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SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

SCHOOL OF VISUAL ART

FOR ALL INTENSIVE PURPOSES

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ABSTRACT

My work explores sex as the ultimate tool for both self-discovery and self-destruction. Sexual desire drives human action and evolution. Libido is present from birth, not puberty, and persists until death. Able to swell and deflate in the blink of an eye, libido guides our actions and reacts to our surroundings. Libido not only guides, but also soothes. It opens up interior spaces where nonsense and pleasure flourish, if only momentarily. We age, external demands increase, desires conflict, and libido comes to occupy the increasingly dissonant spaces within our minds.

My work illustrates and superimposes that absurd contradiction atop seemingly mundane sexual situations. These snapshots of absurdity utilize nonsensical humor and a youthful aesthetic to resonate with the viewer's own experience of being pulled simultaneously in many directions. Specifically, my work explores mundane sexual encounters as moments in adult life where the ridiculous and visceral enables us to both merge and split different facets of identity. A body of drawings, photographs, video, and sculpture filled the Patterson Gallery for one week in a show called *For All Intensive Purposes*.

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My Mom, Dad, Brother, Lenore, Red, Uncle Timmy, Aunt Linda, and Emily for their strength, support, and silliness.

Ellie Skrzat, Caroline Hubbell, and Full Ammo Improv for making me cry from laughter.

Divine, Joan Rivers, and David Mitchell. You guys really get it.

Artist Statement

The phrase "there's sand in her vagina" entered my vocabulary at 12 courtesy of prepubescent girl talk: a friend's boyfriend used it as a synonym for "she's a bitch." I wondered, why would someone have sand in her vagina? Had he filled it with sand or discovered it as such? I cobbled my understanding of womanhood from magazines, slumber parties, and moms. To me, the suburban mother was The American Woman: beautiful, fit, rich, well-mannered, and well-adjusted. Mothers gathered at pool parties- tanning, not burning- talking money, boob jobs, the right women, and the wrong women. They were Vanna White and the TV preacher, peddlers of sex and shame, forever walking the line between sexual temptress and neutered nurse. These guardians of country club decorum were always in control- their bodies, their needs, their desires. My chubby, mouth-breathing self felt both shameful and defiant. Unable to conform, I started looking for the cracks. I explore those moments when hypocrisy surfaces, dissonance deafens, and perfection swells to insanity.

My work illustrates the contradiction of reason and desire brought forth by libido. Seemingly mundane situations recall simultaneous feelings of sexual yearning and repulsion. These snapshots of absurdity utilize humor and a youthful aesthetic to resonate with the viewer's own experience of being pulled simultaneously in many directions. I work with markers, paper-mache, video, food, and party goods. The adolescent process of building an ideal of womanhood parallels my building process and informs my material choices. Information comes in bits-and-pieces: cheap mingles with precious; revolting with sensual; soft with sharp. My work evokes

dreams where subconscious evil interjects a warm memory: you wake up, cold, sweaty, unsure of your surroundings, overcome by both fear and a desire to return.

Nightmare is fantasy realized. Desire overpowers, rational structure disintegrates, and frenzied passion washes over us both physically and mentally. Libido, in all its powerful nonsense, crashes into conventional reason. In the wake of this crash, hypocrisies and contradiction surface, and we struggle to make sense of the chaotic psychological flood plane before us. Certainties are uncertainties, desires are grotesque, and attempts to restore hierarchies impossible.

Chapter 1

Freud, Zizek, and the Uncanny

Slavoj Zizek asserts that nightmare is fantasy realized. Over the course of our lives, human beings spend countless hours imagining and reimagining our wildest desires. These fantasies originate from the deepest and oldest parts of our mind. Primordial urges filter through the more highly developed regions of our brain to produce fantasies that are simultaneously elaborate, cerebral, basic, violent, and lustful. No fantasy can exist separately from the hedonistic mind that guided our evolutionary predecessors and continues to guide us today. The inevitable collision between animal and intellectual, id and superego, creates fantasies that, upon realization, shock and horrify us.

The psychological conflict that breeds nightmare begins in childhood. The id houses libido (the desire for sex) and its resulting fantasies. We are born with an id, but our superego develops over time. The id and superego grow with our minds and in relation to one another; dissecting the conflict between them reveals an enormous amount about those internal and external factors that shape us as human beings. As children, our environments teach us that certain aspects of ourselves are inherently wrong. Our superegos develop as we learn to control and suppress those bad thoughts, desires, and urges. Society asks us to be what it believes is “good” and to fulfill many roles simultaneously. We must be girls, siblings, students, and friends, all of which require different attitudes, skills, and behaviors in order to be fulfilled correctly. Recall the “Goofus & Gallant” comics from Highlights Magazine: two adolescent boys are placed in the same situation, but Gallant always does the right thing and Goofus does the

wrong. Gallant is our superego, teaching us the rules of behavior to help us suppress our ids more precisely. As we age and grow sexually, societal demands become more convoluted and severe, and that primal inner conflict between right and wrong is reintroduced, again and again. Even those internal debates that we classify as rational and adult come down to the basic conflict between id and superego that began in infancy. Questions like “should I take this job?” and “do I want to get married?” are, at their root, a basic conflict between hedonistic desires and the societal “should.” We try to mitigate our emotions and make the wise choice, which often means compromising both our superego and id. In doing so, we prevent the id’s fantasies from becoming reality and thereby avoiding nightmare. But in certain instances when fantasy is realized, like in sexual circumstances, the lustful id gets its way and nightmare follows.

The Uncanny

The horrifying materialization of fantasy into reality frames Freud’s understanding of the uncanny. The idea of the uncanny predates Freud, and is defined as “strange or unusual in a way that is surprising or difficult to understand.” Freud narrows this definition in saying the uncanny is a feeling of cognitive dissonance triggered by something simultaneously familiar and unknown. This feeling is not only strange but also fearful and can quickly develop into the stuff of nightmares. Our superego suppresses fantasies in order to protect us from the implication that lust and violence (id) guide all human thought and action. If an object or situation triggers a subconscious recognition of the id, the superego reacts by triggering fear or disgust: we understand this reaction as the uncanny. When fantasies become reality they escape the superego’s control. We come face-to-face with our own id and nightmare ensues.

During sexual encounters, when fantasy does become reality, there is often an overwhelming sense of the uncanny. The superego is overpowered, we give into our id, and the

disturbing internal origin of desire comes into view. Žižek cites as an example those moments during sexual engagement where we become aware of our body, the veils of passion fall away and we become acutely aware of our own body engaging in a seemingly nonsensical physical action. These moments of realization bring the ever-present internal conflict between desire and repulsion into focus.

The uncanny asks us to reevaluate our understanding of reality. It confronts us with the ancient current of psychological filth subconsciously guiding our thoughts and actions. All the violent and sexual absurdity we try so hard to suppress can surface in an instant. One example of this could be the moment of last call at a bar when the lights come on. We spend our evenings looking for a sexual partner; we use flirtation to craft a fantasy of who this person before us is, and create a mental image of them as the perfect partner. Then the lights come on. The illusion before us breaks and we are confronted with the harsh reality that the other person is far from perfect. In that instant, the root motivation for our actions becomes clear: we realize how all-consuming our desire for sexual gratification truly is and are left feeling disgusted. This disgust is the awareness of the ever-present clash between id and superego. Our illusion degrades, and what was once fantasy becomes nightmare. This conflict has always existed and will always exist. It sits in every corner of our mind, and affects our every thought and action until death. The moments when libido overtakes reason allow us to see the absurd and contradictory roles that exist within us.

Chapter 2

Filth and Fantasy in Film

The power of uncanny to shock us into consciousness is especially evident in film. Although a very young artistic medium, film has an unprecedented ability to spark self-reflection across wide audiences. Žižek calls cinema the “ultimate pervert art” because it does not show us what we desire it teaches us *how* to desire. Those desires that we have long suppressed become so distant from our daily consciousness, our egos, that they are almost imperceptible to us on a daily basis. Cinema does not simply show us what we desire, but rather it plays out the process for obtaining those desires. Cinema enacts the lustful fantasies our ids cannot.

When reality becomes too intense or overwhelming our mind fictionalizes it. This is a defense mechanism, a psychological switch designed to protect us from the inevitable nightmare. Cinema replicates this defense by projecting our internal fantasies onto the big screen and thereby fictionalizing them. It places a comfortable distance between us, the viewer, and the projected fantasy. Fantasies exist in film before our eyes at the same time they exist within us in thought. But we are too psychologically fragile to acknowledge that these fantasies exist. Cinema bypasses that fragility by placing the fantasy into a fictional realm and thereby making its horror easier to digest.

Žižek identifies Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* as a prime example of the uncanny and fantasy becoming nightmare. James Stewart stars as Scottie, a retired police officer with vertigo and a fear of heights. His old friend, Gavin Elster, asks Scottie to follow his beautiful wife, Madeleine, who Elster fears has been possessed. Scottie follows Madeleine and saves her after

she dives into the San Francisco bay. They meet and confess their love for one another, but Madeliene runs suddenly up the steps of a bell tower and jumps to her death. The suicide haunts Scottie, until he runs into a woman, Judy Barton, who reminds him of Madeliene. Scottie changes Judy's dress and appearance to become more like Madeliene. He soon realizes that Gavin paid Judy to impersonate a possessed Madeliene, who he killed for her money. Scottie drives Judy to the bell tower and demands her confession. Judy admits to faking the suicide and begs Scotty to forgive her. They embrace and a nun rises suddenly from a trapdoor, which startles Judy who steps backward and falls from the ledge.

Zizek focuses on the moment that Scottie and Judy embrace as the pivotal moment of transformation from fantasy to reality to nightmare. Scottie holds an image in his mind of who Madeliene is. He obsessively recounts details of her appearance –her hair, profile, suit- and replicates them exactly in Judy. Upon their embrace, Scottie is not so engaged with the realization of that fantasy so much as the setting around him; he looks around as if to check if it was really happening. This is the uncanny moment, the moment of nightmare. Everything looks and feels so familiar yet completely unknown. His fantasy, although exact in appearance, is completely hollow. Scottie examines the scenery around him to verify that the coordinates of his fantasy align with his reality. They do, but he is dissatisfied, then horrified. The awful essence of his fantasy –bringing a dead woman back to life- becomes clear and terrifies him. This psychological horror manifests itself when Judy falls to her death. His fantasy became reality and then became nightmare.

Nightmare in cinema is not necessarily horror. Sometimes filmmakers walk the line between outrageous entertainment and the uncanny nightmare. John Waters is one of those filmmakers. In his 1972 film *Pink Flamingos*, Waters takes real life archetypes and pushes their

characteristics into the bizarre, hilarious, sadistic, and disgusting. The protagonist, Divine, is the self-proclaimed “filthiest person alive” who lives with her mentally ill mother Edie, son Crackers, and friend Cotton. Divine feuds with a married couple, Connie and Raymond Marbles, who run a black market baby ring and claim to be filthier than her. They try to “out filth” one another, culminating in Divine shooting the Marbles after they burn her mobile home. Waters bases the characters on TV and movie archetypes, but pushes them to such an extreme that they are simultaneously engaging and repulsive. Waters uses humor to unlock our ids. He gets us laughing then pushes the situation to such an extreme that we, the viewers, catch ourselves delighting in something truly repulsive. For example, in one scene the Marbles walk in on their assistant, Channing, dressing up in Connie’s clothing and repeating her idioms to himself in the mirror. At first his clownish makeup and juvenile imitations seem funny and silly. The Marbles’ over-the-top reaction upon catching him is also entertaining in its hyperbole. But our laughter turns to sadness, fear, and disgust when their scolding becomes increasingly cruel and unrelenting. Channing begins to cry and they lock him in a closet. Waters turns the mirror towards us, and we catch ourselves laughing at someone else’s pain and brutal humiliation.

Chapter 3

For All Intensive Purposes: Fantasy Realized

The work in *For All Intensive Purposes* explored the aforementioned themes through a variety of mediums: drawing, sculpture, photography, painting, and video all had a place in the show. This diversity of medium enabled me to explore similar concepts in a variety of ways without feeling restricted. Process shaped the pieces both physically and conceptually as they developed, but concept dictated the initial choice of medium.



Figure 1: *Bak 2 Skool*. Markers, gouache, 18"x24", 2014.

I have always felt most comfortable expressing myself creatively through drawing, so when beginning a new body of work I typically begin with two dimensional lines. The drawing *Bak 2 Skool* in Fig. 1 was the first drawing I did for the show and shows my initial investigation of the themes and aesthetics that would become more pronounced in later work. The psychedelic color palette resulted from a return to a favorite medium from my childhood: markers. I enjoy using markers not only for their bold colors but also for their simplicity and predictability of line. The ink goes where it's told and looks on the paper as it does in the packaging. These physical characteristics parallel the minds of young children: bright and exuberant, childhood thought patterns are very much informed by environmental influences; children are often honest and blunt, and transparent in their motivations, desires, and attitudes. This drawing was my first attempt at visually communicating emotional or psychological transparency. I provided x-ray glimpses into certain objects and obscured others. Layers of obscurity and transparency are juxtaposed, and nonsense bumps into reason.



Figure 2: *Cockpit, or Otto Takes His Midlife Crisis to Work and Doesn't Tell His Wife*. Markers, gouache, 18"x24", 2014.

Figure 2 takes the idea of transparency and applies it to more specific, sexual interactions. In this drawing, the cockpit is a metaphor for Freud's understanding of the mind. I impose a rigid network of solid line atop bright, unpredictable washes of color. The figures blend these two styles and represent a sexual ego trying to retain balance. The bodies are odd and disproportionate- their features flatten against one another and merge with the surrounding architecture. The main human figures are distorted, anonymous, and energetic, while the onlookers appear more timid and in greater detail. The colorful network of line asserts itself with childlike pride, and attempts to contain the corporeal sexual energy within. These drawings use

uncanny imagery to disarm the viewer and parallel the dissonance one sometimes feels during sexual encounters.



Figure 3: Still from *Untitled (Hot Dog Contest)*. Digital video, 2014.

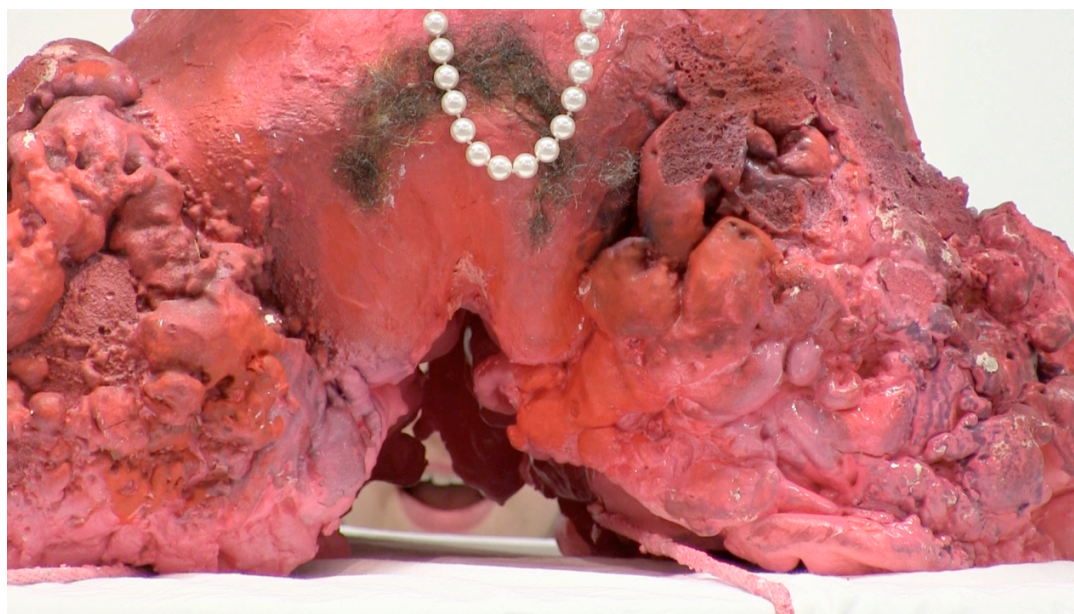


Figure 4: Still from *Downtown*. Digital video, 2014.

Figures 3 and 4 expand the uncanny into the third and fourth dimensions. This video work deals more with the sexual persona and power relationships between lovers and within our own minds. Both video and photography provided me the opportunity to use my own body as a tool with which to create disturbing and at times humorous abstractions of sex as I understand it. The video pieces use symbology from my drawings in the form of found objects and objects fabricated specifically for video. These few key items -jewelry, hair, hot dogs- become props with which to explore the physical limits of my body. Both *Untitled (Hot Dog Contest)* and *Downtown* investigate identity and intrapersonal conflict. The sculpture depicts a persona I have dubbed Miss Bellefonte. She is the physical embodiment of my warped perceptions of the physically and sexually ideal woman. I interact with her in ways that mirror the internal conversations I have with myself regarding, especially in relation to the female body. These pieces draw again on Freudian ideas of the uncanny and separations between ego, superego, and id.

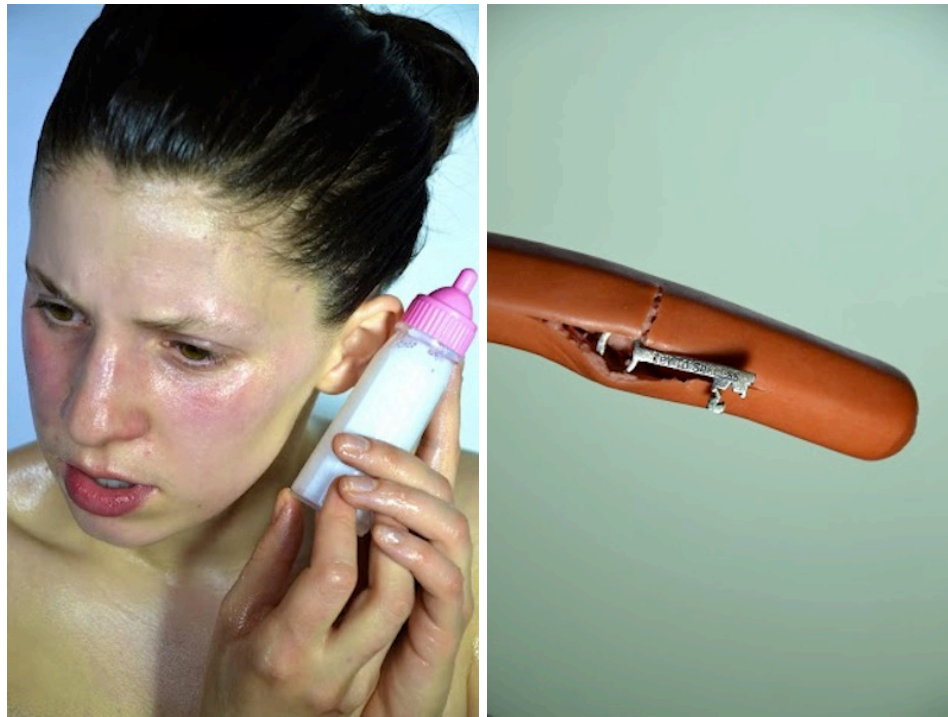


Figure 5: *Jodie Foster*. Digital photographs, 2014.

This sense of the uncanny continues in the photography collaboration with Ellie Skrzat, a Schreyer student studying Drawing & Painting. This series of photographs, entitled *Party Favors*, utilize objects from daily life to blur the line between body and prop. Drawing on the aesthetics of a sad, cheap party, the photographs explore identity within the context of the Party, a space that can be both sexually empowering and exploitative. Exploring issues of body politics, the objects serve as stand-ins for the sexually engaged body, and question the often subconscious tendency to objectify the body. The photographs are displayed and name in pairs. This not only eludes sexual relationships involving two people, but also creates space between the two images, which allows them to engage in a compelling dialogue with one another and their viewer. For example, in *Jodie Foster*, both the baby bottle and hot dog appear as phallic objects, but juxtapose one another in strength and direction. Paired together the photographs have a quick vertical rise and followed by a sloping descent that echoes the emotional arc of certain

relationships. The titles are nonsensical and often reference personal experiences, but their content is universal in its exploration of the psychosexual experience.



Figure 6: *Untitled*. Digital photograph, 2014.

The untitled photograph in Figure 6 is my interpretation of Lynda Benglis' advertisement in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*. The ad, depicting a naked Benglis wearing nothing but sunglasses and brandishing a double dildo, garnered mixed responses when it was first released. Many found it degenerative and exploitive, with numerous female artists and art critics claiming the image was a "kinky stunt" that exposed Benglis' lack of confidence in herself as both an artist and woman. In this photograph I play Benglis, whose phallus has been replaced by a party horn and grapes. My "art dick" is both small and impotent, and attempts to emulate artists of the past often fall short. The image of my body becomes a representation of both my work and self-image: does the work use art history and humor as a crutch? And does this crutch extend into my

life as a woman whose accomplishments rest on the false laurels of attempts at humor and sexual enticement?



Figure 7: Detail of *This Land is Your Land*. Paper-mâché, vinyl tablecloths, acrylic paint, found objects, candy, sand, clay, mixed media, 2.5' x 6', 2014.

The sculptural center piece of the show is the piece *This Land is Your Land*, a detail of which is pictured in Figure 7. The piece is my interpretation of a beer pong table where viewers shoot Ping-Pong balls into several “cups” at the each end of the tables: the only instructions given are “shoot the balls into the holes” and “winners keep playing”. In this “game” the rules are simple but the outcome is uncertain. The rules assume a winner, which implies a “loser”- this draws on human competitive urges that arise even when the goals are unclear. These cups are embedded within a landscape of hills and valleys covered in candies, bubbles, mousetraps, hair, cigarettes, ribbons, tickets, dinosaurs, army men, and clay skulls. This wide array of materials

creates a surreal landscape where the delightful and cheap appear simultaneously playful, sad and disgusting. Viewers shoot balls towards the cave-like cups, and, after inevitably failed attempts to sink them, are forced to physically touch and survey the landscape. With each failed attempt viewers discover more hidden aspects of the landscapes, some of which may appear humorous while others seem unpleasant or dangerous. Initially the piece reads as an exaggerated children's game, but as it is played reveals itself as a stand-in for both the American landscape and the human body. The viewer violates this landscape in their desire to "win."



Figure 8: Installation shot of *For All Intensive Purposes*, Patterson Gallery, 2014.



Figure 9: Installation shot of *For All Intensive Purposes*, Patterson Gallery, 2014.



Figure 10: Installation shot of *For All Intensive Purposes*, Patterson Gallery, 2014.

Conclusion

Art prompts self-discovery. By seeing ourselves reflected in a piece of art – visual art, film, music, etc. - we question our behaviors, attitudes, and the society that helped shape them.

This body of work and the research that informed it asked me to look at myself as a woman, a sexual being, a consumer, and an animal. I attempted to embed the work with questions that led to my better understanding of self, and I hope the work prompts similar questions in others

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ACADEMIC VITA

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Education: Penn State University, Schreyer Honors College Paterno Fellow.
B.A. History & B.F.A. Sculpture

Employment

- *Duck Duck Go.* Dec. 2011- Aug. 2012. Paoli, PA.
 - DDG is a start-up search engine. Led presentations and sought connections with potential interested people/companies.
 - Day-to-day office administration; miscellaneous accounting/ research
- Ask Big Questions fellow. Aug. 2013- Jun. 2014. State College, PA.
 - Organize civil discourse amongst small groups of students
 - Trained at national Hillel institute about dialogue facilitation, using social media to inspire social change, and how to enhance listening skills
- Philadelphia VIP. May 2010- Aug. 2010. Philadelphia, PA.
 - Day-to-day office administration for pro bono law office
 - Participate in housing authority trials

Creative Experience

- IES Abroad Granada creative blogger
- 8 weeks painting a State College community mural, 2010
- "Indigenous Knowledge: Knowing Who 'We Are'" 2012
- Juried Undergraduate Show, 2011
- Juried Undergraduate Show, 2013
- Solo "For All Intensive Purposes" art show, 2014
- "Stop, Collaborate and Listen" 2014
- "Stop, Collaborate and Listen" performance and video show, with artist Q&A

Leadership Opportunities

- Secretary of Full Ammo Improv comedy troupe, 2013-2014
- Founder president of "The Leftist Symposium" political discussion group, 2009-2012
- Representative in monthly debates led by the Political Science Club, 2009-2011
- Penn State representative to United Students Without Sweatshops conference 2010.

- Speaks to COMM 110 (media and democracy) on a semester basis about social activism 2009-2011
- Invited panel speaker hosted by the Communications department about the Occupy movement, 2011
- Co-organizer of Occupy Penn State. Responsibilities included running nightly General Assembly, 2011
- Vice President of Young Democratic Socialists, Penn State chapter 2010-2011

Grants and Awards

- Phi Beta Kappa
- 2011, Recipient of Discovery Grant, to research, write, and draw a graphic novel about women in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia
- Member of Phi Alpha Theta, History Honors Society
- 2012, Liberal Arts Enrichment award
- 2012, Stelts and Fillipelli Scholarship
- Dean's list Spring 2010, Fall 2010, Spring 2011, Fall 2011, Spring 2012, Fall 2012, Spring 2013, Fall 2013

Additional Experience/Skills

- Speaks Spanish
- Nannyng/babysitting experience
- May-August 2010, intern for Philadelphia Volunteers for the Indigent
- 2012, travel writer for MADbudget, an online travel guide featured in Nat Geo Spring 2012. Study abroad Granada, Spain