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# Dismantling the Stigmatization of Female Body Hair Through Embroidery and Interviews With Women of the Hair Belt

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**DISMANTLING THE STIGMATIZATION OF FEMALE BODY HAIR THROUGH  
EMBROIDERY AND INTERVIEWS WITH WOMEN OF THE HAIR BELT**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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*“What ‘Woman is’”: ‘wanting to shave your legs at twelve and being agonized because your mother won’t let you; being agonized at fourteen because you finally have shaved your legs, and your flesh is on fire- . . .[and] tweezing your eyebrows/bleaching your hair/scraping your armpits. . .’” – Wendy Chapkis, *Beauty Secrets**

In Western culture, media has been the most influential tool used in creating female beauty standards. It has constructed female hair removal on screen as taboo, while perpetuating the association of femininity with hairlessness. The construction of female bodies as “naturally” hairless by Western media makes women feel inadequate and self-conscious, while psychologically and economically benefiting a capitalistic, patriarchal society.<sup>1</sup> My work seeks to emphasize the understanding that female body hair is natural and, moreover, feminine and beautiful. I hope to dismantle the stigmatization of female body hair through interactive artwork that highlights these qualities. Furthermore, I want to encourage individuals to create their own sense of femininity, instead of conforming to the hairless feminine ideal created by Western media.

### **History of Female Hair Removal**

The origin of female body hair removal is difficult to pinpoint; however, in *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History*, Victoria Sherrow claims that women in ancient Egypt were the first individuals to regularly remove body hair, using bees wax for sugaring, a hair removal technique similar to waxing.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Sherrow states that women in Ancient Greece and Rome used pumice to remove body hair.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, female hair removal began in 1915 with the creation of Milady Decolletee, Gillette’s first razor designed and marketed to women.<sup>4</sup> “Smaller

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<sup>1</sup> Karlin Lesnik-Oberstein, *The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair*. (Manchester: Manchester, 2006) 47.

<sup>2</sup> Victoria Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 180.

<sup>3</sup> Sherrow, 181.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca M. Herzig, *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*. (New York: New York, 2015) 126.

and curved to better fit the arm pit, the razor was designed to supplement the sleeveless and short sleeved fashions of the period,” explains Rebecca Herzig in *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*. Additionally, a shortage of nylon stockings in the United States during this wartime period led women to start shaving previously hidden hairy legs. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, hair removal techniques progressed with the development of new technology, such as electrolysis and laser, and women began removing hair from other areas on their bodies, like their arms and faces. In the early 2000s, Brazilian waxing, full removal of hair from the genital area, became popular due to its portrayal in mainstream media.<sup>5</sup> Before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, female pubic hair removal was uncommon and usually only performed before hospital births.<sup>6</sup> Studies show that by 2010, one in five women under 25 years of age were maintaining consistent, complete removal of genital hair.<sup>7</sup>

### **Western Media’s Depiction of Female Body Hair and Its Impact on Female Hair Removal**

Western media has been the most influential tool in defining a “feminine” woman. It has established and perpetuated the notion of beautiful and feminine bodies with hairlessness. This hairless ideal dates back to ancient times. In *The Last Taboo*, Alice Macdonald explains the impact of ancient artistic and cultural traditions on what we see today on screen. She states, “The smooth marble bodies of Greek sculpture – whether hairless because of artistic censure or because they reflected the social custom of depilation – have over the centuries structured the cultural imagination in such a way as to make the glabrous female body an entrenched and irresistible feminine aesthetic.”<sup>8</sup> Today, female body hair on screen is nonexistent. Even female

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<sup>5</sup> Herzig, 135.

<sup>6</sup> Herzig, 130.

<sup>7</sup> Herzig, 136.

<sup>8</sup> Lesnik-Oberstein, 309.

characters in television shows about survival, such as *The Walking Dead*, and *Lost* are shown fighting for their lives with perfectly shaved underarms. The notion of women as naturally hairless beings is perpetuated even further in advertisements and films that show already hairless women shaving or waxing. For example, in *Friends*, a well known American sitcom, Phoebe and Monica decide to wax their legs. However, instead of showing hairy legs on screen, the wax is applied to hairless skin and ripped off, making their shrieks of pain unexplainable.<sup>9</sup> Another example of this is in the movie, *Bridget Jones' Diary*. In one scene, the main character, Bridget, is preparing for a date and uses a pink razor to shave already smooth and shiny legs.<sup>10</sup> Even on screen female protagonists with muscular bodies and “masculine” traits, such as Angelina Jolie in *Tomb Raider*, are portrayed without body hair.<sup>11</sup> So when is female body hair shown on screen? According to Macdonald, body hair is only depicted on female characters to signify something derogatory, such as callousness.<sup>12</sup>

Starting in the 1980s, the pornography industry also began promoting “naturally” hairless women with the removal of female pubic hair. “In 1975, *Hustler* magazine published photographs of very young models without visible pubic hair under the headline ‘Adolescent Fantasy’,” Herzig explains in *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*.<sup>13</sup> Feminist critics believed American pubic hair removal practices “demonstrated a preoccupation with the infantile sexlessness of little girls.”<sup>14</sup> However, male readers were pleased and the adult entertainment industry quickly shifted towards hairless female models. Studies show that this shift in the pornography industry influenced ordinary individuals’ grooming habits as well. “The prevalence

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<sup>9</sup> Lesnik-Oberstein, 56.

<sup>10</sup> Lesnik-Oberstein, 296.

<sup>11</sup> Lesnik-Oberstein, 294.

<sup>12</sup> Herzig, 315.

<sup>13</sup> Herzig, 141.

<sup>14</sup> Herzig, 141.

of bare genitals in pornographic material, one review concludes, leads ‘to a perception that bare genitals are more erotic’,” explains Herzig.<sup>15</sup> According to an aestheticians report, many men began asking their wives and girlfriends to imitate the hairless look displayed by porn actresses.<sup>16</sup> Over a short period of time, pubic hair removal transcended the pornography industry and became a beauty “norm” in Western society. Today, even women who don’t consistently remove their genital hair will get waxed as a “special surprise” for their partners.<sup>17</sup> Recently, men have also begun consistently removing and trimming their pubic hair as well, showing that the impact of the pornography on individuals’ grooming habits was so influential, it transcended gender identity.<sup>18</sup>

### Theory

In 1936, philosopher and critical thinker Walter Benjamin argued that the mechanical reproduction of art changes its meaning and authenticity. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin states, “In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Manmade artifacts could always be imitated by men. Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new.”<sup>19</sup> According to Benjamin, mechanical reproduction calls into question an artwork’s aura, authenticity, and presence in time and space. Benjamin’s claims are certainly pertinent to my project because I used both traditional and digital art practices. Furthermore, my designs transformed from digital art, to digital patterns, to digital patterns printed on textile, and then digital patterns printed on textile with hand

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<sup>15</sup> Herzig, 142.

<sup>16</sup> Herzig, 142.

<sup>17</sup> Herzig, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Herzig, 150.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin, 2008) 220.

embroidered designs. According to Benjamin, the transformation from traditional to digital art causes my work to lose authenticity because of its reproducibility and flawlessness. However, I believe embroidery helped me recapture the originality and distinctiveness of my artwork, because no stitch is like another. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin also states, “Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art.”<sup>20</sup> I believe this is true; my physical artwork will elicit a different response from viewers than if I had displayed my work digitally. Furthermore, encouraging viewers to physically touch my piece will force them to actively participate and confront my artwork, rather than having them view my designs on screen in a passive manner. In my work, I used repetition and patterns for emphasis and aesthetic reasons. In art, repetition is when a single object or shape is repeated; pattern is when a combination of elements are repeated.<sup>21</sup> I also used repetition as a reference to shaving, a task women in the United States perform almost daily.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Pattern and Decoration Movement**

Historical influence for my thesis designs originates from The Pattern and Decoration Movement. The Pattern and Decoration Movement was an art movement in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. “The goal was provocative: to break down the traditional boundaries between high art and craft and to validate the decorative pattern work that female hands had applied to ceramics and textiles throughout the ages.”<sup>23</sup> The Pattern and Decoration movement also challenged the male-dominated art sphere by promoting female artists and

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, 234.

<sup>21</sup> Lucy Lamp, “Design in Art: Repetition, Pattern and Rhythm.” *Sophia*. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Merran Toerien and Sue Wilkinson, “Gender and Body Hair: Constructing the Feminine Woman.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 26.4 (2003) 339.

<sup>23</sup> William Grimes, “Miriam Schapiro, 91, a Feminist Artist Who Harnessed Craft and Pattern, Dies.” *The New York Times*. 1.

encouraging the use of traditionally feminine materials and techniques. Miriam Schapiro, a leading figure in the Pattern and Decoration art movement, called this medium “femmage”. Femmage work utilizes materials associated with domesticity and women, such as embroidery, lace, crochet, sewing, quilts, and fabric design.<sup>24</sup>

### **Influential Artists**

Artistic inspiration for my work stems from artists Ghada Amer and Miriam Schapiro. Ghada Amer is an Egyptian born artist, whose work tackles issues of beauty standards, gender, and sexuality. She uses embroidery, acrylic and gel medium on canvas for most of her paintings. Two of Ghada Amer’s paintings that inspired my thesis designs are *Test 8, 2013* and *Sunset With Words- RFGA, 2013*. *Test 8* is a black and white piece that depicts the famous words of Simone de Beauvoir, “one is not born but becomes a woman” from her book *The Second Sex*.<sup>25</sup> In the book, de Beauvoir states that women are not autonomous beings; they define themselves in relationship to men.<sup>26</sup> This quote also highlights the relationship between the natural, what a woman is born with, and the unnatural, what she becomes. Women are born with natural body hair, but through society’s construction of gender, womanhood and femininity, they become “naturally” hairless beings. Another painting by Ghada Amer that helped shape my work is *Sunset With Words – RFGA*. In this colorful painting, the phrase “nobody gives you power you just take it” is repeated across the canvas. Amer is referring to Roseanne Barr’s quote, “The thing women have yet to learn is nobody gives you power. You just take it.” In both pieces, the phrases are repeated to capture a viewer’s attention; however, they are also covered with embroidery, obscuring their messages from afar. Similar to Amer’s paintings, I will be using

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<sup>24</sup> “Feminist Art Movement, Artists and Major Works.” *The Art Story Modern Art Insight*.

<sup>25</sup> Ghada Amer, *Test 8*. 2013. Acrylic, embroidery, and gel medium on canvas.

<sup>26</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. (New York: Knopf, 1953) 3.

repetition through patterns. My work will be displayed in embroidery hoops; however, I will also be using embroidery in my work, to emphasize the texture of hair in my patterns. Like Amer, the message of my work will be obscured to viewers from afar, because I want viewers to have a moment of realization, as they physically touch my work up close. Miriam Schapiro, co-founder of the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts, was a prominent figure in the Pattern and Decoration art movement. Her work addresses topics of femininity and domesticity through a fabric collage art medium she called femmage. Inspiration for my thesis designs comes from Miriam Schapiro's *Anatomy of a Kimono (1974)*, one of her well known femmage works. *Anatomy of a Kimono (1974)* is a ten panel piece made from a mix of acrylic paint, handkerchiefs and fabric. It's filled with "Japanese-inspired shapes".<sup>27</sup> Similar to Schapiro's piece, my work will include sewing, fabric, labor and material historically assigned to women. Furthermore, displaying my designs inside embroidery hoops will unite my work with the Pattern and Decoration art movement.

### ***Delicate & Unshaven***

For my Fall project, I used Adobe Illustrator to create a series of digital patterns about female body hair. My three-piece series, *Delicate & Unshaven*, highlighted areas of the female body that are commonly subjected to hair removal: the upper lip, underarm, and genital areas. I started my project by hand sketching these body parts. Then, I recreated these drawings in Adobe Illustrator using the pen tool. After finalizing my illustrations in Adobe Illustrator, I transformed them into 11x17 inch patterns. I turned my illustrations into patterns because patterns are often associated with perfection and beauty, notions that are not associated with female body hair.

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<sup>27</sup> "Feminist Art Movement, Artists and Major Works." *The Art Story Modern Art Insight*.

Furthermore, I used repetition in my work to represent shaving as a habitual task. After printing my patterns onto textiles, I used embroidery to depict areas of unshaven hair in my designs. I did not fill in my designs and chose to leave them simply outlined in black because I wanted the embroidered areas to be the focus of the series. The only piece which included color was the pubic hair pattern. In this design, I chose to use the color pink because in Western culture pink is often associated with women and femininity.

The presentation of my project changed a great deal over the course of the semester. Originally, I wanted my designs to be silk screened onto large textile sheets and hung in the gallery. Additionally, I wanted to make my work interactive by allowing students to silk screen my designs onto their own apparel; however, my designs were too thin for silk screening. This forced me to find another way to print my designs. With Professor Nakaue's guidance, I found SpoonFlower.com, an online digital textile printing company. I was hesitant about ordering prints online because I did not know the weight of the cotton fabric or how my designs would translate from digital to print. I placed two orders, first a trial order and then a final order, to test their printing. After I received my final prints, I decided to embroider the areas of my design which represented unshaven hair. By applying a traditionally feminine artistic technique to body hair, a topic deemed unfeminine, embroidery allowed me to challenge cultural notions about female body hair and its connection to femininity. Furthermore, I used embroidery to make my piece interactive.

For the final viewing of my work in the Kallick Gallery, I kept each design inside large 12-inch wooden embroidery hoops and hung them 6 inches apart on the wall. I chose this distance because I believe it displayed the aura of each piece individually and collectively. I chose to hang them at a height of 5 feet 6 inches because I wanted them to be at eye level to most

viewers and to make sure viewers of different heights could easily remove them from the wall. For aesthetic purposes, I placed the hoop featuring pubic hair in the center because it's the only piece in the series with color. During the show I stood by my series and instructed viewers to take each hoop off the wall and feel the texture. I submitted a written plaque to the gallery before the exhibition but unfortunately it was not displayed; however, standing next to my piece allowed me to interact with viewers which was extremely interesting. I had wonderful conversations with students and faculty. One student asked me what my view on female hair removal was and if I was trying to encourage women to stop shaving their hair. I explained that the goal of my work was to address the false portrayal of female body hair in the media and to encourage viewers to create their own sense of femininity, whether that means growing their body hair or removing it.

My patterns proved to be aesthetically attractive and engaging while creating ambiguous reactions to body hair; however, there were limitations to my work. One limitation was my work's presence in time and space. Showing my series inside a gallery allowed my work to be interactive, but it limited the amount of viewers that had access to my artwork. A second limitation was my fabric material and color. SpoonFlower.com had a limited selection and only offered white colored fabrics. This hindered my ability to discuss the relationship between race and body hair. To overcome these limitations, I plan on continuing my project in the Spring. I want to examine marginalized identities' relationships with head and body hair in the United States, and compare their experiences with those of White individuals. I will explore what "good" and "bad" hair mean to different races, how these notions were historically established and how they are currently perpetuated by the media. Furthermore, my artwork will be displayed physically and digitally, allowing it to widely circulate and impact more viewers.

## ***Women of the Hair Belt***

Expanding on the fall's exploration of Western media's portrayal of women as "naturally" hairless beings, *Women of the Hair Belt* emphasizes that female body hair is natural, feminine, and beautiful through digital design and embroidery. However, this semester my work was driven by personal interviews with students and professors at the Claremont Colleges who identify as female and ethnically from the areas of the Hair Belt.

## **The Hair Belt**

Originally I wanted my spring semester project to focus on women of color and their experiences with facial and body hair; however, during one of our work in progress critiques, a professor suggested I look at women of the Hair Belt. The Hair Belt is a term given to several countries where individuals are hairier due to environmental and biological reasons. "It begins in southern Spain, congruent with Moorish influence. It extends over the dark-eyed regions of Italy, almost all of Greece, and absolutely all of Turkey. It dips south to include Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt. Continuing on (and darkening in color as maps do to indicate ocean depth) it blankets Syria, Iran, and Afghanistan, before lightening gradually in India," explains Jeffrey Eugenides in *Middlesex*.<sup>28</sup> Focusing on the Hair Belt, instead of women of color exclusively, allowed me to explore participants common experiences with their relationships to facial and body hair, regardless of skin tone.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*. (London: Fourth Estate, 2013) 181-83.

<sup>29</sup> As a biracial woman, with both of my parents' ethnicities hailing from the Hair Belt, I wanted to know about other women from the Hair Belt and their relationship with body and facial hair.

## **Process and Methodology**

I began my Spring Project by interviewing students and professors at the Claremont Colleges who identify as female and ethnically from the areas of the hair belt.

I asked each participant a series of questions: (1) Have you ever been or do you currently feel self-conscious about your body or facial hair? (2) How has your ethnicity impacted your perceptions about body or facial hair? (3) How have the Claremont Colleges impacted your perceptions about body or facial hair? (4) How has the media impacted your thoughts on body or facial hair? (5) Do you remove your body or facial hair? Why or why not? After each interview I photographed each participant. I used these interviews to design representational portraits of each participant in Adobe Illustrator. The color of each 8x8 inch portrait matches the skin tone of the participant. I achieved this by uploading each individual's photography to Adobe Kuler and creating a unique swatch. I decided to combine these individual portraits into a physical quilt. The designs for the front of the quilt consisted of unshaven body and facial features, such as lips, legs, arms, eyebrows, toes, and genitalia. The designs were then uploaded to Spoonflower.com and printed onto cotton fabric. Additionally, I printed a quote from each interview, that corresponded with a design, on 8x8 inch squares for the back of my quilt. I chose to incorporate quotes from participants in my work to give them a voice, but also allow their identities to remain anonymous. The quotes mentioned stereotypes, conversations with other women in their families, and societal pressure and expectations. Lastly, my piece was stuffed with head hair. I chose to stuff the quilt with head hair, instead of cotton or wool batting, because I wanted to address the juxtaposition between body and head hair and how they are valued differently by Western society. For example, women are praised for having long, thick, head hair, but expected to have hairless bodies. Furthermore, wigs made from human hair are often constructed from

women of the Hair Belt. I sourced the head hair for my piece from a local salon in Claremont and from a student at Scripps College, who ethnically identified as being from the Hair Belt.

After each piece was stuffed, I finalized the layout of the quilt. Since I had nine designs in total I created a three by three grid layout. I decided the placement of each square based on an exquisite corpse design. For example, designs with facial features were placed at the top, while portraits of legs and toes were placed at the bottom of the piece. Once this was finalized, I used small gold safety pins to pin each square together. I chose to use safety pins instead of stitching each piece together because this allows the layout of the quilt to change and makes it easy to add future participants to the work. I decided to hang my work from the ceiling, at eye level, in the Kallick Gallery to allow viewers to see the front and back of the quilt. I also had spotlights installed in the gallery on both sides of my work to illuminate the hair inside the quilt.

### **Influential Artists**

This semester I drew upon the work of Faith Ringgold and Sonya Clark for artistic inspiration. Faith Ringgold is an African American artist known for her narrative quilts. The history of quilting is deeply rooted in slavery in the United States. Quilts served several purpose for African American slaves; warmth, storytelling, and preservation of culture. Limited resources also necessitated the recycling of patches of worn out clothes. Traditionally crafted by women, some quilts even depicted the Underground Railroad to guide slaves to freedom. Although Faith Ringgold studied painting at New York City's College, she began experimenting with quilting and sewing during the Pattern and Decoration Movement in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> Her work, which often is a hybrid of painting and quilting, addresses issues of race and gender in America. Faith

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<sup>30</sup> Nancy Doyle, "Artist Profile – Faith Ringgold, African-American Painter of Story Quilts." *Nancy Doyle Fine Art*. 1.

Ringgold's *Change: Faith Ringgold's Over 100 Pound Weight Loss Performance Story Quilt*, (1988) is a series of three quilts depicting her relationship with her body and weight-loss goals. Ringgold used a mixture of photographic and painted self portraits for each quilt. Although the series empowered Ringgold to transform her body and lose weight, it also exemplified the pressure women feel to conform to societal beauty standards. "With this quilt Ringgold visually records the progressive transformation of a woman from what she is expected to be to what she wants to be. The weight gain is part of that struggle and a response to the stress and pressures of conflicting demands and expectations," Mindible explains in *American Shame: Stigma and the Body Politic*.<sup>31</sup> Similar to Ringgold, my work examines societal pressures women experience; however, my work examines women's relationship to facial and body hair instead of weight. Although I used several participants in my work, one of the designs is based on my own experience and relationship with body hair. I chose to transform my designs into a quilt because I wanted my work to tell a story and show the commonality in participants' experiences, even though they hail from different backgrounds. Sonya Clark is an African American artist who uses hair as her medium to express Black identity and history. "Hair is power. Note the Samson myth, Rastafarian dreadlocks, and Angela Davis's Afro of the 1960s. It grows approximately 5 inches a year and measures our lives like Lachesis of the Three Fates in Greek mythology. As carrier of DNA, hair holds the essence of identity. Deep within each strand, the vestiges of our roots resound," Clark explains on her website.<sup>32</sup> Clark's multiple works of art made from human hair inspired me to stuff my piece with real human hair instead of fabric or string.

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<sup>31</sup> Myra Mendible, "Dieting for the Sake of Art: Eleanor Antin, Rachel Rosenthal and Faith Ringgold." *American Shame: Stigma and the Body Politic*. (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana, 2016) 263.

<sup>32</sup> "Sonya Clark." *Sonya Clark Hair Medium*.

## Reflection

At the beginning of the semester I wanted the quilt to be larger in scale; however, with the limited time and resources I had, my piece ended up being 25x25 inches in size. I wish the quilt were larger because I think it would be more impactful on viewers; however, this is a project that I can and intend to add onto in the future. I also was unable to embroider the quotes in the back of the work; however, I think having the quotes simply printed on the back made the hair inside of the piece more visible. The most difficult part of my piece was evenly stuffing each square because the two types of head hair I used were very different. The hair from the salon was thin and straight, while the hair I received from a student was thick and curly. In order to overcome this dilemma, I sewed three sides of each square and stuffed them at the same time before closing each of them. I mixed the two types of hair together to make each square approximately the same thickness. Overall, I believe my work successfully discussed relational experiences with body hair, amongst women of different races. This project tested my ability to adapt as an artist and to think critically about media and how it impacts our daily lives. I look forward to expanding upon my work in the future and hearing viewers' and participants' thoughts on my piece during the Senior exhibition.

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