

DOUBLE FEATURE: SELF INSERT AND BAD END

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

By

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ABSTRACT

Self Insert and *Bad End* are a set of two short films, two installations, and representative of two years of study at Cornell University. The work spans the genres of science-fiction, musical, horror, romance, and slapstick comedy. It comments on tendencies within queer theory, religious dogma, and online communities to moralize elements of ourselves that we cannot control - our desires. These works, both the videos and the installations, have been created with a dysphoric sensibility in mind, through their collaged construction, overstimulating audio-visual qualities, and the trans in-jokes and references to queer fandom peppered throughout. This is a personal quest to explore how desires create their own realities, a revelation of how desire is a mysterious yet crucial element of subjectivity, and a plea for solidarity between marginalized genders and sexualities. Above all, it is a cautionary tale of suicidal theory and suicidal theology.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bec Sommer was born in Saint Louis, Missouri in 1997. He received his BFA in Painting from Kansas City Art Institute in 2020.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch	3
Acknowledgements	4
Table of Contents	5
Body of Text	6
Works Cited	33

Genres are how we organize our formal and narrative desires. In this way, they're incredibly optimistic and aspirational - when working in a genre, there's a format to be working towards or against. My relationship with genre has always been defined both emotionally and viscerally. I've been involved in fandom for nearly fifteen years, having spent my formative years on livejournal, deviantart, fanfiction.net, and AO3. Within fandom history, genres have been codified in a specific way, as what are known as "narrative kinks." These are defined by Seanan McGuire on Livejournal as "those storylines, themes, tropes, and motifs that really get you cooking as a reader, a writer, or both."¹ Fanlore.org defines them as "an element in fiction that the reader or viewer is especially interested in, sometimes on a visceral level, not unlike the traditional meaning of a (sexual) kink being something one may find particularly exciting."² Whether or not these particular kinks are sexual, they are indeed felt in the body. There is a euphoric, physical delight in finding the perfect fic. Linda Williams lists the "body genres" (genres that are intended to elicit specific bodily responses) to be horror, melodrama, and pornography.³ Within fanfiction, all genres act on the body. This sensibility has taught me, from an early age, to have a physical, almost carnal relationship to my chosen genres and beloved texts. In a way that parallels romantic infatuation with another person, I fall in love with these things. This is why I gravitate towards working within genres: this work feeds the previously mentioned infatuation and allows me to incorporate that very attachment into what that work is doing, pointing back at itself as a phenomenon. However, infatuation is a phenomenon that I pair very closely with dysphoria. They are both highly aspirational and motivated feelings, and both are incredibly attuned to the desires of the person holding them. And so, my relationship with genre, as one that's characterized by infatuation and bodily activation, is also one that's perpetually dissatisfied. Nothing could fully satisfy the narrative desire I hold. This is a heavy thing to realize, but is also what allows my work to continue - if something could satisfy me, then I'd simply stop.

I'm greedy. I want the formal, visual, and narrative possibilities of both still and moving images. I make paintings in addition to videos for this reason, and for the reason that painting allows a narrative to complicate itself exponentially further via the gaps that a still image

¹ Seanan McGuire, "My narrative kink is okay, yours is kinda...well, okay." from October 20, 2011. <https://seanan-mcguire.livejournal.com/397607.html>.

² Fanlore, "Narrative Kink," last modified October 31, 2012. https://fanlore.org/wiki/Narrative_Kink.

³ Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," from *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2-13. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1212758>.

inherently will leave behind - it cannot be everything, fill in every moment, or explain itself through dialogue. And I wouldn't want it to do any of these things. I paint when I need to expand a narrative, inflate the metaphor, increase the archive, because these gaps allow for someone - me, or a viewer, or another author, to come and stuff them full of their own narrative desires and the things they need. There are necessarily contradictions and paradoxes in the creation of such an expandable text - it could not possibly hold all these things with ease or comfort - which introduces a dysphoric sensibility. Dysphoria is the antonym to the state of euphoria and tends to be used colloquially to refer to gender distress most commonly found in trans people, although isn't limited to that context. Generally speaking, it refers to a conflicted, dissatisfied, unhappy state. When a painting requires contradiction to exist, existence is ambivalent at best. My dysphoria tends to visualize itself through spaces, figures, and emotionalities that are disjointed and contradictory but desire to be otherwise. And much like the transgender axiom - if you *want* to be trans, you *are* trans - desire is proof of existence. A desirous ontology. Like Lacan promised, they are longing and lacking, but it is the Lack that allows for the fullness to rush in.



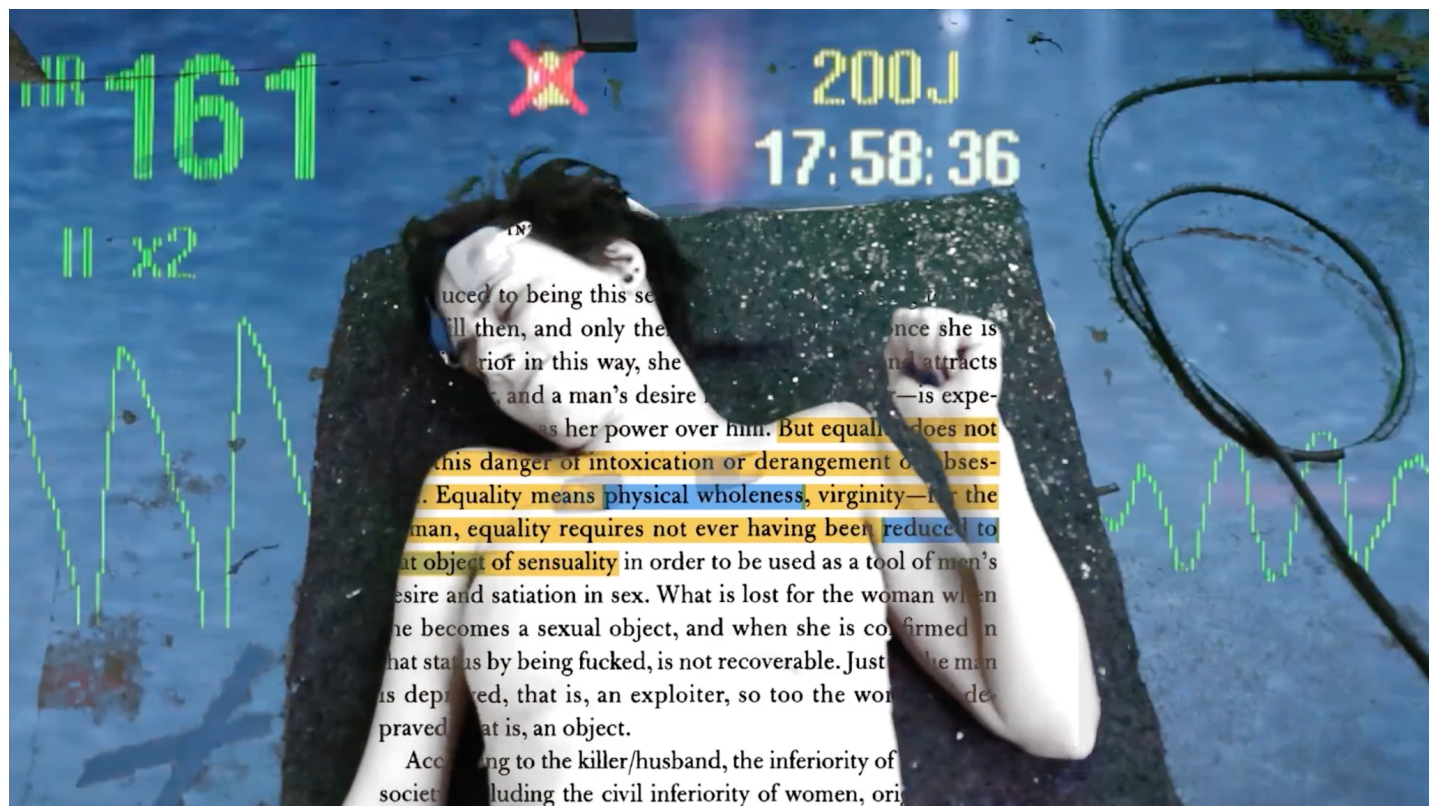
Still from *Self Insert* (2022)

In the Spring of 2022, I completed a thirty minute short film titled *Self Insert*. It is a science fiction romantic musical in which a clone of a scientist falls in love with his creator. It was assembled by collaging together videos that I shot and that I found, leading to a busy, maximalist, and overstimulating appearance and audio landscape. In this film, I use Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse* as a structuring text. This is because I found in it a similar underlying assumption to the rhetoric held by gender critical feminists and other transphobes regarding people who are both transgender and gay: that desire, even without action, has the ability to inflict real, material harm to those subject to it. *Intercourse* is the text that is referenced whenever someone misquotes Dworkin as having said "all heterosexual sex is rape" - although these words are never said in this order, she does make clear in this book that her perspective is that sexual relationships between men and women are inextricable from the dynamics of power and patriarchy of which women are the primary targets. For both sets of (often overlapping) ideologies, transphobia and sex-negativity, desire has an incredible moral dimension. It is very possible, and often unavoidable, to cause harm through thinking the wrong thoughts or having

the wrong wants. Primarily, my decision to bring in *Intercourse* as a text and Dworkin as a character was to both argue strenuously against this position and demonstrate that it is a death cult that will eat everything in its path but also to explore how one might come to hold these positions. After all, *Intercourse*, in addition to being an incredible polemic, is also heartbreaking in its descriptions of autobiographical and observed violation. Andrea Dworkin came by her rage honestly, if nothing else. I don't give much illumination into the specifics of the biography of my Dr. Benjamin, because I believe that spelling out specifically how he came to be the way he is would produce the opposite of a vivid emotional impression - it is more effective to explain less of the events coming, one after another, than to present an image of a person in pain and attempting to exert power over one more powerless. This is giving privilege to narrative over fabula as well as gaining privilege through narrative (the structures that we observe and then apply to dynamics, both between people and within systems). In the audience's experience of my installations, most move in and out of the room at will, which means that if I gave ground to fabula, a viewer would understand less and less and be given fewer and fewer visceral, affective moments. If I want the installation experience to be edifying to as many as possible, I would rather act on a viewer's body than give a rote timeline of events.

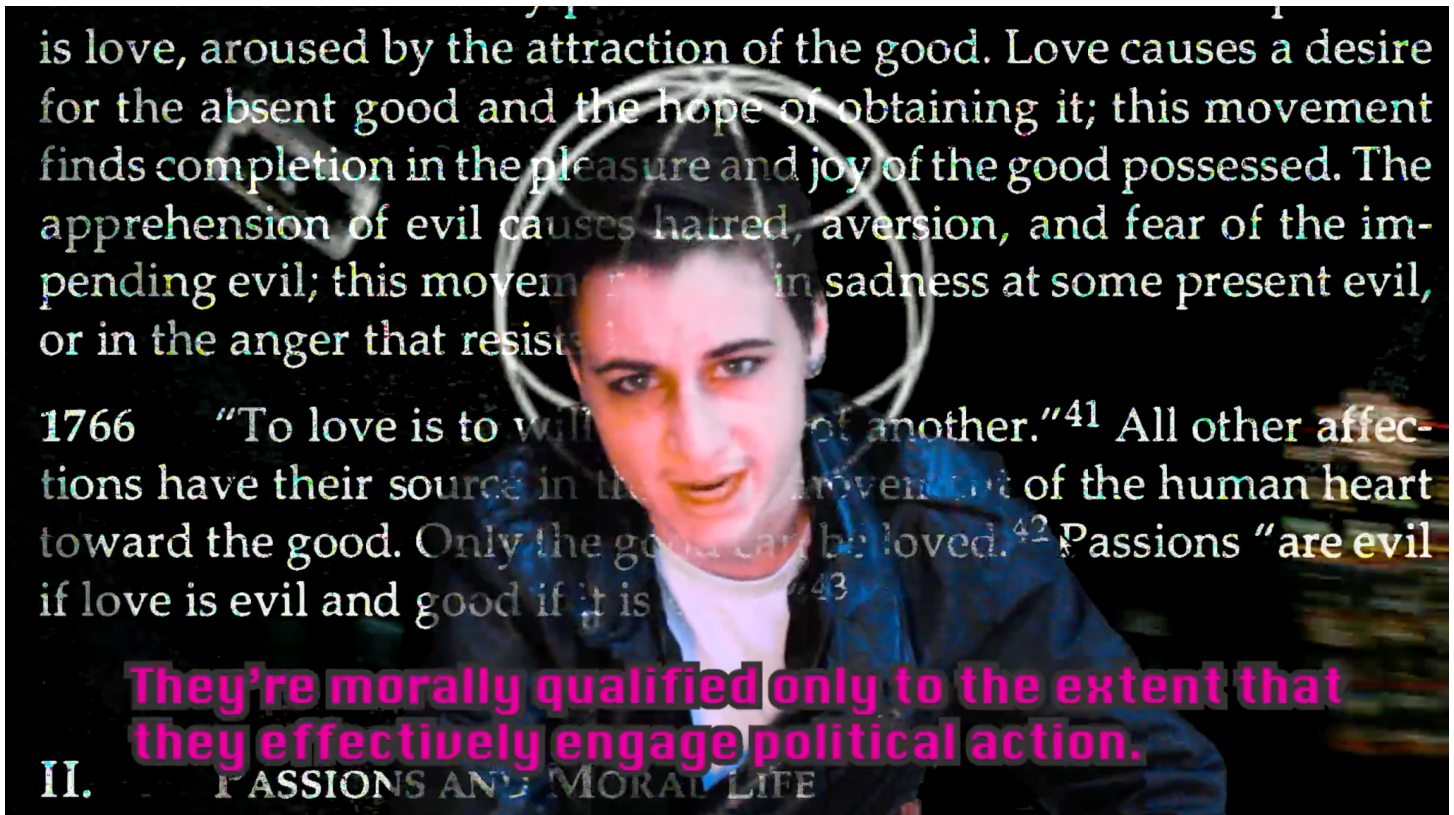
Sarah Schulman, in *Conflict is Not Abuse*, compares the state of being traumatized and the state of supremacy by claiming that both refuse to incorporate new information into their paradigms.⁴ This is how, for example, a group of incredibly scared and traumatized people such as gender critical and anti-trans activists come to resemble, collaborate with, and transform into explicitly fascist coalitions. We see this with how rallies held in March 2023 by Posey Parker on her worldwide "Let Women Speak" tour attract the presence of Neo Nazis that have come out in support of Parker's anti-trans, eradicationist politics. This is how cries of pain become cudgels of power. *Intercourse* then is used in *Self Insert* as a moralizing, normalizing, regulating force that, in *Bad End*, comes to have violent consequences. This force can be seen in how the text appears to physically invade the Duplicate, created by Dr. Conrad Benjamin for the purposes of being clean of any desire or subjectivity.

⁴ Sarah Schulman, *Conflict is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021).



Still from *Self Insert* (2022)

In other moments, particularly within *Bad End*, other characters have other relationships to texts which exert power. Nick Lee, the leather-clad guest on *The Solarian Seat*, is permitted to exist in front of his chosen text, which happens to be the Catechism of the Catholic Church - the text of moral and biblical interpretations that are updated whenever doctrine does. The particular passage displayed discusses the morality of love and of other strong emotions. Nick Lee, in his



Still from *Bad End* (2023)

dialogue, quotes the Catechism with an edit. The original text states, on page 436, "They (passions) are morally qualified only to the extent that they effectively engage reason and will."⁵ Nick Lee exchanges reason and will for political action. In this instance, Nick Lee is the master over these words of power, despite claiming a subjugated position. He is given the power to edit and redact. Notably, the text invades the projection of his body significantly less - although the boundaries of his form are slightly permeable, they aren't so pregnable as the boundaries of the Duplicate. His will to destroy his own will is strong.

Finally, the god of the world of *Bad End*, the individual who wears a facial harness and greets the viewer in the last moments of subjectivity, moves between the words of power at will. He is given license to recognize them and react to them, but they do not linger, either within or without him. He is also given license to dance with them. An incorrigible hedonist, he will find a way to extract pleasure from any circumstances he finds himself within, even the death of one he would happily submit to.

⁵ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*, (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000) 436.

The importance of my playing all roles in both short films lies partially in the fact that I'm talking about subjectivity, but specifically how the coercive powers of marginalization get folded into one's own subjectivity, which is highly convenient for those very marginalizing forces - one does the work of minimization for them. I also play all roles for the same reason I construct the settings through keying and composites: I want to bake the fundamental lack of totality into as many levels of the storytelling and image making process as possible. If all the characters are working against each other, or acting on their own agendas, that makes me a fractured person with multiple contradictory motivations. This dynamic works externally as well - if I play all roles, then I get to display the variety of personae others have tried to shape me into. Acute awareness of the perception of others has been a part of this project from the beginning. In conceiving the disease of Sullivan-Garage, I wrote in my script and workshopping document

Knowledge of others looking, of there being an audience to desire is what makes the desiring destructive - others projecting that the desire is predatory. Perception that the pathological person needs to involve others coercively in order to fulfill fetishistic position. Does it do harm??? I think the people who have this disease have developed a reputation for tricking others into believing that they don't, and that they must hide it, so that intimate partners never find out so that they can continue to feed this desire.

The question of whether or not this disease is a biological fact within my fiction has never mattered too much to me, because what has always mattered was the perception of others that transformed the disease into a problem that must be solved, a fundamental excess within a person. The lack of totality is found in there simply being too much - too much space within space, too much noise, too much desire, too much of me. As I've found in the creation of this work, the more sensory information one is given, the less they can see. Even less than that is how much can be properly understood.

both originally performed by Type O Negative. There are also instances of visual layering, such as during the climax of the performance of “Christian Woman,” in which the main character, at the height of his crisis of faith, declares himself Jesus. This could perhaps be considered the most erotic moment of the video, as a visual obstacle in the form of a crimson veil comes down over all duplicates of the dancing seminarian. This construction of what is erotic and what is pornographic can be transferred to the application of *Intercourse* during the “Bizarre Love Triangle” portion of *Self Insert* - it is a moralizing, regulating force of power upon the duplicate, but it also provides an obstacle to the duplicate’s body - my body - in which one has to try to cross the terms of the power at play in order to access, which will be impossible once the boundary is in place.

Of course, the application of power is, itself, an intensely eroticized phenomena. In *Bad End*, the distinction between even erotic and pornographic power is drawn. The trickster God who carries the character of the egg from life to death and from subjecthood to objecthood is, himself, desiring to be under the eroticized application of power. What makes it erotic, of course, is that it occurs within boundaries of time and context - it cannot be for always. The seminarian and the egg are subject to pornographic power, meaning that it will respect no restrictions of time, context, or space. They feel perpetually subject to the thumb of that power, and nothing short of permanently removing their own subjectivity gland will ease that ache.

As a storyteller, I’m drawn to circular narratives, both the sort that Susan Stewart describes in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* within her chapter on the miniature - the sort that can be picked up, put down, started again at will, the ones in which the sharpest pleasure comes from the distinction between iterations⁷, and the ones that Andrea Long Chu describes in her essay “Did Sissy Porn Make Me Trans?” that are suspended and perpetually extended moments in which desire is allowed to build and build without resolution, like a porn gif.⁸ I’m also someone who has a tendency to ruminate, and in my unhealthiest moments, get caught in poisonous circular thought patterns which seem to have no escape. The best remedy for this I’ve found is to step outside of the thought pattern and become fascinated in its churning machine, find a way to extract my own - emotional, narrative, visceral - pleasure from what it was that was hurting me. The videos and installations housing

⁷ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁸ Andrea Long Chu, *Females: A Concern* (New York City: Verso Books, 2019).

these videos I've constructed allow me this same pleasure, that of making a perpetual cycle. This occurs both in the formal ways I've made these installations and in the narratives I've built. The characters are wracked and ruminate in a similar way that I do. Dr. Conrad Benjamin himself has been set up to continue his cycle of guilt, attempting to cure that guilt, making a physical avatar for that guilt, and then being physically subsumed by that avatar, ad infinitum. I do not believe that he will ever find his way out of this cycle, as he's invested his career, sense of legitimacy, and personal identity into the forceful absolution of his guilt, which has been placed on him by his context. If he were to break from this cycle, he would have to change so radically he'd then be someone else entirely.



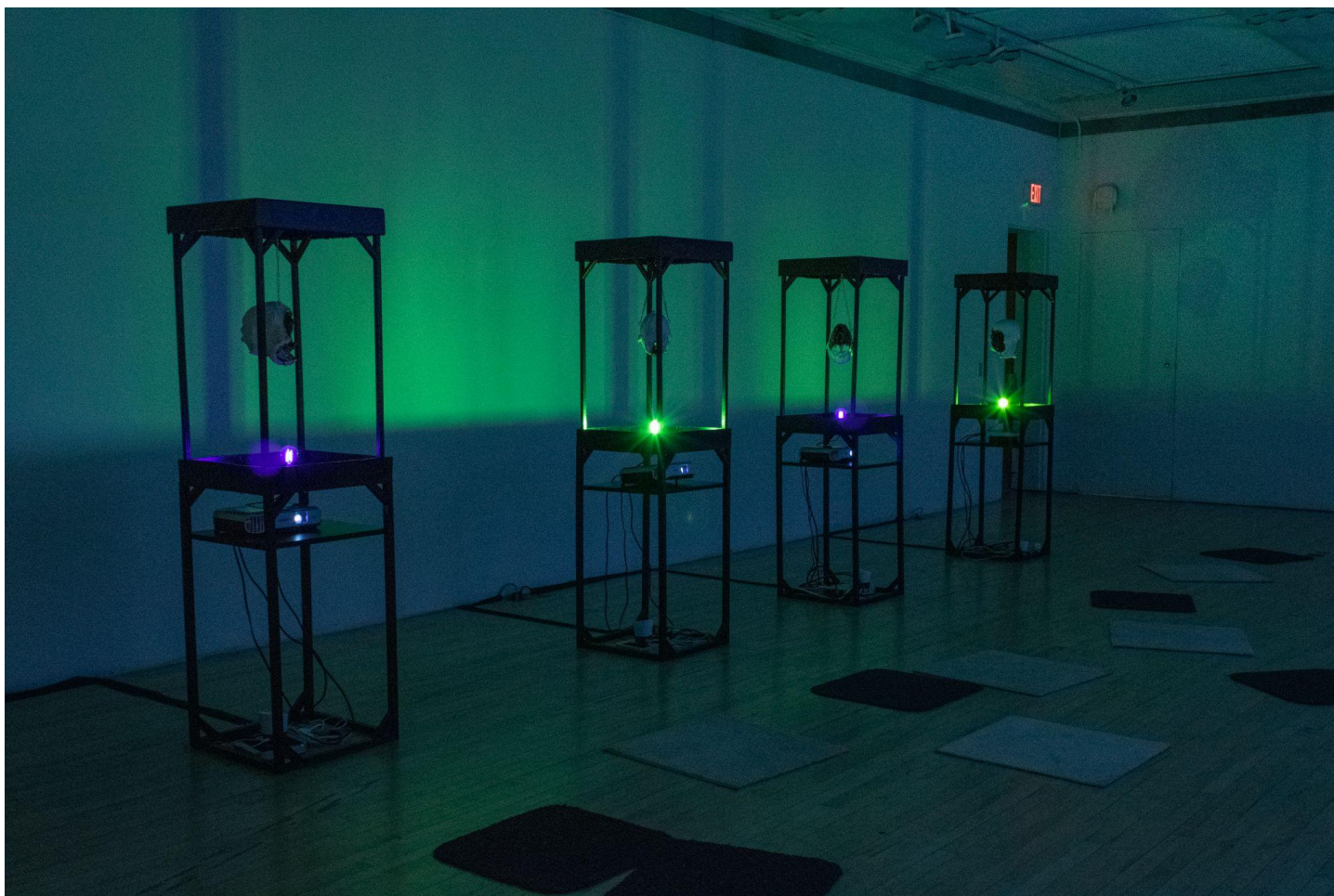
Still from *Bad End* (2023)



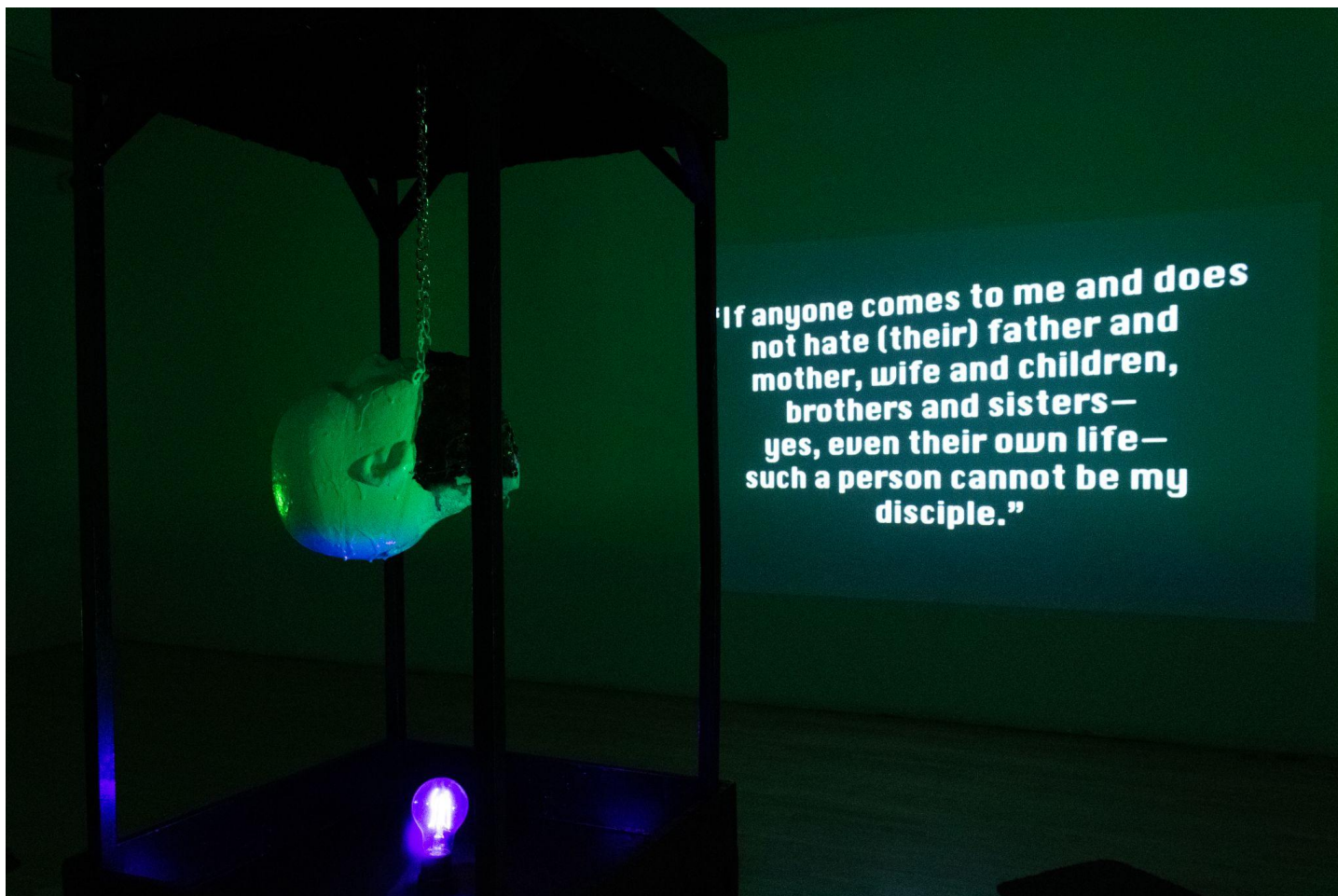
Installation view: *Self Insert*, Tjaden Gallery, Cornell University, 2022

The first iteration of the installation, the one that only featured *Self Insert*, was itself a churning rumination. It consisted of ten channels, all talking over each other, running on simultaneous loops of uneven length. This situation made them speak across the room in unpredictable ways. If one stood in the center of the gallery, it sounded like an endless, cyclical debate of nonsense. The conversation is never permitted to end, which is where the application of power can be found - if we are never permitted to end the debate, then action can never be taken. The second installation, done a year later with the addition of *Bad End*, is less random but still based in a cyclical logic. Both videos are played, one after another, while moving across four channels along an approximately forty foot wall - sometimes doubled, tripled, or

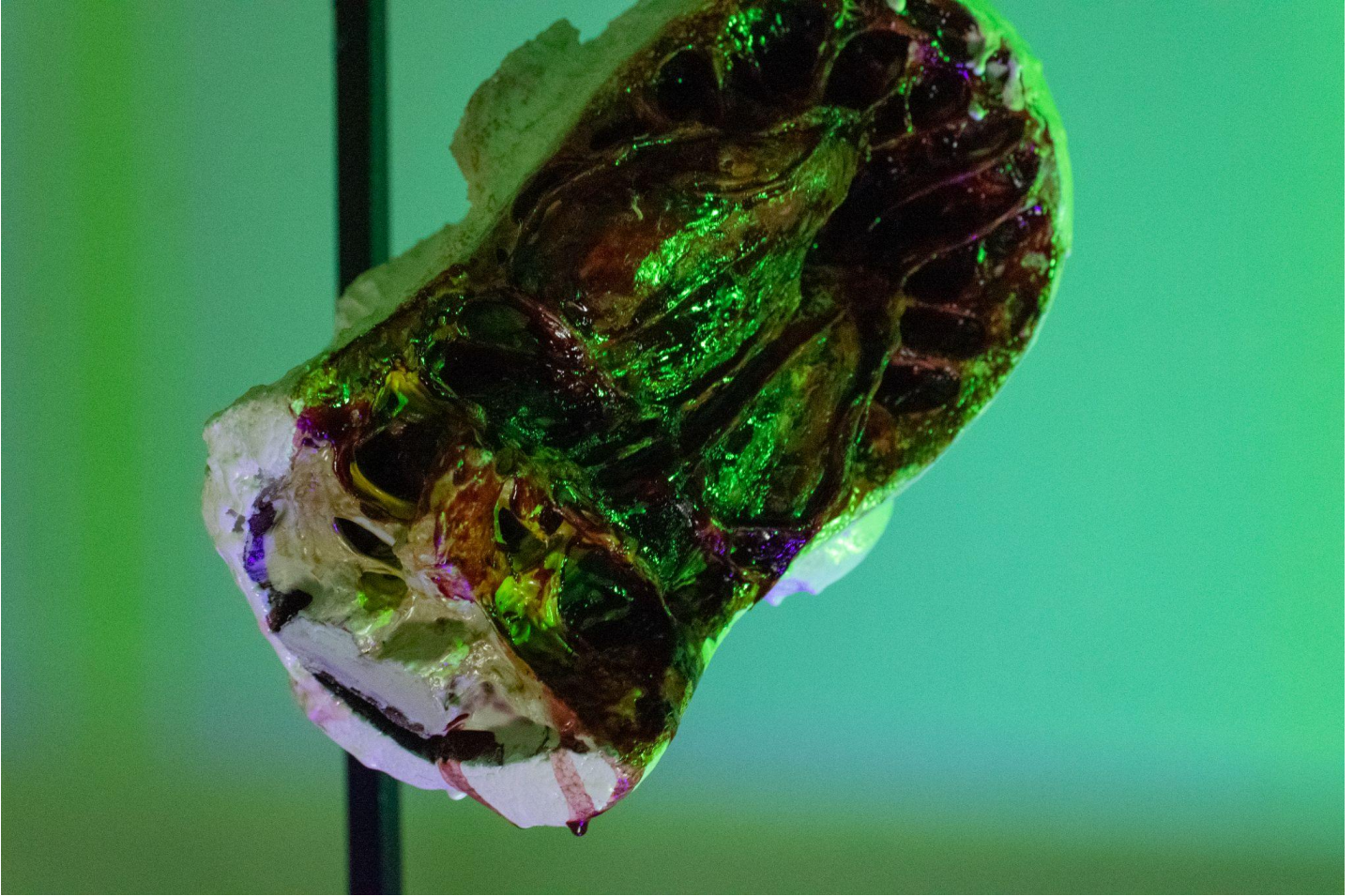
quadrupled. The four sculptures, each containing a projector, a speaker, and a displayed head that has had its subjectivity gland removed, are placed in a strict line. The sculptures themselves consist of two platforms with a black ceiling that the head hangs from on a chain. These platforms and ceiling are supported by legs and corner braces of thin wood dowels. Together, they resemble something that is both gallows and judge's benches, imposing and disciplinary.



Installation view: *Double Feature: Self Insert and Bad End*, Tjaden Gallery, Cornell University, 2023



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The heads have been gouged into and stuffed with gore, melted beyond recognition of their former lives as styrofoam models. They are the condemned and the accusing - the ones who had to obliterate themselves for their own moral good standing and the ones who have been punished for their deviancy with obliteration. They are the ones warned of by Greek poets, those who have “knowledge of the self that begins to come into focus, a self not known before and now disclosed by the lack of it - by pain, by a hole, bitterly.”⁹ Melted by Eros and having lost an element of self held dear, they lose internal constancy and become liquid.

⁹ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), page 66.



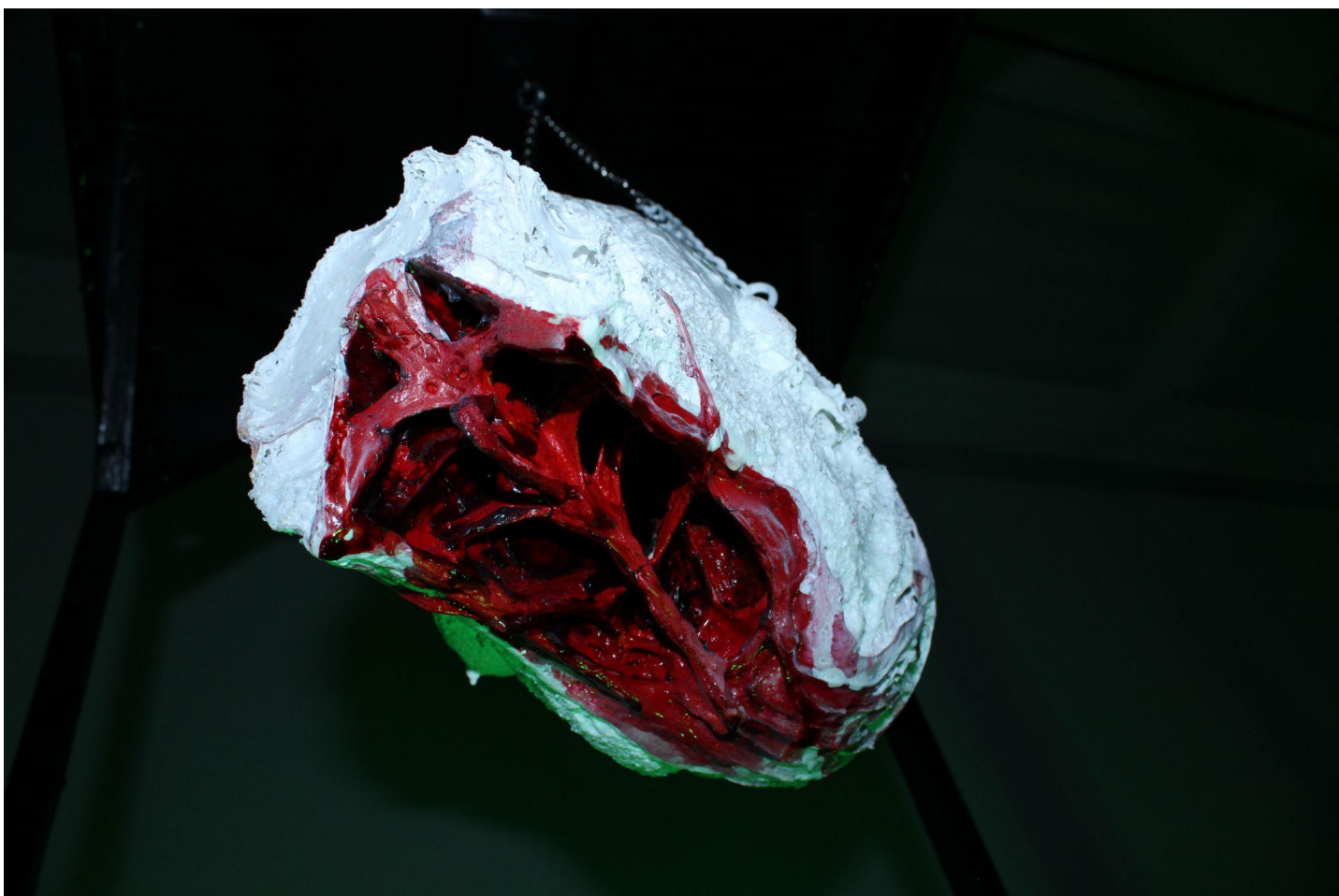
Installation view: *Double Feature: Self Insert and Bad End*, Tjaden Gallery, Cornell University, 2023



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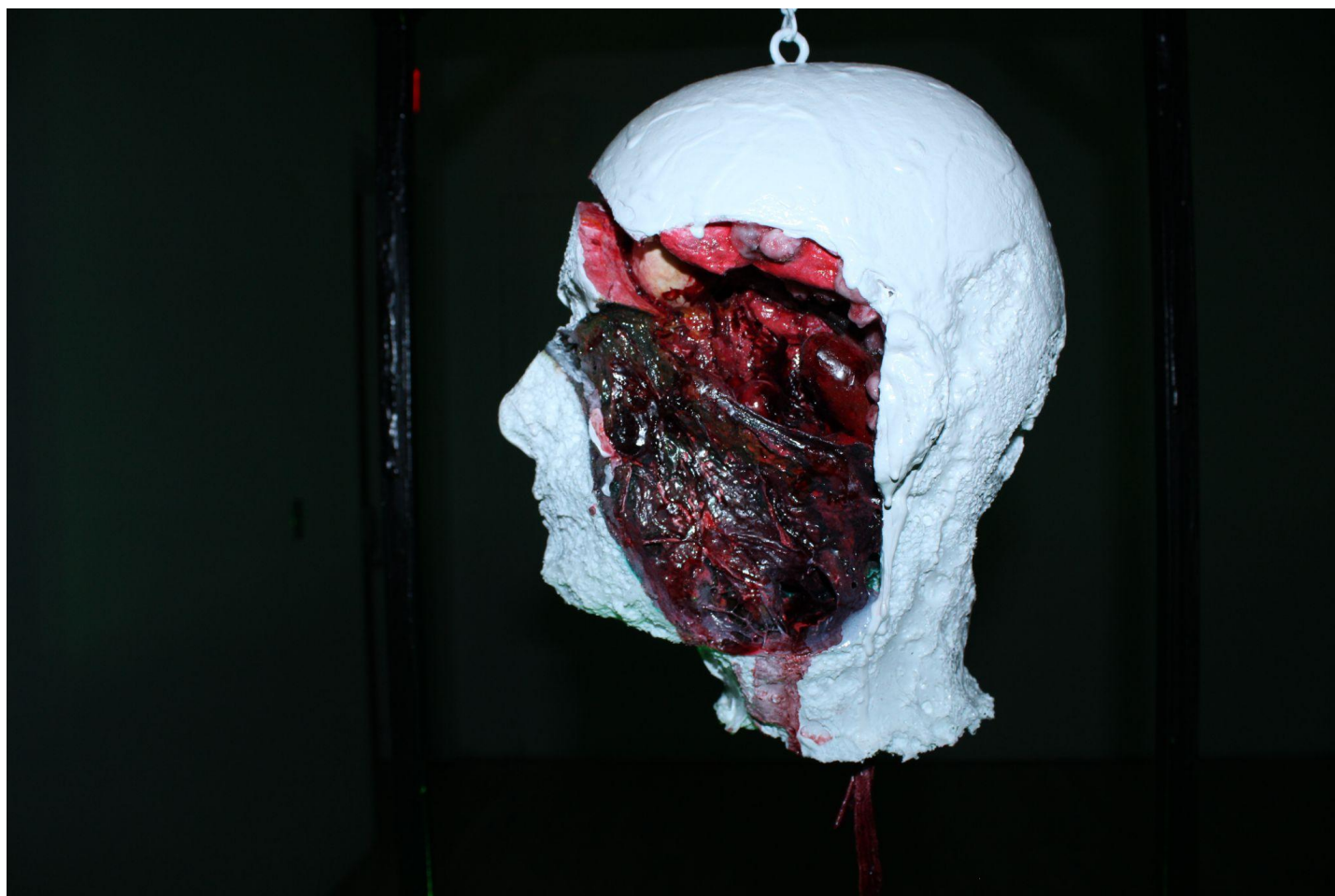
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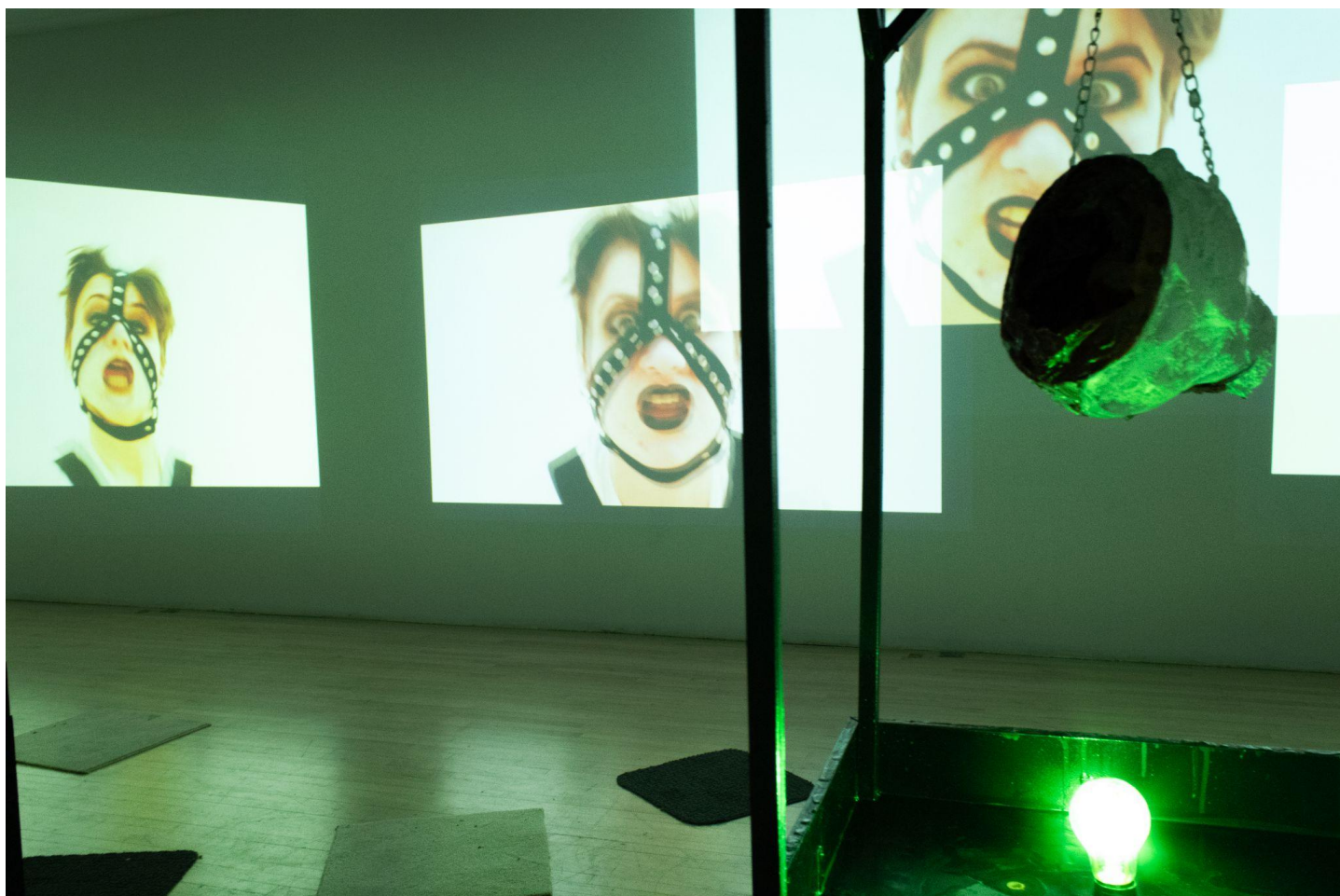


Installation view: *Double Feature: Self Insert and Bad End*, Tjaden Gallery, Cornell University, 2023

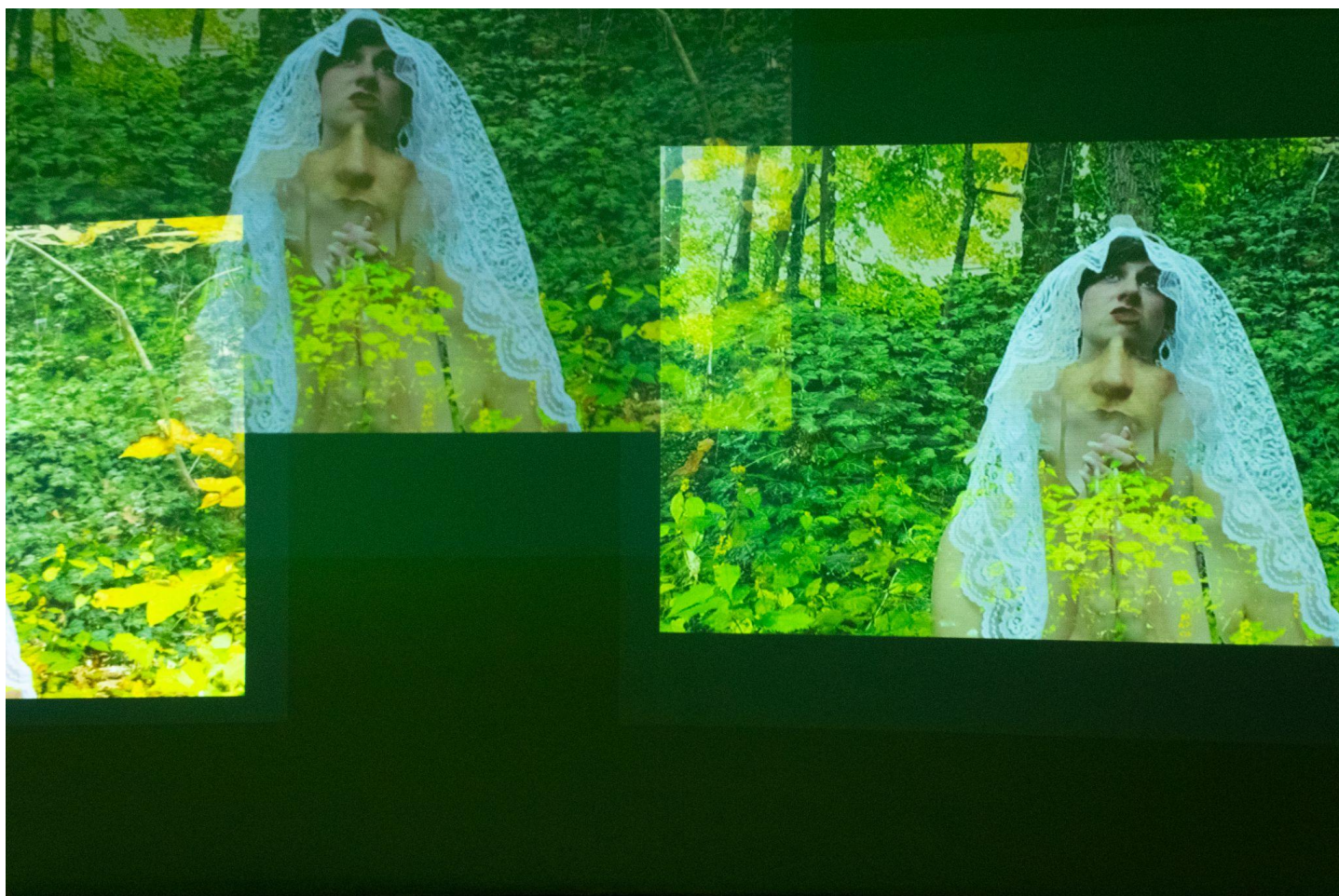
Although the sculptures and stands themselves only stand around six feet tall, their presence in the installation is, indeed, taller still because of the lighting in the room. The overhead gallery lights are off, and the only sources of light come from the stands - their lightbulbs and their projectors. The shadows on the walls display their bars and their heads, in a funhouse distortion of their own physicality. The viewer is invited to sit on the floor like a child in front of the stands - vulnerably exposing one's back to the accusing heads and their homes of black scaffolding. The projections crowd the north wall of Tjaden Gallery, and the characters within the videos are frequently addressing the camera directly, addressing the viewers seated before the stands and sculptures and standing behind them (another popular position for viewers, one that protects vulnerability and allows for noncommittal wandering in and out of the space. Sometimes this is necessary.)



Installation view: *Double Feature: Self Insert and Bad End*, Tjaden Gallery, Cornell University, 2023



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“In the Christian life, the Holy Spirit himself accomplishes his work by mobilizing the whole being, with all its sorrows, fears and sadness, as is visible in the Lord's agony and passion. In Christ human feelings are able to reach their consummation in charity and divine beatitude.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

“A related problem with the iconography of mobility (fluidity) is that sometimes it is merely another word for instability, and instability can cut two ways: its ability to hurt us is as marked as its ability to free us.”

Mari Ruti

“...if the stakes of ‘queer negativity’ do not seem, to its most prominent practitioners, relevant or high it isn’t only because the most zealous combatants inhabit ‘tenured lifeworlds,’ but because the ‘subject’ has already been vacated of any practical psychology—that is, it doesn’t hurt to die.”

Gila Ashtor

“World renowned failure at both death and life
 Given nothingness, purgatory blight
 To run and hide, a cowardly procedure
 Options exhausted, except for anesthesia - anesthesia.”

Type O Negative

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