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In Bad Taste - Art Show

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Lee Honor College

Honor College SR Thesis

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IN BAD TASTE

A late night of margaritas contrived an innovative and possibly controversial idea that would incorporate sexual innuendos as part of a senior exhibition. It was the later sober conscious thought that revealed the true birth of this idea, which was in fact my own personal sexual journey. *In Bad Taste* is a depiction of my own sexual awakening – a journey that began with my childhood in a conservative small town in western Michigan, and continues to evolve as a young adult in my final years of college. The title of the exhibition is a tongue-in-cheek response to its sexual content. It is not meant to be shocking or indecent, rather I am presenting a predominantly humorous perspective of the most vulnerable parts of my life such as rape, BDSM, masturbation, addiction, and of course, sexual pleasure. In an ideal world, this material could be addressed without embarrassment or shame. In this show I have taken on a male identity to recount my sexual encounters that unite to tell my story.

Yet, this ideal world does not exist and we all are burdened by double standards. It is important as a society to realize this is not a just a women's issue, but also a man's- better yet a human issue that should be addressed. By exhibiting my work, my sexual life story, I was willing to take any judgment and comments that would be directed towards me and transform them into an experience that addresses the issue of moral standards, social norms and human sexuality. Throughout my entire education at Western Michigan University this issue was addressed numerous times without a precise solution but all agreed that if change is to happen a person has to speak about their issues publically, educate early, and keep pushing for change.

Due to the fact that I am currently in BA program, and not a BFA, I was not instructed on basic guidelines that I feel would have given me helpful insight as it relates how to stage a proper show. As a result, I was naïve as to how much time and energy would be exuded.

From the shows conception I went through several different thought processes. At the beginning the only thing on my mind was “I’m amusing, this is a great, this idea of ‘Coming Undone’ and I want people to see it.” Looking back this was the wrong mind frame to have. In retrospect I should have focused more on my own experience, emotions, the ideas I was trying to convey and also the repercussions of displaying such controversial work. After making the commitment to Lee Honor College I decided there was no turning back now and the thesis idea became a necessity. As the lists of requirements began to pour in I quickly realized that I had possibly just undertaken something that I’m not sure I was prepared for or equipped to handle.

At the beginning of the project I didn’t consider the full ramifications of my audience disliking or disapproving of my work. I also didn’t think about the impact it would have on those close to me or how it would affect the way others would view me after being exposed to the rawness of my poignant exhibition. I even felt sadness and even a tinge of empathy, when I saw how it negatively affected my dating and personal life during the shows construction process. At one point I was explaining to someone one aspect of the work ‘All the people I would slept with if I didn’t have standards’ and it honestly made him question if I was a “whore” who had given my body to 40 or 50 guys, as if that should matter. Turns out it was a big turn off for him and resulted in us not speaking for a month. Since I was dedicated to the project there was no turning back and I had to finish what I started no matter what the repercussions.

As time went on I began to concern myself again with how others would view my work and also how it possibly reflects on me. At that point I had to make a conscious decision that I was just doing this for me and only me. I found myself reliving certain memories with each intimate partner from my past, the good and the bad. I experienced feelings of bliss as I remembered an inside joke that was often shared and in the next moment I was filled with great sorrow over an occurrence of infidelity that was painfully exposed just through a name. As the process continued, I found layers of my own life being peeled back leaving me with the stark realization that I had my own hidden bias that I was unwilling or unable to see before. I found my eyes being opened for the first time to some physical, emotional and spiritual flaws that were hidden under years of denial. Needless to say this show was exhausting. Having to do over I would definitely do more research early on in the areas of presentation, set-up, explanation, audience affect, critique and etc. as to be better prepared for the physical and emotional toll it would eventually take on me.

When in New Orleans I met an artist that gave me some sound advice: “don’t try to display all of your work at once just for the sake of people seeing it. Hold some of your work back, no matter how amazing it may be. Just showcase the work that directly relates to your story or topic. Don’t expand outwards stretching the topic to fit the needs of the piece that you want to put in... save that work for another show. Remember don’t do anything for the shock factor.”

As for my aesthetic choices I used many everyday objects to personalize this multi-media, performance, and at times, interactive exhibit. I decided to utilize objects from my life that I interacted with daily and use them as apart of my display to help reveal the story.

I wanted the viewer to have a unique and personal experience in the show and in the reception room. Each area of the show revealed another facet of my intimate life journey. Even

the food was in the shape of male genitalia. This was intended as a light and comedic way to keep with the theme.

Such artists as Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin, Ghada Amer, and Lena Dunham influenced the mediums that I used and the way I framed my story. My favorite artist, Sarah Lucas, says that smoking and sexual activities are addictive behaviors, which highly influenced my work in 'Coming Undone.' I also related this addiction idea with my own addiction to activities such as continuing education. Artist Tracey Emin also addressed the difficult subject matter of her own sexual experiences both in a positive and negative light in some of her works. Her idea of her own tent relates to all those that have shared intimate space with her was an obvious influence on my tent. My choices of fabric (pink flowers) even spoke of innocence and purity and a traditional view of the female (sewing and etc.). I personally have never acquired or have never been taught the traditional "woman" traits of sewing and etc., In this project I even found myself sewing into the couch and into my pants as I blindly tried to act as a traditional woman. I based two of my pieces on her ideas and struggles and I also tried to add humor to my view of perceived sexual response and behavior. Artist Lena Dunham's uncensored views of human sensual interaction were also an influence on the humorous aspect of my work. I wanted to embrace my body and my acts for the public unapologetically, owning who I am.

From when I decided to create an exhibition I lacked the time most students have; I had only a semester to refine the idea, find mentors to sign off, produce the different mediums, write the artist statement, and display the work. According to the Lee Honor course the best time to start a thesis would be sometime during your junior year. Since I had a shortened timeline for my exhibition I found myself rushed, unguided and unsure of my precise direction. I was completely unaware of all of the subtle nuisances that went into a show (set-up guidelines, display rules,

artwork labeling and etc.). One of my thesis mentors also wanted to sign off on my artist statement before it's opening, otherwise she would not be on my committee. I was committed to my promise to have her blessing, so that meant I had to meet a fast approaching deadline. I had to FaceTime and email her multiple times over winter break just to keep the review and approval process moving along.

There were many restrictions put upon me due to the controversial content of the show. I had to have a warning label, windows had to be covered, main door was required to be closed, a thesis mentor had to be in attendance at my show at all times and I also was told to have the presence of security (myself and friends standing guard). It seemed that every time I jumped through a hoop there was another pitfall that I was unaware of. Multiple times problems arose with just the process; like the subject matter could be considered offensive so I had to have a warning sign at the front door even when I was setting up. Other problems that were involved, was finding a way to seal the sperm that was used in one of my works so it would not be considered a biohazard. Other issues were how to display the work without unintentionally offending someone. To do this I had to separate the show from the school's public spaces so the main doors that were in the hallway were closed, leaving only a small side door open that had a long red curtain to block the view of people walking past, as well as to hide the works themselves from the passing public's eye. Even the main window into the hallway was completely covered. I agree that it could have been easy to offend people and be "in bad taste" but that was not the intent of my work. It was unapologetic, honest, raw, intimate and quite the opposite of its title. Due to its content I was even forced to take my show down a day early because it coincided with new student tours in the building. All this (and losing one day to MLK Day) made for a bit of a rushed experience.

In an attempt to stay organized and on task I ended up using one of the dorm walls in my room to keep track of all the deadlines for my courses, work schedule, and the completion of each piece for this show. Each work had its own post-it note with a checklist of what still needed to be done. I also had a planner that I used for a timeline. It was a lot for me trying to manage twenty-two credits, nineteen and half hours of work a week, and also setting aside time to dedicate to my thesis. At times I found myself very thankful for a previous summer break abroad and often daydreamed about jumping on a plane again when at times the stress of this show got the best of me.

Although the days and nights leading up to the show were draining, on the night of the shows opening there was tranquility in the air that I could not describe. The artwork revealed a clear and concise narrative of my topic and the audience reception was lively and positive. As the crowd focused on my work and me I actually felt like a mini celebrity finally having a platform to tell my story.

In the beginning I was not sure how the viewers would respond to my exhibition. I knew from the start that not everyone was going to be accepting of my topic, but not to what extent. I remained puzzled and still unclear about how receptive the public would be towards my BA senior exhibition right up until the opening day, January 22, 2016. I came in with the attitude that as long as someone could have a meaningful experience (positive or negative) I would be fine with whatever the final response would be. I would take whatever comments and criticism people had. I would consciously choose to listen, be polite and try to see things from their point of view. That being said I am also unapologetic about how I am telling my story through revealing my sexual encounters to the public. I refused to censor or lie, instead I would create a raw and deeply vulnerable way to convey my message. One sexual partner came to the show and was unaware of my exact number of encounters. He thought he was my last and I never felt it

was his business to know otherwise. Upon viewing my show he saw the new nickname among my encounters and left in a rampage. He kept asking why I would not lie to the public and only to him. I attempted to explain the difference but it was futile. I decided this show was for me to come to terms of who I am, tell my story and not to appease others.

Before the show, when I was in the process of making all the works, mentors of my thesis committee were very fearful for my safety and the safety of the exhibit. They offered suggestions about having friends and myself stand guard in the critique space as the room I was exhibiting the show in lacked formal security. I was unwilling to devote the time and energy it would take guarding the room and was also uncomfortable asking my friends to guard my work. The only security I ended up having was myself and the occasional professor walking by to check in on the work. By the end of the show most of the work was undamaged. I was surprised that a few of my works were untouched by the end of the show, in particular the strap on piece and sperm display, were apparently not offensive enough for the public to deface. Instead, it was the 'Coming Undone' piece that someone decided to take the initiative to cut President Dunn out of my work. As a result I wrote a post on Facebook:

*"To the petulant student who vandalized part of my show,
I do not hate you for being offended with President Dunn being exhibited in my work of "Coming undone." I do however wish that you had left me a sticky note or talked to me about your thoughts on the piece at my reception, instead of cutting his image directly out. My response to your action is this- he stays. If you decide to visit once again on Friday I am pleased to accommodate you with a reason why I chose to incorporate him in this structure (I promise it is of the highest compliment a person can give). I will put the picture back in this time a size bigger. Each time I see that he is missing from the work I will get his image bigger and bigger.*

Thanks for visiting my show.- THE ARTIST"

Interestingly enough the school newspaper even decided to run a story about the vandalism and about President Dunn showing up at the exhibition. While the reporter was very friendly, she didn't get the message of my show in its entirety. I'm unsure whether this was my fault due to being so busy when she was interviewing me or if it was just her way of twisting it for a better headline. Although not completely shocked I was still left upset about how the finished article turned out.

Turns out President Dunn and his wife understood the message I was trying to convey and actually found my work very courageous. I was able to give them both a tour of my show explaining the meaning behind each piece.

Upon president Dunn's arrival I found myself surrounded by media, friends and family. There was a general air of happiness in the room. Many enjoyed food, laughs and great art as we all welcomed president Dunn. Pictures and selfies were taken and people giddily munched on genitalia shaped snacks. Ultimately it was interesting to see just how my guests interacted with the art and to note their level of interest in certain aspects of the display. As the show closed I was left with the feeling that my work had indeed been bold, provocative, raw and yes sometimes uncomfortable for some, but in the end it was the most honest and compelling way to tell my story.