

This Rose is Not a Rose

Alicia Eler

It's a typical occurrence these days: Casually browsing through Instagram, one happens upon a tiny square image in the moving stream that easily sparks new threads of contemplation. My friend and colleague, the emerging artist/writer Brannon Rockwell-Charland, photographed a rose that someone discarded on the sidewalk, and posted it to Instagram. We commented back and forth about the possible backstory of this rose - who might have owned it? did they leave it there by accident or did they angrily throw it? is it a remnant of innocence lost or a lover scorned? Of course we didn't know the answer to these questions—all we had was the evidence that this rose no longer belonged to anyone. It was public property, the sidewalk its only home. Its meaning was an open book of petals.

For Chicago-based artist Catherine Forster, the rose is a repeatedly referenced symbol. Her work looks at the feminine periods of transition - from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to womanhood. She is inspired by the transitions she's witnessed in her three daughters. When her middle daughter came out as trans, Forster had to rethink everything she thought she knew about femininity.

In her exhibition ME NOT at the Rymer Gallery in Nashville, Tennessee, Forster unveils 32 drawings as part of her ongoing series "cactus, flower, f%#k-off, love, roses," which will total to more than 50 individual works of art. The drawings are accompanied by her video "Me Not,"



Untitled #30, 2014

Me Not



ME NOT, video still, 2014

in addition to an open invitation to pluck needles from a cactus, stripping away their protective spines.

In the suite of 32 graphite, watercolor, highlighter and colored pencil drawings on paper, Forster works in a surrealistic manner, melding abstracted body parts in freely associative ways. She is exploring femininity beyond the biological, and what we as humans do to our bodies to conform, transform, and imagine ideas of the feminine based around external forces such as the media, affirmations from friends, loves, family, and other social cultural mirrors.

Forster takes the title for this ongoing drawing series "cactus, flower, f%#k-off, love, roses" from the tags found with the quote: "Roses may say 'I love you,' but the cactus says 'Fuck-off'" by J. Kintz, which she discovered on the site GoodReads—the Yelp of literature, where anyone can write their own book review.

Elsewhere on the Question-and-answer site Quora, I happened upon a thread that discusses the meaning of Gertrude Stein's famous line from the poem *Sacred Emily*: "a rose is a rose is a rose." It's one of those lines heard mentioned in passing, taken out of its original context and, like so many literary phrases today, thrown into conversations because it's become familiar. Lisa Kathryn Perry, a person on Quora [<http://www.quora.com/What-is-the-hidden-meaning-of-A-rose-is-a-rose-is-a-rose>],



Untitled #42, 2014

writes her interpretation of this line in a post: "What Gertrude Stein is saying, strip away all memory, all presumption and see this rose, smell it, touch it, taste it if you will and if you are very lucky listen carefully and hear each petal move . . . and this first time, this first experience is and is and is and is."

This subtle interpretation calls to mind Forster's delicate reimagining of the rose in relation to the fierce cactus. In Forster's interactive cactus plucking at the Rymer Gallery, she asks people to BYOC (bring your own cactus) and pluck off its spine with the other participants. Naturally, one attempts to avoid the violence of these needles. More likely they will get pierced, and bleed for what feels like the first time.

This is not the young girl tearing petals off a flower, reciting to oneself "he loves me, he loves me not." This is the painful removal of the ingrained sharpness of a gender binary. Forster is slowly plucking away the patriarchy until it becomes nothing but a phallus hung up to dry, like the limp cactus devoid of its spines.

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Writer: Alicia Eler is a writer, art critic and culture journalist based in Los Angeles. Her work is published work in *The Guardian UK*, *Hyperallergic*, *Artforum.com*, *Art Papers* and *Art21*.

Catherine Forster

Catherine Forster is an artist, filmmaker, and independent curator based in the Chicago area. She received an M.F.A from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her artwork has been shown at the Notebaert Museum (Chicago), Flint Institute of Art, Carnegie Art Museum, Grand Rapids Art Museum, South Bend Regional Art Museum, The Rymer Gallery (Nashville), Contemporary Art Centre (Vilnius, Lithuania), Brick City Gallery Missouri State University, Merwin Gallery Illinois Wesleyan University, Freewaves (Los Angeles), San Diego Art Institute, Llewellyn Gallery Alfred State College NY, City of Louisville Colorado Sculpture Garden, Orange County Contemporary Art Center, Exit Art (NY), and the Hyde Park Art Center (Chicago), to name a few. Films have been screened at the Sao Paul International Short Film Festival, Krakow International Short Film Festival, Currents Santa Fe International New Media Festival, Magmart Film Festival Casoria International Contemporary Art Museum (Italy), East LA International Film Festival, the Great Lakes International Film Festival, Chicago REEL Short Film Festival, the Other Venice Film Festival (CA), Ecotrope New Media Arts Festival (Omaha), Simultan Media Arts Festival (Romania), Echo Park Film Center (Los Angeles), Directors Lounge (Berlin), and San Diego International Women Film Festival. Forster is also the founder and director of LiveBox, a roving gallery focused on new-media art

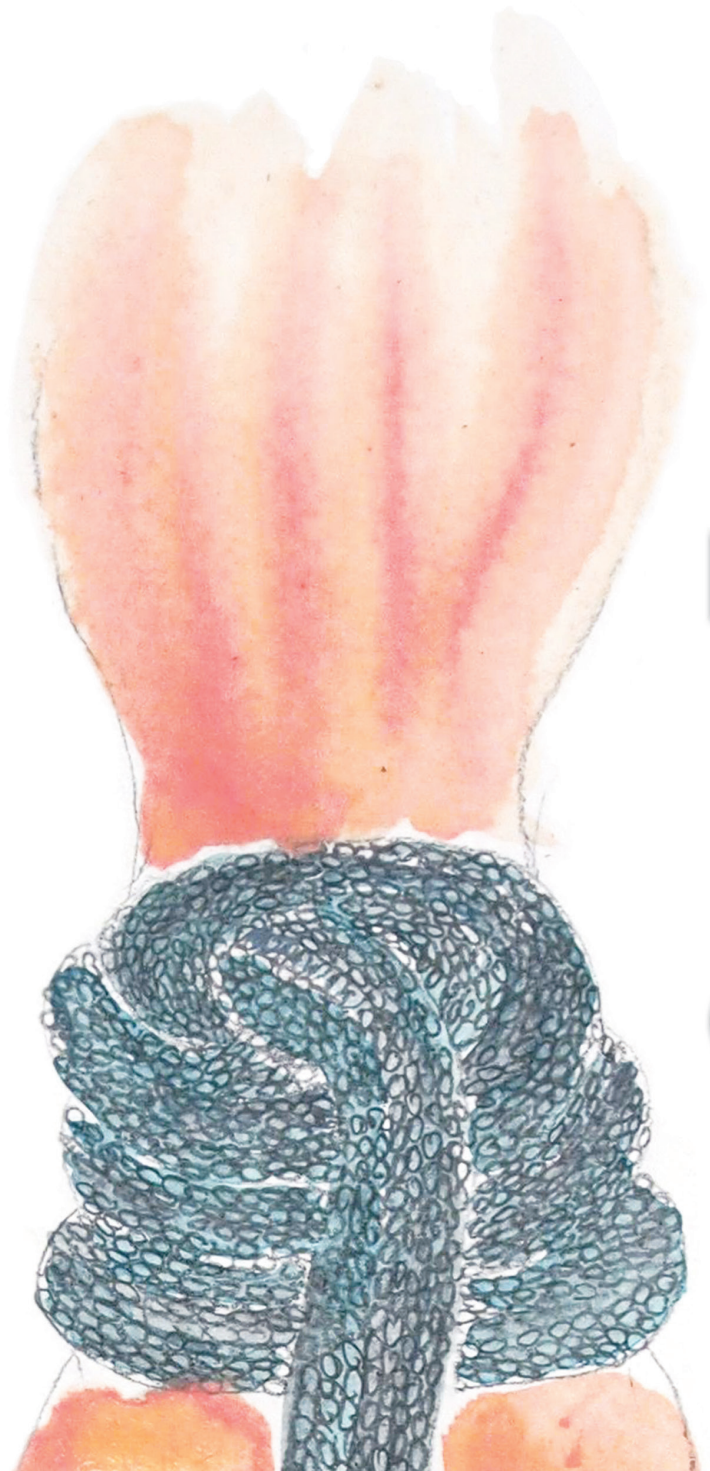


Untitled # 43, 2014

"Me Not" and "cactus, flower, f%#k-off, love, roses" drawings exhibited at the San Diego Art Institute April 18 - May 30, 2015. For more information about the artist contact The Rymer Gallery, 233 5th Ave North, Nashville, TN 37219, (615) 752-6030, theymergallery.com, or view the artist website - catforster.com



Untitled # 26 | The Rymer Gallery, Nashville, TN | June 6 - 30, 2015



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