



thomas
feulmer

bryan
florentin

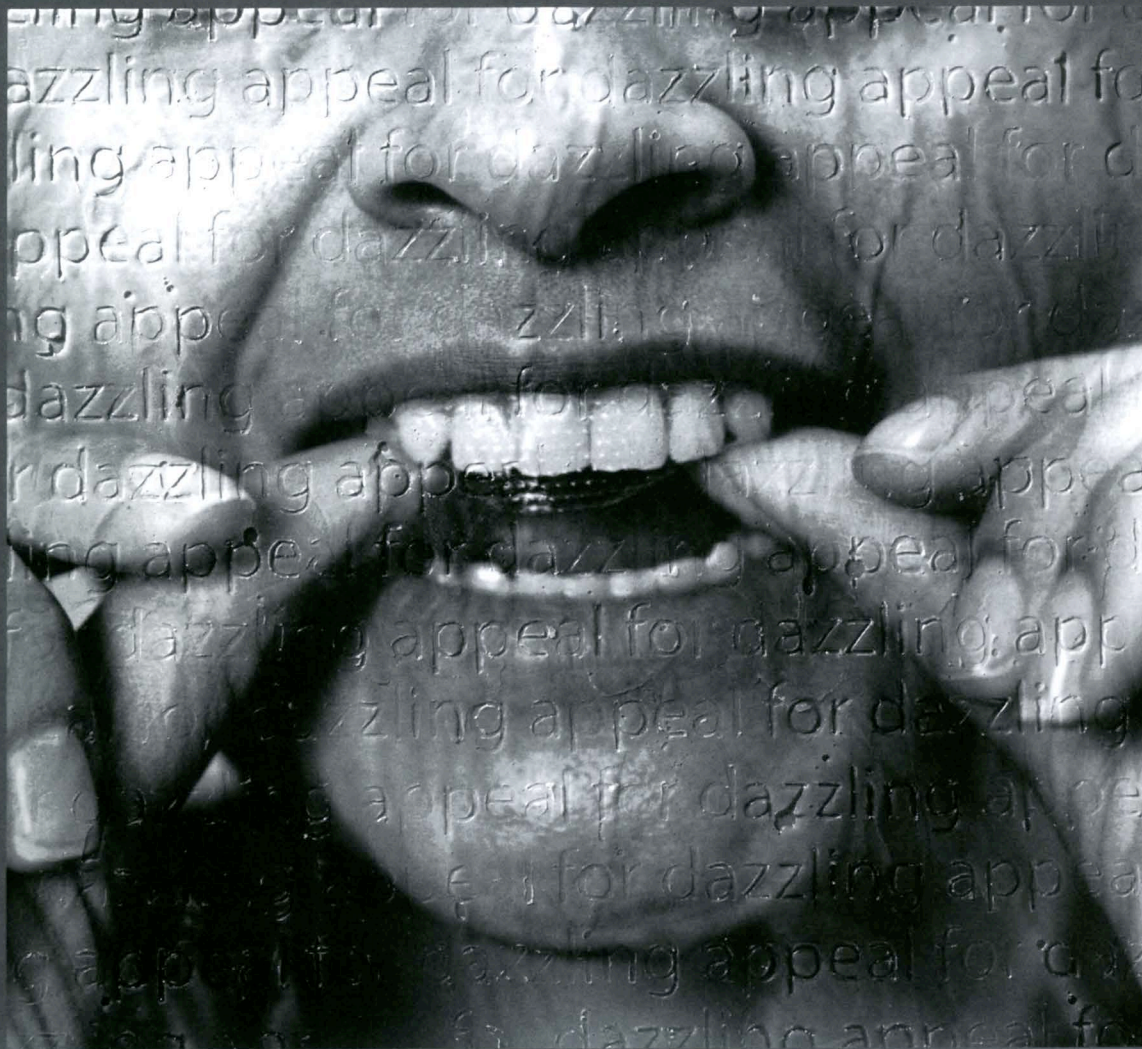
morgan
m. ford

simeen
ishaque

christi
nielsen

<body text = “gender”>

curated by: Marilyn Waligore

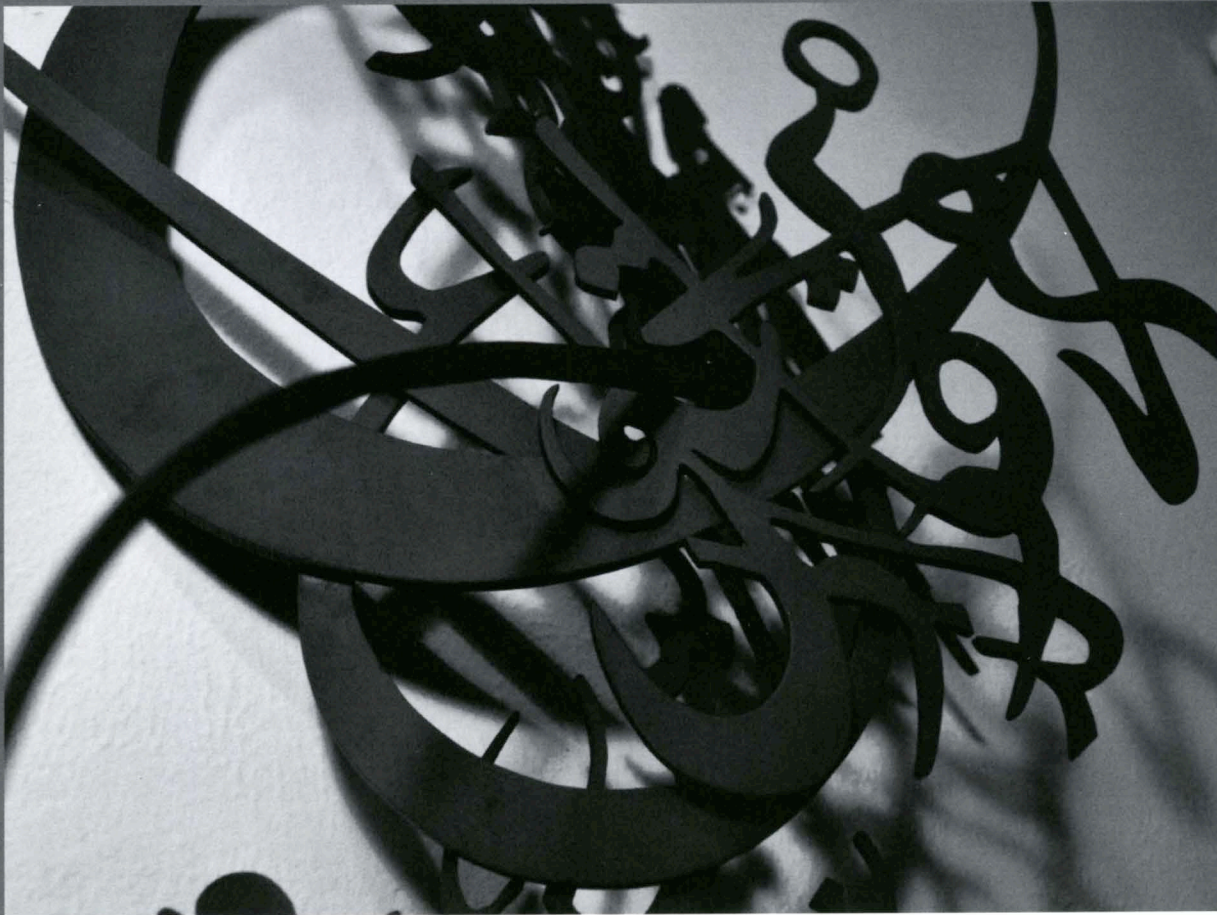


<body text = "gender">, an exhibition curated by UT Dallas Professor Marilyn Waligore, includes work by artists **Thomas Feulmer**, **Bryan Florentin**, **Morgan M. Ford**, **Simeen Ishaque** and **Christi Nielsen**. These five artists explore the representation of the body, as well as cultural attitudes toward the body, gender and sexuality: they are engaged in critical reflection, often referencing the body through its absence; they mine codes and conventions, like unspoken social rules, that inform relationships between gender and language in contemporary culture; and, they address the influences of mediated imagery and consumerism. The exhibition title format is borrowed from HTML, Hyper Text Markup Language, the invisible, underlying programming code for the web, to parallel the unseen and unrecognized messages that guide social behaviors and interactions.

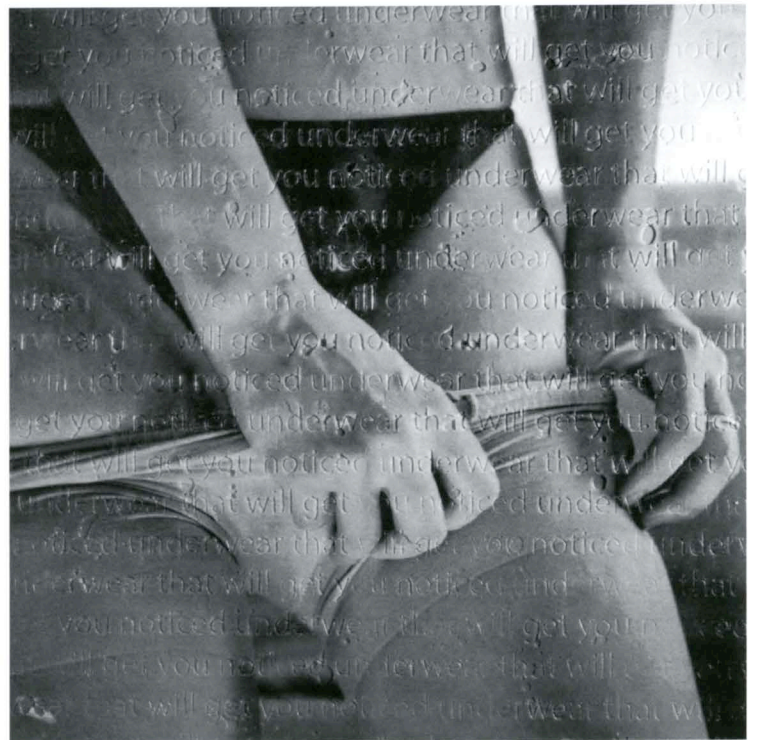
Morgan M. Ford overlays text appropriated from advertising copy onto photographs of women engaged in daily beauty rituals. The tight cropping of the body prioritizes activities that transform the mouth, eyes, teeth, hair, as well as legs and thighs. This framing compartmentalizes the attributes of the individual, to emphasize appearance over identity. Ford comments on beauty standards, and resulting acts of consumerism, which are reinforced by media representations, "The text is appropriated from advertisements from popular women's magazines, and is difficult to read unless

the viewer approaches the piece to investigate. This signifies how the linguistics of advertising, often, subconsciously attempts to persuade women to buy these products."¹ The repetitive refrain, "for dazzling appeal" – in a work with the same title – is juxtaposed with the image of a woman applying a product to obtain "dazzling" white teeth. The straightforward framing resembles a medical photograph, and borders on the grotesque. The patterning of the textured lines interrupts the smooth, glossy surface of the print, while the text itself references advertising slogans that function as appellation, inciting the consumer to spend. The artist believes that women feel pressured to purchase beauty products, an activity required for admission into a society to which they already belong.² In *It is Estimated*, Ford highlights the global expansion of the beauty industry, as measured in terms of GDP, gross domestic product. As young women compare themselves to the glamour of the celebrity, a possible conclusion is one of personal inadequacy, which can be ameliorated through the purchases of products such as cosmetics. Ford borrows artist strategies from Barbara Kruger, who matches stock images with revised slogans. Ford's figures are not models, but they adopt stereotypical poses. The resulting awkwardness, rendered in black and white and embalmed in wax, contrasts the ubiquitous fullcolor displays of the body in mass media. Ford's images resemble more of a personal confrontation with a mirror than the airbrushed entreaty of a Hollywood starlet.

Simeen Ishaque, *Text Inspired Wood Sculpture*, 2008, wood



Simeen Ishaque's calligraphic markings in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, become three-dimensional. Her sculptural form represents Judith beheading Holofernes, while alluding to the role of women in Middle Eastern societies. Ishaque recalls a work by the 17th Century painter Artemisia Gentileschi, which portrays a Jewish heroine as she decapitates a general. As Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have noted, "What is particular is the prominence Gentileschi gave to the figure of Judith, portraying her as a powerful and decisive woman bravely defending herself, liberating her people, fully capable of an act of carefully planned violence."³



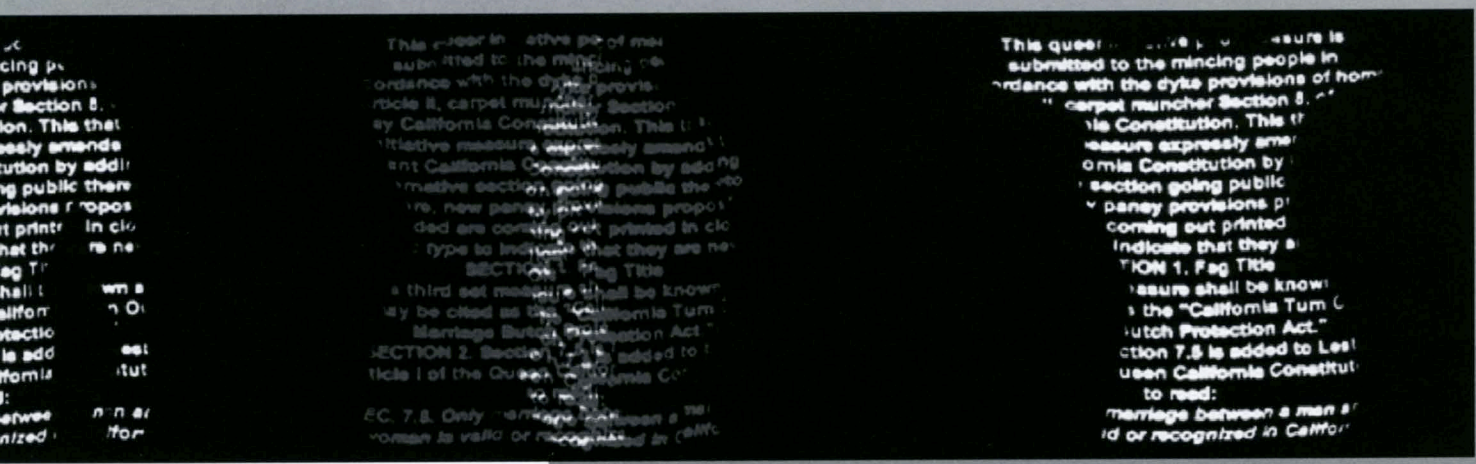
Morgan M. Ford, *Underwear That Will Get You Noticed 2*, 2008, 24" x 24", Lambda Print & Beeswax.



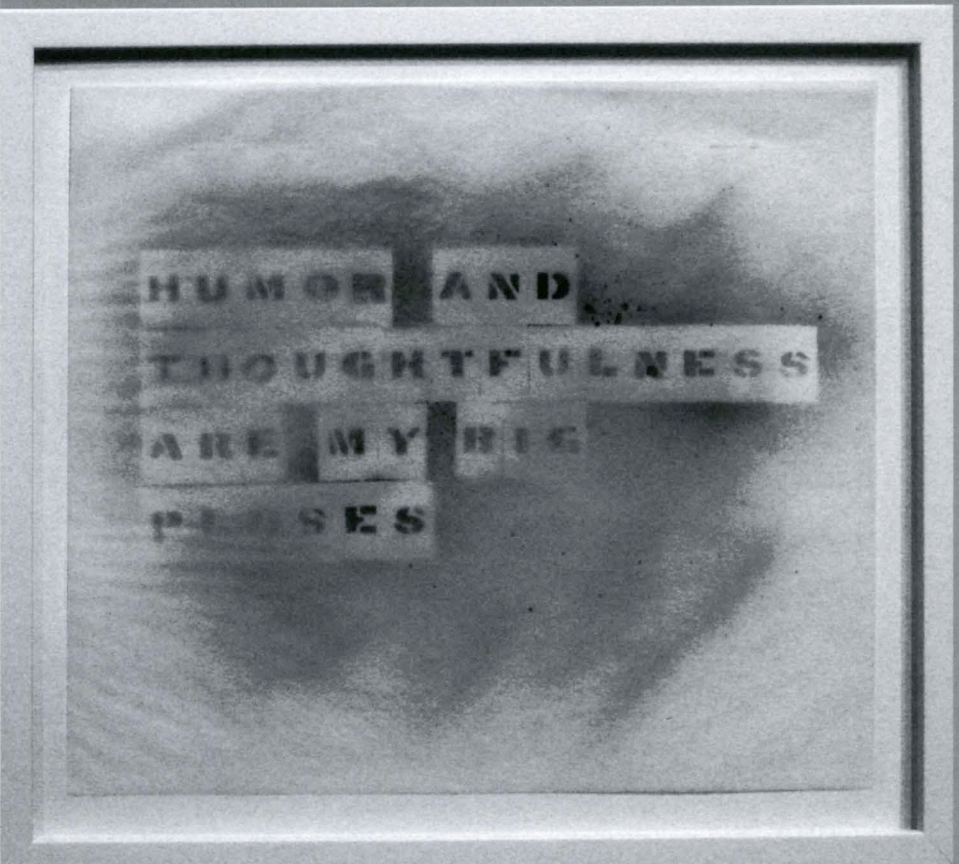
In Ishaque's representation of Judith, the female figure remains dominant, while only the bearded head of Holofernes remains. For Ishaque, the depiction of the female as active, rather than passive, as verbal rather than silent, demonstrates her re-visioning of the female form. Ishaque explores methods to represent the body in its absence, through inclusion of the veil, and wrappings of loose garments, which frame the spilling forth of language. The human figure is transformed by this expressive force, rendered through lyrical interpretations of the poetry of "Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Mirza Ghalib, both of whom powerfully wrote about freedom of thought and speech."⁴ As the viewer encounters Ishaque's Judith, the transparent, open body hovers, like text floating on a page. This visualization of language alludes to the internal self, acknowledging what one is trying to say, from the inside, rather than emphasizing the physical self. For Ishaque, the transformation of ideas into drawings, lines that form bodies, represents the fusing of body and mind, body and spirit.

Christi Nielsen's video, informed by online feedback from her blog and from social networking websites, appropriates text from California's recent Proposition 8 vote. She revises the definition of marriage, as outlined in state documents, to ask questions regarding the body, sexuality and the law. An undulating female figure, defined by a silhouette, resembles an animated gif, like an online enticement linked to a porn website. Upon inspection, the text contained by the body reveals fragments of California's legal definition of marriage, which the artist has stolen, edited and recontextualized. Language of the gay community—dyke, pansy, queen, butch—stand in as substitutions for institutional legalese. The dry text of the legislature becomes subverted—and inverted, as white text on a black background—to pose questions regarding how one defines "normal" unions. The representation of sexuality, symbolized by the outline of the female cabaret dancer, calls out to the heterosexual male viewer, but the language of seduction has been replaced with the institutions of law. The resulting image-text juxtaposition confounds interpretation, suggesting that this dialogue regarding marriage and sexuality is more nuanced than black and white.

Bryan Florentin's appropriation of wedding photographs results in a deconstruction of these conventional documents, underscoring the societal codes and human aspirations displayed in these images. The wedding album represents an image collection that portrays a tradition often informed by heterosexual norms. The throwing of the bouquet, *Custom (Photograph) #1*, 2009, represents the handing down of a tradition, as the recipient of the bouquet is intended to become part of the next union. Florentin erases the reason for the gathering of women, following a visual strategy practiced by John Baldessari, to underscore the arrangement of figures. Their gestures, as they now reach for an empty sky, denote their intentions. In *Custom (Photograph) #3*, Florentin's presentation of a wedding party turned upside down indirectly references the embrace of the marriage ceremony by same-sex couples by challenging the typical depiction of bride and groom. By inverting the image, the array of figures becomes a pattern rather than the documentation of a ritual. Staccato notes of white high-heeled shoes dot the picture plane from the left, continuing with the white buttonnieres on the right. Florentin uses image fragments like language, building meaning through repetition, sequencing, and in some cases, omission. Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* portrayed a bride and her bachelors, and Florentin revisits that subject matter, with his own interpretation of the social/sexual apparatus involved in human coupling. His installation *Archive (temporary)* from 2008-9, comprised of approximately 20 photographs and a metal bed frame, alludes to the relationship between our identity and sexual preference. In a set of photographs, the mattress serves as understudy for the missing body; an autopsy reveals its steel core. The sequence of fragmented images of the sensory organs and orifices, eye, ear, mouth, genitals, are all framed through the metal coils of the mattress. Florentin states, "The piece uses beds to connote a corporal quality... and proposes that memory, especially memory of a lover's physicality, is accumulated and stored there. The allusion to autopsy (y-incision) suggests a way to retrieve and examine those memories..."⁵ As in the work of artist Felix Gonzales-Torres, the body is referenced through its absence.



Thomas Feulmer collects online personal ads. Spray paint and stencils transform the letterforms; the ad copy resembles the impromptu signage of the street—albeit with a sprinkling of pinks and pastels. Feulmer's selection of want ads reveals humor and irony, as a long list of preferred personal attributes becomes undercut by the disclaimer "but not requirements." For the artist, this undercutting appears "where the men envision their perfect lover...so it hints at a kind of longing or awareness"⁶ that the individual's fantasy of finding an ideal mate will not be achieved. As Feulmer accumulates listings of "pluses" and "minuses," the viewer may consider their own physical attributes and flaws, as well as preferences. These ads reveal ideals from the perspective of a gay subculture, while they also illustrate our shared need for human connection. Body-building magazines represent similar source material for exploring the development of desire through media. Photographs of hyper-masculine male bodies in Schwarzenegger form are negotiated and recontextualized through the addition of text, to reveal their homoerotic quality. Feulmer's work examines the nature of desire, our need for intimacy, and definitions of gender and sexuality.




Thomas Feulmer, *Online Personal Ad (HUMOR AND...)*, 2008
 spray paint on tracing paper, framed,
 17 x 20 inches, Courtesy Marty Walker Gallery

Together these five artists reflect on contemporary attitudes toward gender and sexuality, while embracing connections between images and language. As Amelia Jones has stated, "Body art practices solicit rather than distance the spectator, drawing her or him into the work of art as an intersubjective exchange."⁷ Jones observes that interpretation can be viewed as an exchange, between artist and viewer, affirming the viewer's own embodied experience. These works, involving text, video, photography and installation, all strive to engage the viewer, often pulling from and revising methods found in mass media to achieve that goal.

— Marilyn Waligore, 2009



Bryan Florentin,
Archive (Temporary),
2008-9
installation (detail),
mixed media, dimensions
variable



TALL. MUSCULAR.
HAIRY. 35+.
REDHEADS.
BLONDES. S&P.
X&HUNG ARE ALL
PLUSSES (BUT NOT
REQUIREMENTS)!

¹ Morgan M. Ford, Artist's statement, 2009

² Ford

³ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981. p. 21.

⁴ Simeen Ishaque. Artist's Statement. Homepage. Oct. 2, 2009
<http://simeenishaque.squarespace.com/artists-statement>

⁵ Bryan Florentin, email to the author, Jun. 14, 2009

⁶ Thomas Feulmer, email to the author, Jun. 4, 2009

⁷ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1998. p.31



Artist Talk: Simeen Ishaque

Thur., Nov. 5, 1:30 p.m., Visual Arts Building, room 1.105

Reception: Fri., Oct. 30, 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.

October 30 – November 28, 2009

The University of Texas at Dallas
Visual Arts Building, Main Gallery

Gallery Hours: Mon. – Fri., 9 a.m. – 10 p.m.; Sat., 9 a.m. – 6 p.m.; Sun. closed.

cover images:

Bryan Florentin (above)
Custom (Photograph) #1
2009, 12" x 15", giclee print

Simeen Ishaque (front)
Body Language, 2008, wood,
fabric, thread

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