

The Comparative Study: Work of Artist Barbara Kruger in Comparison to the Work of Melissa Lee Johnson

This Comparative Study focuses on analyzing two different artists, one international and one local, and a total of four different artworks. The context of these artworks will be assessed based on the Contemporary Movement. Barbara Kruger is the first artist who will be studied, followed by the Milwaukee area local artist, Melissa Lee Johnson. Both of these artists are inspirations to my work, in formal qualities as well as function, and material usage. This study will critique the culture of these works as well as the qualities of the principles of art and elements of design, determined by how well these help to deliver the overall message. These works will be critiqued against my own.

Barbara Kruger

Donald Trump

Date: 2016

Medium: Election Issue Cover

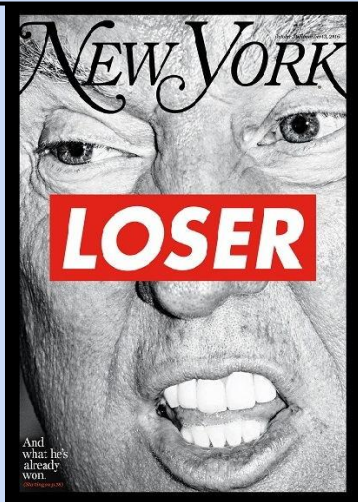
<http://nymag.com/press/2016/10/cover-donald-trump-by-barbara-kruger-for-the-election-issue.html>

As a recent example of her work, Barbara Kruger has taken an image of Donald Trump, and used a word that he is known to overuse in order to critique his position of power in America.

Evaluation of Cultural Significance of Barbara Kruger's artwork

Barbara Kruger is a contemporary silkscreen print artist who started creating her work in the 1960s. She creates work using popular images from the media and then layering these images with short and often sarcastic quotes. These short quotes are meant to critique popular ideas revolving around society, gender, politics, and beauty. Barbara Kruger's first work was first inspired by and during the era of "Reaganomics," which is the term coined to refer to the economic policies of former American president Ronald Reagan from 1981-1989. Her work is recognizable by the bold red and white texts and borders.

Much of Kruger's work is influenced by how she experiences being a woman, and is thus based off of principles of feminism and equality. She was born and raised in the United States, which has instilled ideas of freedom and equality into her work. Her work aims to highlight how pop culture manipulates the American population through the media. She includes sarcastic comments and messages about America's founding principles in her work in order to critique the structure of the society that she lives in, and dispute the "American Dream." She aims to encourage the questioning of societal rules and expectations by the viewer in her feminist artwork to critique these ideas. By creating a provocative body of work, Kruger attempts to draw debate regarding politics, and bring the questioning of authority into traditional art. The works that have been selected by Barbara Kruger are called *You Are Not Yourself* and *We Don't Need Another Hero*.



Artistic Style and Technique

- Screenprint artist
- Layers found images in her work from billboards, in books, magazines, and pop culture
- She aims to shock the viewer with sarcastic comments about beauty, gender, class, power, politics, and race
- Layers blocks of text that are usually red and white on top of black and white images



Barbara Kruger

We Don't Need Another Hero

Size: 277x533cm

Medium: Photographic Vinyl

Date: 1986

<http://collection.whitney.org/object/34103>

Interpretation of Function and Purpose- Barbara Kruger's *You Are Not Yourself*

- *You Are Not Yourself* depicts a girl crying in front of a broken mirror. This image gives this piece a very dramatic tone.
- While Kruger is known to layer bold red and white text on top of images, the text in this artwork is black and white. This gives unity to the image, and brings emphasis to the words through contrasting grey values.
- The contrasting values help to create atmosphere within the work through depth, which helps to build drama.
- The use of black and white images within Kruger's work may connect a viewer to earlier, or outdated times in history, when they are analyzed in the 21st century. For this reason, the message that her work gives may change as time passes. However, her work is somewhat timeless due to the subject-girls throughout history will always struggle with self-confidence.
- The woman's hand in front of the mirror helps to create unity by connecting the foreground (in front of the mirror) to the background (in the mirror).



Barbara Kruger

You are not yourself

Size: 182x121cm

Medium: photo collage

Date: 1981

http://www.skarstedt.com/exhibitions/2009-03-18_barbara-kruger/#/images/39/

- Asymmetrical balance is created in the piece through the reflections in the mirror. The cracks create varying degrees of reflection, which allows the viewer to see repeated slices of the woman's face.
- On the other hand, the words "You Are Not Yourself" look like they are cut out of a magazine, which gives the piece a layered or cartoon look, and lightens the tone of the image.
- The text in this work seems as though it just states "You Are Yourself", *until* one sees the smaller "Not." Barbara Kruger did this to symbolize how it may not be obvious how manipulative media can be within one's own life. This critiques how TV shows, movies, magazines, and social media all influence the way a consumer dresses, acts, and tries to look.
- The bullet hole, or gash in the middle of the mirror placed by the woman makes her seem like a monster. This piece perfectly captures a vulnerable point in time right after the character has become angry with her own appearance, and hit in the mirror in a moment of realization.

Interpretation of Function and Purpose- Barbara Kruger's *You Are Not Yourself*



-Barbara layers the words, "You Are Not Yourself" over the image of a mirror to critique self image, and the way that mass media runs our lives by encouraging us to have a certain appearance, buy certain things, and have certain interests. Through this work, she relays the message that there is really no such thing as uniqueness, but rather that humans have the natural tendency to copy what we see as cool, or "in trend." By layering this message on top of an image of a girl looking at herself, Kruger brings the viewer into a state of self-realization.

This piece of Kruger's work is timeless. Even though much of her work takes on the form of a black and white image (which may seem outdated), women struggle with the same issues during their teen years in every decade. Before the age of social media, young students were influenced by magazines and pop culture. Kruger creates work that will remain relevant to American culture forever.

-The cracked mirror implies that the girl has tried to smash her appearance, probably due to being upset or unsatisfied by how she looks. This creates an overly dramatic effect, which allows Kruger to critique the pressures put on girls from a very young age, such as looking, dressing, and acting a certain way. Kruger may use this image to reference negative self-image problems in many adolescents.



Barbara Kruger
You are not Yourself
Size: 182x121cm
Medium: photo collage
Date: 1981

Interpretation of Function and Purpose- Barbara Kruger's *We Don't Need Another Hero*

-Kruger brings the idea of mass media into her work by reproducing a billboard seen all over the UK

-A girl is shown admiring a boys muscles in awe of his masculine abilities and strength, which speaks to gender stereotypes, and traditional gender expectations

-The words: "we don't need another hero" critique the role and power of men and women in society

-The use of bold, contrasting red and white text and border, signal an urgent message evident in many of Kruger's works, or giving an emphasis to the power of the words on the picture



-The boy is shown to be trying very hard to please the girl by flexing his muscles, while the girl looks at only his arm. This representation can show us how focused we get on trying to fulfill our gender stereotypes, that at times we don't recognize that muscles or outer beauty, for example, aren't as important as the media makes them out to be. This also critiques the idea that men have to be "masculine" in order to attract a partner by being strong, for example.

Barbara Kruger
We Don't Need Another Hero
Size: 277x533cm
Medium: Photographic Vinyl
Date: 1986

-The red border helps to bring unity to the artwork by connecting the words to the whole image through color and style

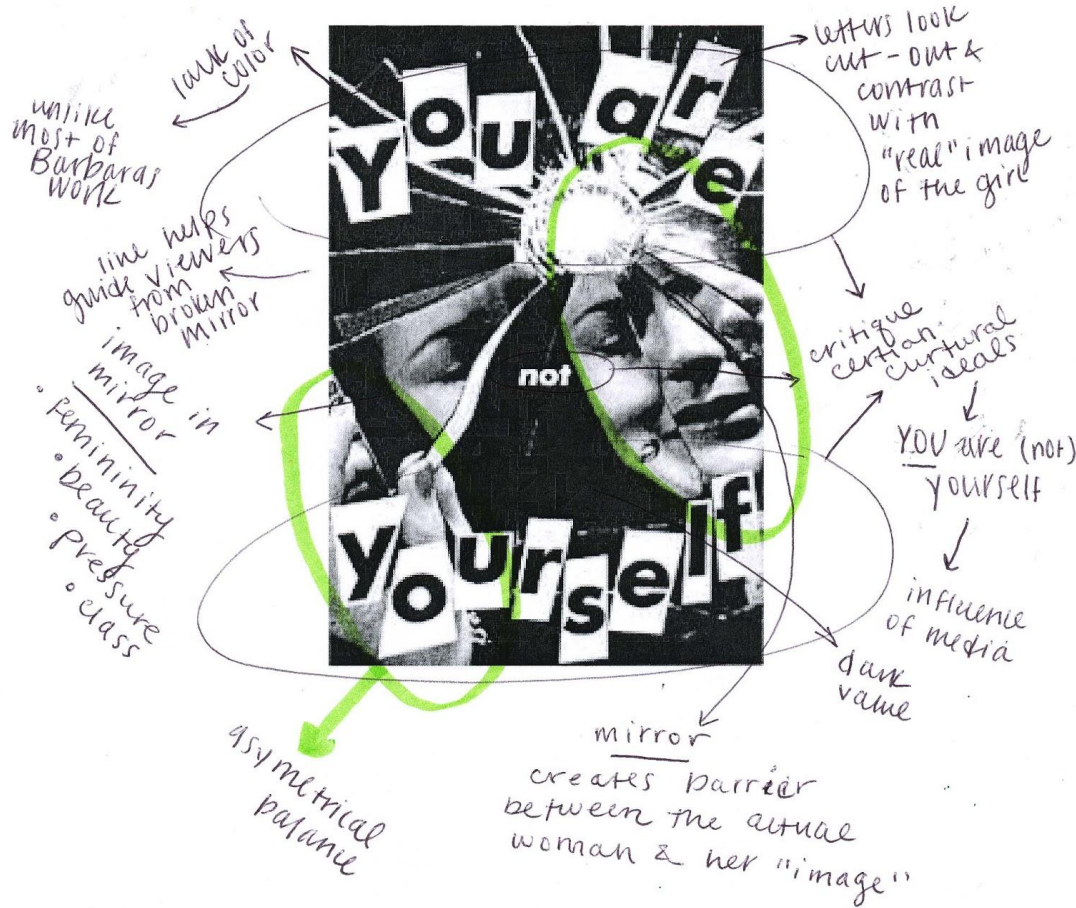
-expression of the girls face critiques the "dumb" woman stereotype, that would cause one to be so deeply transfixed on something as artificial to someone's character and well-being as some muscles.

-The use of blank space distracts from other elements, and gives focus and importance to the image

-The image uses the physical strength of the boy to symbolize a higher social power

-the age of the children in the photo shows that stereotypes are prevalent in the lives of even young children.

Analysis of Formal Qualities of Barbara Kruger's work



-Many of the images used in Kruger's work are taken from vessels of pop culture such as the news, reality shows, celebrities lives, and cinema. By using recognizable images in her work, Kruger can create a connection between her work and the viewer using references coming from pop culture and displayed through the words.

-The words and phrases placed on top of the images critique certain cultural ideals. For example, in *You Are Not Yourself*, Kruger destroys the idea that everyone is unique and different, and instead hints that we follow what the leaders in our society do in order to fit in.

-Black and white images are used to identify these ideals as outdated.

-Images and words cause the viewer to question expectations revolving around femininity, beauty, and class that are portrayed by the media. These works criticize the idea that we often are blind to letting media and pop culture have an influence on our everyday choices. Many of her works question the idea of gender expectations and roles, such as the idea that men must be masculine, strong, and have power, while women must be loyal, and birth children.



Evaluation of Cultural Significance of Melissa Lee Johnson's work

Melissa Lee Johnson is a Milwaukee-based artist, who is currently working for a local liberal newspaper called *The Shepherd Express*. She is a fine artist, illustrator, and graphic designer who also explores areas including writing, poster-making, animation, and fibers. She is a graduate of the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design.

Much of her work is feminist-based, and includes 21st century references like emojis, social media drama, and Tinder. Her work also includes themes of breakups, makeups, and on-the-phone arguments. Melissa Lee Johnson draws text boxes coming out of phones to represent this kind of online drama. Johnson's work has a very 21st century style, and her drawings usually are very busy, which emulates the life of someone living in a city in the midwest. Her work is like her own self-reflective journal, or a teenage diary, spilling on secrets of ex-boyfriends, ex-best friends, and hot tinder dates. Her work takes on a very unique approach to illustration.



Section of *Effortlessly Nasty* by
Melissa Lee Johnson

After an interview with Johnson, a curator of the Milwaukee Art Shore said that “She feels that the lack of mobility we feel as young people can be channeled into various activities as outlets of expression, and for her that form was art.” (1). This been said, she takes inspiration from many of the issues she faced as a teenager. In this same interview, Melissa said, “I view my drawings as stages. I’m really interested in young women feeling like they're constantly being looked on....It’s so constant; women are always on stage”(1).

(1) ”The Performance and the Stage.” The Milwaukee Lake Shore. July 5, 2016.

Melissa Lee Johnson

½ of the *Student Redesign for Sexual Health Brochure Series*

Medium: Digital drawing

Date: 2016

<http://melissaleejohnsonart.com/drawing/>

Interpretation of Function and Purpose- Melissa Lee Johnson's *Effortlessly Nasty*

-Movement created by the busy background gives a sense of the passing of time and creates chaos within the artwork

-Asymmetrical balance is created by the two figures

-The soft pink and blue hues create unity within the artwork

-Soft hues and picnic blanket create a fun, warm environment, and a calm atmosphere

-Women dressed in little clothing, and all of the objects give the piece a very nonchalant tone

-Characters created show an absence of social norm through their clothes, hair, and tattoos

-Busy background creates variety within themes discussed

-Repeated line and object gives different pattern to sections in the work



-Elements of postmodernism such as a talking doll, floating messages, and empty space in the background give a sense of loss of time or sanity

-The use of line brings texture to objects like her stockings and the picnic blanket

-Very non conforming graphic, comic-like design

-Sharp, crisp lines mixed in with sketches create characters

-Text boxes are used to animate objects like their phones, and the doll which highlights the the role that technology plays in our lives

Melissa Lee Johnson

Effortlessly Nasty

Medium: Colored pencil and graphite on paper

Date: 2016

<http://melissaleejohnsonart.com/drawing/>

-Skewed proportion of the two figures pull the style of the artwork far from realist, and closer to animated or cartoon



Interpretation of Function and Purpose- Melissa Lee Johnson's *She Says She Wants to Claw Your Eyes Out*



-The poses of the two girls in a boxing ring, and the harsh word bubble above them create motion within the artwork

-The hair of one girl matches the swimsuit of the other, which creates unity within the two figures. The fighting figures act like ying and yang- two opposing pieces that make up a balanced whole.

-Space left in the background gives us no reference place or time, and could show that the conflict is in one's mind, or non-existent in the actual world

-The use of hanging tomato baskets, and flying tomatoes help to show growth and rage.

-The use of red and green colors, often associated with the joyous holiday season contrast with the tense tone of the work shown through the fighting girls.

-Diction gives the artwork a competitive tone. Johnson writes "Winner wins an empty beer glass with snakes on it!" and "Loser wins their favorite sweater, lit on fire." The "prize" for winning contradicts itself, because it is something negative, which shows the viewer that there is no motif for fighting.



Melissa Lee Johnson

She Says She Wants to Claw Your Eyes Out

Medium: Colored pencil and graphite on paper

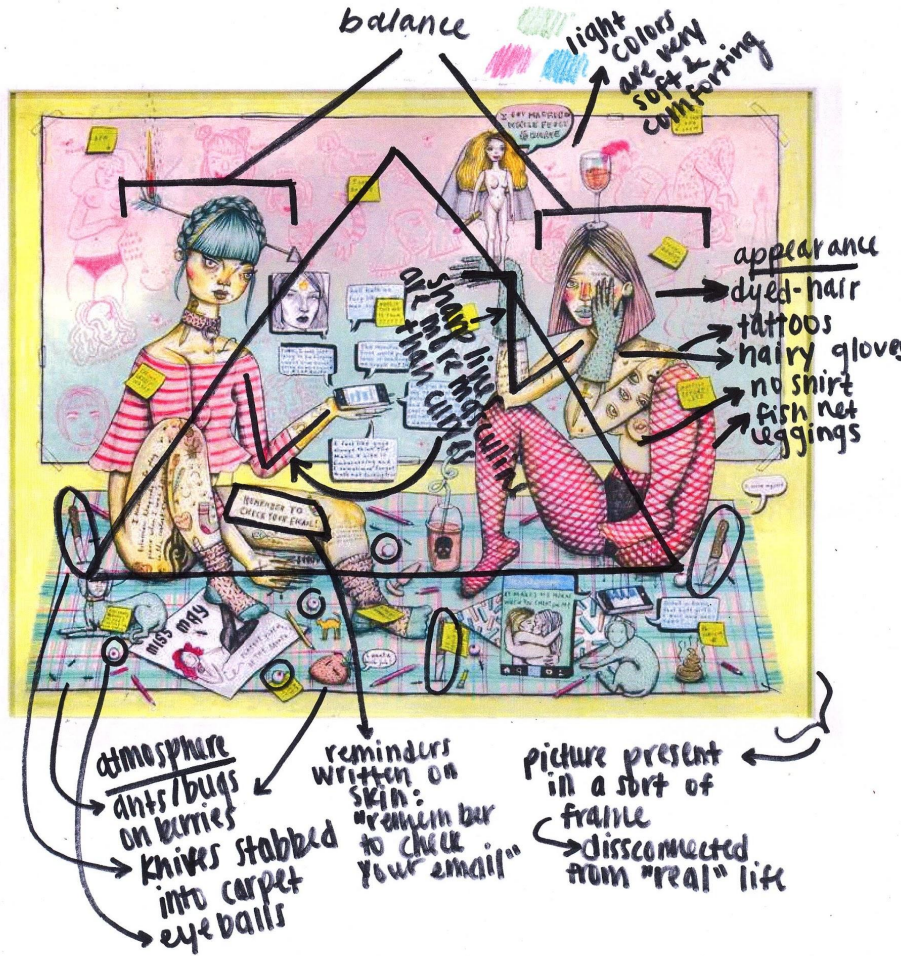
Date: 2016

<http://melissaleejohnsonart.com/drawing/>

Analysis of Formal Qualities of Melissa Lee Johnson's Artwork



- Replication of comic style graphics build story and character within each artwork
- The use of sarcastic and overly-dramatic comments reflect the tone of the artwork
- Dream-like quality is created by the different elements including the wine balancing on top of girls head, the speaking Barbie doll, the knives in the floor, and constant reminders and thoughts circling around the image.
- The use of raw, and "nasty" words to draw attention to the dramatic or annoying tone
 - "Remember to check your email"
 - "I feel like guys always think that the music I like is embarrassing and sometimes I forget that's not true"
- Characters portrayed are careless and resemble the feminist stereotype by having hairy legs, being without a bra or clothes, and having brightly dyed hair
- The very imperfect images and raw words that Melissa Lee Johnson creates allow the viewer to connect to the artwork through the common human condition



We don't n

Contrasting Artistic Styles

Section of *We Don't
Need Another Hero* by
Barbara Kruger

Barbara Kruger

- Works mainly with silkscreen prints, layering photos with text
- Often uses black and white images
- Many of her works have a white and red border text that contrasts greatly with the black and white photographs
- Kruger takes images from pop-culture and mass media to manipulate in her works
- Kruger produces her work to “shock” viewers
- Prints are often eye-catching and meant to get your attention
- Kruger usually layers photo with one main quote that draws attention to the meaning of the image

Section of *Effortlessly
Nasty* by Melissa Lee
Johnson

Melissa Lee Johnson

- Works mainly with colored pencil and graphite on paper
- Johnson likes to use lots of color (mainly soft, pastel hues)
- hand-drawn images
- cartoon, alien-like characters
- disproportionate figures
- sense of unity or balance present in the placement of figures and objects
- objects are often “floating” in an empty background, and have no tie to conventional principles such as gravity
- Draws tiny or delicate woman-like figures
- Johnson produces her own unique images, instead of getting them from pop culture



Comparing Artistic Styles- Similarities between Barbara Kruger and Melissa Lee Johnson

-Both artists mix text or commentary with visuals in their work
 -Both produce primarily feminist-based work
 -Both artists create a sense of unity in all pieces of work through color scheme, and the placement of the subject

- Both artists use color to create tone or mood:
- Johnson uses soft hues to create a laid back environment, which may seem more calming or relaxed to the viewer
 - Kruger uses the stark red coloring on top of a black and white photograph to draw attention to the words. The red borders and flashy words create a sense of urgency.

-create meaning through symbols of pop-culture

- Johnson uses “emojis” and symbols from popular social media sites to connect with her younger generation of viewers
- Kruger uses popular images such as those seen on mass-produced billboards to attract those who pay attention to politics and the news



Section of *Effortlessly Nasty* by Melissa Lee Johnson



Section of *We Don't Need Another Hero* by Barbara Kruger



Both Artists use space to disconnect objects from a specific space and time

Section of *We Don't Need Another Hero* by Barbara Kruger

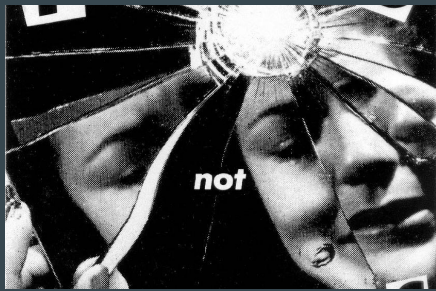


Section of *She Says She Wants To Claw Your Eyes Out* by Melissa Lee Johnson



Section of *Effortlessly Nasty* by Melissa Lee Johnson



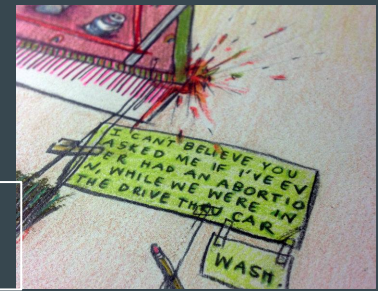


Comparing the Use of Emotion- Differences between Kruger and Johnson

Section of *You Are Not Yourself* by Barbara Kruger

Barbara Kruger

- Artwork is meant to get in your face and shock you
- Women are shown as self-conscious or submissive in order to critique gender norms in the media or pop-culture
- Artwork plays with the viewers emotions in order to provoke thought
- Emotion is often seen in relation to females
- Emotion is used to critique gender roles
- Artwork encourages a change or understanding of a new perspective
- Often emotion comes through in the the second layer of the artwork



Section of *Effortlessly Nasty* by Melissa Lee Johnson

Melissa Lee Johnson

- Dreamlike or euphoric quality
- Emotion is sometimes humorous
- Characters have a confident or an uncaring attitude
- Emotion is often seen through jealousy or hatred
- Emotion is seen in the context of third-world problems
- Characters in Johnson's work are usually very overly-dramatic
- The use of emotion is more up front, as opposed to hidden through sarcasm

Comparing the Use of Emotion in Work by Both Barbara Kruger and Melissa Lee Johnson



Barbara Kruger

We Don't Need Another Hero

Size: 277x533cm

Medium: Photographic Vinyl

Date: 1986

Barbara Kruger uses facial expression in order to express emotion in her artwork. For example, in this piece, the boy's face is straining to display a flustered confidence in his strength.



Melissa Lee Johnson
She Says She Wants to Claw Your Eyes Out



-Both Barbara Kruger and Melissa Lee Johnson use drama in their artwork in order to get a message across:

- Johnson uses text bubbles and signs to create this dramatic tone
- Kruger uses the pairing of both image and text

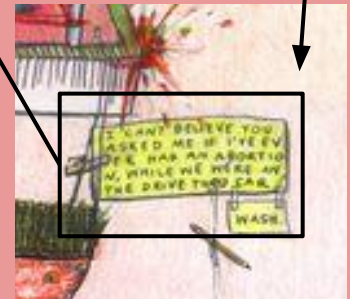
-The artists both use sarcasm, which pokes holes in what a viewer may think is true

- Both artists critique societal issues revolving around gender by layering text on the image

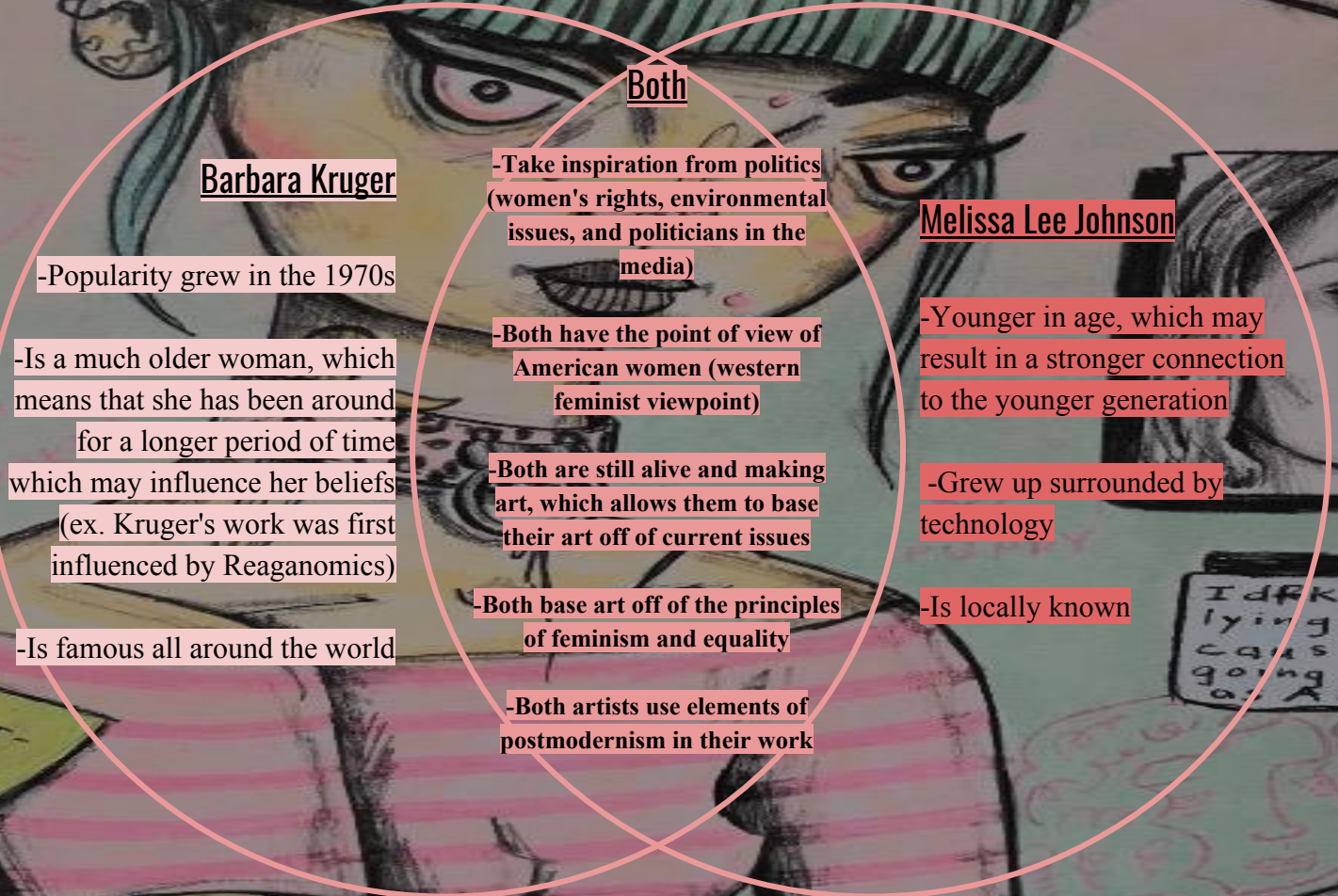
-Use of emotion helps to connect to the viewer to the pieces through the human condition

- *We Don't Need Another Hero* focuses on desire for attention and love especially in young teenagers
- *She Says She Wants to Claw Your Eyes Out* focuses topics such as friendships and breakups, which is common for the human condition.

"I can't believe you asked me if I've ever had an abortion, while we were in the drive thru car wash."



Comparing Cultural Contexts of the Work of Barbara Kruger and Melissa Lee Johnson



EFFORTLESSLY NASTY

I dffk, I was j
lying in bed
cause I'm ne
going to be as
an ASAP ROOM

LITTLE LAUREN

Effect of Barbara Kruger's work on my own

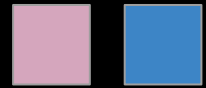


My own piece, *Equality*, is inspired by Barbara Kruger's work. Not only have I taken inspiration from her usual choice of theme, but I have also taken inspiration from the formal qualities of her design. For example, in *We Don't Need Another Hero*, she plays with the idea of gender roles in order to critique the way that women prefer to chase after men that are “masculine” and physically strong. I have used Kruger's way of playing with traditional roles in my work by placing the pink and blue in behind the man and woman, as this acts as a barrier between common goals such as equal pay.

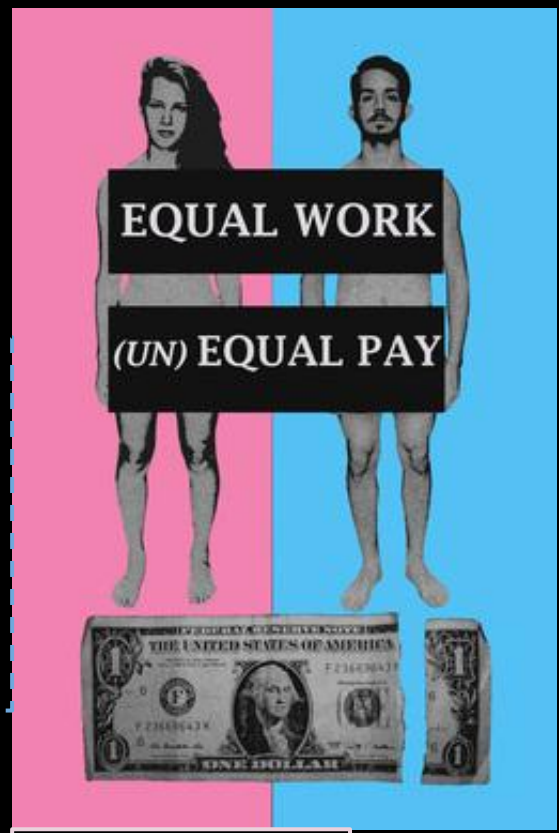
COLOR & TONE:

Barbara Kruger is known for using black and white images with a red border and text boxes in her artworks. The red that contrasts against the background in her work creates a sense of urgency.

Unlike Barbara Kruger, I have made use of softer tones. These cooler tones (purple/pink and blue) create a calmer atmosphere, which sends a less urgent message than Kruger's work. The colors in my own work are also meant to be stereotypical according to gender (blue for male and pink for female).



Barbara Kruger is also known for her constant use of text boxes. I have taken advantage of this in my work, but have used the text boxes as a way to create the shape of an equal sign which covers the male and female body parts. Unlike the text boxes in Barbara Kruger's work, I have used the actual form of the messages in order to support my message.



Equality
Size: 24x36cm
Medium: Digital Collage
Date: September, 2016

Function, Purpose, and Materials Comparing My Own Work with Barbara Kruger's

Function & Purpose:

-Barbara Kruger's work is produced in order to provoke questions by the audience. She uses appropriated images and sarcastic quotes to do so. One sees Kruger's work in the eye of the public as she is an international artist.

-My own work, such as *Not Ur Type*, inspired by Barbara Kruger, uses my own props and images. While my work also aims to provoke question of everyday stereotypes and assumptions, the sphere of influence of my work is much smaller.

-Kruger's body of work has unity which creates power. Unity is created within her body of work through similar colors, and by having her own distinct style.

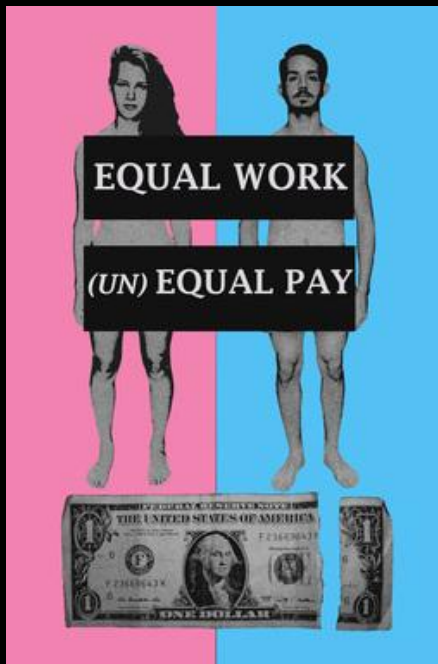
-My body of work is unlike that of Kruger's because I do not use the same format for all of my pieces. Therefore, as a whole collection, individual works may not be as powerful.

Not Ur Type

Size: 8x13cm

Medium: Digital Photograph

Date: November, 2017



Comparing the use of Materials:

-Barbara's work was done by screenprint, while my work was created with digitally altered photographs in photoshop

-Barbara Kruger takes her images from media and pop culture (uses images shown to the public in billboards and ads), while the images that I used were ones that I took (not taken from sources viewed publicly in ads or media)

Effect of Melissa Lee Johnson's work on my own

Function and Purpose:

Both artworks serve as a way to express feelings on a certain issue. However, my artwork is more political, while Melissa Lee Johnson's is created to capture a specific scene in time which demonstrates a dramatic friend breakup.



Cultural Significance:

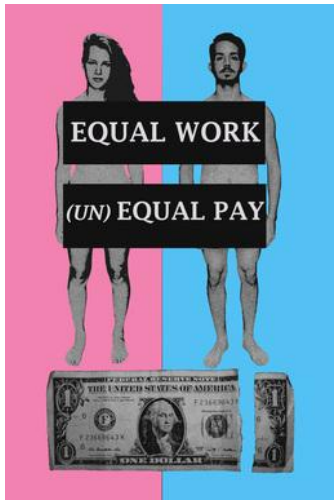
Melissa Lee Johnson comes from a 21st-century feminist point of view. Her work contains elements of social media, tinder meetups, and drama based around other social blades. While my artwork doesn't contain references to social media, it instead contains references to something as ancient as a Christianity, but places a modern twist on it. My work is instead inspired by modern-day feminist views that have been spread by technology that brings the world together

Formal Qualities and Materials:

One thing about Melissa Lee Johnson's work is that she always creates space in the background by removing the characters from any recognizable attributes. I have done this in my work to the right by filling the space with symbols that help to support my argument, rather than setting the figure within a recognizable environment. Both the work by Johnson and the piece inspired by Johnson are mysterious in the way that emphasis is placed on movement and change in a space and time that a viewer may be unfamiliar with.



Matriarch
Size: 30x45cm
Medium: colored pencil and permanent marker on paper
Date: October, 2017



Equality

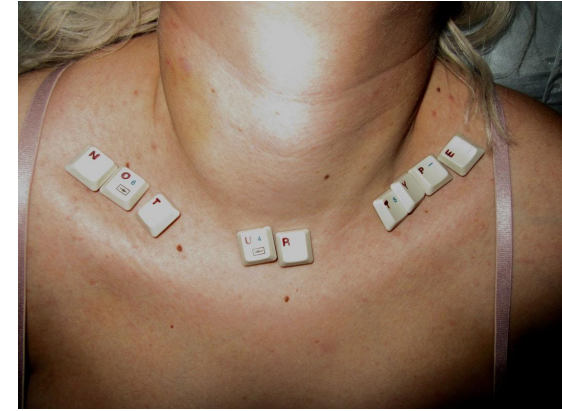
- The use of color blocks placed next to each other allow an artwork to create atmosphere, and stand out against each other, as shown in Barbara Kruger's *We Don't Need Another Hero*
- Symbols are powerful ways to illustrate your opinion through art. For example, in *Equality*, I used a picture of a torn dollar bill to represent the wage gap between men and women.



Matriarch

- The use of pattern, as shown in the blanket present in Melissa Lee Johnson's *Effortlessly Nasty*, helps to provide space and atmosphere.
- Creating cartoon-like figures can help to emphasize drama. This makes sense when I think about political cartoons, and the way that artists emphasize certain features in order to focus on specific parts of people's personalities. Melissa Lee Johnson uses this brightly-colored cartoon-like style in all of her work.

Connection to Own Artwork- What I have learned from Kruger & Johnson



Not Ur Type

- Both artists have inspired me to mix medias and experiment with props (In *Not Ur Type*, I used keys that were physically placed on the model to spell out a message instead of adding wording later in photoshop by digitally layering on top on image).

Formal Qualities

Contextual Qualities

Cultural Elements

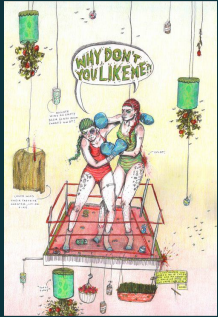


Barbara Kruger

- screenprint (digital)
- 2D piece
- color scheme: varying grey hues
- contrast created from varying values

- shown as a part of an installation
- smaller piece of work, unlike some of her billboard-sized installations

- influenced by western culture and feminism
- political, anti-capitalist
- influenced by “Reaganomics”

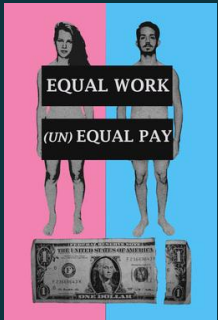


Melissa Lee Johnson

- drawing with graphite, colored pencil, and marker
- 2D piece
- varying color scheme: light, soft hues, red & green
- rough texture
- use of talking bubble helps to highlight angry tone

- shown with exhibition of similar work in gallery setting
- interest in expanding the tradition of editorial illustration

- locally known artist
- use of personal experience, as well as the experience of other women
- work focuses on themes associated with growth during the female experience



My Own Work

- digitally altered photograph created with photoshop
- 2D piece
- color scheme: grey, pink, and light blue
- words layered on top of image
- use of visual symbol (dollar bill and equal sign)

- created after exposure to both Barbara Kruger and Melissa Lee Johnson
- not meant to be shown with a set, piece stands alone

- influenced by the work of both Barbara Kruger and Melissa Lee Johnson
- biased in a way intentionally displaying ideals associated with feminism under Western influence