

PRACTICES / PRATIQUES

Pretty Ugly:

*Toward
a Joyful*

*Vision of
Disfigurement*

/Grace Athena Flott/

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Body liberation is the fundamental motivation for my work as a painter. I am fascinated by myths of normalcy and social constructions of health, beauty, and gender within the global North and especially the United States. As a kid who grew up in white suburban America, I was raised to strive toward normalcy in all its forms until I went through a major fire-related injury that disrupted my identity as able-bodied and placed my body firmly outside mainstream media norms. I realized then that I did not see myself—a cis-woman with visible disfigurement and chronic pain—or “imperfect” bodies like mine portrayed in film, television, the arts, or news as anything but a harmful stereotype. Through painting, printmaking, and installation I unearth and celebrate stories of body variation. In artistic practice, I am especially drawn to stories that are written on the surface of and about the body, which I often represent through the figure or narrative still life. While realism in oil painting is my primary visual language, my lexicon also includes surrealistic pictorial space and abstract patterns created by printing textures directly from my own body. I trust the body as a primary source in the search to uncover our cultural narratives for many different social hierarchies that rely on binaries such as abled/disabled, grotesque/beautiful, broken/healthy, and victim/survivor. My work is about revealing the origins of these stories and creating spaces where bodies like mine are empowered and autonomous.

As asserted by author Ann Millett-Gallant, our notions of ourselves are formed with and against other bodies.¹ My practice allows me to explore the shifting nature of this performance from the position of living with a visible difference but also within a broader context of presenting as “other.” I employ symbols and signs that communicate this external performance of identity while also elevating the status of my subjects, largely folks with subaltern identities. However, I reject the traditional artist-subject power relationship common to Western art-historical portraiture and instead prioritize reciprocal relationships rooted in consent. I am aware that my specific community, folks impacted by burn injuries, experiences toxic staring, so I take inspiration from feminist disability scholars by inviting subjects in as collaborators and participants in a co-creative process.²

I acknowledge my own internalized normative gaze and offer opportunities for models to have more directorial control over the artwork in multiple ways. For example, I prioritize ongoing dialogue with each model in addition to recording an interview wherein we discuss questions such as: what is it like to navigate the world in this body? What language or terms do you prefer to describe your experience with scars? How does having visible (or invisible) body differences overlap with other parts of your identity, and how would you like to see this experience portrayed in artwork and media broadly? The interviews remain largely unedited and are accessible alongside each painting during exhibitions to offer direct insight into the lived experience of each subject. I also incorporate their artistic vision, including specific colors, poses, and lighting, and they retain final approval of the preliminary compositional study. Each model may elect to make a direct contribution by making relief prints directly from their own scars, patterns which I then screen print into the portraiture. The result is a slow art, built only as quickly as our relationship—sometimes over years. It is a process of witnessing each other; my painting of them is a document of our relationship as much as it is a visual record of the individual.

In my work, I am responding to historic and current disparities in representation by co-creating alongside my burn community, a group positioned at the crux of disability, gender, and racial environmental justice. An important context for me is the recognition that the portrayal and treatment of folks with visible differences is directly linked to the legacy of what are colloquially known as the Ugly Laws, a nineteenth-century wave of city ordinances



/fig. 1/ Grace A. Flott, *Amalgamation*, 2022. Acrylic ink on tulle, 152 x 610 cm.
Collection of the artist, Seattle, WA. Photo: Courtesy of the artist. (previous page)

across the US that banned poor people and people with disfigurements from being seen in public.³ Today, this bias is replicated in a multitude of systems, for example, by social media companies that allow algorithms to flag images of folks with facial differences as “graphic or violent” and deactivate their accounts.⁴ In this context, every time I publish or exhibit my work—on and off-line—I am educating the public about disfigurement. In online spaces, I share relevant images of my work in solidarity with movements for equal representation of facial difference and visible difference by employing hashtags such as #iamnotyourvillain, a campaign slogan from the UK-based non-profit Changing Faces,⁵ or I repurpose the hashtag #scarstoyourbeautiful, the title of a song by Canadian pop musician Alessia Cara. Simply being present and inserting my art into ongoing campaigns or cultural dialogue on social media is an advocacy work and emotional labor that I consider an integral part of my artistic practice.

Woven together, my paintings, printmaking and community-based projects transmute the erasure and reduction of my identity and invite viewers to find wholeness and healing in forms that we consider broken and scarred. In these wounds, I plant seeds with color, pattern, and storytelling that may ultimately grow into joy and belonging for all bodies.

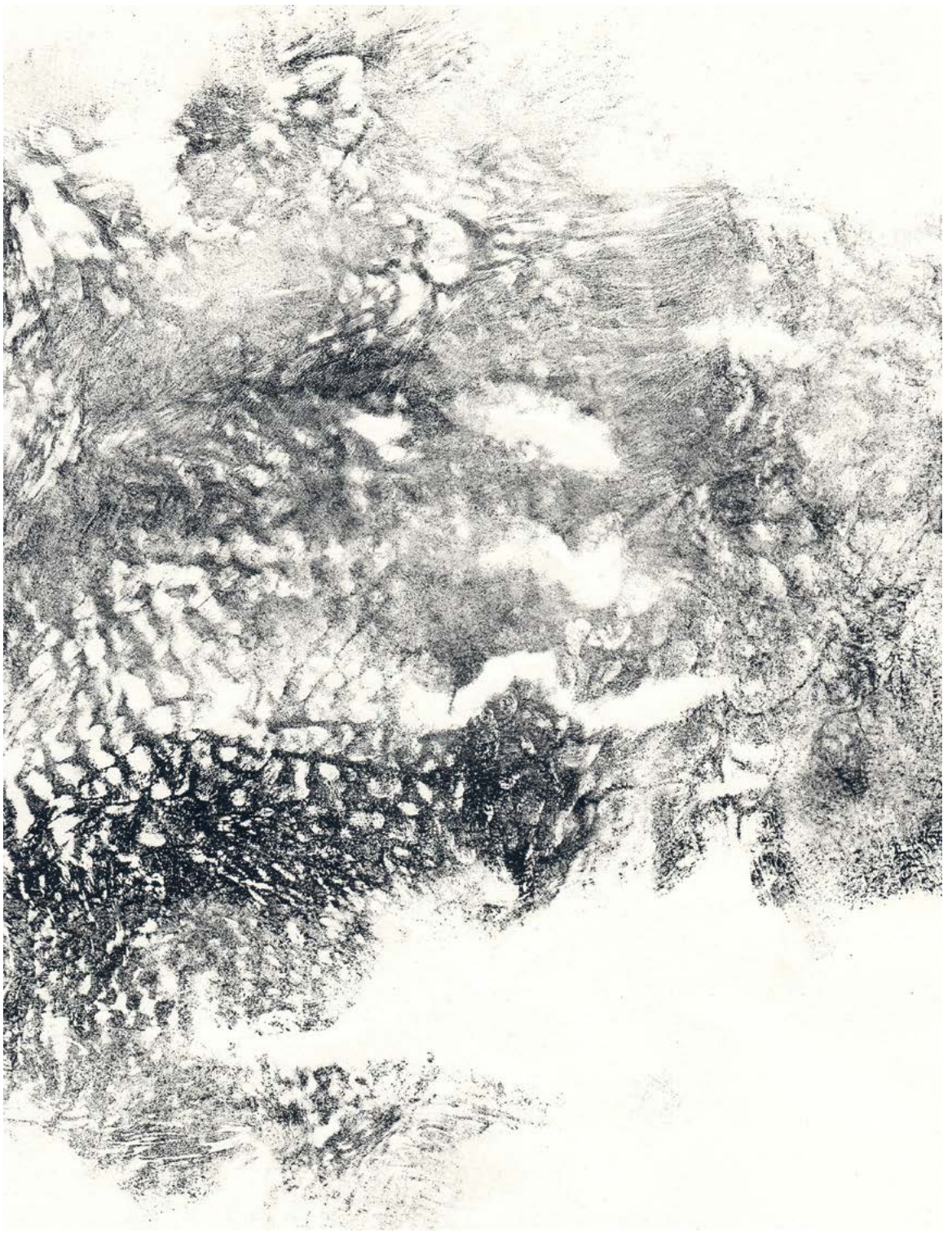
1 Ann Millett-Gallant, *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

2 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

3 Adrienne Phelps Coco, “Diseased, Maimed, Mutilated: Categorizations of Disability and an Ugly Law in Late Nineteenth-Century Chicago,” *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 1 (2010): 23–37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40802107>.

4 Molly Longman, “AI and Humans Are Making Life & Dating Online Harder for Burn Survivors,” *Refinery 29*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2023/04/11313664/tiktok-bumble-censorship-burn-survivors>.

5 “I Am Not Your Villain: Representing Disfigurements in Film,” *Changing Faces*, <https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/i-am-not-your-villain/>.



/fig. 2/ Grace A. Flott, *Scar Print #2 (left arm)*, 2022. Oil-based ink on paper, 22.8 x 30.5 cm. Collection of the artist, Seattle, WA. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



/fig. 3/ Grace A. Flott, *Statue of Liberation (Portrait of Tonya)*, 2023.
Oil and acrylic on aluminum panel, 76.2 x 101.6 cm. Collection of Port of Seattle, Seattle, WA.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

/fig. 4/ Grace A. Flott, Detail of *Statue of Liberation (Portrait of Tonya)*, 2023.
Oil and acrylic on aluminum panel, 76.2 x 101.6 cm. Collection of Port of Seattle, Seattle, WA.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.





/fig. 5/ Grace A. Flott, *Glow Up (Portrait of Alizé)*, 2021. Oil on aluminum panel, 50.8 x 55.9 cm. Collection University of Washington Medicine, Seattle, WA. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



/fig. 6/ Grace A. Flott, *New Monuments (Self-portrait Triptych)*, 2021.
Oil on three wood panels, 60.9 x 147.3 cm. Private collection, Washington, DC.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



/fig. 7/ Grace A. Flott, *Let it Shine (Portrait of Kari)*, 2023. Oil on aluminum panel, 66 x 66 cm. Collection of the artist, Seattle, WA. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

/fig. 8/ Grace A. Flott, Detail of *Let it Shine (Portrait of Kari)*, 2023. Oil on aluminum panel, 66 x 66 cm. Collection of the artist, Seattle, WA. Photo: Courtesy of the artist. (next page)

