

Embrace

Identity is an ever-changing dance. Despite this, cultural patriarchy is a choreography of categorization that enforces static hierarchy, such as masculine/feminine, good/bad, self/other. The patriarchal hierarchy creates disconnection and individualism, as our identities are complex and unable to conform to categorization. In the grey, liminal space of identity, there is loneliness, frailty, failure, loss, and struggle. This exhibition envisions a queer, feminist, maternal world where we can disrupt the choreography, and embrace our infinite potentials.

Drawing on the isolation of the past few years, the artist found herself thinking of Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expedition. In the memoir *South!*, Ernest Shackleton recounts his Antarctic expedition aboard the *Endurance* from 1914-1917. The expedition failed its objectives and resulted in the crew being trapped in the Antarctic for almost 3 years. Amid this pandemic the idea of being adrift on an ice floe, disconnected from a world you once knew, might seem too close to home. However, Shackleton's story is not just about fear, it is also a story of survival against all odds. Shackleton writes about the ways community was essential to their survival. This crew of men found beautiful moments of hope, connection, and intimacy. A particular scene that inspired much of the content of this exhibition depicts a small group of the crew journeying for weeks in a small boat, continually wet and cold due to exposure. Shackleton describes moments of tender intimacy as his crew embraced one another to survive:

“When we were not on watch we lay in each other's arms for warmth. Our frozen suits thawed where our bodies met, and as the slightest movement exposed these comparatively warm spots to the biting air, we clung motionless, whispering each to his companion our hopes and thoughts”.

The intimacy of this moment, and even the language used in writing it, is not traditionally masculine. It doesn't question or critique their masculinity, but instead offers us potential for non-judgemental, non-gendered tenderness.

The silhouettes in the exhibition reinterpret photographs by Frank Hurley (the photographer on the expedition) creating soft and intimate moments. The original photographs document the loneliness and connection felt by the crew, in both mundane and spectacular scenes. By depicting the profound loneliness of some of the more tragic scenes coupled with acts of care for each other, and care for the artwork itself, the complexity of these experiences is apparent. These are images of isolation, but also of hope and disruptive, genderless care.

Throughout the exhibition artistic swimming is used as another metaphor for disrupting boundaries associated with gender. In *How Can I Get Through to You?*, Terrence Real uses dance as a metaphor for cultural patriarchy:

“The choreography of patriarchy, this unholy fusion of love, loss, and violence, spares no one...I want to change the dance.”

Embrace uses the artist’s own experiences in artistic swimming (formerly called synchronized swimming) metaphorically to address the choreography of categorization, and the idealization of gendered characteristics. Artistic swimming fosters a community of strong feminine sisterhood, but also enforces strict aesthetic ideals of “good” feminine bodies and behaviour. This exhibition explores a new choreography that embraces feminine power, while refusing boundaries.

Embroidery and fabric are incorporated throughout the exhibition as a gendered medium and an empathetic practice. Stitching is a caring action, and like other labour constituted as “women’s work”, is often under-valued. The artist’s great-grandmother’s embroidery patterns are used as a motif of ideal womanhood, another reference to “good” feminine behaviour. The child-like imagery of puppies, kittens, and flowers are stripped of the colour and context intended for these patterns. Under cultural patriarchy every component of our lives (our labour, the colours we like, the clothing we choose, the way we interact with others) are all placed into the categories of “women’s” or “men’s”. Femininity and masculinity don’t belong to women or men. Our humanity is too complex to be reduced and restricted into two categories to be considered “good” in this world. In this exhibition, by balancing care and disruption, the expectation to be “good” is torn apart at the seams.

Embrace creates a space for these ideas and various sets of imagery to converge. Fabric depictions of the *Endurance* Antarctic expedition, videos of bodies in water, embroidery and sound, the presence of shadows, all critique the choreography of categorization and offer potentials for hope. During this particularly divisive and isolated period, we are offered an opportunity to consider what we want to hold on to, and what we can let go of. The sounds of water and whales swell, a reminder that we are not alone.

So much pain and loneliness come from failure to embody all the expectations of cultural patriarchy. There is no clear answer for how to escape cultural patriarchy. *Embrace* asks questions through art. It blends gendered materials and imagery, creating a speculative space of possibility. Could we instead embody empathy and embrace a collective skin? Could we suffer, heal, and love, together? We can embrace our infinite potentials and hold each other for warmth. What remains when we have torn down the structures around us? Hope.