

CATHEXIS

By

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Summary of Project in Lieu of Thesis
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Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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By

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Chair: Nan Smith

Major: Art and Art History

“Cathexis: Merriam Webster defines this as an investment of mental or emotional energy in a person, object, or idea.”

The gender theories of Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*, proposes the cyborg as a constructed being that lacks any genetic signifiers of sex or gender. She argues that the cyborg is a metaphor for a third constructed gender. This idealized organism is neither male nor female, since it is built to represent the fully realized inner identity of the being. In *Cathexis*, although veneered in an armored shell that exhibits some gendered characteristics, these cyborgs exhibit androgyny that blurs distinctions between male and female. The multiple figure sculptures in *Cathexis* represent the cyborg in a post-gender world where humanity exists as male and female humans along with the cyborg as a third

recombinant gender. This place is imaginary, but should provoke the viewer into questioning identity stereotypes.

Historically, the male has always been depicted as the hero and the female has been pushed to the background, seen as a victim or as a villain. The damsel-in-distress is a common portrayal of the victim seen in media around the world. The depiction women in film noir are an example of how they can use their sexuality to manipulate men; they are the villain. This project is an attempt to reimagine the way we see gender norms by changing the rules.

In *Cathexis* the cyborg bodies are plated in a hexagonal pattern, a reference to nature. The hexagon, a geometric shape composed of six sides, is found in nature at both the microscopic and planetary levels. This is in direct reference to the molecular structure of diamonds, the shape of insect hives as well as the cyclonic storm found on the northern pole of the planet Saturn. This patterning is also common in the costuming of comic book heroes, Japanese animation, even on stealth military vehicles. The hexagon represents both technology and nature in *Cathexis* and metallic lusters fired onto glossed surfaces adds precious metal to the work to provide technological and futuristic associations.

In *Cathexis*, the gender binary is explored through the examination and the implementation of socially constructed dichotomies. Nature and technology are socially coded as female and male respectively. The lines of these gender assignments are blurred by imbuing the female form with technology and reducing muscle mass of the male physique. Ceramics is the ideal material for this concept. The figures by design are futuristic, but clay is an ancient material with a long history. By combining the future and past, these works create a dualism that is both relatable and foreign. *Cathexis* asks the question: "If a person were given complete control to construct their physical body how would they reflect who they feel they are through it?"

Introduction

Being human is more than being the corporeal body. One's identity is defined by both inner and outer influences of life. Individual identity can be constrained by social constructions, in particular the concept of gender. Gender is more than the exterior appearance of a person. The concept of "self" removes biological ties; it indicates what it means to simply be. My project proposes a constructed being, originally born into the world, but given control to choose their avatar. These figurines represent the psychological self in a shell that is devoid of gender stereotypes. It might be frightening to lose one's natural body and be placed within a manmade shell. We are beings that experience a multitude of sensations that make up who we are. Using the figurine scale is essential since it invites the viewer to be intimate with the sculptures and softens potentially anxiety provoking ideas.

The Cyborg

Technology has become very prominent in day-to-day life and its use and impact only increases over time. The term "cyborg," short for cybernetic organism, was coined in 1960 and is used to describe a being with both organic and mechanical parts. This being is constructed, but it does retain part of the original organism. Donna Haraway, Distinguished Professor Emerita, of the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, uses the cyborg as a metaphor to discuss gender and feminism. In her essay, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science Technology and the Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, she proposes the cyborg as a being that complicates our notion of gender. This constructed being is not born into the world and lacks biological definition as male or female. In Haraway's writing, the being becomes always the cyborg-other. Through the use of technology as the means or contexts for human hybridization, cyborgs come to represent unfamiliar "otherness," one which challenges the connotative stability of human identity (Balsamo, 2000, p. 149). It is no longer binary because it may contain differing sex/gender markers. The cyborg body allows there to be an

ambiguous “Other” that is beyond the male/female binary. This constructed being is able to make their outer appearance match the person they are on the inside. Thus the gender playing field is potentially rendered more neutral where neither male nor female dominate in society.

The cyberpunk classic *Ghost in the Shell (1995)* explores the notion of gender and one’s self that heavily roots itself within Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*. The film is an adaptation of a serialized Japanese Manga, or comic book. This Japanese Animation, *anime* for short, is set in 21st century Japan and layers science fiction with action, philosophy, and the theology. In her book, Susan Napier, author of *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* investigates the substructures and cultural impact of *GitS*. *GitS* is a unique text in that it presents the viewer with two kinds of technological futures, artificial intelligence and the cyborg body, as it attempts to reconcile them through a structure that has clearly theological underpinnings (Napier, 2001, p. 105). The idea of identity based on the organic body is brought into question in *GitS*. The film is laced with doll and puppet imagery to associate the body with vessels that challenge the viewer with associations of mind and manufactured body.

GitS has a strong female sensibility in terms of traditional female links with the irrational and the uncanny and with the interior and the reflective (Napier, 2001, p. 105-106). The protagonist of the film is Major Motoko Kusanagi, a soldier that has a cybernetic body that has been constructed for her. *GitS* presents us with Major Kusanagi’s journey to find her identity. The opening scenes of the film reveal the construction of her body as the birth of Kusanagi. Her cyborg identity is not evolved from birth but comes into being as a fully realized creation, a direct reference to Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*. Kusanagi’s body is owned by the government.

GitS goes well beyond the typical science fiction in privileging the mechanical and the logical, the world typically associated with “masculine” discourse (Napier, 2001, p. 115). Typically the female is not

seen as the strong military leader but instead a supporting character. Kusanagi's body is somewhat androgynous in appearance but clearly female. The layering of the female form over the male identity considered to be the role of a military leader. The outward appearance of the cyborg body can be gender specific, but no longer carries the same connotations familiar to the human form. Without these stereotypes, this new body renders the idea of gender fluid and focuses more on the person within the machine. This is the science fictional character of the cyborg – it is a hybrid, but the specific traits which mark its human-ness and machine-ness vary widely (Balsamo, 2000, p. 149).

Comparing Cultures

In the West technology is associated with the masculine and nature with the feminine. Culture influences the imagery of cyborgs and hybrids, and in the west there are iconic cyborgs found in films like *The Terminator* and *Robocop*. These machines are unable to break free of their programmed directives and are examples of extreme technological rationality. Is it surprising that these machines are male? The cyborg images in the west emerge from the idea, inherent in our culture, that technology, science, and rationality are all masculine. In contrast, femininity is culturally imagined as less compatible with technology. This is to say that because our cultural imagination aligns masculinity and rationality with technology and science, male gendered cyborgs fail to radically challenge the distinction between human and machine (Balsamo, 2000, p. 151).

This gendering of technology creates a contradiction when associating the female form with science. Western culture associates nature, nurture, and irrationality with femininity. Female cyborgs embody cultural contradictions which strain the technological imagination. Technology isn't feminine, and femininity isn't rational (Balsamo, 2000, p. 151). Consider *GitS*, and the fact that it is a Japanese film, a reflection of eastern culture. Kusanagi is a strong character, female on the outside, but more gender ambiguous because of the manufactured body. By comparison, this film exhibits a harmonious approach

to technology. In Japan, the robot or cyborg is seen as an ally to humanity and not an enemy. Currently, Japan is the world leader in humanoid robotics and automation. Their culture views the robot or cyborg as an ally to humanity and not an enemy as commonly portrayed in western media.

Cathexis

In *Cathexis*, human and machine combine with references to animal forms to explore the gender binary. This work offers different understanding of gender by using masculine and feminine visual signifiers in non-traditional ways. In many creative works, male and female gender norms are often used to interpret art through common associations. Male figures typically represent “mankind” or are identified as “human.” Works of art that portray the female form tend to carry the connotation of “object.” *Cathexis* challenges the viewer to remove, or mute, norms associated with human figuration by displaying gendered signifiers with inverted content.

Yvonne Tasker, author of *Action Heroines in the 1980's - The Limits of Masculinity*, examines action heroines of the 80's and how they relate to western gender norms. The concept of a strong female is relatively new in contemporary times. There are no words that define the strongly muscular female body without using masculine associated vocabulary. A more specific phenomenon associated with recent cinema is the appearance of a *muscular* action heroine (Tasker, 2000, p. 295). Most notably, there was significant media buzz about Linda Hamilton's physique in the movie *Terminator 2*. The cyborgs in *Cathexis* portray power in both externally-rendered genders to symbolize a balance of physical strength. Figures that are identified as female exhibit more of the muscular action heroine body. The male figures exhibit a lean articulated body type that is both powerful and graceful, giving it both male strength and female poise. This more delicate physique adapts better to the cyborg synthesis of genders or creation of a non-typical alternate to human gender when compared to bodies of the hyper-muscular action heroes of the 1980's. The use of these associations with readable gendered body

types in the sculpted cyborgs creates an equivocal blending of gender traits in these works that may both attract and confuse humans.

Each figurine is a stylized body with a classical reference, not referencing a specific person or particular human model. This is significant because who a person is will come from their mind's eye and not from an outside source. The bodies are sculpted unclothed to reveal classical anatomy relating to the timelessness of Greek sculptures and show muscular strength. Shame is closely associated with nudity, but these figures transcend the confines of the mortal shell and are freed from this emotional tie. As cyborgs, the figures are neither psychologically or physically vulnerable since these are no longer organic bodies but simply the shell of an identity.

In Greek mythology, a chimera is a creature that is made up of two distinct animals. The cyborgs in *Cathexis* could be considered as chimeras because of the combination of organic and inorganic materials, the blend of genders through female form combined with technology and strength, and the combination of human illogic with circuited logic. In a sense, the human body can be considered natural and aligns with the stereotypically "feminine" because it is fallible. A machine, or cyborg body, would then be culturally coded as "masculine" because of the consistency of which it will perform. The cyborgs in *Cathexis* are the brain and essence of a person in control of a constructed body. These cyborg bodies are linked back to nature by the adornments on their heads that resemble the different sized ears, feather plumes, or fur patterns of animals. This is the only part of each figurine that is noticeably "other." The head design of cyborgs imagined in *Cathexis* implies horns and ornamentation that reference fur and feathers to refer back to the traditional sense of the chimera.

Materials

Duality is a major theme in my work that informs both my representation of gender and my choice of materials. White earthenware paper clay is used to model my sculptures. Paper clay lends its

natural building strength to support the precarious nature of the sculptures during construction. The use of ceramic as my material references underlying concepts of duality, in that the figures are futuristic, but modeled with an ancient material, by human hands. They are constructed forms built up of parts, just as the cyborg would be. The dual nature of material and content refers to the dichotomy found in the cyborg; this is the combining of the organic and inorganic.

The figurines are glazed with a combination of matte and glossy surfaces. The glossy surface is applied to areas that are significant to the pattern on the figure. These decisions for surfacing are based on comic book hero costume design. Comic book hero costumes have emblems, contrasting colors, and patterning consistent with their powers. Similarly, the figurines of *Cathexis* have areas intended for differentiation in surface treatment. Key areas of the plating are intended for lusters. This gives some mild contrast between the two surfaces showing that each figure is a combination of elements. The surface is overglazed with lusters and a wash of underglaze. The underglaze is an accent that enhances the incised lines of the armor plating. These lines are viewed as the seams in the plating on the figure.

The hexagon is heavily referenced in the line work and is meant to reinforce the natural within the figure. The hexagonal plating also indicates strength. In diamonds, the hardest material known, the carbon atoms create a lattice that is hexagonal in shape. These hexagonal patterns are also found in many costume elements of comic book and *anime* characters. The lusters on the figures are being used to draw the viewers in to the work and to create that jewel-like addition that some figurines were adorned with during ancient Greek and Roman times.

Right Hand of God & Left Arm of the Devil (Figs. 1, 1.1, 1.2, 1.3)

“Right Hand of God” and “Left Arm of the Devil” are counterparts that allude to the pagan gods of ancient Greece. In *Cathexis*, these figures are low on the hierarchy of the created cyborg gods and act as the first tier gatekeepers for a space they protect. They lack the flowing drapery other figures have and must rely on their bodies as the tool to create drama. The drapery is symbolic of the power structure. Swooping cloth additions allow the more static figurines to be animated. This reduces the amount of performed gesture needed to create drama in the composition. Since they are the smallest figures they sit atop stones to anchor them to the nature they once belonged to.

“Right Hand of God” is female, but powerful in her physique. Her body is simultaneously effeminate and masculine, an expression of androgyny. “Left Arm of the Devil” is male but gender signifiers are obscured because of crossed legs and leaning forward hiding his chest. Both figures have gold luster to allude to their roles and titles. Their spines are decorated with blue luster to draw attention to the nervous system that is central to every human and also appears in the cyborgs. Blue is commonly associated with electricity and indicates the spinal nerve impulses in the body. These figures are meant to protect the figurine, “Third”.



Fig. 1



Fig. 1.1



Fig. 1.2



Fig. 1.3

Third (Figs. 2, 2.1)

“Third” is located between its two guardians, “Right Hand of God” and “Left Arm of the Devil.” This figure depicts loneliness, appearing as a solitary being in the moment of decision. This figure is the most human in the group and the most awkward. He is male by design and not idealized, instead he is slender and meant to reflect the imperfections found in the organic body. Becoming a cyborg may mean losing gender norms and privilege; this can be a moment of uncertainty for some humans. He contemplates what he has become, or will be, in this post gender world. This figure is the first with both hands to have gold fingers. He has lost his sense of touch and the potential of that human sensory experience. There are blue luster highlights on this figure to highlight the nervous system. In addition, there are gold accents on the chest that allude to the circulatory system. He is becoming cyborg. It’s potentially scary to leave the organic behind and enter the world as something “other.”



Fig. 2



Fig. 2.1

Israfil A & B (Figs. 3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3)

“Israfil A & B” are the second set of figures poised as guardians to keep fear at bay. They are also gatekeepers and provide a layer for entry into the core of the art work. The Israfil figures are named after an Islamic angel, considered to be the counterpart of the western angel Raphael. Standing firmly on two feet, they lose some ability to be dynamic so they must become animated through different means. The billowing cloth around and between these figures creates a reference to baroque sculpture. These sweeping motions between the two Israfil’s resembles the opposite directions of *yin* and *yang*. These figures function with a dual role. They function to protect the metaphor of the cyborg and keep the entity, Fear, from the apex of the installation.



Fig. 3



Fig. 3.1



Fig. 3.2



Fig. 3.3

Fear (Figs. 4, 4.1)

“Fear” is the antagonist. The emotion of fear evokes a fight or flight response to a stimuli. As a character, his aggressive gaze looks at the future with skepticism and concern. He hesitates, for he needs to cling to humanity and the privilege lost when he became a cyborg. His pose is closely related to that of superheroes found on the covers of comic books and references that of the protagonist commonly found on a rooftop, looking out across a cityscape. The linear design on the back of the figure closely resembles that of a scorpion, symbol of defensiveness and protection of his own interests. His gaze exhibits a person ready to fight the uncertainty that comes from change.



Fig.4



Fig. 4.1

Going Hero (Figs. 5, 5.1)

“Going Hero” signifies the apex of the installation and carries both traditional female and male traits. In the front the cyborg is female, but the back becomes more androgynous. The patterning of the plates on the ribcage reference wings to symbolize flight or the desire to rise above. It is as if the figure has just landed from flight and arrived to save everyone. This figure is no longer bound by the gender dichotomy. This cyborg simply exists as a human being in a shell, confident and proud because their identity is now tangible to them. The cloth design reveals the final hierarchy; a person in full control of their power. Going Hero is to be seen as the antithesis of Fear. Instead, this figure is meant to inspire through scale and placement in relation to the other figures.



Fig. 5



Fig. 5.1

Installation (Figs. 6, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5)

The arrangement of the sculptures is similar to a gallery of heroes or a hall of fame. Each figure tells its own story, which supports the narrative as a whole. The installation design is conceived as radiating layers of energy and light. The pedestals are connected in the floor space and are arranged around a central piece to create a hexagonal pattern. The curved wall, used as a backdrop for the installation design, frames the figures. The hexagonal painted pattern conforms to the geometry of the pedestal grouping. The blue grey background color sets off the white figurines in high contrast. The hexagons that are on the wall are solid and connect with the pedestals. The hexagonal pattern flows from right to left in order to reference the eastern influence that is found in the figures. Japanese text and Manga are traditionally read from right-to-left.

Throughout history, statuary has represented powerful leaders, heroes, and deities. In *Cathexis* the figure is represented, like an ancient Greek god, as an idealized form. I use figurines to represent fictional beings and a hierarchy they belong to. These full figures are connected by form, gesture, color, and gaze. For example, “Going Hero” and “Fear” are complimentary pieces that use the billowing cloth to indicate a connection between them.

Each figurine sits atop a pedestal that is lit from within to highlight the figure and create drama. The translucent plexiglass-topped pedestals keep the illumination at an even glow to symbolize the ethereal nature of the cyborg metaphor. The figures appear to float in their environment with a seemingly other-worldly effect. The symmetrical pattern of both male and female flanking the four corners indicates an even distribution of implied power. The center line is composed of three figures: two male and one female. The female is framed by two male figures to put her as the center of attention.



Fig. 6



Fig. 6.1



Fig. 6.2



Fig. 6.3



Fig. 6.4



Fig. 6.5

Artistic Influences

My inspirations include elements of Classical, Renaissance, and Baroque figure sculpture. Historical and contemporary narrative associations, such as references to western art history, science fiction, Japanese animation, and video games serve as familiar points of access for the viewer. Videogame concept artists that work with science fiction themes are important to me. The style of Yoji Shinkawa has informed my work. Shinkawa's illustrations are closely related to traditional Japanese ink wash paintings. Shinkawa captures the spirit of the characters and environments he imagines. His most notable designs are represented in the *Metal Gear Solid* and *Zone of Enders* titles published by Konami, a videogame company. In each series he uses the Japanese *mecha* style to depict cyborgs and robots. The term *mecha* is short for "mechanical" and is typically termed as *mecha anime* in the states.

Since Japanese culture has embraced the robot as a potential friend of humans, it is only natural for them to evolve the style of their *mecha* designs beyond western influences. This specific style is evident in the film *Ghost in the Shell*. Shinkawa's designs for the character, Gray Fox, closely resembles the style of line work on the human figure found on the protagonist's cybernetic body during the introduction scene of *GitS*. The figure is rendered as panels as if they are plated in armor, but with some relation to the musculoskeletal system underneath. This particular stylization has influenced the development of my figurines.

In addition, to the *mecha* designs by Yoji Shinkawa I draw heavy references to western comic book illustrations. Prior to working with clay I studied the comic book artist, Jim Lee. Lee's aesthetic, anatomical accuracy and theatrical presentation all lend themselves to the work I have produced. His work has been the bar I have tried to meet over many years of figure drawing. The drawing techniques developed translate well with the content and imagery chosen. This study of comic book illustration allows me to visualize a scene that might apply to each sculpture.

The influence of Classical, Renaissance, and Baroque figure sculpture are apparent in my figures. Ceramic figure sculptor, Christyl Boger, employs a Baroque aesthetic. Each sculpted figure Boger creates is either seated or reclining, but all figures appear to be in motion. This motion, found in Baroque art, is also apparent in my sculptures. In addition to baroque stylizations, Boger uses traditional ceramic surfacing of glaze and luster. Other elements of classical sculpture, specifically ancient Greek sculpture of pagan gods, are needed in order to further offset the contemporary imagery which I am using. These god-like figures are not unlike the cyborgs I am portraying. These hybrid beings are essentially immortal as long as they remain in working order. In this way I reference the theological ideas stated in *GitS* and offer my ideas about what these beings truly are.

Renaissance sculptors, specifically Michelangelo, are heavily referenced in the work. His craft was done with a photographic memory without use of a model during a lot of his process. From personal experience, this method lends itself to creating idealized forms. This idealization is very prominent in his works, but so are his anatomical inconsistencies. It's very clear that the Renaissance artists were referencing the classical Greek and Roman sculptures because of their white appearance. Classical sculpture was originally painted, but once the Renaissance sculptors began to mimic their style the paint had been lost. This brought about the marble figures we are currently familiar with. Each of my figures is primarily white as a result of this influence. These figures are meant to heavily reference their roots in sculpture as familiar human forms, but host contemporary imagery.

Conclusion

Cathexis is my interpretation of the third gender where I attempt to question the idea of the soul and what it means to simply be. If the viewer were the cyborg, the constructed body represents an idealized self, offering everyone the power to be who they imagine themselves to be. The theoretical aspect of the sculptures created for *Cathexis* proposes gender fluidity a possibility whereby the essence of the person and the body are interchangeable. In an effort to address the current gender dichotomy the figurines, presented in this show, are both human and non-human. These figures are metaphors for human potential, a plausible scenario, a future where one can exist as an individual unbound by the social constructs of gender.

Recipe & Materials Appendix

Clear Gloss Glaze (Cone 04)

37.5 Gerstley Borate

37.5 Frit 3124

20 Flint

5 EPK

Laguna Wades Paper Clay EM750 (Cone 04)

Amaco Liquid Matt Glaze LM-10

Hanovia Blue Luster

Hanovia Liquid Bright Gold Luster

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Biographical Sketch

Robert Alan Kolhouse was born on July 7, 1976, in Kokomo, Indiana. The eldest of two children, he grew up mostly in Indianapolis, IN, graduating from Columbus North High School in 1994. Prior to his return to academia, Robert worked in retail management for Radio Shack and Game Stop for five years. After his termination he worked as a front line information technology (IT) support specialist and on his B.F.A. concurrently for seven years. He earned his B.F.A. in Studio Art from Indiana University (IU) and his M.F.A. in Studio Art from the University of Florida (UF) in 2011 and 2014, respectively.

Robert has continued to show artwork nationally during his time at UF at shows such as the NCECA Student Juried Exhibition in 2013, the Pence Gallery in Davis, CA, the HYART Gallery in Madison, WI, and in various online galleries such as the Linus Galleries, and Four Points Contemporary in 2014. After his May 2014 graduation he will be working as a studio assistant at the Penland Center for Crafts in Penland, NC. Robert has been married to Sarah Lynn Florini Ph.D. for two years and will rejoin her in Madison, WI prior to his assistantship.