Tipping Point

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Tipping Point
by Pang Zong Vang

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Acknowledgements

To the four people who have kept me sane: Alee, Kang Zoua, Kong and, most of all,

Kuv Nam.
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From ancient times to the present, the male fear of the female unknown has been conceptualized as the *vagina dentata*, and perpetuated in folklore across the world. Tales warned men of the dangers of the vagina before its teeth were pulled, lest it shred the phallus and testicles away.\(^{1}\)

In one such story from Uttar Pradesh, a wealthy landlord engages the help of men from various castes in disarming the *vagina dentata* of a beautiful maiden. Eventually and with great effort, the men were able to extract the teeth using a flint and tongs, making the girl marriageable to the wealthy landlord.\(^{2}\) This long-lived motif of disarming the vagina-with-teeth may be viewed as a folkloric manifestation of rape culture.

“In an elevator with beautiful Asian women, with wine in hand. How could it get any better?” said one white European man to the other. The other two Asian women, clearly international students, exchanged anxious looks before getting off abruptly at the next floor. Alone with the men, red Solo cups in their hands, I took out my phone and called my best friend.

“What do you think she’s saying?” the man with the sagging face joked to his friend.

“She’s saying: We can touch her breasts. That we can do whatever we want with her body,” the other replied, as they swayed closer to my corner of the elevator. In those few minutes I was alone with them in the Hunter MFA elevator I had switched from perfect English to Hmong to make it known to my friend that I felt unsafe. This memory serves as the first of many instances in which I was sexualized and racially exoticized since moving to New York City.\(^{3}\)

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\(^{3}\) In March 2014 I attended Hunter Open Studios while visiting New York City for my graduate admissions interview for a position in their Combined Media program. This incident occurred as I was leaving the building to return to my hotel for the night. I was so shaken I did not go out by myself after dark for the remainder of my trip.
A long-standing tradition in the West, the exoticized and hypersexualized Asian woman is a stereotype perpetuated by all types of media and, in particular, pornography. “Asian women appear on screen as dragon ladies and prostitutes with hearts of gold, and they perform a particular sexual role as fantastic figures in American cinema,” Professor Celine Parreñas Shimizu argues in her article Sex Acts: Two Meditations on Race and Sexuality. These performed types can be broken into three groups: 1) the Dragon Lady, 2) the butterfly with the heart of gold, and 3) the dominatrix.4

Actress Lucy Liu represents an example of the Dragon Lady type through roles in such media as Ling Woo in the television series Ally McBeal; severe and career-driven, Ling Woo is so domineering that she appears almost villainous. In the series Ling Woo utilizes her sexuality to conquer and destroy, perpetuating the Dragon Lady type.5 Anna May Wong, one of the first Asian American actresses to reach some level of stardom, illustrated the butterfly with the heart of gold in her first leading role in the silent film The Toll of the Sea (1922). In the film, her character Lotus Flower rescues an American white man and bears him a child in a storyline that echoes Madame Butterfly. In the end Lotus Blossom gives her biracial son to her husband, who has returned and is now married to a white woman, and commits suicide by drowning in the sea.6 Through such a sacrifice, Lotus Flower knowingly whitewashes her child so that he can live a life of white privilege. In Payback (1999) Liu plays Pearl, a mafia hit woman and sadistic dominatrix, a character that solidifies the connection between the lethal and sexualized Asian woman; subsequent roles such as

4 Celine Parreñas Shimizu and Helen Lee, Two Meditations on Race and Sexuality (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004).
O-Ren Ishii in the *Kill Bill* film series by Quentin Tarantino further establishes this paradigm. This pairing of stereotypes—the demure subservient Asian woman with the lethal femme fatale—I am knowingly navigating in the image making and self-representation in my work.

My imagery seeks to subvert any notion of submissiveness and victimization. By brandishing my own weapon, I create a sense of visceral fear in the audience, among whom there are no doubt perpetrators of sexual violence. In my work I seek to question this slippage of power, domination/submission and agency, and to complicate the conventional understanding of victim narratives. In tandem with my own journey of recovery from sexual trauma, my current works act not only as record of but also as evidence of the struggle of agency and power in a body that has been violated. Rather than art-as-therapy, my work functions as protest imagery, illustrating the tipping point for a woman of color living in an oppressive patriarchal society. My current works explore themes of fantastical delicious revenge upon my oppressors: my rapist, my catcallers, and the probing male gaze.

One night my elder siblings had stayed out too late for my father’s liking. Rifle cocked, he sat fuming at the door, awaiting their arrival home. As a toddler, I was too young to remember, but my mother told the story so often it became my own memory. How she shrieked out for them to run for their lives as they stepped onto our front porch. How my sister hid inside my father’s boat in the garage. How my brother hid for the entire night in the bushes bordering our neighbor’s backyard. How my mother took me by the hand and walked all the way to my uncle’s house, begging him to convince my father not to kill us that night. And later, how she bundled up all the knives we had in the house and hid them so we could sleep without fear our father would kill us during the night.

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During my childhood, kitchen knives were both everyday implements used in cooking and instruments with the potential to harm us. While my father never actually stabbed any of his children, we were often intimidated by the sound and sight of him running the household blades across the surface of a cutting stone “just because they were dull.” In my work, I claim the kitchen knife as an image of my power by showing it as a literal and metaphorical threat to patriarchy.

*Pussy with Blade* (Image 1) alludes to the *vagina dentata* motif through the emergence of a kitchen knife between the thighs of the dark figure who seems to tower over the viewer. The female figure is posed over an indiscernible stain, adding to the dramatic inference of violence made present by her blade. Her posture is active and alert, as if she is ready to pounce. Furthermore, she appears oblivious to the presence of the camera. The camera bears witness — in the same way the audience/camera functions in Ana Mendieta’s *Rape Scene, 1973* (Image 2). Both women are bent over, with legs split. Their faces [and identities] obscured by their pose, allowing them to function as an everywoman. In Mendieta’s scene the artist casts herself as passive victim. In *Pussy with Blade* (Image 1) the woman emerges with agency, becoming an avenger, enactor of violence or vigilante.
1. Pang Zong Vang, *Pussy with blade*, photographic print, 44”x 66”, 2017

2. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, photograph, colour on paper, 1973
The focus of the camera upon back corner, combined with the blur of the kitchen blade only adds to the sense of the blade in motion, a sharp, steel phallic extension of the woman’s body. Shown the moment that violence appears imminent, the audience is asked to construct their own narrative.

*Pussy with Blade* references and critiques the work of female performance artists who use their bodies as objects to be acted upon both by audience and by the artist herself. To cut and to be cut — either by oneself or by others — bestows immense power on the performer through the inversion of agency. Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (Image 3), performed between 1964-1966, challenged individuals from the audience to exercise power upon the female body. By allowing audience members to cut away at her clothing, Ono made her body vulnerable through a literal stripping away, while simultaneously reclaiming her own identity through the “ceremony” enacted upon her. She, as an Asian woman at the hands of a white crowd, is disrobed and made vulnerable through each piece that is cut away. In this work Ono reveals the violence enacted upon the ever-enduring subservient Asian woman. By surrendering her body to the mercy of the crowd, Ono implicates the audience, forcing an awareness of their own abuse of power.
Cutting oneself becomes a feat of endurance in Marina Abramovic’s *Rhythm 10* (Images 4 and 5), performed initially in Edinburgh in 1973. Cycling through ten different types of knives (including kitchen knives), Abramovic recorded herself repeatedly stabbing the areas between her fingers on her outstretched left hand. As she does so, the cassette replays the rhythmic sounds of the blades hitting the table while another tape player records vents in real time. For a total of twenty eight times Abramovic attempts to land her stabs in the exact same place between her fingers. In doing so the artist repeatedly cuts the same areas on her hands while the rest of her body remains static throughout. In *Rhythm 0* (Image 6) Abramovic puts herself at the mercy of her audience for six hours, presenting her body as an entity to be acted upon with an array of seventy-two objects. A text presented alongside the available objects absolved the audience of any liability or guilt. Objects

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presented for use included: a pen, scissors, chains, an axe, a gun, a bullet, a Polaroid camera, a
bandage, a feather, olive oil, Sulphur, wire, perfume and a whip. She endured disrobing, kissing,
fondling, a head wound, rose thorns pressed into her belly, and a loaded gun pressed to her head.
Only the intervention of another audience member prevented her from getting shot.


*Untitled* (Image 7) implicates viewers in a similar manner. The kitchen blade dangles from the top of the image and seems to hover just above the viewer’s head. Its reflective surface draws attention to the rough, matted human hair where a handle should be. Recalling a ritual object, the kitchen blade is made frightening and even grotesque by the addition of hair, a part of the body that remains mysterious because it can only be touched or “known” through intimacy. The art object functions as a powerful amulet recalling both the feminine and the mundane, a dangled threat of *if this, then that*. The function of the kitchen knife as an everyday object becomes problematized by the ineffectual, matted hairball cum handle. The audience imagines touching what should not be touched, complicating the initial narrative of object as perpetrator and implicating the audience reflexively.
7. Pang Zong Vang, *Untitled*, kitchen blade, hair of the artist and the artist’s mother, clear adhesive, translucent line, dimensions variable, 2016

The long, mangled hair that replaces the usual handle of the kitchen blade speaks to the feminine; its dark mass evokes depictions of the vengeful, long-haired female ghosts in Asian horror narratives. In the Thai film, *Shutter*, the ghost of a female student returns after her suicide to wreak vengeance upon her rapists, manifesting inside a dark room as a mass of dark hair emerging from the sink (see Image 8). Among her victims, her former lover who stood aside and photographed her rape at the hands of his friends. Across cultures and religions female hair is regarded as a signifier of the potency of female sexuality and power. In fact, it’s so potent that observant Muslim women cover theirs with a hijab and Hasidic women must shave their head when they marry.
At a recent concert I attended, the metal band dedicated their last song to Satan and the female orgasm. Female sexuality has long been demonized, associated with sin and temptation to desires of the flesh across religions and cultures. As such, the hair in both *Untitled* and in *Recoil* (Image 9) function as commentary upon female sexuality and sexual agency, simultaneously attractive and repellant as a juxtaposition of parts and pieces. Recognizable perhaps as tools of a sort, *Recoil* and *Untitled* present implements capable of threatening and/or enabling the viewer. *Recoil*, more directly than *Untitled* pulls literal visual cues from sex toys: a whip constructed from a human braid and a silicone-coated kitchen knife handle. The coated handle of *Recoil* converts its “function” into an overt implementation for penetration. In this work hair takes on a more sensual role, recalling the feeling of hair grazing the skin rather than the sting of a whip. Pain and pleasure are both only a crack away.

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10 In early August I saw the Swedish metal band *Ghost* in Minneapolis, Minnesota; they are a satiric “satanic” band that is largely performative and ritualistic in the name of theatre more than of actual Satanic beliefs, and are incredibly cognizant in communicating that all women should be respected in their audience--more specifically calling for no sexual harassment and/or fondling during their concerts.
9. Pang Zong Vang, *Recall*, artist’s own hair, kitchen knife handle, sex toy-grade silicone, adhesive, approximately 7.5” in length, 2017

*Quid Pro Quo* and *Selfie* (see Images 10 and 11) operate in the tandem with the suspended works to confront the viewer with full-frontal perspectives of a woman wielding a kitchen blade in lieu of a strap on. In *Quid Pro Quo* her body is stretched out and vulnerable, a soft focus visual that serves as foil to the possibility of violence that unfolds as the viewer registers that a knife has replaced a usual dildo inside the leather strap-on. Dark shadows and reflections from the metal blade are cast upon the soft-bellied female form.

11. Pang Zong Vang, *Selfie*, Archival photographic print, 30”x 33”, 2017
In stark contrast *Selfie* (Image 11), less than a third the size of *Quid Pro Quo*, reveals the artist as the bearer of this weapon. Utilizing the visual conventions of selfies (in particular the “dick picture” culture), I subvert this pervasive means of harassment. Over the years *my* desire is to awaken a similar fear in others, especially my male oppressors. *Selfie* also addresses the power differential between images of women knowingly and intentionally taken and circulated versus those circulated through means of manipulation and harassment, as in revenge porn. In the practice of revenge porn, former partners of the woman/women circulate intimate photographs of the woman/women as a means of taking revenge for various petty reasons. Through self-representation and self-presentation I am subverting this dynamic of the woman as a sexual object and taking back the power. I am the actor, rather than an entity acted upon. Black and white posters of *Selfie* (see Installation view detail 4), presented as takeaways, further underscored this self-representation and confrontation with the viewer through its offering of an image laden with uncomfortable content.

The photographs and sculptures use intense imagery and the threat of aggression to captivate the eye and emotions of the viewer. My drawings, on the other hand, function as a comedic foil to these themes of retribution and vendetta. They portray a fantastic, alternative pre-history during which blind phallosauruses terrorized womankind, and were killed off by a race of identical, strap-on-wearing Pang Zong Vangs. Dinosaurs, specifically brachiosaurus, first appeared in my work as a signifier of both a specific moment of trauma in my childhood, as well as a signifier of patriarchy and oppression.

*Extinction* (Image 12) chronicles the death of the last of phallosauruses, as two of my clones keep watch, dildos at attention. Through the destruction of the last of this species they take on their power, their knife dildos replaced with phallosaurus-headed dildos to signify the beginning of a new
era of peace. *Armed Women Encountering a Pack of Blind phallosaurus*es (Image 13) captures the moment of first encounter, immediately before the fray. The women, strap-ons at the ready, are armed to the teeth as they happen upon this group of phallosaurus/es. Blind to the approach of the women, but sensing their presence through their sense of smell, the phallosaurus/es turn their heads in search of the hunters.


*Beheading* (Image 14) and *Gutting* (Image 15) further continue this exploration of revenge and violence in an exploration of fantasy in an unspecified time. Visceral and visually arresting, these illustrations of femme violence recall work such as *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (Image 16) by Artemisia Gentileschi. In this painting Judith, with the assistance of her handmaiden, is in the midst of beheading her enemy Holofernes, after having seduced him. Gentileschi chose to capture, mid-action, the exact moment in which the blood began spraying. Judith has long served as an archetype of the femme fatale, crossing enemy lines and using her beauty as a means of defeating her enemy.

15. Pang Zong Vang, *Gutting*, gouache on paper, 8”x 12”, 2017
In contrast to Gentileschi’s chiaroscuro in *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, the war between my clones and the phallosauruses in my drawings is rendered without a specified context on blank white paper. Using gouache furthers this flatness of space and form. This contrast between flatness and the unreal, against the actuality of depictions of violent acts of dismemberment, add an additional layer of dark comedy to the works collectively. The scale and size of *Beheading* and *Gutting* draws the viewer in closer for thorough examination, rather than the directly confrontational scale of the photographic works *Pussy With Blade* (Image 1) and *Selfie* (Image 11).
The sculptural piece *Entry Wound* (Image 12) evokes a sexual toy such as a “pussy in a pouch” with its slit that doubles both as wound and orifice. Stubbles of hair emerge from the skin-like surface, growing in density towards the slit/wound. The insertion of human hair insinuates the sexual undertones of the work and further heightens the sensation that the viewer’s gaze is invasive as her/his eyes rove over the work. As a material, silicone has some resemblance to skin or a body, and *Entry Wound*’s intimate scale-- in contrast to that of *Pussy with blade* and *Quid Pro Quo*--furthers the voyeuristic encounter. Violence pierces the body through the making of an entry where one never existed. An act of violence forces a passage through the body, leaving physical, emotional and metaphorical scar tissue with its path. Made at a hand-held scale, *Entry Wound* straddles the realm of possibility between a sex toy and palimpsest of violence and/or pleasure. The initial idea and imagery emerged from visual research into what flesh looked like once stabbed: washed clean of blood the wound became an abstracted gape, both sexual and visually arresting. My work seeks to complicate the meaning of violence and its visual signifiers, through an investigation of how violence manifests inside and outside the body, as well as the evidence it leaves in its path.
In a similar vein, *Slab* (Image 13) and *Untitled (Cylinder)* (Image 14) act as the receptacles of pain and pleasure. *Slab*, more explicitly than *Entry wound* and *Cylinder*, displays evidence of violence with a larger gash. *Entry wound* and *Slab* function both as inanimate evidence of possible, as well as possibly once-alive receptacles of violence. These works were created with an intent to recall meat and the body, whereupon what is normal and what is not is ambiguous to the viewer. In that regard, these works normalize the wounds/orifices through the [visual] “washing away of the blood.” *Cylinder* is decidedly an inanimate receptacle, whether of pain or pleasure, through its scale and form; cast into an artificially-perfect form it lifts as many visual quotations from votive candle to the Madonna, as it does Fleshlights (masturbatory tools for men shaped in tubes with various textured interiors). Made by embedding two knives into its mold as the silicone cured, *Cylinder* more subtly explores the concept of continued victimhood and self-masturbation through its obscured function.
as both a holder of blades as well as possible masturbation tool. In this work I explore the edges to the definition of victimhood [both self-made and experienced] and the role it plays in complicating the relation to one’s own body and one’s own desire. After experiencing sexual assault my preferences with partners shifted; where once I desired loving arms I now wanted aggression. I could not ignore this shift in desire.

13. Pang Zong Vang, Slab, bodysafe-grade silicone, artist’s own hair, 4.5” x 6”, 2017
As a body of work these objects, photographs and drawings do not explicitly decry my experience with violence, and more specifically sexual violence. Rather, they function outside of the prescribed narrative of victim and perpetrator. My goal in making these works is to problematize the stereotypical relationship between victim and predator and transform it into an alternative, more complex dynamic. When starting out this body of work, I saw the film *Elle* (Image 15), and was greatly impacted by how it complicated the victim/perpetrator/bystander relationship. Michèle, played by Isabelle Huppert, is raped and knowingly engages in rape-fantasy role playing with her rapist afterwards. Eventually Michèle sets up a death-by-proxy scenario in which her son kills her “attacker”. After experiencing sexual assault in my romantic relationship, my preferences in partners shifted; where once I desired loving arms, I now wanted aggression. I could not ignore this shift in desire. It is the blurred lines of consent/non-consent, agency/non-agency that I seek to evoke in this body of works.
2. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, Photograph, colour on paper, 1973
7. Pang Zong Vang, *Untitled*, kitchen blade, hair of the artist and the artist’s mother, clear adhesive, translucent line, dimensions variable, 2016
9. Pang Zong Vang, *Recoil*, artist’s own hair, kitchen knife handle, sex toy-grade silicone, adhesive, approximately 7.5” in length, 2017
11. Pang Zong Vang, *Selfie*, Archival photographic print, 30”x33”, 2017
15. Pang Zong Vang, *Gutting*, gouache on paper, 8”x 12”, 2017
16. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, Oil on canvas, 78.33” × 64.13”, 1614-20
17. National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples
18. Pang Zong Vang, *Entry wound*, bodysafe-grade silicone, artist’s own hair, 3.5”x 4”, 2017
19. Pang Zong Vang, *Slab*, bodysafe-grade silicone, artist’s own hair, 4.5”x 6”, 2017
20. Pang Zong Vang, *Untitled (Cylinder)*, bodysafe-grade silicone, artist’s own hair, 3”x 3"x 6.75”, 2017
Installation View

Hunter MFA Spring 2017 Thesis Exhibition-Part I
205 Hudson Street
April 20th-May 7th, 2017
Installation view 2

Installation view, (Untitled Cylinder), 2017
Installation view. *Disembowelment* and *Beheading*, both 2017

Installation view. *Recueil*, 2017
Installation view. *Selfie*, 2017, black and white print on gloss, edition of 750, 18”x 24”, 2017

Installation view. *Untitled*, 2017
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