhaps. :)

NOTES

1. Theorized by Muñoz in *"The White to Be Angry": Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag* (1997).
2. See *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999).
3. See *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992).
4. *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), and *Barbarella* (1968).
5. *Time*, 1970 "Cinema: Some Sort of Nadir"
6. I first encountered Grace Jones in the *Pee Wee's Playhouse Christmas Special*, where she emerged from a giant packing box and sang "Little Drummer Boy" dressed in a sculptural metallic dress and headdress. This rocked my world as a kid and I still revisit this episode every holiday season: <https://youtu.be/98JrWm9IMMA>
7. See Jones' controversial collaborations with French photographer and ex-lover, Jean Paul Goude: <https://www.jeanpaulgoude.com/en/archives/grace-jones>
8. Grace Jones performing with a caged tiger: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5EyewfIODI>
9. Bobby Conn performing on *Chic-A-Go-Go*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2XmrmaXeLg
10. Many of these websites are gone now, but i-dressup.com made news in 2019 for a data security breach. This is an apology to my parents, for using their ancient email address to make many accounts on these sites. I'm sure it's very corrupted by now.
11. Bryant is also well known for her role as a spokesperson for Florida Orange Juice in the 1970s. She sang the official theme song for the brand and starred in a commercial series animated by Walt Disney Studios. The "orange bird" character can be seen today on Disney merchandise and is beloved by super fans for some reason: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ffEJJhB8qI>
12. Watch Anita Bryant get pied in the face: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tHGmSh7f-0> Bryant's vitriol was met with vocal protests by the gay community across the United States, including a boycott on orange juice and screwdriver cocktails. Some of my favorite protest signs include "Anita Bryant Sucks Oranges" and "Anita Who?"
13. Pickford won the 2nd Academy Award for Best Actress for her performance in *Coquette* (1929). She also received an honorary Oscar in 1976.
14. She has several theaters and buildings named after her, a star on the Hollywood (and Toronto) Walk of Fame, and a prohibition-era cocktail. Yes, I've taken a photo with her star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.
15. Original editions of *Attitude* are understandably a collector's item, but you can purchase the re-issue from your favorite bookseller. Be sure to gander at these scandalous page spreads: <https://www.parigibooks.com/pages/books/33205/tom-tierney/attitude-an-adult-paperdoll-book-signed-presentation-copy>
16. Is there anything funnier than the Abbott and Costello cats? I watched this several times in a manic state while writing this thesis document: <https://youtu.be/m5GdhX0rVMA>

17. Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate, and many other social movements defined the tumultuous year of 2020.
18. I especially recommend the essay “Do These Sequins Make My Butt Look Fat? Wardrobe, Image, and the Challenge of Identity in the Music of Black American Women” by Gail Hilson Woldu.
19. The United States (and many other countries) is currently facing a horrifying wave of regressive social attitudes and oppressive legislation against the LGBTQ+ community. Coincidentally many mainstream clothing outlets are pushing a “cottagecore” aesthetic (aka Puritan chic) that fits right in with the past trends of conservative political movements.
20. I also pulled inspiration from Japanese “lolita” street style, 1950s babydoll aesthetics, child beauty pageants, Catholic communion garb, debutante ballgowns, and turn of the century Victorian styles.
21. “You mean... we could’ve been friends this whole time?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cth9aakWf38>
22. Frank Wilderson III coined the phrase *Afropessimism*, which positions anti-Blackness and violence against Black people at the core of white, Western history and society. Nuotama Bodomo’s film, *Everybody Dies!*, reflects this ideology through surrealism and campy aesthetics that disorients the viewer:
<https://nuotamabodomo.info/everybody-dies> I highly recommend watching the television series *Random Acts of Flyness*, which features many segments directed by Bodomo.
23. MYSTERY. BABYLON THE GREAT. MOTHER OF HAROLTS. ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. Book of Revelations, 17:5.
24. My first reading of Josephine’s work in a critical context was Malik Gaines’ *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible*, which was another influential text in my graduate research.
25. Diana Ross has paid homage to Baker throughout her career: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUFUFW4PfVI>
Other celebrity nods include Beyoncé, Lynn Whitfield, Laverne Cox, Yara Shahidi, and problematically Miley Cyrus.
26. There is so much I could say about making teenage girls dress up as virginal child brides for Jesus, but I’ll reserve that for another document.
27. The photographs are shared on my MFA blog:
<https://fullresgradstudios.ecuad.ca/szarders/2022/11/04/fall-2022-explorations/>
28. Act a fool, girl... Act a fool: <https://youtu.be/PmvQp1KBWTQ>

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