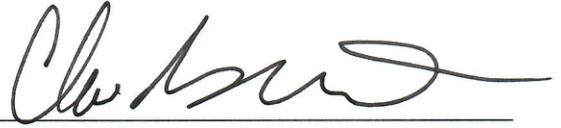


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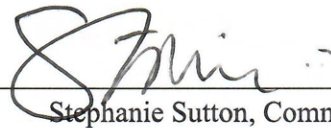
To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Maddie Foss entitled "Girl Rot."

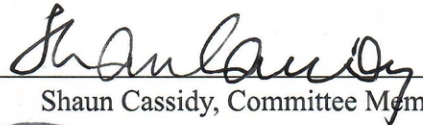
We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art.



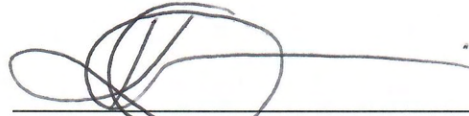
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Jack DeRochi, Dean, Graduate School

GIRL ROT

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

Of the

College of Visual and Performing Arts

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Of

Master of Fine Arts

In Visual Arts

Winthrop University

May, 2024

By

Maddie Foss

**Abstract**

Does individual identity curate our personal environments, or do environmental variables infiltrate the idea of selfhood? My work is a journey of questioning the origins of selfhood while simultaneously trying to understand identity through the lens of the physical world and online landscapes that influence me. Through an examination of identity work, the history of pop culture icons, and online aesthetics, my artwork is immersed in gender, sexuality, and media study conversations that help me better understand myself and others that heavily engage online. I am an interdisciplinary artist working in digital drawings, collages, and installations with my media reflecting the literature I immerse myself in.

It is through the navigation of these worlds that my selfhood collides with consumerism, tradition, and rituals that draws me to question power dynamics and structures within today's society.

## **Acknowledgment**

While I am sure the saying “it takes a village to raise a child” is true, I say forget about the kids. More importantly, it takes a village to create a MFA body of work. I would like to thank Claudia O’Steen, Stephaine Sutton, and Shaun Cassidy for agreeing to be on my committee and giving their time and energy to further my success. I am thankful for Dr. Michelle Livek for the unwavering encouragement she has given me since the moment I met her. I would also like to thank Emily Shelton, Chloe Compton, and Austin Reynolds for the many laughs and cries we shared during this journey together. I do not think I would have made it here today without my studio mates by my side. I thank my parents, Dave and Leanne Foss, for being my biggest supporters and giving me free housing in this economy so I can truly focus on my career. I would like to thank my sister, Keri Cauthen, for proofreading this and every other paper I have written up to this point. I would not be coherent without her. Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Mahmoud Alhousseiny, for always pushing me to be a better artist, even if it sometimes portrays men in a bad light.

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*That girl,  
Mean girl,  
Clean girl dinner.  
Tomato girl,  
Strawberry girl,  
Hot girl summer.  
Stay at home girlfriend,  
Day in the life,  
The type of woman that will make a good wife.  
I'm changing my last name to our white to a wedding,  
The romance of a teen,  
Girls' pink messy bedding.  
It's an artfully arranged pile of snacks,  
Not the emotional labor we hold on our backs.  
Coquette girl,  
Rat girl,  
Hot girl walk.  
Choices of girlhood performed on girl-tok,  
Tied bows and coke bottles.  
A girl diploma,  
Some flares paid for by Sophia Coppola.  
Domestic engineering sang us the chorus,  
Choreographed dance of romanticized performance.  
Make it sweet and pink just to get by...*

- Phoebe Taylor

## **A Rat Girl Scrambling Around in a Jesus Loving World**

My mother says that her greatest regret of motherhood was allowing death to live in our household. I do not see it that way as I know nothing different. My grandmother suddenly collapsed one day from a blood clot when my father was nine and never recovered. My aunt was murdered by her husband. I attended the trial and even took the stand while still in my mother's womb. At the age of three, my half-sister went on a trip with her friends, but never returned due to a car crash on a very rainy day. When I was sixteen, history repeated itself as my best friend's mom never returned home due to a drunk driver that hit her head on.

Growing up living with death made each of these tragedies less tragic, and they quickly became just a part of normal life for me. I got used to the sad looks from random people and took in every detail when my parents would offer new information on the dead to help make better sense of the family lore I had to string together over the years. Having an ongoing list of women who died too soon, most of whom I did not know because I was too young, planted a seed of curiosity about femininity inside me. I was not sure why I had this fascination since I had plenty of living, strong women who raised me, along with men who uplifted these women and myself. Now that I am older, I realize those feelings grew inside me because I knew all the women missing in my life would have had an impact on me that I never got to experience except for the one time a year my family would make the long drive to my sister's grave to cry for all the ones we lost to heaven.



At the age of five, I began to question the existence of God after a Bible study teacher told me that animals came before man, with no mention of dinosaurs. At that very moment, I decided my love for dinosaurs surpassed anything an organized religion could offer me. I had to accept that my loved ones were not in heaven. Even with my revelation, I still spent many of my Wednesday nights at various friends' churches pretending to pray as a preacher whispered to an acoustic version of *My God* by Jeremy Camp. I even got baptized three times at various church camps as a way to break up the days of preachy lectures I would tune out while doodling.

Around the same time as my devotion to dinosaurs developed, I began to push back against the staple elements of girlhood and the expectations tied to my gender. No pink, no lace, and no Barbies for me. Why would I want to have a tea party with dolls when I can make mud pies for my scavenged new worm friends? Even from the perspective of a dinosaur worshiping child, I recognized that acts associated with girlhood, such as wearing a pink dress, were often dismissed as frivolities typical of ditzzy women. I did not want to be viewed as a silly little girl without a thought in her head except for plans of what outfit she would wear next.

While I knew even then that equating so-called "girly" traits with silliness or weakness was flawed, I now realize that my deliberate avoidance of these traits was part of the problem. The same trends persisted into my preteen and teenage years. My Tumblr feed was my sanctuary, filled with grainy stills of various manic pixie dream girls in blue and green hues in an attempt to visualize my identity. There were no rom-coms in my Netflix queue or anything too girly in my closet.

Like many young artists who felt out of place, I seized the first opportunity to escape my hometown of Rock Hill, South Carolina. At fifteen, I left for South Carolina's Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities, where for the first time, I felt seen among my peers. I began to flourish academically, particularly in the social sciences and visual art classes, so much so that in 2017 I entered Birmingham-Southern College as a double major in psychology and fine arts. During this time, I participated in The Experimental Social Cognition and Perception Lab, where I became fluent in race, gender, and grief literature. When I was not in the rat lab or analyzing statistical data, I was in my art studio, merging my research through printmaking and ceramics into very personal and confessional art. This process was very rewarding, but also exhausting.

In college, I embarked on a journey to embrace the femininity that my younger self so thoroughly scorned and tried to obliterate. The shade Millennial Pink started as a gateway drug that infiltrated my earth-toned room, gradually seeping into my wardrobe and ultimately manifesting in my art. I graduated with a Bachelor's of Science degree in 2021. I packed up my room, along with my two retired lab rats I now called pets, and we made the long trek back home. As I left my newly established life in Birmingham, AL, and returned to where I grew up, I was burnt out. I also had to face the town I spent so much energy running away from. As I found a place for my mountain of pink pillows and rat cage in my reclaimed old room at my parent's house, I was confronted with the idea of selfhood and belonging. The way I chose to deal with these intensely existential thoughts and questions was to drown myself in social media, specifically TikTok. I quickly became a self-proclaimed "Rat Girl," which is a micro-trend of empowered women

scurrying around the streets, nibbling on little snacks, and embracing rodent energy. I felt at peace with my memes of rats and comforted by the viral sounds I heard repeatedly.

Another prevalent trend on my side of TikTok involves individuals, particularly those who identify as women, nurturing their inner child through missed desires or nostalgia. This often means indulging in the childlike pleasures that they missed out on earlier, like buying popular kid stuffed animals with their adult money or, in my case, embracing an abundance of pink and sporting glittery nail polish. While healing my inner child, I finally rekindled the joy I used to find in creating. Without access to a printmaking studio or ceramic kiln, I clung to my iPad and moved towards a more digital approach. I began doodling silly little ideas on Procreate and having fun with art again. Although elements of my past works remained, the new pieces resonated more with silliness, inspired by the online trends I encountered on TikTok.

With years of questioning my identity in relation to my experiences, location, and addiction to social media, I was left to question: Does individual identity curate our personal environments, or do environmental variables infiltrate the idea of selfhood?

### **Pixelated Thoughts Through a Social Lens**

The social scientist inside me never truly departed after I left the labs in Birmingham behind. My artistic practice is still heavily inspired by research and observation. While my art continues to draw from social science literature, which will be discussed later, I now spend most of my time analyzing my own behaviors and interests as if it were a case study. I also closely observe trends and aesthetics that unfold on social media platforms. I still dedicate countless hours to TikTok and Instagram, immersing

myself in content and culture tailored by my algorithms. This phase of my process can span weeks, sometimes months, of liking posts and sharing videos with loved ones before I am inspired to make a piece of art. I have to mentally categorize the lyrics, visuals, and trends before everything clicks together in my brain to fully process.

My digital drawings are the power source for my work. It is the first step to any of my pieces, regardless of the media or form the finished product might take. Influenced by the rapid ebb and flow of online trends, the digital medium allows me to swiftly jot down my ideas. I predominantly work in Procreate, a graphic editing software, while also using Pinterest and Google images to reference and trace, which gives the work a flat and collage-like appearance and allows me to focus on color choices and fluid line movement. Due to my long standing experiences in traditional analog art, I tend to gravitate towards digital brushes on Procreate resembling traditional media, such as colored pencils. I also work in layers to produce my digital drawings, which is directly affected by my background in printmaking.

Once my thoughts are pixelated through a screen, I consider my next steps. Some images will forever live in the digital realm, while others will grow to hold space in our physical reality, oscillating between the virtual and the tangible. When I determine if a piece should transition into the tangible world, carefully decide what media that I will use. Most of my materials can be traced back to the domestic realm, which conceptually relates to my work and my personal relationship between home and identity. Nail polish, rugs, pimple patches, and computer screens are consistently used. I create a dialogue with the materials and the digital landscapes I am working with as much as I can. For example, using glitter nail polish to varnish or to seal a drawing to emulate the glow of a screen

(see figure 1) or using pimple patches the same way we would use emojis (see figure 2) illustrates this ongoing push and pull between my studio practice and the digital realm. Just as my material choices are influenced by the digital landscape, I also utilize techniques that are trending or that have gone viral on social media. Rug tufting is something I quickly became obsessed with after seeing the process go viral on TikTok. This material and process not only coincide with the domestic realm like the other materials I frequently use, it also reveals the performance of making that directly relates to the digital platform I am referencing in my work.

The word performance always comes back to me when discussing my work. While I do utilize the act of traditional performance art in my practice, I see all of my art as a performative experience in one form or another. Whether I am literally dressing up as certain aesthetic versions of myself or simply acting out the angsty teenager I cannot seem to grow out of, every piece of art I make is depicting a very specific version of myself that feels almost theatrical. Perhaps this is due to most of my pieces featuring pretty and pink subject matter stemming from an exaggerated feeling of aggression or sadness that is usually only revealed through the titles. For example, the digital drawing entitled *at least i'm pretty* depicts a pastel colored birthday party with chairs and a cake, with only the melancholy title revealing a deeper undertone (see figure 3). I like to think of my titles as an inside joke between myself as the artist and those willing to take the time to read them. I want anyone who approaches my work to be able to enjoy the images on a surface level; however, it is important to offer the viewers who understand the complex emotions I am alluding to a chance to understand and be seen.

Although I am an interdisciplinary artist working with many different media at once, one aspect of my art that ties it all together formally is the color scheme. The pieces are crafted with vibrant greens, blues, and yellows, and almost always with an overwhelming use of pink. The allure of pink resonates with my personal journey of healing my inner child, but also its unique history. Pink is the only color not on the electromagnetic spectrum, meaning the diversity of pink hues results from adding or subtracting yellow & blue tones from a broad range of colors. Furthermore, the color is very polarizing and is in constant contradiction with itself. For example, pink is tied to high-brow art, such as the highly feminine and floral Rococo Period (Bucknell). However, in contemporary times, pink is also seen in low-brow cultures, such as the boom of millennial pink on cheaply made decor that I was attracted to during my undergraduate college years. This history is directly related to the concepts of my work, often focusing on the contradiction or juxtaposition of girlhood and identity.

### **The Rebellion of Girls, Girls, Girls**

Juno Birch is a contemporary artist that greatly inspires my art. She works in digital and ceramic media; however, she is primarily known for her drag queen performances as a transgender woman. She primarily deals with themes of identity and “artificial femininity.” Her use of playfulness through form and color, and her use of humor to portray complex emotions greatly inspire my work. In reference to her drag, she states that she is an alien that came to earth and tried to act like a woman by performing the looks of a 1950s housewife. This is achieved through the type of hair, makeup, and

clothes she wears (see figure 4). Birch dresses this way to reflect her feelings of alienation growing up as a transgender woman, feeling as though she could never get the act of womanhood precisely right (Solarin). Moreover, her digital prints and sculptures echo these concepts and emotions. All the figures in her pieces conform to womanly figures, yet they exhibit masculine details (see figure 5). Broad shoulders, Adam's apples, and beard scruff are used in most of the women depicted, which are the primary triggers of Juno Birch's gender dysphoria. She says she tries not to take art too seriously, but rather "taking a piss out of everything is my way of coping with being trans" (Solarin). Her playful backstory, the bright colors, and the loose "alien" forms she portrays demonstrate this sentiment.

Currently, Birch is mostly focusing on her in-person performances and on her self-titled YouTube channel. On her YouTube platform, she uploads makeup videos and showcases her gameplay of the hit 2004 life simulator, *The Sims 2*. During these videos, Birch wears campy outfits based on stereotypes of women, such as huge wigs with curlers, dish gloves with painted fingernails, and mascara running down her iconic blue alien painted face. She gives commentary on what she is doing with her catch phrases, such as dramatically yelling "stunning" in her British accent, or impersonating celebrity Jennifer Coolidge.

The art form of drag itself is simultaneously a celebration and an act of rebellion of stereotypical gender roles and performances. Every aspect of Juno Birch's persona reflects the nature of drag, from her color choice and outfits, to the way she communicates, and has profound reasoning behind them while simultaneously looking effortless and authentic. The idea of artificial femininity that Birch uses fascinates me and

directly relates to my own exaggerated performances referenced in my artwork.

Furthermore, she has mastered the art of not taking herself too seriously and allowing herself to have fun with her art through dark humor about her insecurities.

An example of Juno Birch's use of artificial femininity and references can be seen in my piece entitled *tickled pink* (see figure 6). The piece is a digital collage that takes inspiration from a vintage magazine template. All of the borders, the title, and the subheading that reads "Think pink! For Valentine's Day, any day. There's nothing like it to give you a glow!" was traced from the template. The original black and white vintage design was given what drag queens call a "yassified" makeover, meaning I changed the template into a hyper-feminine display with hot pink text and a mix of hand-drawn and found backgrounds of pink and blue clouds.

All five figures in the image are self portraits of myself in various poses. The top photograph is of myself sticking out my tongue, referencing Olivia Rodrigo's hit album *Sour*. However, instead of stickers on my face like Rodrigo, yellow and pink star pimple patches are covering my face. "Cutesy" patches to cover acne have become a trend to emphasize blemishes in an aesthetically pleasing way, rather than try to hide them. In the largest image on the right of the piece, I am wearing cleaning gloves with nail polish on them that directly relates to Birch's persona while holding a pickle, referencing the trend of "pickle girls." Pickle girls are individuals who simply love pickles and make it known online as a personality trait. In the bottom left corner image, I portray myself as a mother figure, only with rats instead of human children with the caption "there's nothing sexier than a mother with her children."



Each photograph within the template of *tickled pink* displays a different element of my identity that is put into a process of adding pop culture iconography, like Juno Birch does within her drag practice. By taking something so dynamic and ever-changing, like the sense of self, and putting it through a framework of things created to be sold to us, such as an album cover or a magazine spread, I am creating an artificial version of myself that becomes more relatable to viewers, much like Juno Birch reflects on and creates an artificial femininity for herself.

Like many early twenty-something year olds, I am drawn to “Sad Girl” musical artists such as Phoebe Bridgers, Lorde, Taylor Swift, and boygenius. As much as I identify myself and my art in this music, Chappell Roan’s debut album *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess* feels the most appropriate to discuss. Pitchfork’s review describes the album as “a bold and uproarious pop project stitched with stories about discovering love, sex, and oneself in a new place” (Horn). Much like myself, Roan is inspired by drag queen aesthetics which play into her campy visuals and sound. She calls herself “the pop star of Goodwill,” which not only speaks to her “cheap” and glamp outfits, but her use of mixing different pop culture references as if they are merchandise on a thrift store floor. References to films such as *But I’m a Cheerleader*, *Mean Girls*, *Aquamarine*, and *Hannah Montana* are mixed into her lyrics and music videos. Furthermore, one article on her debut album discusses Roan in relation to Patsy Cline, RuPaul, Kesha, Oliva Rodrigo, and other artists, which is a testament to the sponge-like mentality of her creative process (Horn). She is taking these pop culture relics, such as films or pop culture personas, and combining them in a resourceful way.

Chappell Roan’s wide use of pop culture inspiration is paralleled with her range of complex emotions displayed in the story of *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*. From melodramatic songs about her Southern mom’s disapproval and ballads about rough break-ups, to upbeat tracks about the disappointment of heterosexual men, Roan takes her listeners on an emotional journey through her twenties. In her song “Femininomenon” she creates a cheer-like song about being unsatisfied in a relationship, stating:

You know know what you need,  
 And so does he,  
 But does it happen? (No!),  
 But does it happen? (No!),  
 Well, what we really need is a femininomenon (Roan).

This chant-like style situated in between yelling and talking is heard throughout the album, giving her audience of mostly women and queer individuals the space to cathartically scream-sing about toxic relationships or about silly things, like how horny they are.

The artistry Chappell Roan displays in her debut album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*, paints the picture of a glittery moodboard of teenage angst, which is the overall aesthetic I strive for in my work. In a way, I am “the artist of Poshmark” (a digital thrift store), referencing digital media from TikTok and Instagram in my creative process. Furthermore, I am taking my viewers on the journey of my twenties, seeing it as my second adolescence filled with self discovery and raw feelings. I am creating a space

made with the intent of cathartic emotions through my own experiences within my work and the gallery space.

This glittery moodboard aesthetic can be seen in the piece entitled, *crying at the nail salon (i'm so sick of online love)* (see figure 7). The piece is a digital collage of nineties and early two-thousands pop culture relics, such as fish, Furby's, and old desktop screens. Much like Roan who has a "more is more" approach to her style, the piece has over thirty layers of images and textures of vibrant colors that create a muddy mix of nostalgic pixels. On top of the collage is layers of different glitter nail polishes, adding more dimension to the piece and continuing the feeling of nostalgia that most women have towards playing with nail polish as kids. The title itself is a lyric from Chappell Roan's song "Femininomenon," but also is a nod to the cathartic emotions of self discovery and raw feelings that are created through the act of something as simple as surfing the internet with friends or doing your nails at a sleepover.

### **Finding Home in Hyperreality**

The term hyperreality refers to a simulation of reality, specifically the virtual reproduction of objects, events, or everyday experiences that replace the authenticity of the real (Barroso 2). Today we live in a hybrid world of virtual and physical space with the distinction between simulation and reality becoming less and less noticeable. Through meme sharing, Instagram reels, and TikTok sounds, the way we interact with one another online intertwines with in-person conversations to the point that it becomes nearly impossible to separate the two. Since reality and hyperreality are so interwoven together, one of the easiest ways to differentiate between the two is that the virtual world is

presented via bits of information generated by a computer (Barroso 5). My artwork specifically focuses on the identity work in the hyperreality realm; however, navigating this realm can be slippery and challenging. To truly grasp literature on this topic, it is beneficial to anchor the research in the physical realm.

To begin this exploration of the physical realm, it is helpful to discuss a space that most connects to my work: the domestic. *Dismantling Mantelpieces: Narrating and Materializing Culture in the Home*, by Rachel Hurdley, is an empirical sociological study that focuses on the constructions of narratives and identity building around objects displayed in the home and the relationship between the meaning of home, material culture, and consumption. By investigating why people feel so connected to their house and belongings, she found the root of this connection is performance. The article defines the home as the setting where the self is enacted and “otherness” is managed. Homes are private spaces where one is free to enact the self; however, there is a potential for surveillance and judgment by visitors. Therefore, domestic displays are not only a performance of the self, but also a performance for others (Hurdley 718). It is through this performance that narratives begin to form about objects that can help an individual understand their identity as a whole. The visual productions of the home can reveal social and moral identities. They even show timeless identities that are not immediately present, such as older hobbies or music collections that are unused at the moment, but still represent an important aspect of the person. This is because the individual becomes a producer of cultural displays and a co-constructor of meaning through the “aestheticization of everyday life” (Hurdley 718). It is through the aestheticization of everyday life that we use the mundane, such as rearranging decor on the mantelpiece, to

build important connections to identity work. By working to construct and reconstruct our domestic spaces, we are engaging with important performances that shape our identity.

The same framework for identity work can also be applied to online landscapes. For example, homepages or phone lock screens display one's domestic and/or private self, as they include information regarding one's personal interests and relationships through photographs and graphics that shows what is most important to an individual. The performance aspect of homepages leaves a digital space for identity exploration that can continuously be constructed and reworked, much like the aestheticization of domestic places (Consalvo and Paasonen 30, Hurdley 718). Lock screens are set knowing other people will see them and make judgements based off of them; therefore, we actively change our screens to display parts of our lives that we want others to see. While the tangible home and the digital homepage clearly connect as real and hyperreal versions of the domestic, online identity construction extends beyond the initial screen presented when we access our devices.

Research on identity work within social media shows that social media plays such a big role in many people's lives that it has become almost impossible to construct, negotiate, and present identities entirely separate from social media (De Smet and Dhaenens 70). For example, Spotify is a social media platform that allows users to connect through music. With an immense library of music, audiobooks, and podcasts, Spotify encourages users to curate private and public playlists, and also allows friends to see what is streaming in real-time, engaging with algorithmically-created playlists made especially for an individual user (De Smet and Dhaenens 66). By crafting, arranging, and

rearranging playlists, the individual is negotiating and making sense of their sense of self. However, with Spotify's social aspect, interacting with the self does not stop at understanding the self, one must also perform the self for others (De Smet and Dhaenens 74). For example, Spotify Wrapped is a marketing campaign that allows Spotify users to view a compilation of data about their activity on the platform over the past year. Spotify Wrapped typically includes the five musicians a user has listened to most often, the songs which they have listened to most, and their favorite music genres. Spotify Wrapped also includes information about activity on the Spotify platform as a whole. It usually comes out in a story-like graphic, making it easy to add to your Instagram story to share with friends as a way to perform identity for others. A key difference between presenting the self on social media, instead of in the home, is that individuals on social media are engaging with a computer-generated algorithm.

This implies that the virtual is thinking for us. In other words, the individual is not so much revealed as constructed by their data. However, like in the home, users perform parts of their identity, such as gender or age, through actions in the application.

The relationship between the home, hyperreality, and identity can be seen in the piece entitled *olympia* (see figures 8 and 9). The piece is a choppy animation that shifts between the two stills that shows a home interior space with myself as the figure staring back at the viewer. I created this piece by taking screenshots of home decor while surfing the internet, meaning each element was first chosen by my algorithms and then myself. Due to this collage-like way of working, the space is flat with nonsensical perspectives and lighting, further displaying the images as a constructed hyperreal space. The moving parts of the animation include bags that I carry around in real life, rats moving around the

room, and cockroaches dancing in the background, connecting and displaying my personality and identity through the piece. By placing myself in the digital realm (literally and figuratively) and hand picking all the elements within the work, I am in a way acting as the algorithm for the viewer.

### **The History of Girls Being Girls Online**

With internet users performing parts of their identity and the virtual supplementing thinking on our behalf, the algorithms cluster similar individuals, creating subcultures and/or online aesthetics. However, before a deep dive into identity work within current online aesthetics, we must start with a short lesson of girl history.

In the early 2000s, Hollywood had three controversial pop stars: child actress Lindsay Lohan, popstar Britney Spears, and reality television star Paris Hilton. All three were favorite targets of the paparazzi, known for their “out of control” party lifestyles, and were often featured in the vast digital footprint that magazines had at that time. On November 29th, 2006, it was rumored that Lohan and Hilton were feuding; however, the three girls were seen leaving a club together (Le, “Explaining the Hyperfemininity”). The image of them smiling in a car was splattered all over every tabloid the next day with the famous title "Bimbo Summit." This event provided another opportunity for the paparazzi to slut-shame and belittle women in Hollywood.

Fast forward to the 2010s, where began the rise of the #girlboss on Tumblr and Instagram. “Girlboss” is a term usually used to describe a millennial woman who is self-made, running their own business, and acting as their own boss (Le, “Explaining the

Hyperfemininity”). Actively trying to work against the “Bimbo” title, Girlbosses intentionally acted like businessmen, trying to be as cutthroat as possible. The movement was originally branded as a positive change of women climbing the corporate ladder; however, Girlbosses quickly became the butt of the joke to Generation Z, who criticize Girlbosses for continuing the same oppressive systems they supposedly fought against for their own monetary gain.

After the quick rise and fall of the Girlboss, many online aesthetics started emerging that sought to address the undertaking of the Girlboss movement. From 2013 to 2017, the Tumblr Sad Girl entered the chat. Zoe Alderton, a scholar on internet and performance of mood states, “The Sad Girl is core to a new brand of feminism and philosophy that defines the performance of mood online, revealing both why young women are so sad and how sadness can actually be a way of releasing negative affect and protesting wrongdoing rather than wallowing in non-action” (95). Sad girls combat the hyper-positive demands of contemporary feminism that are illustrated in the Girlboss aesthetic. While Girlbosses embraced societal norms to ensure their own financial success, this brought a trend of toxic positivity towards women that Sad Girls reject. Instead of ignoring society’s issues and patriarchal shortcomings, Sad Girls acknowledge the unavoidable depressing world we live in through coping with dark humor. Through the use of meme sharing images and sad glitter words on Tumblr, they lean into self-destruction and sadness as an active and articulate way of going against the status quo of oppression (Thelandersson 171). Furthermore, by discussing astrology, leftist politics, and the disappointment in heterosexual men, Sad Girls are encouraging critical



thinking by inviting audiences to be part of a complex set of understandings about power and privilege.

Coming full circle, we now see the rise of a movement called "Bimbocore" on TikTok. Its members are reclaiming the term "Bimbo," associating it with "self-confidence and 'feeling hot,' self-determination in identity and sexuality, inclusivity, kindness, and a left-leaning political stance (Pierce 204). One overarching quality of Bimbos is their hyper-femininity with the overpowering use of pink, which is recontextualizing encoded meanings of the dominant culture in the service of empowering marginalized communities, such as women and queer individuals. Self-proclaimed Bimbos abandon insecurity, being blissfully ignorant and embodying everything men want, so much so that they become everything men hate, referencing common phrases such as "bark at men" and "capitalism is made up" (Pierce 212). It is through the use of TikTok's algorithm that creates communities based on aesthetics that Bimbos have been able to take a term with a negative connotation and turn it into something that one can be proud of.

Along with Bimbocore, there has been an explosion of "girl" aesthetics and personas online. "Tomato Girls," "Girls Girls," and "Rat Girls" are some of the new up and coming "girlies" at this time. In the podcast *High Brow*, Mina Le discusses the use of the word "girl" and how the division of aesthetics is an example of how pop culture is dying due to its division into hyper-specific algorithms. Le states that although the use of "girl" can be seen as a stance for the gender binary, most individuals who use "girl" to categorize themselves are young, leftist individuals who believe in a gender spectrum. "Girl" is more of a state of mind for any person that allows for silliness and a whimsical

outlook (Le, “online aesthetics”). Furthermore, with the excessive use of categorization online, such as all the different girl personas, we are losing mainstream pop culture to hyper-specific For You Pages made for the individual (Le, “online aesthetics”). For example, a self-proclaimed Bimbo would have a very different idea of what is popular at the time than a self-proclaimed Dark Academic since their aesthetics are so visually different.

Although we are witnessing the “death of pop culture,” we are seeing a trend of individuals rejecting the death of girlhood with the boom of “girl” aesthetics and personas. As Mina Le stated, there is a new definition of “girls” which is continuing the carefree attitude of girlhood that allows individuals to be silly and whimsical (“online aesthetics”). With the new definition of “girls,” along with the movement of healing the inner child discussed earlier, it is clear that there is a larger movement happening online of rejecting the death of girlhood and embracing a childlike sense of wonder, regardless of the aesthetic an individual chooses to follow.

We are also seeing this with the sensational popularity of Beyoncé’s *Renaissance Tour*, Greta Gerwin’s *Barbie* movie, and Taylor Swift’s *Eras Tour* shows during the summer of 2023. All of these massive hits have targeted audiences of older teenage and adult women and queer individuals. Even though the audiences were older, a community was created from dressing up for the events in speciality curated outfits with friendship bracelets to match. *Renaissance* attendees wore disco-inspired clubwear, *Eras Tour* was dominated by sparkles, and *Barbie* screenings were met with crowds of magenta and bubblegum pink. As shown throughout the online history, almost every girl-led movement started with the rebellion of another. After years of COVID isolation and

reactionary politics targeting women, such as the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, this wave of dressed up femininity is no different (Goldberg). Women have been waiting for their voices and authentic female perspectives to be validated by our consumerist society. The economic success of “Summer of Girlhood” pulling in money is further proof that there is power in women’s pockets.

### **The Rejection of Girlhood Death Told Through Visual Art**

My piece entitled *double identity* (see figure 10), plays on the death of mainstream media discussed earlier, along with the different “girl aesthetics” by altering a well-known meme to fit my specific narrative. The original image of two Spider-Men pointing at each other comes from episode 19b of the 1967 Spider-Man cartoon, “Double Identity.” In the episode, the villain attempts to impersonate the hero. Although the image had been used as a meme for some time, it did not reach widespread popularity until the mid-2010s, when people would make jokes describing situations where two very similar people meet (Adam). It started growing popular on “Black Twitter”, then quickly spread to other areas of the internet. The meme is still used today and can be seen in mainstream media, such as the hit movie *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*.

My version of *double identity* consists of seven figures, all myself, pointing at each other in similar poses and in the same scene as the meme. Each figure represents an online aesthetic I have participated in, admired, and followed. Starting from the back left going clockwise, the figures represent “Dark Academia,” “Kidcore,” “Emo,” “Bimbocore,” “Clean Girl,” “Rat Girl,” and “Cottagecore.” I personally connect with the

“Rat Girl” aesthetic the most, scurrying around with unkempt hair and nibbling on girl dinners (aka glorified snacks), which is why it is the closest to the viewer. Although all of the figures are myself, it truly feels as though none of these aspects of my personality have been left in the same room to confront one another. Each role comes out appropriately, ready to engage with the specific community, then departs when a new aesthetic comes my way.

As shown through research and *double identity*, the internet and social media are a playground to construct, negotiate, and present identities. For myself, and many others, the internet is like our second home filled with important identity work and fond memories. Although the internet can feel like a world that we can live in, the internet is a hyperreal space, a simulation of reality. The piece entitled *hey google, what are the signs of delusion* visualizes just that (see figure 11). This piece is an installation that started as a digital drawing (see figure 12). After spending hours indulging in house decor content on Pinterest, I began taking screenshots and collaging the images together in Procreate. I then drew on top of the combined images with a bright pink and orange color scheme that references the hyper-feminine “Bimbocore” aesthetic. Once the digital drawing was complete, I constructed the installation. Since the drawing was created by combining different images, the perspective is confusing and flattened. I emphasized this quality by creating a mix of 2D and 3D elements. The plant and pictures on the wall are two-dimensional and are printed on paper, the dining room chair and sink function also function as two-dimensional objects, but come out from the wall about three inches. The addition of sculptural elements including a worm-like chair and platform make their way into the our three-dimensional world, establishing a push and pull between the two

dimensional digital landscape and the three dimensional physical world we inhabit. Even the wall itself comes off the constructed wall on the left-hand side, showing its construction similar to a stage set. The strange perspective and mixing of elements create a space that feels concrete enough to enter; however, the viewer and I can never be fully physically present.

Although the internet can be warm and welcoming at times, there is always a darker underbelly to anything as complex as hyperreality. *The death of girlhood* (see figure 13) is an installation that consists of a vintage lawn chair, a rectangular piece of astroturf with dirt around it, a neon blue painted background, and a five-by-five-foot green tufted rug in the shape of a heart. The tufted rug has cream-colored worms in the background with felted words in the foreground reading, “Everything will be okay when the worms eat my body.” My inspiration for this piece came from the old Microsoft Windows background of a landscape (see figure 14). Within my research, I became obsessed with the idea of artificial landscapes, precisely the Windows background, since it was a literal interpretation of a hyperreal landscape imitating a real place. The installation represents the artificial landscapes of the online world with a neon sky and fake grass. Considering both of the landscapes that I grew up in, I realized all of my childhood friends lost a part of their innocence in the two places where there were no eyes to watch them: outside in the backroads of our hometown, or in the depths of chatrooms and social media. The way the lawn chair and rug are placed in this landscape, the scene becomes a graveside for girlhood.

The tufted rug is the only handmade object in the installation. The saying itself came from a meme of Care Bears I found while scrolling on Instagram that immediately

gave me pains of nostalgia while I was heavily active on “Sad Girl Tumblr.” For this rug, I felt the need to do what “Sad Tumblr Girls” do best: acknowledge the unavoidable depressing world we live in by coping with dark humor. This was achieved by juxtaposing innocent girly aesthetics of bright colors, the rug’s heart shape emphasized by the layers of lace around the perimeter, and the small button heart used as a period with the rational and cold words.

Another “Sad Girl Tumblr” aesthetic piece is entitled *down the drain* (see figure 15). The image is of a pile of vibrantly pink stuffed animals in a dingy and dirty washing machine. I first saw the image while scrolling on Instagram. It reminded me of something I would see on Tumblr in my teenage years with the juxtaposition of the bright pinks to the grainy background and the fake deep quote for the caption I now forget. When drawing the image myself, I used a dark brown pencil on Procreate to emphasize the pinks in the stuffed animals. Furthermore, I added many photo editing filters and overlaid images to deepen the background, making the environment look even more repulsive than it actually is. The title of the piece comes from the title of Julia Fox’s memoir, *Down the Drain*. In her memoir, Fox tells her life story of how she became a pop culture icon, including her mental journey, her drug addiction, and the oversexualization of her body from an early age. In the book, Fox states the name came from someone telling her she was throwing her life down the drain, yet it was her life choices that made her the celebrity she is today. Although most of us will never be a celebrity, we all have been told we are doing something wrong by being our authentic self, especially at a young age when we are still developing ourselves and probably our love for stuffed animals.

Although I am not a big fan of journaling or writing like Julia Fox, I do have an ongoing list of things that really piss me off entitled *things that really piss me off* (see figure 16). This piece started off as an assignment by a professor to help hone into my aggression and/or female rage; however, it quickly became humorous observations about our existence today. With statements like “TikTok ads,” “my mindset that drinking water will make me skinnier,” and “old people,” the work highlights the nonsensical thought processes and predicaments we go through, especially in the digital realm. Since we are bombarded with so much information at once, we are forced to make quick, and often intense, opinions about things we see in person and particularly online. The work itself is a video piece that shows the list being typed out in what looks like in real time. This encourages viewers to engage with the video to see what will be typed next. Furthermore, since the typing is done in a continuous fashion, there are many typing errors that add to the authenticity of the piece. *Things that really piss me off* is a relatable, sometimes offensive depiction of what social media does to us: It makes us feel as though our opinions matter, when really no one cares.

### **Installation of *Girl Rot***

When first walking into the gallery space, an animated projection with the exhibition title and a QR code is on the viewer's right (see figure 17). The QR code is linked to my website that has images of the work, along with the labels of the individual pieces. This will replace the physical labels in the gallery space so that the labels do not become a visual distraction due to the amount of work in the space. The viewer is then

forced to navigate a digital landscape to understand the physical gallery space, further connecting the pieces to the digital hyperreality.

The first piece the viewers are confronted with is the installation entitled *hey google, what are the signs of delusion*. This placement is intentional to not only disrupt the viewer's pathway, but also immediately have viewers question the reality and dimension of the gallery space as a whole. Furthermore, viewers are promptly faced with the overwhelming color of pink that will be continued throughout the show. On the other side of the fake hanging wall is *the death of girlhood* installation, which is placed to utilize the other side of the wall.

After the pathway disruption from the installations, the next three walls are filled with the two-dimensional work displayed in a gallery wall style. Some pieces are flush to the wall, some are hanging from plastic balls, and others are attached to foam boards to create a push and pull (see figure 18). This emulates the dimension and perspective shifts seen in *hey google, what are the signs of delusion*. All of the pieces, whether self portraits, screens, or sculptural pieces, are mixed together throughout the space to disrupt any preconceived hierarchy of content or materials.

Besides the two installations, there are three pieces placed on the ground of the gallery. The first is titled *pixel dream girl* (see figure 19). This work is tiled pieces of "thank you" plastic bags painted in the same color scheme of *hey google, what are the signs of delusion*. Curled around *pixel dream girl* is an orange extension cord that connects to the back of *hey google, what are the signs of delusion* fake stage wall by a false outlet (see figure 20). The second ground piece the viewer encounters is entitled *dissociating* (see figure 21) that consists of a portable screen, multiple orange extension



cords, and dirt. On the portable screen is an animation that looks like a downloading screen; however, it says dissociating, instead of downloading. After the loading bars fill, an image of a crying cat appears before one of three different error screens come up (see figure 22). All the errors have the iconic blue background of an error screen and says something about the computer restarting before the animation loops again. The final floor piece is titled *bite me* (see figure 23). The sculpture is of a cake placed on dirt that is made out of foam, candles, chewed bubble gum, resin, nail polish, cockroaches, and shrimp skins (see figure 24). The piece was created to interact with many of the birthday scenes and cakes within the gallery.

All of the floor works in the exhibition relate to the rot within Girl Rot. Whether alluding to the deterioration of mental health in *dissociating* or the literal decay of the materials that make up *bite me*, the pieces connect to the materiality and concept of *the death of girlhood* installation.

The last wall of the gallery space before the viewer's exit has multiple digital drawings of landscape images, all entitled *just another landscape* (see figure 25). After being exposed to my obsessive examination of identity work, the death of girlhood, and online aesthetics, viewers are led to view different interpretations of landscapes as a cheeky way to end their experience. Along with *just another landscape*, a pink vending machine is next to the exit, filled with stickers and small prints all priced for a dollar (see figure 26). The stickers and prints are from components of the exhibit work, along with a horoscope like assignment where buyers are given a random “feminine essence” card that consists of an image of myself and a pop song lyric that represents the buyer. This not only references interactions we deal with online, such as personality quizzes and rising

trend of microtransactions, but also allows viewers of mostly college age and older to live out the childhood experience of receiving a candy or small memento at a mall or amusement park. This vending machine also sheds light on some of the anti-capitalist ideals that naturally come with my work due to materials and subject matter. By selling versions of my pieces for a dollar, I am pushing back on the elitism of the art world and gallery space.

## **Conclusion**

The fascinating thing about Girl Rot is that it is not as grotesque as the name suggests. Like most things girls do, there is mess but always beauty. The worms will always crawl in our manicured lawns, and our nails will always need a touch-up or two. The essence of girl rot is the richness in human emotion mixed with the cluttered, over-consumerized, occasionally overperformed, and oversexualized experience of girlhood. If you get it, you get it.

I came into this journey questioning if I would be the same person without the internet, or if I am genuinely a byproduct of the algorithms. Like any burning question, there is no satisfying answer. We live in a time when having a personal aesthetic to display our identity is crucial to our personal and professional lives. We strive to put ourselves in a specific aesthetic box so we do not end up like Britney Spears and Lindsey Lohan for others to do it for us. There is something powerful about closing yourself in rather than allowing others to do it for you. I see myself and my artwork within the context of the “Sad Tumblr Girls,” the “Bimbos,” and all the other “girlies” on the

internet. While I do not feel closer to understanding myself, I think this work is essential. Through the interplay of reality and hyperreality within my work, the pieces become polished yet bruised with layers of self-questioning and self-actualization.

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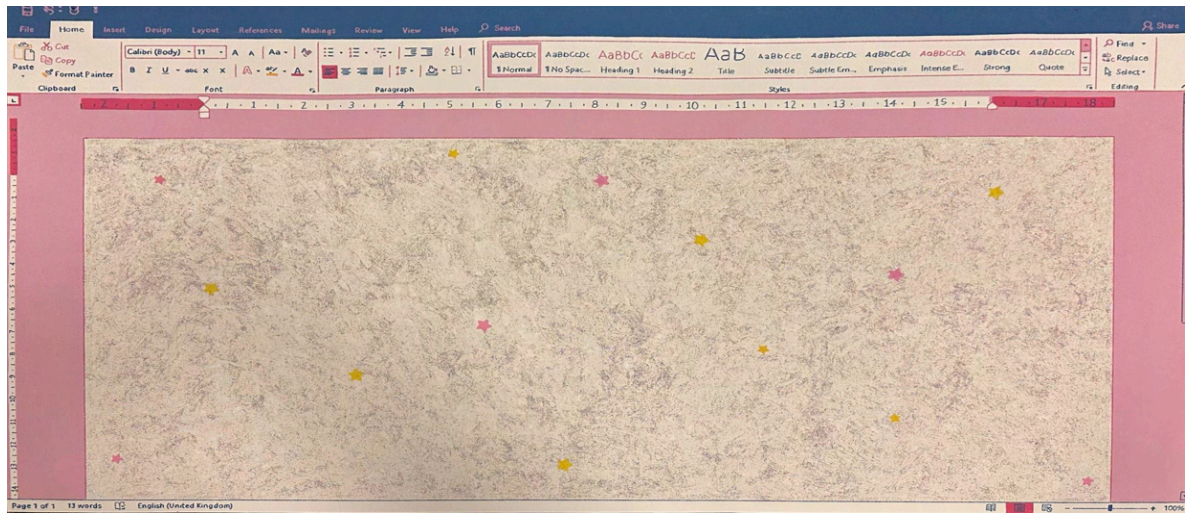


Figure 1. Maddie Foss, *girl talk*, 2023, Digital drawing, nail polish, & pimple patches.

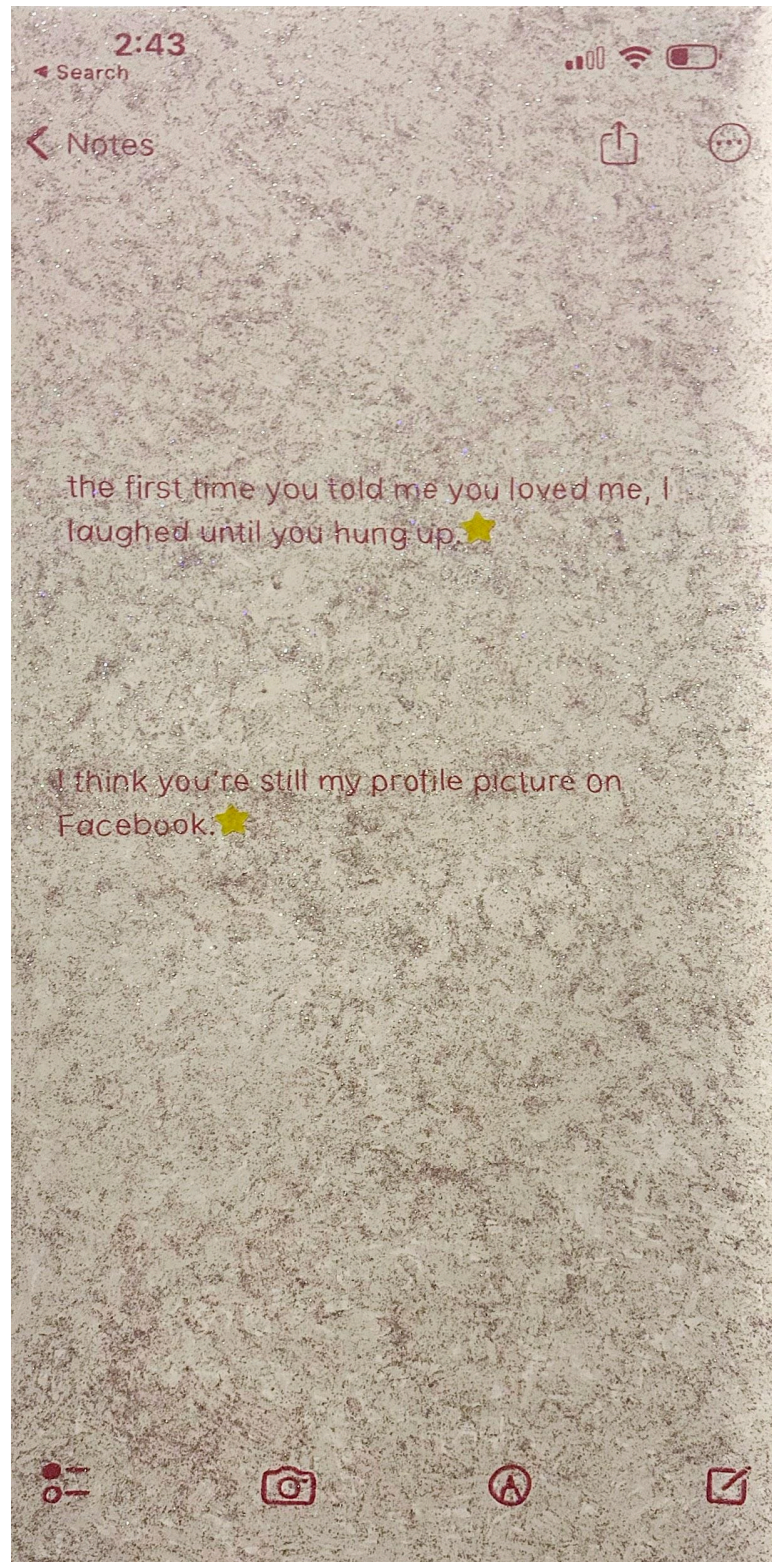


Figure 2. Maddie Foss, *first loves*, 2023, Digital drawing, nail polish, & pimple patches.





Figure 3. Maddie Foss, *at least i'm pretty*, 2023, Digital drawing.



Figure 4. Juno Birch.

<https://www.vogue.com/vogueworld/article/juno-birch-british-sculptor-and-drag-queen-gl>

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Figure 5. Juno Birch, *Human Groceries*, Digital.

[https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/40526/1/juno-birch-makes-an-art-of-taking-the-piss.](https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/40526/1/juno-birch-makes-an-art-of-taking-the-piss)



Figure 6. Maddie Foss, *tickled pink*, 2023, Digital Collage.



Figure 7. Maddie Foss, *crying at the nail salon (i'm so sick of online love, 2024*, Digital collage, nail polish, ink, & resin.



Figure 8. Maddie Foss, *olympia*, 2023, Video still.



Figure 9. Maddie Foss, *olympia*, 2023, Video still.



Figure 10. Maddie Foss, *double identity*, 2023, Digital collage.





Figure 11. Maddie Foss, *hey google, what are the signs of delusion*, 2023, Installation.



Figure 12. Maddie Foss, *hey google, what are the signs of delusion*, 2023, Digital collage.



Figure 13. Maddie Foss, *the death of girlhood*, 2024, Installation.



Figure 14. Microsoft XP's "Bliss" Background.

<https://www.newegg.com/insider/history-microsoft-xps-bliss-background/>



Figure 15. Maddie Foss, *down the drain*, 2024, Digital collage.

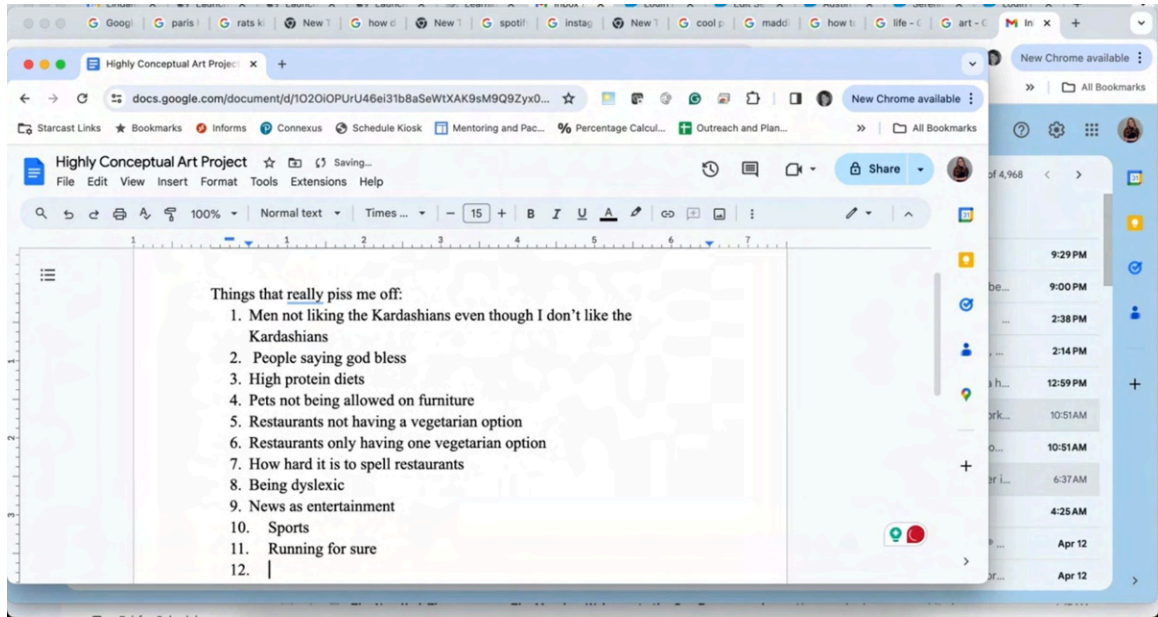


Figure 16. Maddie Foss, *things that really piss me off*, 2024, Video still.



Figure 17. Maddie Foss, *exhibit title*, 2024, Projection.



Figure 18. Installation Documentation.





Figure 19. Maddie Foss, *pixel dream girl*, 2023, Wood, resin, plastic bags, house paint, and found cord.



Figure 20. Installation detail.



Figure 21. Maddie Foss, *dissociating*, 2024, Animation, portable screen, extension cord, dirt.



Figure 22. Maddie Foss, *dissociating*, 2024, Animation, portable screen, extension cord, dirt.



Figure 23. Maddie Foss, *bite me*, 2024, Foam, candles, chewed bubble gum, resin, nail polish, cockroaches, shrimp skins, dirt.



Figure 24. Maddie Foss, *bite me*, 2024, Foam, candles, chewed bubble gum, resin, nail polish, cockroaches, shrimp skins, dirt.



Figure 25. Installation Documentation.



Figure 26. Maddie Foss, *capitalism is made up*, 2024, sticker vending machine.