

# Hey, My Gender Is Up Here

A Corporeal Journey through Patriarchy

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## EXAMENSARBETE

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Inriktning: Bildkonst

Handledare: Marika Holm, Robert Back

Titel: Hej, mitt genus är här uppe; En kroppslig resa genom patriarkatet

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### Abstrakt

I mitt examensarbete reflekterar jag över upplevelsen av att bli uppfattad och tolkad inom ramen av ett patriarkalt system.

I textdelen av mitt examensarbete fokuserar jag på medvetenheten om att leva i en kropp och hur en tillvaro som kretsar kring utseende är oundviklig inom det västerländska samhället, med särskild tonvikt på genus och hur det genomsyrar allt. Genom att tillämpa en autoetnografisk metod utforskar jag dessa teman från ett icke-binärt perspektiv, och väver samman personliga insikter med symboliska tolkningar av mina konstverk och feministisk teori.

I mitt visuella arbete tolkar jag begrepp som konformitet, förväntningar och motstånd genom keramisk skulptur och installation. Jag försöker förmedla känslan av en ofrivilligt kategoriserad kropp som förvandlas under den ciskönade, heterosexuella blicken och sociala roller.

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Språk: engelska

Nyckelord: genus, kropp, blicken, patriarkat, feministisk teori

## OPINNÄYTETYÖ

Tekijä: Eli Kaunisvesi

Koulutus ja paikkakunta: Kuvataiteilija, Pietarsaari

Suuntautumisvaihtoehto: Kuvataide

Ohjaaja(t): Marika Holm, Robert Back

Nimike: Hei, sukupuoleni on täällä ylhäällä; kehollinen matka halki patriarkatin

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### Tiivistelmä

Lopputyössäni pohdin kokemusta havaituksi ja tulkituksi tulemisesta patriarkaatissa.

Tekstissäni keskityn kehossa olemisen tietoisuuteen ja länsimaisen yhteiskunnan ulkonäkökeskeisen olemassaolon väistämättömyyteen, erityisesti sukupuolta ja sen omnipresenssiä korostaen. Tutkin kyseisiä teemoja autoetnografista metodia hyödyntäen, muunsukupuolisesta näkökulmasta, punoen yhteen henkilökohtaisia oivalluksia, symbolisia tulkintoja taiteellisesta työstäni ja feminististä teoriaa

Visuaalisessa työssäni tulkitsen käsitteitä kuten konformismi, odotukset ja uhmaaminen keramiikkaveistosten ja installaatioiden kautta. Yritän välittää tunnetta kehosta, joka muuttuu vastentahtoisesti cissukupuolisen, heteroseksuaalisen katseen ja sosiaalisten roolien alla.

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Kieli: englanti

Avainsanat: sukupuoli, keho, katse, patriarkatti, feministinen teoria

## **BACHELOR'S THESIS**

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### **Abstract**

In my bachelor's thesis I contemplate the experience of being perceived and interpreted within the confines of a patriarchal system.

In my text, my focus is on the awareness of inhabiting a body and the inescapability of appearance-centric existence within Western society with a particular emphasis on gender and its omnipresence. Employing an autoethnographic method, I explore these themes through a non-binary lens, intertwining personal insights with the symbolic interpretations of my art pieces and feminist theory.

In my visual work, I interpret concepts such as conformity, expectations, and defiance through ceramic sculpture and installation. I try to convey the feeling of an involuntarily categorized body transforming under the cisgender heterosexual gaze, and social roles.

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Language: english

Key words: gender, body, gaze, patriarchy, feminist theory

## Acknowledgements

No art is apolitical. The artist is an inherently political being. Their work reflects who they are and their position in the world. Their art speaks about what they think is worth expressing. Believing this, as I do, writing about anything but the ongoing atrocities has felt difficult. My heart aches and breaks daily witnessing genocide. I wonder, when I get my degree, what remains or is born from the burning ashes. From the River to the Sea. Free Palestine.

### My heartfelt thanks to:

*Alexandra Marina*, for your valuable friendship, collegiality, and divine passion.

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## 1 Introduction

The main reason for choosing a subject as wide as “gender/patriarchy” as a starting point for my final work, beyond the fact that power is a theme I have been working with for years, was the fact that I’ve experienced the harmful effects (ranging from mild annoyance to outright danger) since I can remember, but didn’t for the longest time have the language to explain exactly what I, and especially the women in my life were experiencing. Reading feminist philosophy and finding terms for concepts, actions, and forms of oppression feels incredibly validating and is a starting point to more easily recognizing and dismantling them. It should be a common goal to abolish the patriarchy. It is harmful to everyone. A handful of people can live up to the standards, but nobody can be truly free within its confines.

### Realizing Gender

The earliest memory I have of actively engaging in gender is from daycare, when playing house, I remember always choosing the role of the older brother, regardless of if there was anyone else playing the required counterpart sibling. It was never an issue, we were children, nobody cared as long as you chose a role nobody else had already laid claim to. A few years after that, in preschool, I told my friends for the first time that I wanted to be a boy. It was not a big deal then either, but I remember being teased about it by my peers. I recanted it, not because of how people reacted, but more because of uncertainty, I think.

Later in middle school I drew a picture with a black and gray swirling background with red text that read something along the lines of “from this you can tell that I am boyish!” (Clearly, I was laying the groundwork for my artistry already back then.) It is the choice of colors, or the lack thereof, and the word boyish that is key because I had some sense of what a girl is and what a boy is - that is to say, the very basics of biological sex and gender norms, not gender. It wasn't until high school when I told one of my friends in a proclamation of my own perceived unlovableness that I am completely weird and fifty percent trans. The day after that, I spoke to another friend about it at school, and she went “oh, you mean like genderfluid?” Needless to say, my ~~world~~ gender was shaken.

It wasn't until I had found a resemblance of confidence in the solidity of my understanding of gender, that I found a sense of enjoyment in expressing myself with how I looked, no matter what others thought of me. I understood myself better. It turned out that not everyone struggled to find girl clothes that looked enough like boy clothes. However, it didn't change the conflicting desire of wanting to be one of the guys while also wanting to be perceived as attractive by those guys.

## 2 Sex ≠ Gender

In the West, people are assigned a gender that is determined according to the external sex characteristics observed at birth (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Even if the infant is intersex, it is assigned as either male or female. The sex is determined for medical and legal reasons but the gender that comes with it and that often is reinforced before the child is even born is a *social construction* (Griffin, 2017). An idea that exists because of human interaction, because we have more or less collectively agreed it does. Nothing innate or objective. A comparable hypothetical would be dividing people into two different social groups based on height or eye color instead. Dividing bathrooms, appropriate clothes and colors, acceptable behavior and hobbies depending on if the irises of your eyes are blue or brown. Each group is observable and eye color is a physical fact but our choice to sort people based on it is a social construction.

Born from the application of physical characteristics to social categories is the experience of dysphoria—the distress arising from the misalignment of one's gender and sex (Fisk, 1974). People feel compelled to transition because societal norms impose identities upon them that they do not identify with. This discrepancy between external expectations and internal identity leads people to seek changes that align with their true selves, allowing them to be seen in a light that feels right (Wade & Ferree, 2019).

It is utterly confounding to think that we expect eight billion people of the same species to fit neatly in two distinct categories of any kind. Even - or especially - biologically. The cherry on top of this cake of binary lunacy is organizing our social world and positions in society

based on the presence or absence of certain organs - a social divide that isn't a universally occurring one by any means (Oyewumi, 1997).

### 3 Sculpting Genderless Bodies

There is no escaping the binary or simply not thinking about it when it affects your whole life so intrinsically. It is more often than not an othering factor. A part of my identity that I struggle with — not because of being unsure of what or who I am, rather because of everything and everyone outside of me. It is exhausting. I am so tired of having a body — of having ideas imposed on my body — of being perceived as someone or something of a body-specific value.

With my androgynous sculptures, which are self-portraits of a sort, I attempt to convey the feeling of having so much imposed on oneself that one gets physically distorted in the process. The ceramic bodies become exceedingly more relatable to me as they stray from realistic human features to something more foreign. And though they are alien, donning four fingers on each hand or elongated limbs, I know that the sculptures themselves will be (mis-)gendered by the viewer (in fact they already have, while still being works in progress), since gender is so completely ingrained in our culture.

It's an odd feeling to "defend" the gender of an inanimate object. Not too far from being misgendered myself, an uncomfortable feeling, not entirely as if being insulted, but jarring at best and hurtful at worst. I'm aware that subconsciously it is myself that I am speaking up for when pointing out people's assumptions about my sculptures. As if I would've been personally misinterpreted in the process. Because of course my sad and angry babies (term of endearment) are non-binary or completely lack the concept of gender! Can't you *sense* it?

Often, when I choose to wear clothing that is considered traditionally feminine, it feels like a paper-thin disguise, one that the people around me so easily "fall for." I feel nearly delusional when people don't bat an eye when they see me in a dress - as would be

expected when someone so blatantly disregards gender norms. Like a cartoon villain donning a fake mustache.

Simultaneously, I feel like I should cherish the features of my gendered body. I could “make good use of it.” Give. Let people experience it. Touch it. Though this view smells an awful lot like self-objectification, the thoughts pull me towards ideas of utilizing my body in art in different ways. The potential of *being* a sculpture, of tackling hypocrisies around voyeurism and power in a tactile way. Like the works of VALIE EXPORT and Marina Abramovic, whose bold performances greatly influenced my decision to pursue art in the first place. Their performances in the 60s and 70s, especially Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974), shaped my view of what art could be. They confronted the public about the act of viewing and judging the female body and the artist, and they did so with their bodies.

I long for a future where I can freely use my body to express ideas in my artistic endeavors without the burden of being misinterpreted as something I am not or causing embarrassment to my family and loved ones. However, I recognize the daunting reality that the ideas and societal norms surrounding gender make this nearly unattainable within the current societal context.

## **4 Life is a LARP**

Just like how gender is formed by people repeatedly acting out masculinity or femininity based on reigning gender norms (Butler, 1990), so I like to think of life. I calm and amuse myself with the sociological theory that life is but a performance (Goffman, 1956). In the sense that the roles handed to me, some willfully taken on, are indeed just roles that I perform in collaboration with everyone else. However, unlike Goffman's theory on the performed self, I choose to believe that the “real me,” however elusive, exists in peace underneath all the masks, safe, though not untouched nor completely undisturbed. A little like the artist. The part of me that I choose not to scrutinize in its innateness. A paint smeared robe and beret that I have the privilege to gladly embody at will.

What I enjoy most about the role of the artist is the freedom to question and break norms, that they're allowed to live on the edge of social conventions. They might even be expected to do so. The artist is also passionate to a fault, choosing creative expression over comfort - out of necessity, working on their masterpiece into the long hours of the night, caffeinated and sleep deprived yet exceptionally determined. I'm romanticizing, of course, as is expected when it comes to roles - not realities. Nevertheless, the role has its detrimental downsides however one decides to play it.

The eclectic artist bears the risk of being reduced to someone of no sound mind, someone not to be taken seriously, someone lazy and selfish, and still someone who is expected to work out of passion for their craft (the artist does not need to eat or pay rent, they simply chain-smoke and exist). Yet this role is not available or as easily attained by everyone equally. By default, it gets progressively harder the further you are from a white, cisgender, straight sized, and able-bodied Christian man.

#### **4.1 Remnants**

Historically, in the West, women have been kept at arm's length from whatever *real artistry* was at the time. Either by simply not being allowed to practice certain forms of art i.e., nude croquis, or being ostracized or questioned about their morals if they chose art before or instead of their predetermined roles in society. The common sentiment was that women were too sensitive or not sensitive in the right way to be artists. While that has changed and women are no longer looked down upon for pursuing careers in art, to this day, the art history that is widely taught is the canon of white men (Nochlin, 1988).

## **5 The Body**

Smooth folds, soft stretch over solid shapes, orifices, and protrusions. Warm and wet. Inviting and repulsive. Tactile.

I have, for the longest time, felt hyperaware of my body. Both in the sense of what it looks like and where it is in relation to everything and everyone else in a room, as well as how clothing clings to my skin, stretches over it. I was around nine years old when I no longer felt comfortable wearing a sleeveless shirt to gym class. I vaguely remember thinking my arms were too big. It escalated from there, of course.

It is not uncommon for girls and women to adopt an “observer’s perspective” when evaluating their physical appearance. This tendency can result in habitual self-monitoring, resulting in feelings of shame and anxiety (among countless other negative effects) (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). As a result of societal expectations and fatphobia, the body becomes a burden even if it is free from ailments, even when it is physically comfortable and content. Fat bodies are not allowed to exist in the same way straight sized or skinny bodies are. Under the guise of health concerns, fat bodies are under constant criticism and never considered neutral (Hemmingson & Wollter, 2022). The stigma and oppression in itself leads to health concerns that can outweigh the damage of physical ailments that are commonly attributed to weight (Wu & Berry, 2022).

## **5.1 Shifting Perspectives**

One unfortunate thing that provides me with an escape from the negative thoughts about my body, when I’m feeling less than content, is thinking that it is only a vessel I exist in. It is not actually me. It is because of the less-than-ideal conscious detachment, that I can occasionally let go of thinking about my appearance. I find some comfort in the thought that the ideas imposed on me are imposed only on this visual-physical output that I have little control over. However, I don’t live in a constant dissociative state, nor can I escape the treatment I receive or my position in society based on my body. Sooner or later, I am reminded of how I am interpreted. My body, in the end, is me.

It was not until my mid-twenties that I found a resemblance of comfort in the size and shape of my body. Even joy. Beyond feminist theory, a partial contributor to the relatively newfound appreciation and gratitude for my body, was the artist in me. I found the beauty in the shapes of my body. The softness, the fuzzy hair on my chin, the blue veins like

streams under the pale skin of my arms, the green ones on the sides of my face. The angles of the bones my feet consist of.

Now, I try to focus on experiencing my body in the way I experience nature and art. With openness and curiosity. With joy. With pleasure. In the way that I find nature wonderful in its uncuratedness and thriving on diversity. In the way that I let go of expectations when experimenting with ceramics and treasure every unpredicted deviancy. Smooth, polished, and perfect is dull.

## 6 Being Perceived

Our lives and strife for joy are hindered by a society and culture that revolves around the way we are perceived by the people around us. But how big of an impact does being perceived and objectified have on us? Beyond disordered eating and anxiety, the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) suggests that women who self-objectify, due to the capitalistic and patriarchal culture where much of a woman's worth is directly tied to her attractiveness to heterosexual men, lack resources for assessing how the body feels, because of how much attention goes to self-monitoring. This theory was recently put to the test in a study conducted by Felig et al. (2021) where women with higher states of self-objectification reported lower levels of feeling cold compared to women who were less self-objectifying. Naturally, this raises further questions about how far beyond loss of sensory awareness the negative effects of an appearance-centered culture reach.

### 6.1 Subverting the Gaze

While remaining critical of many of the famous radical feminist artists and art works from the 70s and 80s in their sex/gender essentialism and for the interests of middle-class white women being in the center, i.e. the art installation *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) by Judy Chicago, I am still inspired by their subversion of the heterosexual male gaze through “vulgarity.”

There is a sort of autonomy and freedom to be found in flaunting a nonconforming existence and acts that are deemed vulgar - when performed by someone whose code of conduct doesn't allow it. The viewer loses control over the subject when it doesn't conform to the expectations. Particularly when the feminine body is "supposed to be" either the art object or sex object when depicted on a canvas or in clay.

When sculpting my piece titled "Go piss Girl", a casually squatting, urinating figure, I decided to add yet another dimension to the perceiving/being perceived. As I was sculpting the head, after the body had already found its final form, I found it difficult to decide on one singular forever-expression. I knew there was defiance in them, but it becomes wavering under enough pressure when one stands alone. So instead of making the decision myself, I provide the viewer with a few options (heads). How does the viewer feel about this entity, urinating before them? How does the viewer think the entity should feel?

## **7 The Paradox of Patriarchy**

Beyond dictating norms seemingly regarding one's entire life, Western patriarchal societies have been constructed upon the belief that men are entitled to positions of authority. The prevailing social convention implies that women are incapable of engaging in stereotypical masculinity, while men face societal condemnation if they exhibit stereotypical femininity due to the devaluation of femininity (Lindsey, 2015). A system that is upheld by most parties involved.

So, while women, non-binary, and gender nonconforming people bear the brunt of patriarchal oppression, men are not immune to its harmful effects either. They too, need to keep up a performance – for the sake of their status and other men. According to Wade & Ferree (2019), due to the rigorous and sometimes violent enforcement of gender hierarchies, both conformity and defiance can pose risks.

Tragically, the harm reaches further yet, beyond human interaction. It turns out that gender norms might cause men to harm not only other people, but the planet as well. According to studies on compensatory masculinity - men are less likely to care about the

environment due to the perception of caring for the environment being associated with femininity; men tend to engage in more littering, recycle less frequently, adopt less sustainable eating habits, and consume more energy (Olcott, 2017).

### **7.1 Volcano of Man**

There is something tragicomical about the paradoxical concept of the ultimate man, the “alpha male.” The unattainable ideal, constant competition and risk of falling short. I attempt to visualize this hegemonic masculinity and the allure of conformity in the piece titled “Disco in the Void (might as well)” A biomorphic cone or volcano-like structure in black clay, with a faint voice of a woman echoing from inside, while on top small men are crawling, eager or desperate to be the first one to reach the top.

## **8 Earth’s Potent Pudding**

What initially drew me to working with clay was the immediate connection I felt to the tactile qualities and logic of it. Unlike painting, which involves layering and abstraction, clay offers me a direct and tangible means of expression that resonates with me on a fundamental level. The process is thoughtful and intuitive, the idea or concept I’m working on has the time to mature and evolve during the sculpting.

I find solace in clay. Not only in the meditative process and intimacy of working it with my hands for hours on end, but also in the natural source of it. I find reassurance in the fact that my preferred medium originates from the earth itself and is relatively eco-conscious. That allows me to create pieces that are likely to outlive me, without compromising my environmental values.

## 9 The art in depth

With my humanoid sculptures I subvert the gendered body. They carry both idealizations, physical realities and insecurities. The bodies revolt against themselves instead of the expectations placed upon them. They become simultaneously further from reality and closer to more relatable entities.

### 9.1 Go piss Girl!

The title name of the larger humanoid sculpture is a reference to a silly contemporary phrase with a covid delirium meme origin. It is an encouraging statement that to my understanding, can be used nearly synonymously to "yes, do it", while the action one is encouraged to take doesn't necessarily have to be urination.

The sculpture is a humanoid being who is squatting in a rather relaxed position, arms resting on its thighs. Similarly to the other androgynous sculpture, "wasted resource," this one also has disproportionately sized limbs and is one step further in its transformation to something alien, namely its hands giving it away, with only four fingers on each.

The sculpture stands on a patch of bright green grass. Perhaps it is somewhere out in nature relieving itself. The combination of the environment and the alien features raises the question if the entity is on an entirely different planet, therefore lacking the social rules and stigma around the act of urinating before others, stripping it from the presumption of shame or defiance of anything. That brings into question other norms regarding its look; it is nude and has a beautiful plump belly. A thing I didn't think twice about when sculpting. The whole piece opens a dialogue about body and norms, straying from the in relation simple concept of reclaiming the narrative through vulgarity.

### 9.2 Wasted resource

As much as the piece titled "Wasted resource" is about representing a non-binary body, it is about love. About societal constrictions and disconnect. Frozen in a moment between either kneeling or getting up, the sculpture's partially lax posture and downwards tilted

head signifies a sort of acceptance and grief. Perhaps it is gathering strength to get up again. Due to the metallic glaze and the water feature, the humanoid sculpture becomes reminiscent of a bronze statue or public fountain. One that I imagine could be found in any cityscape.

## **10 Final Words**

I create representation. For myself, but even more so for the sake of others who share my experience. The feeling you get when you see yourself represented in any media or public sphere is akin to relief. It is as if the feeling of validation manifests physically in my body. I hope that my art, nonconformity, and budding pride can empower someone else to stand a little taller, take a little more space, and feel a little more at peace in their body.

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