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An Artistic Exploration of Contemporary Online Courtship

by

Kenzie Housego

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
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Abstract

This paper traces how my multi-media art practice explores contemporary courtship by investigating past and present modes of behaviour related to dating rituals. By using a research-creation methodological approach, my textile-based practice combines technological components to engage audiences in a dialogue with artworks based on gathered experiences of love and dating online. This body of work investigates the conveyed meanings of emojis, texts, and sexts, while juxtaposing historical and contemporary visual symbology to draw parallels or find differences between methods of signalling attraction through display. This study seeks to highlight how romantic communication, conducted and transmitted via screens and on digital platforms, can be interpreted or misinterpreted between potential partners. Given that romantic exchanges in digital culture are therefore processed through technology and appear as symbols and codes which may or may not be successfully communicated, I aim to understand this phenomenon through created experiences which examine facets of 21st century courtship.

Contemporary online courtship employs new and unprecedented mechanisms for connecting with potential romantic partners, theoretically enhancing the chance of finding true love (if that is the goal). This paper details the development of , a five part series of investigatory electronic and textile new media artworks that analyze digital courtship behaviours, probing their historical Victorian-era roots, while examining how they both break from these traditions and reinvent contemporary online dating romance. The combination of historical and contemporary, symbolically-laden, modes of visual communication uncover various facets of 21st century romance including: its relationship to technology, online self-representation, communication, gender tropes, and historical and contemporary signs and signifiers connected to notions of romance and courtship texts.

These artworks leverage technology through embedded electronic sensors, LED light displays, and texting with programmed artwork chatbots. The audience is invited to engage with the artworks in a dialectical relationship. The outcome of this audience participation is intended to produce a deeper understanding of contemporary dating through a relational approach via these technological tools. Viewers shift from passive observers of the artworks to active

co-producers as they utilize digital media to express their ideas while experiencing other points of view, and ultimately, form their own individual meanings.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, original work by the author, K. Housego.

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Dedication

For all the lonely hearts.

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Selected Exhibition History

Housego, K. (March 2018) “Frills and Furbelows” (University of Calgary, Gallery 621)

Housego, K. (August 2019) “Courtship Rituals” (University of Calgary, The Arnett Gallery)

Housego, K. (November 2019) “Primary Floriography” (University of Calgary, The Arnett Gallery)

Appendix A

Appendix A: Housego, K. (2020) *Contemporary Courtship Questionnaire*

Appendix B

Appendix B: Housego, K. (2020) *Questionnaire Data and Artwork Integration*

Introduction

“... [H]e’d messaged Nahid, who kept texting him body parts and who now wanted to schedule a date....Nahid texted him back a [purple devil emoji] and then an [angel emoji]—maybe meaning she was angry but ultimately a trooper? Or he was in hell and she was in heaven? He didn’t know. That stupid [purple devil emoji] was everywhere. What did it mean? What was being communicated?” (Brodesser-Akner, 2019, p. 95)



The passage above from Taffy Brodesser-Akner’s novel *Fleishman is in Trouble* wonderfully captures the miscommunication that commonly occurs within the confusing landscape of 21st century online dating, or ‘contemporary courtship’ as I refer to it throughout this paper.

The focus of this research-creation project examines contemporary courtship communication, online representation, and its relationship to historical modes of romantic rituals. I explore these relationships through visual symbology, digital adornment, and the screen within the context of new media and textile art. As a multidisciplinary artist working in a Neo-baroque aesthetic, my practice includes a combination of materials including fibre, new media, sculpture, and assemblage. I often mix and match art-making methods and techniques within each piece, working, at times, in detailed hand-embroidery and, at other times, in assemblage and sculptural effects. I rely on contemporary technologies to create my work, from digital embroidery and sewing machines to laser cutters guided by computer-coded programming. My works incorporate decor from found objects while also selecting mediums that communicate my observations regarding courtship and technology.

Aesthetically, the term “Neo-baroque” best exemplifies the stylistic use of excess, ornamentation, drama, and spectacle to conjure feelings related to romantic love and courtship present within my art. As curator Lena Vigna (2013) describes it, “Neo-baroque” is a contemporary expression of “excess and lavishness, the decorative or the ornamental, and the theatrical,” while noting that artists working in the Neo-baroque style use a variety of mediums to “explore luxury, excess, consumption, artificiality, illusion, fantasy, beauty, and the grotesque” (p. 1). For me, this description resonates with my art stylistically, borrowing symbols associated

with the feminine such as pearls, lace and flowers, the dramatic quality of gender (relations/performance) that occurs in dating is explicitly communicated. The complex and alluring quality of Neo-baroque is transmitted through a theatrical display of new media in my work, with a montage of historical and contemporary symbols, both subtle and overt. This new iteration of the Baroque style is well-matched to describe the highly emotional subject of contemporary dating, which I examine and explore. Just as the Baroque was an age of aesthetic excess, so too do we find ourselves in an age of digital excess.

The use of technology such as LEDs, micro-controllers, texting, and screens within my research is symbolic of the digital and virtual realms in which we participate as a society. The virtual encompasses social media platform (SMP) activity, online personas, online dating, and online branding. The digital world has become ubiquitous in communication, constantly shaping contemporary society, particularly in relation to online representation. In my art practice there is a tendency to focus on the more feminine aspects of representation on SMPs such as, the prevalence of materials with historical craft or ‘minor art’ associations including lace, doilies, flower arrangements, and pearls, signifying the feminine ideal associated with “women’s work” and often historically relegated to the domestic sphere. The blending of symbolism through materials enables me to visually comment on aspects of these binary identities, ie. the online and the “off-line” self. The visual languages I have developed also reflect the excess of the digitally connected contemporary world I live in. It acknowledges the lineage between history and the present, while illuminating craft techniques, soft materials and depictions of the feminine in contrast to online representations.


The culminating body of work synthesized by my research-creation praxis,  , and discussed throughout this paper, was exhibited in September 2021 at EMMEDIA Gallery and Production Society, an artist-run centre located in Calgary, Alberta.  featured five textile-based new media artworks, which reference large scale embroidery hoops. All of the artworks contain digital components such as electronic light emitting diodes (LEDs) and some include programmed applications known as “chatbots” used to conduct real time online communication. Chatbots are designed to convincingly simulate the way a human would respond in a conversation via a trained artificial intelligence (AI) program.

Each artwork explores a specific facet of contemporary courtship, including the role of technology, the impact of online representation, communication tactics, and finally historical and contemporary signs and signifiers connected to notions of romance and dating texts. Throughout the series, I analyze contemporary dating by drawing parallels between romantic communication symbology, tactics, texts, and historical signs and signifiers used in courting. I employ imagery rooted in floriography, also referred to as the language of flowers, as a visual symbolic tactic to uncover fundamental changes and dichotomies between expectations and behaviours in courtship.

As a white settler cisgender heterosexual women, this body of artwork was created and informed by my particular societal positioning, understanding, and experience. It is my hope that this series of works will resonate with people of various genders and sexual orientations by investigating the universal facets of courtship's relationship to technology, online representation, dating tropes, communication, and miscommunication.

Chapter 1: Methods & Materials for

1.1 Research-Creation & Data Acquisition

My art practice is underpinned by a methodological approach involving a research-creation process, which has been applied to all five works in  discussed in this paper. A key part of my process has been data acquisition through questionnaires, personal heuristic inquiry, and literature reviews. Under the umbrella of research-creation, these data acquisition strategies are outlined in my research-creation flowchart below (Fig. 1).

I began my research using a method of heuristic exploration as a way for self-inquiry and dialogue with others directed at learning underlying meanings of pivotal human experiences concerned with dating. This method initially examined and documented my own experience of online dating and the various dating applications I have used to reflect an early 21st century experience. This was followed by conversations with my partner about our early online dating communications, as well as conversations with friends who have also participated in these

contemporary courtship activities. Reflecting and journaling on these experiences and conversations has given me textual, emotional, and experiential data.

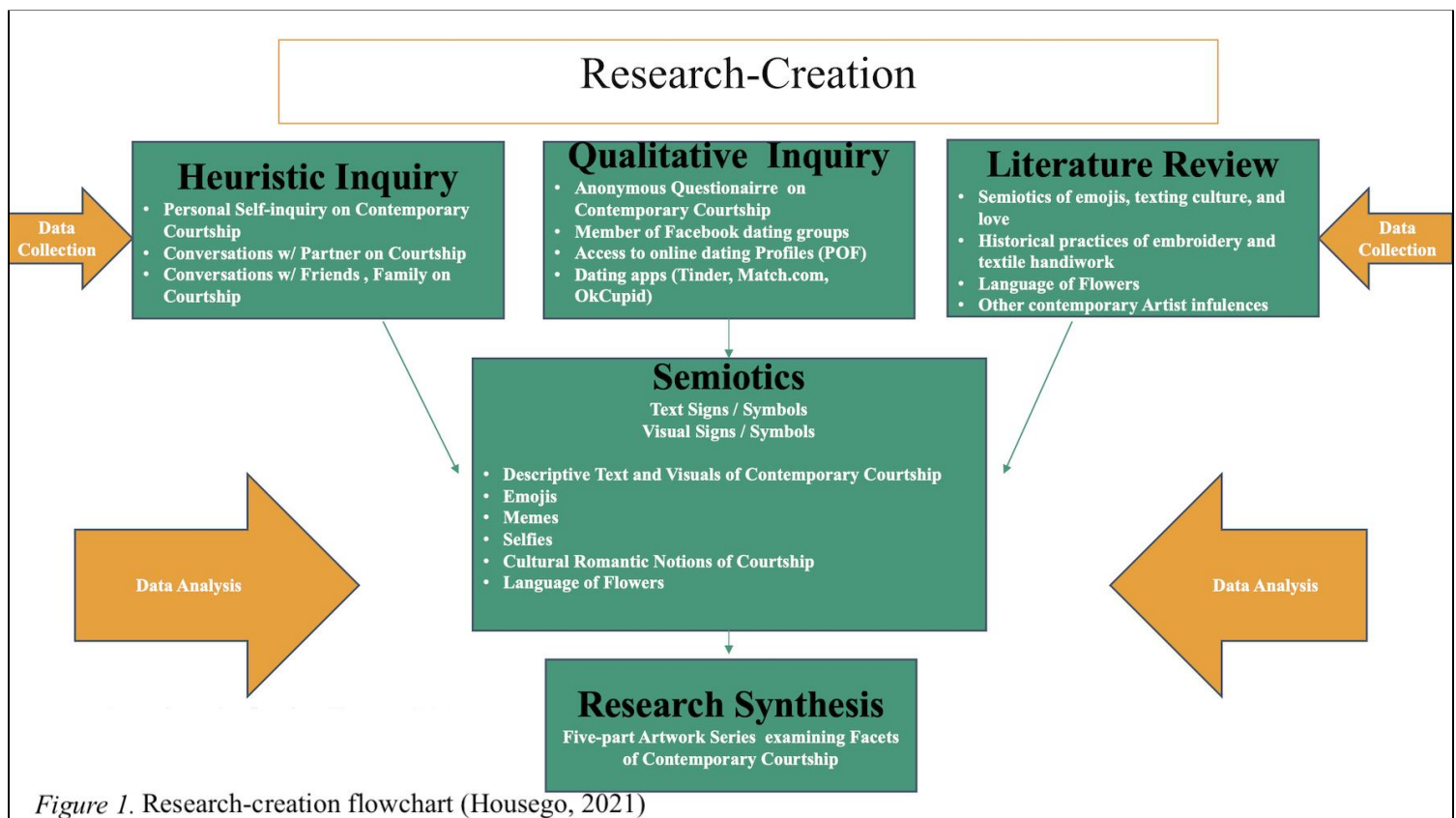


Figure 1. Research-creation flowchart (Housego, 2021)

In order to begin my research on contemporary courtship rituals, I targeted digital platforms like dating websites and social media to gather information. In October 2019 I decided to create a new online dating account on the popular dating website Plenty of Fish (POF) for research purposes. This account allowed me to browse the dating profiles of single men, and make notes on common textual themes, phrases, and aspirations. Much of this research informed the creation of *Primary Data - The Language of the Red, Yellow, and Blue Roses* (discussed in Chapter 2). I also investigated social media as a site to acquire data. I am a member of a Facebook group called “The Tinder Profile,” with 475 members which serves as a contemporary message board for women to share negative or worrisome messages or interactions they have had with men in the Calgary area on the dating application Tinder. I am also a member of a private Facebook group with 16.4k members called “Grindr Scruff FAILS,” where members can share humorous or disturbing interactions, images, and sexts they have received on the gay dating applications Scruff and Grindr. As with the POF account, I have been observing this group

without interacting with members, while making observations and notes of poignant messages, ideas, experiences, and images related to contemporary courtship communication.

The meaning of 😈 [Purple Devil emoji], as demonstrated in the opening quote from the Introduction, indicates a typical point of contention in miscommunication. This particular emoji depicted as “the smiling [devil face] adds a nuance of naughtiness...and mischievousness” making the context in which it is used (within casual online communication) important for its interpretation by those who receive it (Danesi, 2016, p. 24). It is worth noting that the dating applications I studied (Grindr, Scruff, and Tinder) may have a reputation for being more focused around connecting people who are seeking casual relationships as opposed to long term relationships. Opinions on the intentions of POF-users may be mixed, although I met my husband on this website in 2015, so it may be a matter of personal experience. Whereas dating applications such as Match, eHarmony and possibly Hinge are clearly branded as platforms for individuals seeking serious, monogamous, committed relationships.

In addition to gathering data by observing courtship communication through online platforms, I have researched the topic of courtship rituals by reading literature and peer-reviewed scholarly articles on the topic. In developing a literature review, my sources focus on interpretations of contemporary (digital) symbolism such as emojis and texting culture, as well as their interrelationship to courtship, craftwork by women, romantic intentions, and womanhood. A fundamental

source for this body of work has been about the history of floriography and the symbolic

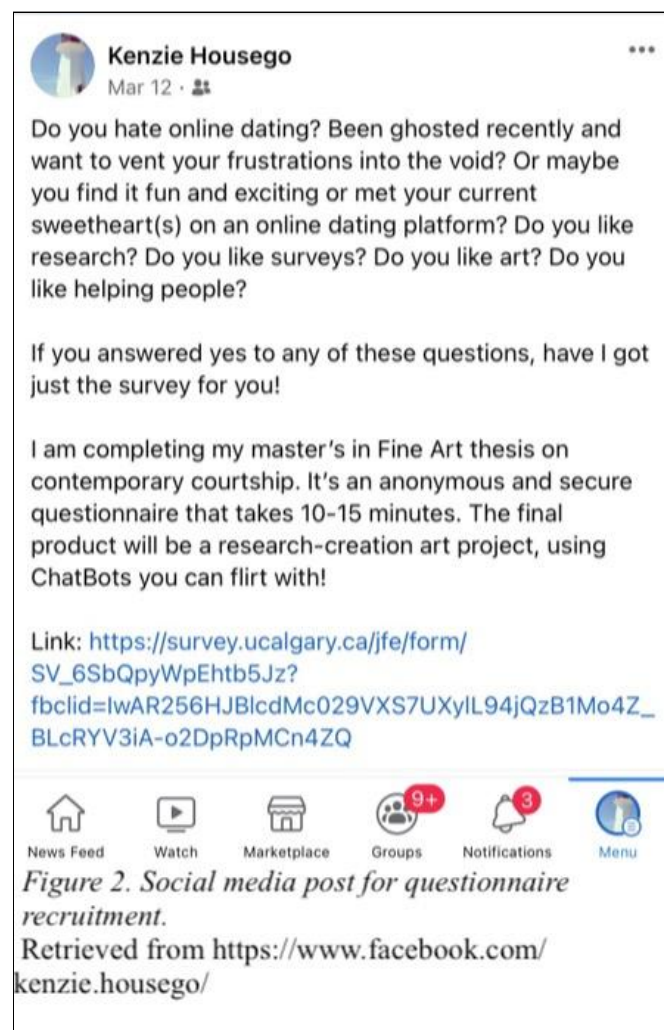


Figure 2. Social media post for questionnaire recruitment.

Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/kenzie.housego/>


meanings associated with various floral species. Along with researching online dating websites, social media, and literary sources, I also created and circulated a questionnaire about dating and courtship (see Appendix A for full questionnaire).

In 2020, the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board approved the data collection survey for this research study. I developed a two-page anonymous online questionnaire, through the secure system platform Qualtrics, which is an online survey platform with servers located in Toronto. Researcher access to the survey data is password-protected, and transmission as well as the data is encrypted. Survey responses cannot be linked to your computer. Questions asked in the survey related to general biographical information and the participants' thoughts, ideas, feelings, or experiences related to contemporary courtship – online dating, digital communication, and/or miscommunication. The following are some examples of the questions asked:


- *Are emojis and visual symbols an important part of communicating with a romantic partner or potential romantic partner?*
- *Can you tell me a memorable story that involved digital communication or miscommunication in regard to contemporary dating?*
- *What do you hate about contemporary courtship?*
- *What do you enjoy about contemporary courtship?*

I circulated this survey via a series of social media posts (Fig. 2), and amongst graduate peers and other artist-colleagues to complete and share it with their own contacts. 109 individuals participated in the online questionnaire in total.

1.2 Data Analysis

After gathering data through these qualitative and heuristic methods, I analyzed this information using creative (art-making) and qualitative (epistemological) approaches methods, in addition to semiotics. The qualitative process of my data analysis for  included reviewing the participants' completed questionnaires while making notes and writing about their overarching feelings, experiences, and perspectives given the themes presented in

their answers. After reviewing these findings, my ideas germinated into the basis of the synthesis stage of my art-making.


I then further analyzed this accumulation of data through the study of visual semiotics focusing on dating attitudes and practices, which, in turn, contributed to the curation of my own iconography to synthesize into my research-creation process. For example, the classic symbol of a red rose signifying true love or romance, or the popular emoji with its tongue out used as a symbol for flirtation, are both iconic visuals in contemporary online dating. Thus, visual semiotics are significant to my practice for conveying narratives that relate to contemporary courtship by reflecting the various documented feelings, text, words, descriptions, stories, and themes distilled into prominent visual signs and signifiers. This paper will outline the visual signs and signifiers related to courtship in ; specifically, in references to flowers, floral textiles, embroidery, emojis, hashtags, LED lights, and electronics.

1.3 Materiality in

Once I had identified these visual symbols and signs, the primary creative approach serving as the basis for my art-making occurred almost entirely with my hands. As a material thinker, I respond to my observations through drawing, placing, and sewing items together to experiment with composition. By physically moving collected materials on a canvas, wooden panel, or sewing items together, I intuitively situate the elements in relation to one another. I then take a step back to observe and reflect before responding. This stage of my data analysis is deeply linked with the creative process of synthesis and usually involves manipulation of art materials and found objects through layering, allowing me to analyze the historical and contemporary signs and signifiers imbued in the media. Through physical manipulation, layering, and building textures, the response cycle allows for the emergence of meanings, new correlations, conflicts, juxtapositions, and dichotomies between materials (signs and signifiers) for interpretation. This process is how I creatively synthesize my research data, leveraging design to reinforce semiotic relationships with the aim of creating new perspectives, observations, or statements concerning my research problem.

For example, my artworks are layered compositions often built up from the background of historical embroidery and textiles. One reason I depend on textiles as my canvas is that it

serves as a signifier of historical romantic rituals and is a conduit for conveying feminine attributes thought to be desired by male suitors. On top of this backdrop I include contemporary symbols associated with digital communication like emojis, texts, and memes as a way to address the same intentions through new materials and forms.

The primary repeating structure connecting all five artworks in  is the use of large display hoops that function both as circular, tondo-like frames, while paying homage to embroidery and textile work. When analyzing the embroidery hoop as an object semiotically, it struck me that this item is both a tool and a method of display for a finished craft object. In much the same way, our digital devices are both very useful tools and a medium to display information and images. I myself cannot count the times I have been with family or friends and we have pulled out our phone or iPad to show someone an image we recently took.

For me these tondo-like canvases also harken back to the connection of the ring itself, being used across time as a “symbol of perfection and infinity since antiquity” (Danesi, 2019, p.138). Semiotician Marcel Danesi (2019) writes extensively about the significance of the ring in his book *The Semiotics of Love*, in which he states that “the exchange of the rings is a common courtship, betrothal, and marriage ritual, thus connecting the symbolism of the ring to attendant rituals of love and romance and, by extension, to a sense of social bonding between the love partners and the social milieu in which the ritual takes place” (p.139). Danesi goes on to note that the ring's pendant might be the love knot made of ribbons, while they are likely “intended to symbolize eternal union” represented by the winding loops with no beginning or end, much like the Mobius strip (Danesi, 2019, p. 136). This is where the expression “to tie the knot” – synonymous with the act of getting married – comes from (Danesi, 2019, p.136).


As the circular shape of the hoops symbolize the ring as eternal love, so too does the surface area within the frame act as a mirror to reflect the communications bound up in dating rituals. Much of the symbolism embedded into these five artworks, including selfie pictures, dating profile descriptions, and emojis, are commonly displayed on the flat digital screens of handheld devices. An important element in the artworks’ presentation is their large scale. The magnitude of the hoops are intended to emphasize how visual symbolism connected to courtship has shifted significantly over time. This change in scale coupled with the choice to utilize tactile

materials such as textiles, embroidery, and fibre gives physicality to the flat digital image sources. By reinterpreting historical signs out of tangible materials, I aim to bring this imagery into a physical space, emerging out from the digital screen. I use materiality and scale therefore as aids to highlight facets of courtship such as its relationship to technology, online representation, dating tropes, communication, and miscommunication.

1.4 Creative Data Synthesis

The analysis of data and its synthesis are intertwined within my practice. As mentioned previously in the materials section, the manual manipulation and layering of collected data and physical materials allows for tacit discovery and understanding of the presented subjects. Within these intertwined processes, I consider how audiences may interact with the work. I use humour as a tactic to engage my audience through the use of playful and humorous imagery as they relate to my research topic. The use of humor and kitsch to draw viewers in to talk about potentially broad and complex subjects is a powerful tool to hold attention and facilitate a memorable experience.

In order to ensure participation with my viewers, I employ interactive technology such as embedded electronic sensors, LED light displays, and texting with programmed artwork chatbots. The audience is invited to engage with the artworks in a dialectical relationship. The outcome of this audience participation is intended to produce a deeper understanding of contemporary dating through a relational approach via these technological tools. Viewers shift from passive observers of the artworks to active co-producers as they utilize digital media to express their ideas while experiencing other points of view, and ultimately, forming their own individual meanings.

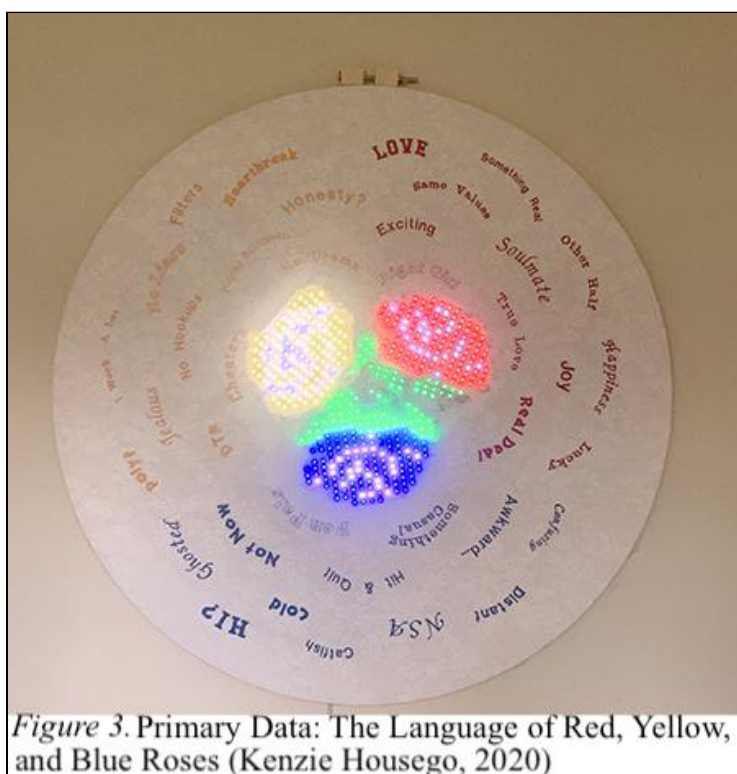
The following chapters will examine each of the five artworks in  individually, providing detailed historical and contemporary cultural context related to the multiple facets of this research question.

Chapter 2: *Primary Data: The Language of the Red, Yellow, and Blue Roses*

This chapter will discuss research surrounding my personal connection to textiles as an art material, the social context of historical embroidery, the language of flowers (floriography), text, online representation, and the precursor of online dating profiles, the “Lonely Hearts” ad. Although these research areas have influenced various pieces throughout my entire body of work, the key artwork discussed here in Chapter 2, *Primary Data: The Language of the Red, Yellow, and Blue Roses* (Fig. 3), is a culmination of my various interests and, as such, was the first artwork I created for the ❤️💔❤️ art exhibition.

2.1 Materials in *Primary Data*

In my artistic practice, I embrace notions of romance, courtship, and online representation through the use of textiles as a material vehicle embedded with narrative. It is impossible to separate the social meanings inherent in material. The integration of textiles has been a consistent basis of my art-making and has filtered into every work in ❤️💔❤️. In this series I use fabrics to explore historical contexts of courtship. By recreating contemporary digital symbols with this innately tactile material, I seek to



create juxtapositions and draw connections between the past and contemporary courtship impulses and avenues of expression. This chapter discusses the first key artwork emerging out of my research-creation methodology. This textile and new media artwork showcases electronics, fabrics, and fibres – all consistent mediums I use throughout my art. The decision to integrate

textile is informed by my own personal history and intimate connection to this medium in particular.

Reflecting on the choice of material, I cannot help but think of my family and my exposure to domestic textile artworks as a child. On beginning my MFA program in 2018, my father gifted me scraps of quilts he sewed from fabric found in my paternal grandmother's home in 1975 upon completing his own MFA program at York University in Toronto. In addition, my paternal grandmother was a significant influence on me growing up. She taught me how to knit when I was 11 years old. I have early childhood memories of running fingers over her detailed crocheted and embroidered tablecloths. My maternal grandmother was also an avid embroiderer. She was a war-bride from Scotland who landed in Canada in 1947 from Glasgow. Her voyage would have likely prevented her from carrying a hope chest with her.

Hope chests were typically wooden furniture chests brought into a marriage by the bride. They would be filled with household items such as linen, embroidery and weaving work intended to display a woman's familial wealth as well as her craft skills (Stone, 2015). I was told by my mother that my maternal grandmother likely brought a shoe box filled with small embroidery work and her hand skills of crochet and embroidery to decorate her new Canadian home. Later the walls in her home were filled with numerous highly detailed embroidered floral scenes hanging in frames.



*Figure 4. Maternal grandmother's textiles
(Housego, 2021)*

I now own these pieces of linen and doilies that were handmade by my grandmothers along with delicately embroidered pieces for table settings. Some of these items are integrated into my artwork (this will be specifically illustrated in Chapter 4). These treasured textile pieces along with other found doilies and embroidery work I've collected over time often prominently feature floral patterns and designs. This emphasis on floral work in embroidery can be linked to the

once popular Victorian tradition known as Floriography, meaning the language of flowers.

My research-creation regarding the language of flowers and new media culminated in an earlier exhibition entitled *Primary Floriography Data*, exhibited in November 2019 at the University of Calgary's Arnett Gallery. This exhibition prominently featured the first iteration of *Primary Data: The Language of the Red, Yellow, & Blue Roses*. A circular embroidery textile mixed media artwork centrally depicts three digital LED roses. The juxtaposition of old and new materials captures the essence of my research on contemporary courtship: many dating interactions play out digitally yet the feelings conveyed of love and desire are timeless. The materiality of my work, specifically the choice of electronic digital media, harkens back to these ancient aspects of online dating. Thus, the LED components in my iconography symbolize the digital component of being online while embroidery symbolizes the timeless inertia of dating, bringing the digital back into a tangible physical space. The final iteration of *Primary Data: The Language of the Red, Yellow, & Blue Roses* exhibited in ❤️💔❤️ features additional embroidery and a more dense composition of text surrounding each LED flower.

2.2 The Social Context of Historical Embroidery

The historical needlework practices I typically reference in my artwork originate from 18th and 19th century samplers. Commonly used as educational tools for girls from all social backgrounds in the West, samplers were needlework pieces (Rana, 2014, p.162). For an affluent girl of this historical period, needlework might be displayed in the home to prove to family and friends her skills in this craft as well as her good upbringing and domesticity (Rana, 2014, p. 162). As art historian Rozsika Parker (1984/2019) argues in *The Subversive Stitch*, her now classic monograph about the relationship between women and embroidery, “embroidery structured a young girl’s life, and prepared her for marriage” (p. 116). The lineage of “women’s work” was previously deeply culturally connected to the desire to make a comfortable home for one’s husband and family. This inter-relationship between women and embroidery is another way to track the evolution of values in courtship and self-representation throughout history.

During the Victorian era, floral symbolism was also prominent in women's embroidery artwork. Not only were these signifiers common subjects embroidered on objects for a young woman's matrimonial hope chest, but more broadly, the technical and aesthetic value of embroidered everyday objects often indicated a woman's value as a potential wife and mother to prospective men (Parker, 1984/2019, p. 128). This historical context of textiles used in courtship and its symbols informs the contemporary symbols I include in my compositions. As a visual juxtaposition I believe it creates a dynamic, heterogeneous experience for the viewer.

Primary Data addresses how embroidery can contain embedded narratives associated with the life circumstances of young women and their pursuit of love and romance. Leading up to the creation of *Primary Data*, my "Courtship Rituals" series, exhibited in 2019, examined historical signs and signifiers associated with courtship displayed against their contemporary counterparts. Embroidery for me is an ideal art-making medium for my research. As Parker argues, embroidery is in itself a "cultural practice involving iconography, style and a social function" (Parker, 1984/2019, p. 6). This was my first experiment investigating the use of semiotic layering as a method to present the historical and contemporary interconnectedness of love, sex, and courtship. At this point, a tacit "A-ha!" moment occurred. Cross-stitch patterns in embroidery work could be realized in the pixelated images created with LEDs

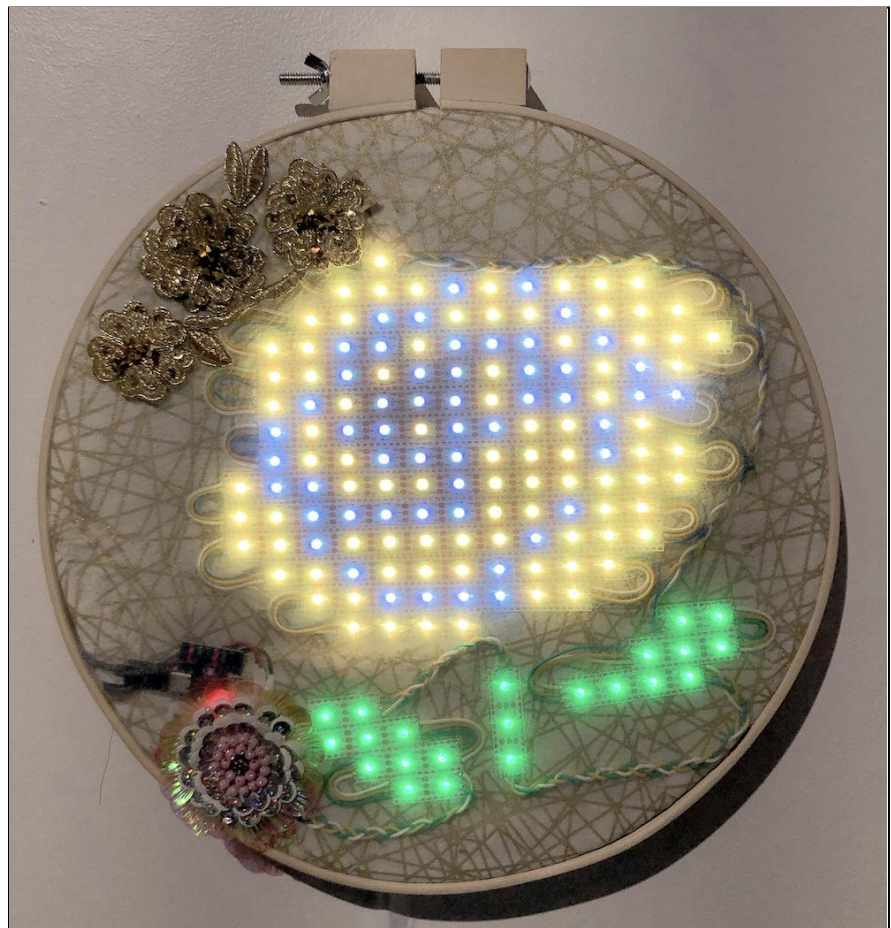


Figure 5. CourtshipRituals: Yellow Rose (Housego, 2019)

(Fig. 5). In replicating these popular historical cross-stitch patterns in LED matrices, a semiotic layering is produced that highlights the inter-relationship between technology and craft on the one hand, and the relationship between historical and contemporary courtship visual communication on the other. These earlier iterations helped confirm and inspire *Primary Data's* subject, technique, and materials.

2.3 The Language of Flowers

Steadfast symbols of love, roses are centrally featured in *Primary Data*. All one has to do to find the symbolic meaning of a rose is look at the popular TV Show *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette* to understand the impact of giving and receiving this flower. Why do they give roses to the special chosen contestants? Because the symbolism embedded in a rose is understood in western popular culture to be associated with romance.

Floriography, the practice of arranging flowers with meanings, was at the height of its popularity in Western culture during the 19th century, particularly emerging out of the Victorian period in England. This visual and olfactory form of cytological communication consisted of specific flowers and plants used as gifts to send coded messages to recipients, allowing the sender to express feelings that could not be spoken in 19th century society. With floral dictionaries in hand, Victorians often exchanged "talking bouquets," composed of posies, tussie-mussies, or nosegays, traditionally bound with a doily which could be worn or carried as a fashion accessory (Brick, 2008, p. 61-62).

Esteemed quilting expert Cindy Brick (2008), for example, explains that the pansy could be used to express amorous feelings for another as it symbolised "you occupy my thoughts; think of me" (p. 62). Likewise, Brick continues, the rosebud has been used to symbolize a "confession of love; untiring love" (Brick, 2008, p. 62). White roses imply girlhood, while black roses have a long association with sickness or death (Brick, 2008, p. 62). The central three primary coloured roses featured in *Primary Data* include a yellow rose which connotes jealousy, a red rose representing true romantic love, and a blue rose signifying all that is unattainable (Brick, 2008, p. 62).

2.4 Text as Online Representation

Primary Data uses written text from online dating profiles to explore online representation in relation to contemporary courtship. The work explores how we describe ourselves and how we describe what we want out of relationships, be they casual or long-term commitments. Online self-representation through text in dating profiles includes how we describe our physical traits (real or imagined) and representations about who we are in terms of our personality or interests.

The phrases and expressions exchanged in online dating profiles reflect a person's communication style, motives, and desires. The words embroidered into *Primary Data* are

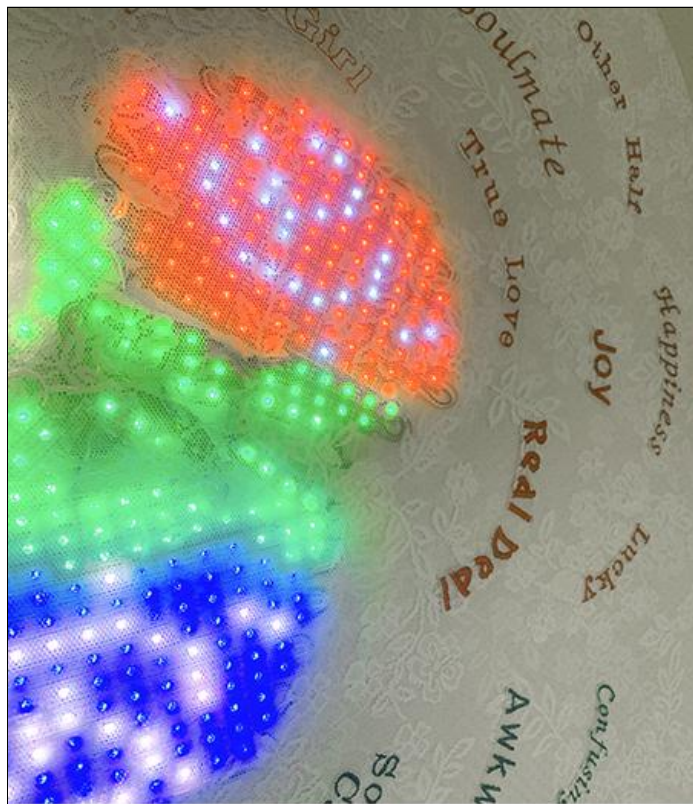


Figure 6. Primary Data: The Language of Red, Yellow, and Blue Roses Detail (Housego, 2020)

taken from heterosexual men's dating profiles on the popular Plenty of Fish (POF) dating website. This text is situated around LED flowers that symbolize the associated colour of the rose used to interpret their meaning. When organizing the composition, I imagined the text as floating rose petals placed in relation to the digital flowers. The phrases included represent three main categories of meaning pertaining to love in floriography: "true love"; expressions of concern such as "jealousy" or "infidelity"; and, "the unattainable", which could allude to inauthenticity or ambivalence around commitment, or casual dating scenarios.

These categories were reinforced by the responses given in the contemporary courtship survey I distributed. When asked "What emotions come to mind, when you think of dating in the

last 10 years?” Many participants used words such as *hopeful*, *joy*, *euphoria*, *lucky*, and *love*, supporting the category of “true love” signified by the red rose. Likewise, popular words like *fear*, *insecurity*, and *betrayal* could fall into the category of the yellow rose’s symbolic meaning of “jealousy” or “infidelity.” Lastly, words like *frustration*, *confusing*, *distant*, *doubt*, and *non-committal* to describe emotions surrounding dating reinforce the category emblematic of the blue rose – “the unattainable” (Housego, 2020). For me, the survey solidified my thesis about the symbolic significance of colours and how meaning is strengthened when combined with associated phrases. A large portion of my work pertains to how people make connections through dating apps, whether that be direct or indirect through text and imagery. Or by borrowing from historical motifs and text found in personal classified advertisements.

2.5 Lonely Hearts Personal Advertisements

Classified personal newspaper advertisements (aka “lonely hearts” or “personals”) first appeared in the 1690s and by the 18th century had evolved into a prosperous part of the press business (Beauman, 2012). As lonely hearts advertisements are a formative example of the use of text in courtship, they informed my research in understanding the evolution of dating as it entered the digital world. I would argue that 21st century online dating applications and profile descriptions have replaced the historical lonely hearts personal ad.

For example the website OkCupid alone is responsible for around 30,000 dates between new couples every day. That’s 60,000 people who are meeting for the first time daily because of the website (Rudder, 2014, p. 9). In fact, studies reveal that an estimated 3,000 couples begin long term relationships online and approximately 200 of them will get married, as writer and comedian Aziz Ansari (2015) points out in the book *Modern Love* (p. 71). To research *Modern Love* Ansari teamed up with well-known sociologist Eric Klinenberg. Together they conducted a year-long research project which involved diverse international focus groups. They also created a “Modern Romantics” subreddit form on the website Reddit, where they gathered thousands of responses to survey questions. Lastly they interviewed anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and journalists whose research focuses on contemporary courtship (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015, p. 6). The book Ansari and Klineberg co-wrote is relevant to my research, as around 2015, I was lent *Modern Love* by a friend who knew I was frustrated with the challenges

of dating in the digital age and seeking understanding. Reading this book was an early foundational spark for pursuing further research on the subject of contemporary online dating years later.

Online dating originated in the 1960s when the first computer dating services claimed that they could leverage the new power of computers to help the luckless in love find their soulmate in a rational, efficient manner (Strimpel, 2017, p. 319). The process usually involved clients filling out lengthy questionnaires that were entered into a computer system that would then match theoretically compatible people, who would then be set up on a date. These original online dating services stayed around throughout the 1980s, but widespread public adoption did not catch on. The reason being most likely stemmed from the lack of public access to personal computers, as well as the inability for these companies to actually show “what made two people good romantic partners... [or] ...evidence that the system actually worked” thereby fostering distrust in the new services (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015, p. 72). Furthermore, such early computer dating services suffered because of the stigma that to require them was a sign of desperation in love. In the 1980s and early 1990s classified or lonely hearts advertising was the more popular medium for single individuals to seek connections (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015, p. 72).

In researching the history of courting language to better understand the lineage of contemporary courtship texts, I stumbled upon one of the first documented advertisements to attract potential partners (classified personal ad) published in 1695 in the *Collection for the Improvement of Husbandry and Trade*, a London periodical. A 30-year-old man with “a very good estate”, announced he would “willingly match himself to some good young gentlewoman that has a fortune of 3,000 pounds or thereabouts” (Beauman, 2012). At the time the ad was published, many readers might have gasped at this ambitious sum, as £3,000 is equivalent to approximately £300,000 today. By 1710, all of the 53 newspapers in England featured personal lonely hearts adverts, “all from men, mostly in their 20s, and all setting financial conditions for courtship” (Beauman, 2012). These original advertisements were superficial, filled with popular adjectives such as “respectable,” “agreeable,” “accomplished,” and “domestic” (Beauman, 2012). In 1750 one man went much further by problematically describing his ideal wife, as a woman who had “...good teeth, soft lips, sweet breath...neat in her person, her bosom full, plump,

The lonely hearts advertisements became a staple of the newspaper business and have remained so for centuries.

These types of advertisements really caught on in the 1960s with the sexual revolution, when both men and women were energized to try new tactics for meeting potential romantic partners. Decades before online classifieds, the weekly and daily newspapers eventually also gained popularity with LGBT folks. To save room in these brief ads, usually under 50 words, people used abbreviations such as ISO (in search of), SJF (single Jewish female), SWM (single white male), or SBPM (single black professional male) (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015, p. 73). These acronyms function in a similar way to how we use

BASICS

Self employed

Single, I am putting in serious effort to find someone, Seeking a woman, Dating

Master's Degree

Calgary, Alberta

LIFESTYLE

Doesn't Smoke

Drinks Socially

Doesn't Do Drugs

Is Non Religious

Doesn't Have Kids

Prefer Not to Say

BIO

5' 11" (180cm)

Brown

Caucasian

Libra

Athletic body type

Brown

ABOUT: [REDACTED]

I am a city outdoorsy guy, love beaches, pubs, BBQ, walks, camping, cuddling, kissing, wine and movie nights.

Not a fan of winter and I usually hibernate ??

Oh ya, I would love to have someone who can go to see the sunrise or sunset,looking for a best friend that has common ground!

Just here to find a good girl to spend some time with,a simple girl who is fun, affectionate, loyal and has her life together.

No one atm

INSIGHTS

Ambitious

Professional

Figure 7. POF dating profile example. 2021, Retrieved from <https://www.pof.com>

Figure 7. POF dating profile example. 2021, Retrieved from <https://www.pof.com>

abbreviations like LOL (laugh out loud), NSA (no strings attached) or DTF (down to fuck) in online dating profiles or texts today. The basic framework of the lonely hearts ad are arguably still prevalent in contemporary dating rituals. In my artwork I seek to further draw out this evolution and genealogy using both historical and contemporary courtship visual symbolism.


In constructing *Primary Data*, the online dating profiles I researched more closely resemble the personals from the 1980s or 1990s as opposed to the ads from the 18th century. Specifically, the profiles I read mainly focused on descriptions of the self, the person's interests, hobbies, and only left a sentence or two to lay out what they are seeking in a romantic partner. The biggest differences between lonely hearts and online dating profiles are the ability to include much more information than the typical 50 word paper ad, the addition of images, and the inclusion of predetermined categories such as religion, height, level of education, drug use preference, smoking preference, or number of children, to name just a few. See figure 7 for an example of a typical dating profile from a heterosexual male on POF (username is redacted to ensure privacy).

Although print media still remains a traditional place for matrimonial announcements to appear, dating websites and applications have taken over as the predominant platform where dating begins. A study published in 2019 by Stanford University stated that 39% of heterosexual couples in the US met online (Rosenfeld, 2019, p.13). This was also the case for more than 70% of LGBT couples (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015, p. 85). It seems that the lonely hearts of the world are making connections and forming partnerships through the shift to this digital world since personal ads never accounted for more than 1% of marriages, at least in America.

Overall *Primary Data* brings together historical and contemporary signs used in courtship through its materials (textiles and technology), subject matter (roses and dating text), and study of personal ads (lonely hearts and dating website profiles).

Chapter 3: *SEND NUDES*


This chapter will discuss the prevalence of online dating, my personal experiences with it, and my research into the popular meme “Send Nudes,” in addition to its connection to digital

courtship and its cross-over into sales as an ethically-questionable marketing tactic. I will also discuss the prominence of embroidery work (or samplers) of the Victorian-era, and how these samplers foregrounded the materiality of language as the subject itself. This chapter traces the trajectory of some of my earlier artistic experiments, leading to the mixed media artwork entitled *SEND NUDES* featured in the  exhibition.

3.1 Online Dating

Statistics demonstrate that online dating apps and matchmaking websites have become a mainstream pathway to find love in the 21st century, facilitating the emergence of dating trends that have emerged from human-to-human connections to a growing reliance of humans on the mediation of visual symbology (Rudder, 2014; Rosenfeld, 2019). Online profile descriptions, emojis, acronyms, and sexting have become the new visual codes that communicate desire, attraction, and romantic (or non-romantic) intention. As a millennial born in 1985, I am very familiar with using dating applications, reading and interpreting online dating profiles, and navigating attitudes in these digital domains of communication and online representation.

The heuristic research undertaken for this dissertation was in part, associated with my own personal experience of online dating. I feel like I spent my 20s in a cycle of online dating – trying out the latest dating app, reviewing profiles, matching with people, answering messages and trying to get to know these matches by setting up coffee dates that sometimes worked out, and other times fell through, eventually ending simply in a friendship. I would then give up for a few months due to frustration or hurt, before starting this cycle all over again. Although this cycle was disappointing at times, I eventually met my partner online. In fact, we got married in June 2019 while I was conducting this heuristic research.

In the initial phase of our online courtship, it was common for my partner and I to exchange emojis in our communications, at times some of these messages contained “gifts” of the floral  emojis. While I appreciate receiving real flowers more, I was flattered by the sentiment that the emoji represented in the same way. In the end, he did buy me real roses for our first Valentine's day together. This event served as a point of departure, informing my research questions and compelling me to learn more about others' personal experiences. The development

of the questionnaire mentioned in Chapter 1, allowed for the collection of numerous stories, views, and experiences concerning online contemporary courtship by individuals from various backgrounds, sexualities, and geographies.

3.2 Memes as Digital Symbolology

The concept for *SEND NUDES* (Fig. 8) grew from the research-creation approach that produced *Primary Data*. In both artworks, I borrowed text found in online dating and re-interpreted it by re-producing the words in historical embroidery. A key characteristic of this work is the juxtaposition of its more “analog” attributes such as fabric and embroidery, with its



digital elements such as LED media and contemporary symbolology like hashtags and emojis. Notably, its title adopts the popular meme it is named after, a ubiquitous declaration found in conversations amongst users of dating websites and social media. The unscrupulous attitude of the “send nudes” meme presumes that the sender is either rude, blunt, vulgar, cheeky or titillating depending on context, which creates a humorous association when considering how the work is composed of ornate gold thread, floral embellishments, and delicately scalloped lace-trimmed borders.

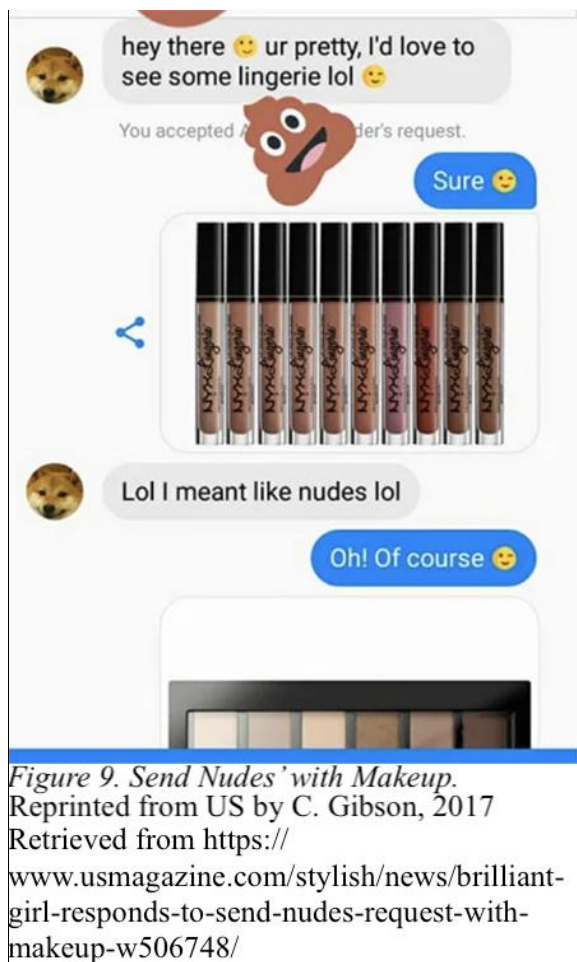
References to this meme, along with the infamous “dick pic” meme and sexting, came up multiple times in the responses to my courtship questionnaire. When asked to describe memorable experiences related to online dating, the responses ranged from negative and creepy to exciting and sexy. One man stated he was happily surprised when a woman sent him an unsolicited “send nudes” text while he was in a lecture, declaring “That was a trip!” One person shared that they “used to have a stash of dick pics to

send back when...[they]...got unsolicited ones". More than several individuals also claimed that sexting and sending nudes was how they knew an online relationship had started. Also, the "send nudes" meme was revealed to be a behavior, thought to be a common cliché, that people who identify as men participate in, along with dick pics of course.

By appropriating this sexually-charged "send nudes" slogan and representing it with elaborate gilded font, the artwork embodies its contrasting semiotics: romantic imagery of the past slowly crafted by hand, with a viral sexting meme disseminated digitally. Herein notions of

romance, virtue, and courtship symbolism are at odds with each other, creating innuendo derived from tension.

Since gaining global popularity on the social news website Reddit in the mid 2000's, the "send nudes" meme has been widely paired with images and used by millennials to poke fun at the ridiculousness of sexting culture. Defined as internet slang "used to request sexually explicit photographs from someone" via various forms of communication, including web-based services and text messages, the meme began circulating the internet in Brazil in 2015, with its Portuguese translation "manda nudes" (Know Your Meme, n.d.). This online phrase is characteristically stated as an "unexpected punchline in images and videos," and has triggered viral social media videos



(Know Your Meme, n.d.). Examples of these viral spinoffs using the slogan range from playful and light-hearted to sexualized advertisements targeting youth, with the latter sort provoking strong criticism. *Brilliant Girl Responds to 'Send Nudes' with Makeup* (Fig. 9) shows an exchange of texts where a woman who was asked to "send nudes" by a man, brazenly texts back

images of nude-coloured makeup products. Apparently marketers found inspiration in the meme, which actually inspired a line of makeup products called *Send Nude* (Gibson, 2017).



Figure 10. Kraft Send Noods ad. Reprinted from New York Post by H. Sparks, 2021, Retrieved from <https://nypost.com/2020/10/14/kraft-cancels-send-noods-campaign-after-backlash/>

Another example of the impact this meme has had beyond online dating, is the way in which popular brands have spun it into advertising campaigns, resulting in recent disastrous results. For instance, in 2020, Kraft Dinner launched their #send noods campaign (Fig. 10) in an attempt at a “tongue-in-cheek viral moment” (Sparks, 2020). The

subsequent response from angry parents called the joke “offensive” and accused the brand of “sexualizing children” despite no kids appearing in the advertisements. In response to this backlash, Kraft quickly retracted all traces of the online campaign. (Sparks, 2020)

Along these lines, in 2021, the Canadian brand Garage Clothing was criticized for an email

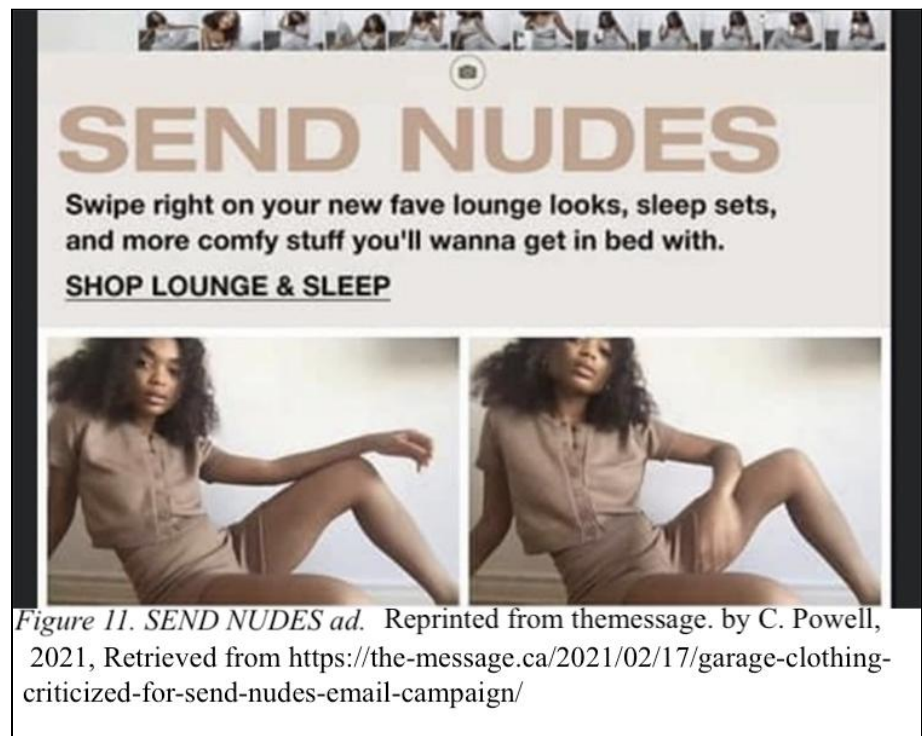



Figure 11. SEND NUDES ad. Reprinted from themessage. by C. Powell, 2021, Retrieved from <https://the-message.ca/2021/02/17/garage-clothing-criticized-for-send-nudes-email-campaign/>

marketing campaign sent to its customer base, which featured the meme in capital letters above the image of a young female model in neutral-coloured loungewear (Powell, 2021). To further aggravate the situation the captions read "Swipe right on your new fave lounge looks, sleep sets, and more comfy stuff you'll wanna get in bed with" (Fig. 11) (Powell, 2021). Garage Clothing describes itself as "a casual clothing brand for young women who are fun and effortlessly sexy", yet by "swiping right" the advertisement draws a clear connection to the act performed on dating applications when you "like" a person's dating profile (Powell, 2021), inferring the brand may be objectifying its target demographic. Parents responded in a similar way to this Garage Clothing advertisement as they had to Kraft Dinner by taking their outrage to social media to criticize this marketing newsletter since children, some as young as 12, received this email (Powell, 2021). While these examples are problematic and possibly verge towards sexploitation, they show how "send nudes" meme is a familiar expression among millennials and Gen Z cohorts, expanding into mainstream mass media culture by being adopted (and co-opted) by marketers.

The choice to use the "send nudes" meme allowed me to create my own ironic adaptation and poke fun at the mainstream controversy surrounding it. Also, as demonstrated from the responses received in the courtship questionnaire, the "send nudes" text is a real and common part of contemporary online courtship, be it a shocking message to receive or a surprising, sexy innuendo. My artwork *SEND NUDES* takes this declarative statement and softens its overt sexual implications through the use of delicate textile materials, detailed gilded embroidered letters, and floral motifs creating an ironic message.

3.3 Humour

The *SEND NUDES* multimedia artwork in  presents a playful cultural commentary on digital communication in contemporary courtship. With colourful and bright floral motifs integrated into the background, the work is an extension of *Primary Data*, as both works feature emboldened text sewn with delicate embroidery. My intention within this artwork is to be humorous, attention-grabbing, and unexpected. I hope it provokes audiences to think about their relationship to this millennial and Gen Z vernacular, and possibly question the unexpected discrepancy between message and materials.

While *SEND NUDES* addresses a meme understood generationally by millennials and Gen Z, probing online communication as a facet of contemporary courtship, there are other

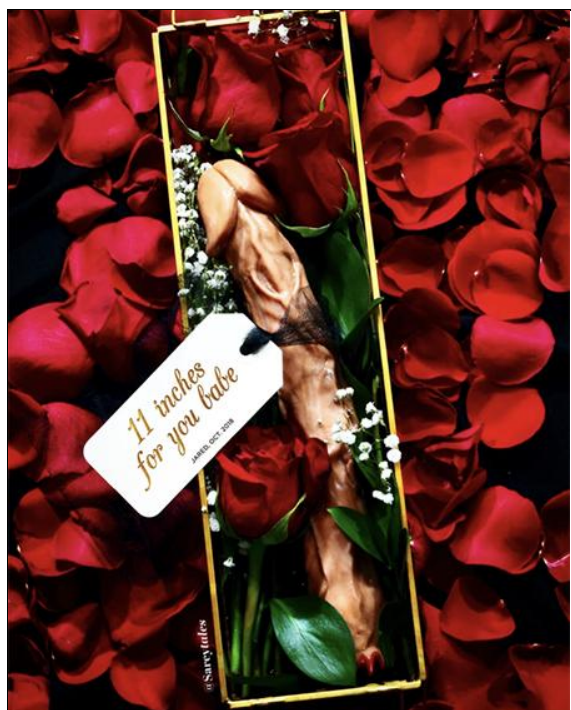


Figure 12. *The Gift*. Reprinted from Sareytales by S. Ruden, 2019, Retrieved from <http://www.sareytales.com/portfolio#/the-gift/>

“inspired by the creepy, cruel and misogynistic messages she has received during her online dating journey” (Mazur, 2020). She uses these “tragic” messages she has received in producing thought-provoking and fearless digital artworks that challenge sexual harassment, cyber-bullying, and victim blaming, all prevalent pitfalls of the online dating world (Ruden, n.d.).

Three of Ruden’s bold and colourful text based artworks in particular have inspired my practice. *The Gift* (Fig. 12) recalls the occasion when Ruden was offered an internet stranger’s genitals after receiving a greeting from him on a

contemporary artists whose works also convey personal experiences of dating online.

Detroit-based artist Sarey Ruden uses her experience as an online dater in her illustrated series, “Sareytales”. Ruden’s oeuvre is “a nod to her not-so-romantic dating experiences,” which she describes as “...like fairy tales but messed up” (Mazur, 2020). Although Ruden’s work reflects a more cynical voice than my own art, she also uses humour to analyze the terrain of online dating. Her body of work is rooted in autobiography, being

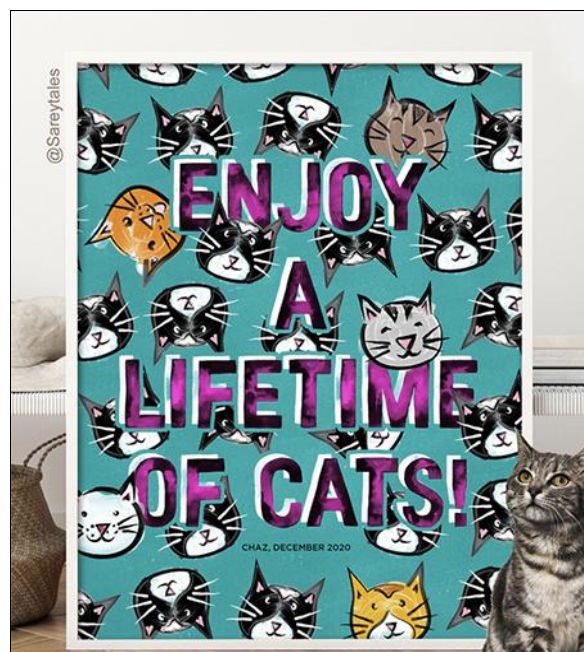
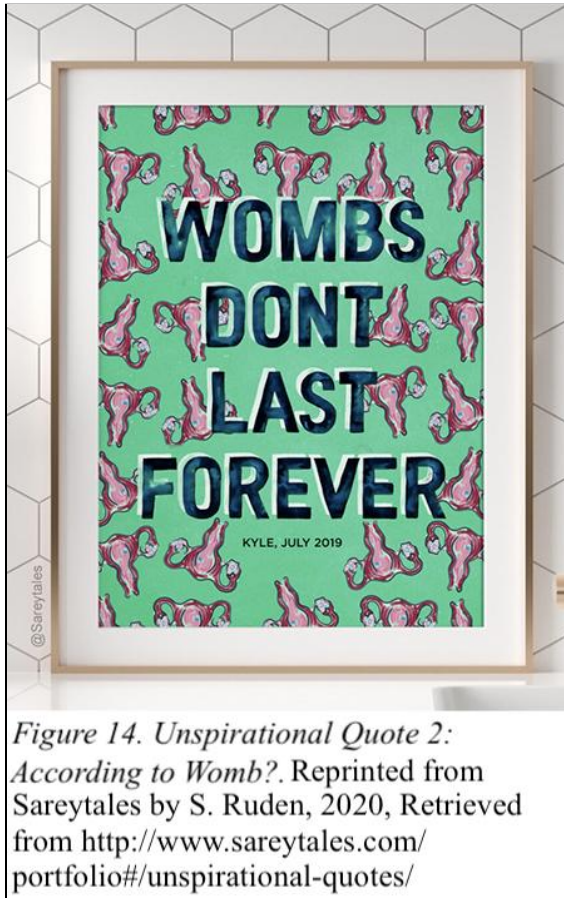


Figure 13. *Unspirational Quote 4: Cats4Ever*. Reprinted from Sareytales by S. Ruden, 2020, Retrieved from <http://www.sareytales.com/portfolio#/unspirational-quotes/>

dating app. Ruden also uses troubling messages she has received online as slogans in her art. For example, she comically captures the snide remark from Chaz, “Enjoy a Lifetime of Cats!” in her work *Unspirational Quote 4: Cats4Ever* (Fig. 13). While *Unspirational Quote 2: According to*



Womb? (Fig. 14) features a message from Kyle that cuttngly declares, “wombs don’t last forever.”

(Ruden, n.d.). I especially enjoy the directness of Ruden’s artwork, particularly how she emphasizes the text component and juxtaposes these words with playful graphical imagery to support the ridiculousness and humour of the messages.

Sarey Ruden’s deeply personal and humourous artistic take on contemporary online dating communication and miscommunication has been very inspirational and influential for me as I undertook the research-creation for ❤️💔❤️.

This artwork also features two light elements highlighting areas of the composition with a configured, LED-lit floral cross-stitch pattern, and a digital pixelated video clip moving coloured emoji

hearts. Across the upper and lower sections of the embroidery are a series of hashtags stitched in red-pink thread. I use this embellishment in my lexicon to symbolize digital communication, social media, and the virality of media within culture. Finally, there is a glimpse of a reproduction *toile de jouy* French fabric, originating from the late 18th century. This historically rich and repetitious fabric often showcases courting couples in pastoral scenes. The scene presented in *SEND NUDES* depicts an 18th century courtship vignette of a woman and man exchanging flowers to the left of the central text.

I enjoy the dichotomy of the romanticized notion of courtship contrasted with memes and hashtags. My motivation is to inject humour into the artwork, adding to its semiotic layering. I will elaborate on this fabric choice and its further significance in Chapter 5.

3.4 Samplers

There are several elements in *SEND NUDES* which contain historical references to modes of communication found in samplers. Introduced in Chapter 2, samplers are domestic textile pieces made by young women, often using floriography and biblical or vernacular texts. In *SEND NUDES* the finely embroidered script spelling out the meme with cross-stitch patterns and the floral LEDs are influenced by 19th century textile samplers. The configured LED-lit pixelated flower cross-stitch pattern in the lower left of *SEND NUDES* is inspired by the dog rose featured at the central top section of a sampler from 1844, created by a woman named Martha James (Fig. 15). According to a late-19th century dictionary entitled *The Language of Flowers*, the dog rose symbolizes pleasure and pain (Greenaway, 1884/1992, p. 37).



Figure 15. Martha James 1844. Reprinted from Hands Across The Sea Sampler 2021, Retrieved from <https://hands-across-the-sea-samplers.com/product/martha-james-1844/>

SEND NUDES's LED integration and use of florals and embroidery text is strongly influenced by samplers, harkening back to the Victorian era-practice of needlework created by women. The elaborately embroidered meme is placed in the centre of the hoop using a symmetrical format common to historical samplers. Throughout history, textile work, as an art form, was typically assigned to the female gender, and prized in young women as an ideal domestic skill. As discussed, samplers showed both the creative skill of a potential wife for suitors and reflected her virtues.

However, and more interestingly, samplers were individual artistic expressions, achieved when these young women had autonomy over the choice of imagery they used. For example, the sampler by Martha James also contains a colourful border of honeysuckle, symbolizing generous and devoted affection (Greenaway, 1884/1992, p. 22). The choice of design and flowers often became coded symbols for young women's hopes and dreams of love and marriage. As florals offered abundant thematic symbolism and could reveal character traits of its author, samplers became a vehicle for me to research and reference courtship rituals of the past, and particularly the symbolism of flowers (Brick 2008).

In a way *SEND NUDES* can be viewed as a contemporary sampler constructed with digital era art-making tools and materials including a digital embroidery machine, LEDs, and electronics. Drawing from a culturally influential meme, it examines facets of contemporary courtship communication, gender tropes, and the integration of technology into present day dating.

3.5 Previous Artwork Experiments



Figure 16. Courting Rituals: Red Rose (Housego, 2019)

My series "Courtship Rituals" (2019) involved artistic research experiments that were influential to the development of ❤️💔❤️, particularly those that highlighted parallels and dichotomies within courting rituals over time and visual symbols currently used in online communication. These earlier artistic experiments from "Courtship Rituals" not only incorporated research on language, but also featured embroidered text elements referencing samplers (Fig. 16). Not only was the function of making samplers in the past a practical way to

teach needlework skills, but it could also be used to “teach the girls literacy and numeracy, as they almost always stitched the alphabet and numerals on their samplers” (Rana, 2014, p. 164). The artwork from “Courtship Rituals” in Figure 16 shows this reference to the embroidered alphabet in the central top section of the piece. Instead of also including numbers, I tapped into contemporary symbolism by digitally embroidering a series of hashtags to the left of the LED rose. The use of embroidered text, symbolism, and floral patterns within the “Courtship Rituals” series foreshadowed the development *SEND NUDES* and the other artwork in ❤️💔❤️.

Chapter 4: *Selfie Guys*

This section will give an overview of the development of ❤️💔❤️’s *Selfie Guys*, including background research on specific material choices, concepts of self-representation within contemporary courtship, and my use of relational aesthetics through interactive technologies such as motion sensors.

4.1 Self-representation

Given how important online self-representation is to user profiles on dating websites, I decided to explore this area by constructing an embroidered montage of men for *Selfie Guys* (Fig. 17). This mixed media work represents the facet of my research question examining how the human figure is self-represented online. In addition, the notion of the gaze is foregrounded, suggesting that online dating




Figure 17. *Selfie Guys* (Housego, 2021)

verges upon voyeurism. It was estimated in 2014 that 93 million selfies were taken globally each day (Diefenbach & Christoforakos, 2017, p. 3), and as the title *Selfie Guys* suggests, this work explores “the selfie” in an anecdotal way. I was struck by a peer of mine whose first comment upon seeing the piece was, “This is Tinder!”, which confirmed to me that the type of selfies posted on dating applications are immediately recognizable. The selfie poses portrayed here are synonymous with contemporary dating sites and, as this viewer’s reaction attests, they are undeniably categorized as emitting an air of sexual innuendo.

The work’s composition is balanced while its layered imagery is dense. The embroidery is mounted on a three-foot diameter hoop presenting twelve male figures, all absorbed in the act of taking selfies. These images were sourced from various internet locations including the Facebook group “The Tinder Profile,” along with selfies shared by questionnaire contributors and acquaintances. The selfie guy characters are machine-embroidered in a deep burgundy colour onto toile de jouy-patterned fabric (Fig. 18). The composition is embellished with a grid of white pearls, which I selected for their tactile qualities and romantic connotations. Specifically for my practice, the white pearl is part of my visual art-making iconography, paradoxically

symbolizing both purity and eroticism. The use of pearls also gives a nod to the opulence of Neo-baroque style.

As with the other works in , *Selfie Guys* houses LEDs, strategically placed behind the embroidered fabric, corresponding to each figure’s cell phone camera. These lights are automatically triggered when viewers approach

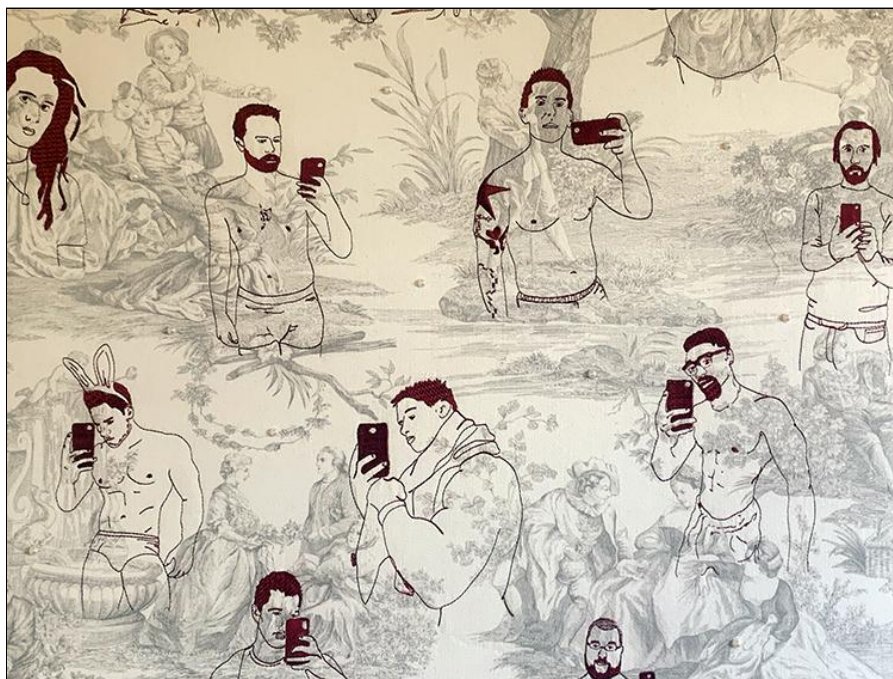


Figure 18. Selfie Guys Detail (Housego, 2021)

the work through an electronic movement sensor placed on the wall directly below the hoop. When activated, it triggers an Arduino-programmed light effect, mimicking an array of cell phone camera flashes, reminiscent of selfie and sexting culture.

I made *Selfie Guys* in an effort to draw viewers into the artwork in a playfully humorous and engaging way. My goal is to give viewers a reason to pause, question, and reflect on these selfie guys taking pictures of them, or on the phenomenon of the selfie itself. Through this work, I seek to open an opportunity for discourse around selfie culture and online self-representation in relation to contemporary courtship.

Along with the juxtaposition of embroidery and digitally-interfaced media, I draw from historical patterns to engage the viewer. This semiotic layering evokes two distinct attitudes about courtship. Displayed against the toile de jouy patterns as a backdrop to the composition, there is a pulsating juxtaposition of men attempting to take their sexy mirror selfies in order to attract a potential mate. The effect exemplifies the exaggerated, anti-chivalry, or sexuality, embedded in the contemporary realities of dating.

4.2 Toile de Jouy

Research related to *Selfie Guys* includes both the 21st century phenomenon of the “selfie” and the toile de jouy fabric design. Toile de Jouy' (also known more colloquially as "Toile") is a type of decorating pattern consisting of a white or off-white background, on which a repeated pattern depicting fairly complex pastoral themes are printed, such as couples having a picnic by a lake or an arrangement of flowers (Andrew, 2008, p. 49). These are narrative textiles, often showcasing a sequence of “events” displayed in vignette or separate scenes (Andrew, 2008, p. 51). The pattern consists of a single colour, most often black, dark red, or blue. This connection to toile’s history is the reason I chose to use a singular burgundy colour to embroider the selfie images.

The contrast between dating rituals associated with the period that toile fabric was popular and our current moment is among my aims. The term "Toile de Jouy" originated in

France in the late 18th century (Andrew, 2008, p. 49). In the French language the phrase literally means "cloth from Jouy-en Josas," a town in the southwest suburbs of Paris (Andrew, 2008, p.49). This idyllic perspective communicated in the content of the Toile de Jouy used in *Selfie Guys* underlines my intention to subvert and parody by layering contemporary images of courtship in the form of the male selfie image.

4.3 The Selfie

The selfie images featured in *Selfie Guys* are signifiers of profile pictures on contemporary dating sites. Questionnaire participants were asked about representation or misrepresentation displayed on online dating sites. The selfie, types of selfies, and selfie angles were mentioned by both men and women. One individual identifying as a woman confessed that women are "very specific on angles and making sure...[they]...show no flaws" in their online selfies (Housego, 2020). Another individual also supported this idea with regards to men, stating that they use "lower camera angles to make themselves look bigger. Showing off their bodies" often in a mirror selfie (Housego, 2020). Many questionnaire participants also deemed specific types of selfies "cliché" for both men and women. Specifically, the cleavage (high-angled) selfie, "overly-filtered selfie," and the "hiking selfie" shot for women. For men, the "profile image of abs," "gym selfies," the "bathroom shirtless mirror selfie," and photos of them holding a fish (Housego, 2020).

Despite all the text information individuals put on their online dating profiles, OKCupid co-founder Christian Rudder "estimates that photos drive 90 percent" of the interactions in online dating (as cited in Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015, p. 97). As a dating data analyst, Rudder has reviewed thousands of dating profile images and has made some surprising discoveries. The courtship questionnaire responders may regard "selfies" as cliché, however Rudder (2010) discovered that for both men and women, selfies most often equate to more incoming messages on dating websites than a portrait photo taken by someone else. Perhaps what selfies lack in expert photographic quality, they make up for with intimacy, approachability, and a sense of closeness (Rudder, 2010). Specifically for women, the photos that resulted in higher in-app message rates were the high-angled selfie pictures, while the least effective photos were the ones

taken while drinking alcohol or posing with an animal (Rudder, 2010). Interestingly for men, the most effective profile photos were ones where they were posing with an animal, followed by the shirtless muscle photo or “ab selfie,” and then images featuring them doing an interesting activity. Traveling, drinking, and being outdoors were the types of photos revealed to be the least effective for men on their dating profiles (Rudder, 2010). And for the men not interested in including a shirtless image of themselves, Rudder’s data revealed that it is best not to swing too hard in the other direction – men wearing casual clothing in their pictures fared better than men posing in formal attire (Rudder, 2010).

Rudder’s research into the most effective dating profile images, along with the data I received from my courtship questionnaire, solidified that for *Selfie Guys* I wanted to reference the infamous male bathroom mirror muscle/abs selfie in a mediated figurative way through embroidery.

4.4 Previous Artwork Experiments

In March 2018, my exhibition “Frills & Furbelows” featured works focused on the representation of the online self and the distortions that can occur on digital platforms. Using media and material such as lace, fabric, sequins, and pearls, along with electronics, LEDs, and screens, I set out to include interactive technical elements within artworks as an experiment of conducting research through audience participation with my art. The addition of technology in the form of an iPad and the SMP Snapchat allowed me to make broader observations concerning the relationships between gender performance and technology.

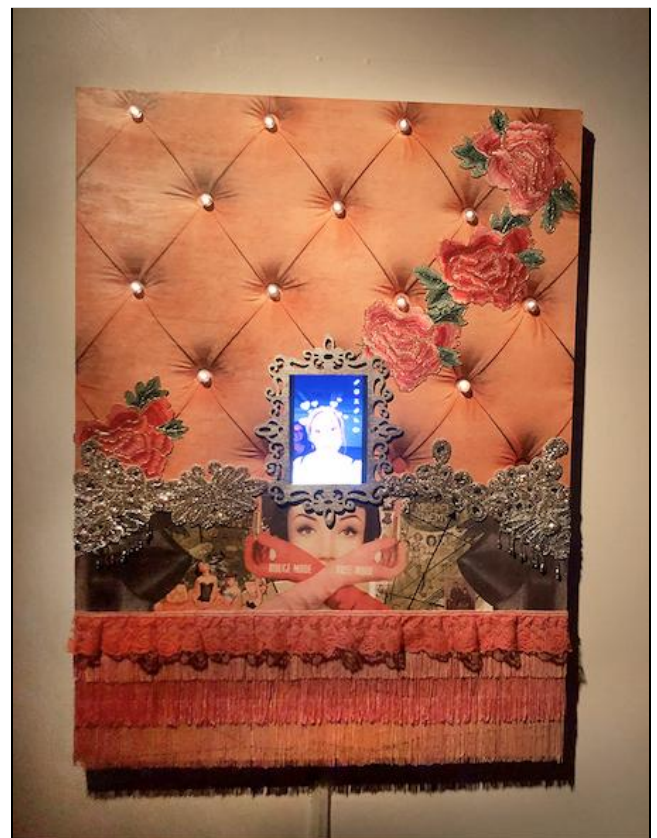


Figure 19. Vanity (Housego, 2018)

Two works in particular set a precedence for my current research questions and specifically for the development of *Selfie Guys*. *Vanity* (Fig. 19, 20) and *Gone Hunting, Is it a Match?* (Fig. 21) are two works that were displayed across from one another in the University of

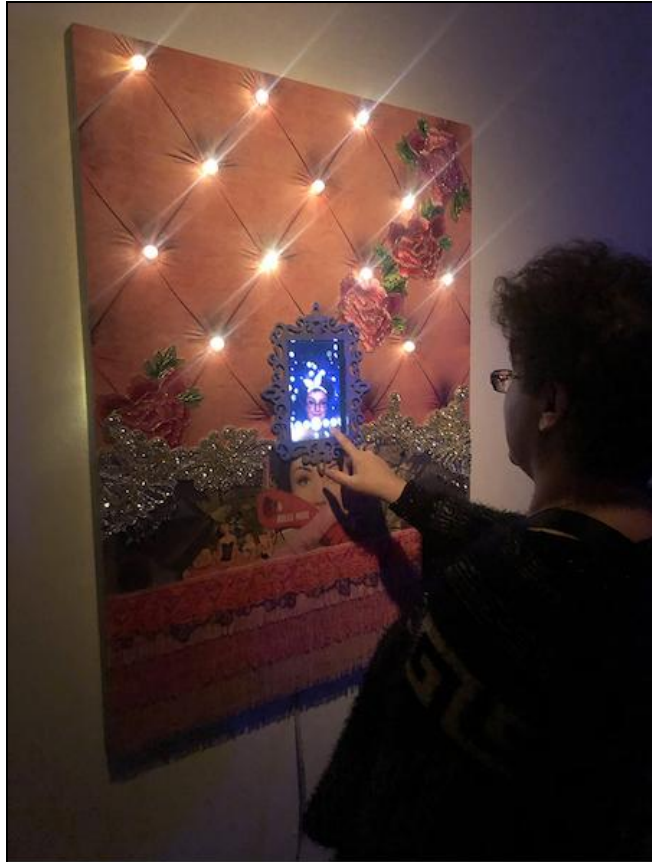


Figure 20. *Vanity* Detail (Housego, 2018)

Calgary exhibition space. *Vanity* incorporated a mirrored iPad connected to Snapchat, the popular social media application. When viewers gazed into the mirrored surface, the work allowed them to interact with the app and post story chats to a Snapchat handle called “The Selfie Project”. Because of this interactive element, people spent large amounts of time interacting with the work, coming back repeatedly to engage with it. The mirrored iPad enabled viewers to add filters to their own image, which lengthened their engagement with the exhibition as a whole.

The relationship between these works also provided some intriguing dialogues. Because *Vanity* hung directly opposite *Gone Hunting, Is it a Match?*, the latter work appeared behind the viewer as they looked at their own reflection in the mirrored iPad attached to *Vanity*. *Gone Hunting* is a somewhat satirical piece, based on the “It’s a

Calgary exhibition space. *Vanity* incorporated a mirrored iPad connected to Snapchat, the popular social media application. When viewers gazed into the mirrored surface, the work allowed them to interact with the app and post story chats to a Snapchat handle called “The Selfie Project”. Because of this interactive element, people spent large amounts of time interacting with the work, coming back repeatedly to engage with it. The



Figure 21. *Gone Hunting, Is it a Match?* (Housego, 2018)

Match" screen in the Tinder interface (Figure 22), although my iteration arranged these icons on a scorched wooden background.

Referencing the ubiquitous love symbol of the heart pierced by an arrow, “suggesting both that love pierces us through the heart and that once pierced we cannot escape its fate,” *Gone Hunting*’s analogy stems from the Roman myth of Cupid (Danesi, 2019 p.132). The Roman Cupid (or the Greek god Eros) was one of the sons of Venus, the goddess of love. In dealing with his own heartbreak, Cupid took out his anger on others “by either uniting or dividing them romantically with his arrows,” thus leaving love’s destiny up to fate (Danesi, 2019, p.3).

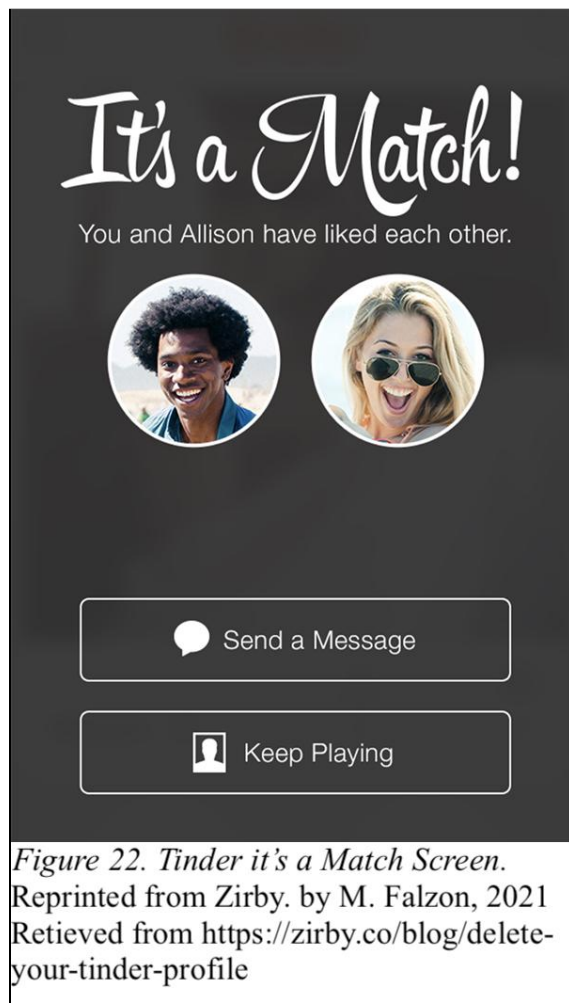


Figure 22. Tinder it's a Match Screen.
Reprinted from Zirby. by M. Falzon, 2021
Retrieved from <https://zirby.co/blog/delete-your-tinder-profile>



The conversation between the two artworks led me to contemplate the complexities of contemporary courtship and how people eager to find love present themselves online in relation to courting behaviours played out in online dating websites or apps. When considered together, these works reified patterns of behaviour around contemporary courtship, specifically evident in the selfie, sexting, and self-representation. This concept of capturing and re-interpreting the online dating selfie directly influenced the creation of *Selfie Guys* for ❤️💔❤️.

The experimental artworks featured in “Frills & Furbelows” was where I also began using excess, ornamentation, drama, and spectacle to conjure feelings of love and lust. In contrast to the order and idealism of the Renaissance, the 17th century Baroque period was characterized by spectacle, drama, and theatricality meant to stir emotion in

an audience. I use Neo-baroque to describe the kitschy aspects that sometimes parodies gestures of romantic love.

The prevalent use of online imaging filters in popular social media networking applications such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat promote digitally customizable forms of adornment within a set range of established beauty standards. For instance filters enhance faces in different ways: they smooth, brighten, beautify, and glamourize in a way that the Neo-baroque amplifies and exaggerates. *Selfie Guys* showcases this contemporary obsession with the selfie and the typical selfies produced by men on dating platforms. The Neo-baroque aesthetic is the perfect visual vehicle to address this “age of the filter” or “age of the selfie” wherein the ubiquitous digital sphere shapes online and offline identities and inevitably influences online courtship.

4.5 Viewer Participation through Interactive Technology

These previous research-creation experiments demonstrate that the use of participatory technology and new media art can play an important role in engaging viewers, providing deeper and more imaginative discourse. Observing how *Vanity* and *Gone Hunting, Is it a Match?* functioned in the gallery space was influential to my decision to use relational aesthetics as a tactic within my thesis exhibition . Several artworks in  use “the emergence of new communications and information technologies” (Martin, 2007 p. 369) to produce a relational aesthetic experience for visitors, inviting the audience to interact with the artwork in ways that provoke them to reflect upon their social context.

With my most recent body of work I wanted to narrow my focus to examine contemporary courtship and all that it entailed: the selfie, sexting, self-representation via a screen, and texting. *Selfie Guys* embodies the facet of self-representation and the gaze, while acknowledging the somewhat voyeuristic nature of online dating. *Selfie Guys* also features certain characteristics that visually explore how humans interact using technology – a defining feature of relational aesthetic art-making tactics (Stewart, 2007, p. 369). From the dynamic I observed in viewers based on their interaction with *Vanity* in my previous exhibition “Frills and Furbelows,” I intended to mimic that “relational” aspect in my next work.

Nearly 25 years ago, French curator Nicolas Bourriaud first wrote about the theory of relational aesthetics in contemporary art, wherein he argued that art is based on social relations (Stewart, 2007, p.370). Bourriaud sees technology as a social relation and the various technological innovations he discusses are all considered in terms of their social form and how they affect our social relations (Stewart, 2007, p.370). Bourriaud also believed that the creation of the Internet was a pivotal moment in the development of the new theory, undoubtedly allowing for more technologically engaging artworks to be facilitated by artists (Stewart, 2007). In the same way that relational aesthetics is characterized as “interactive, user-friendly and relational” (Bourriaud as quoted in Stewart, 2007), the programmed motion sensor and LEDs used in the creation of *Selfie Guys* to promote viewer engagement are designed for everyone.

Operating in the field of human relations, *Selfie Guys* is activated by the viewer as they move near the artwork. Their motion triggers a dynamic LED-programmed light effect resembling the flash from a phone camera. As the LEDs are placed directly behind the figures’ cell phones, the visual effect is that these figures are taking photos or selfies, creating a surprising and theatrical experience for the unexpected viewer. The drama triggered by the flash is informed by the Neo-baroque style I associate with my art. Heightening the artwork’s surreal quality, I also made a conscious decision to make it unclear whether or not the figures are taking pictures of themselves (as these bodies are all referenced from mirror selfies) or the viewer. As the true scenario is uncertain to the viewer, the artwork has the potential to further investigate the notion of the gaze, while exploring the concept of voyeurism within online dating.

4.6 Contemporary Artists and the Selfie

Are selfies simply contemporary versions of art historical self-portraits by the great masters? Maybe this urge to capture ourselves digitally stems from the same motivation iconic artists had when rendering their self-portraits in oil. Rembrandt, likely the most well-known of all portraitists, is said to have painted himself at least 30 times (Sooke, 2017). Art critic and journalist Alastair Sooke notes how selfies have become an area that even internationally respected artists embrace. In fact, in an interview with Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, Sooke sheds light on the selfie by highlighting how contemporary artists have been inspired by the phenomenon (Sooke, 2017). Declaring himself “the best selfie artist,” (Sooke, 2017) Weiwei’s

love of the selfie may underscore the tendency that internationally renowned artists may have for this digitized version of self portraiture. As Sooke points out, the selfie shares many of the characteristics of Weiwei's art such as his concerns with "repetition, multiplication, and the relationship between the individual and society" (Sooke, 2017). This article made me reconsider the judgement that selfies are little more than narcissistic tendencies that millennials obsessively participate in.

Another example of how the selfie has become an inspiration within contemporary art was demonstrated at the world's first exhibition exploring the history of the selfie, "From Selfie to Self-Expression" (2017) at the Saatchi Gallery in London. Huawei smart phones and the Saatchi Gallery teamed up to present this interactive exhibition showcasing key artists working in digital and user-generated content (Benjamin, 2017). From classical masters such as Van Gogh and Velazquez, to contemporary art stars like Cindy Sherman and Tracey Emin, the show underscored how art comes alive through "digital (re)casting" (Benjamin, 2017). As a validation of the selfie, this exhibition sought to "capture self-portraiture in all its forms and power to reboot how audiences understand art" (Benjamin, 2017).

Opening with a collection of historical self-portraits, "From Selfie to Self-Expression" features works digitally displayed on a series of flat touch screens, forming a massive digital version of the original. Resembling enormous iPhones, these screens cycled between images of Rembrandt van Rijn's *Self-portrait with Two Circles* (c. 1665–1669), Edvard Munch's *Self-Portrait* (1882), Vincent Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Pipe* (1886), and others (Fig.23) (Benjamin, 2017).

Another interactive piece using technology in a relational aesthetics approach featured in the exhibition was *Zoom Pavilion* by artists Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Krzysztof Wodiczko (Fig. 24). This installation consists of a dark room with projected surveillance footage surrounding the space. Mounted cameras record and loop visitors' movements within the room and project these digital images back onto the walls and ceiling. It is documented that many



Figure 23. An installation shot of Saatchi Gallery's "From Selfie to Self-Expression." Reprinted from QUARTZ. by R. Benjamin, 2017, Retrieved from <https://qz.com/1038612/saatchi-gallery-selfie-exhibition-selfies-are-the-contemporary-version-of-the-art-masters-self-portraits/>



Figure 24. "Zoom Pavillon" by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Krzysztof Wodiczko. Retrieved from QUARTZ. by R. Benjamin, 2017, Retrieved from <https://qz.com/1038612/saatchi-gallery-selfie-exhibition-selfies-are-the-contemporary-version-of-the-art-masters-self-portraits/>

viewers "instantly began taking photos of [their] physical selves, then snapping photos of [their own] images on the walls, thus taking meta-selfies" (Benjamin, 2017). This computerized interactivity and human behaviour produces an unique cycle of people "documenting themselves being documented," playing with the ideas of environmental surveillance and self-surveillance (Benjamin, 2017).

This artwork specifically relates to concepts I explore in *Selfie Guys*. I am researching the act of self-documentation through selfies, and the voyeurism that comes along with distributing this content on online dating platforms.

“From Selfie to Self-Expression” closed with the images generated by the Huawei smartphones for Saatchi Gallery’s sponsored international selfie contest (Fig. 25). By welcoming user-generated art, unknown artists could bypass the typical artworld system to participate in an exhibition. Nigel Hurst, CEO of Saatchi Gallery and the exhibition's curator, said through this contest “People are telling a story about themselves” clearly linking the selfie to the idea of online self-representation (Benjamin, 2017). The contest received images from “14,000 selfie enthusiasts from 113 countries” highlighting the role of the smartphone as an emerging artistic tool or medium for self-expression (Benjamin, 2017).



Figure 25. A wall of selfies submitted to the #SaatchiSelfie competition. Retrieved from QUARTZ. by R. Benjamin, 2017, Retrieved from <https://qz.com/1038612/saatchi-gallery-selfie-exhibition-selfies-are-the-contemporary-version-of-the-art-masters-self-portraits/>

This exhibition highlighted my intrigue about this selfie phenomenon, and how it has mushroomed into such a definitive online medium for self-representation, particularly within online dating. My research-creation of 💖💔💖’s *Selfie Guys* examines the selfie spectacle and its relationship to voyeurism, along with online self-representation, the selfie, textiles, and audience participation.

Chapter 5: *Emoji Bot*

This chapter will continue discussing my use of a relational approach to art-making by introducing another digitally enlivened work whose title speaks for itself: *Emoji Bot*. I will

comment on the selection of materials and their textures as well as the research I conducted and its symbolic meaning. Finally, I will outline my contributing ideas for the physical development of *Emoji Bot*.

5.1 A Relational Approach

Along with *Selfie Guys*, my exploratory research for *Emoji Bot* (Fig. 26) continued to



Figure 26. *Emoji Bot* (Housego, 2021)

look at visual communication and courtship analysis. Rather than focus on the selfie, the development of *Emoji Bot* relied on using information gathered about emojis from my research questionnaire (Appendix A). The work also references the emoji as a semiotic device. Through the integration of technology such as LEDs in making the artwork, I hope to observe the outcomes of viewer engagement based on the principles of relational aesthetics, which will not only enhance the aesthetic experience of *Emoji Bot*, but also add an experiential dimension. Artists working in this aesthetic are “responding to deep and encompassing social transformations of the conditions and

conception of art” (Stewart, 2007, p. 369).

Several of the artworks in ❤️❤️❤️ focus on the dimension of social exchange using texting technology to entice viewers to interact. *Emoji Bot* and *Flirt Bot* (the latter will be discussed in Chapter 6) facilitate the conversation between artwork and viewer (or co-artist) through chatbots. As defined by IBM, a chatbot “is a support system [often used]...for...customer service. Using artificial intelligence and natural language processing...chatbot[s] can simulate

conversation with a user through messaging applications, websites, mobile apps and more, giving them accurate and relevant information” (IBM, 2021).

The chatbot used in *Emoji Bot* provides the ability for communication via emojis between the artwork and the viewer. The way it works is that the artwork has an associated phone number, displayed on its label. Viewers are invited to text the artwork at this phone number. The phone number is connected to a programmed chatbot on a server, which responds to the viewer’s texts with flirtatious text sent back to their personal phone. The caveat is that the chatbot communicates only with emojis. Facilitating real time communication between the artwork itself and the viewer. It’s my hope that *Emoji Bot* highlights the prevalence of digital communications via emojis (visual symbolism) creating an opening for discours on this evolution within communication and texting.

5.2 Layering & Light

Emoji Bot is attention grabbing in the way that emojis were designed. A bright and playful winking face greets the viewer with its tongue hanging out, signifying sexual intentions as a widely used sign on popular dating applications (Danesi, 2017, p.21). Placed in the centre of the circular composition, the emoji is illuminated with LEDs, encompassed by embroidered floral designs, and an unexpected mash-up of materials. For maximum effect, the central emoji is highlighted with a yellow LED side-lit lighting effect, conducted through a large clear acrylic circle, conveying the look of an optic LED sign.

In this work I incorporate florals related to the historical notions of love,



Figure 27. *Emoji Bot Deatil* (Housego, 2021)

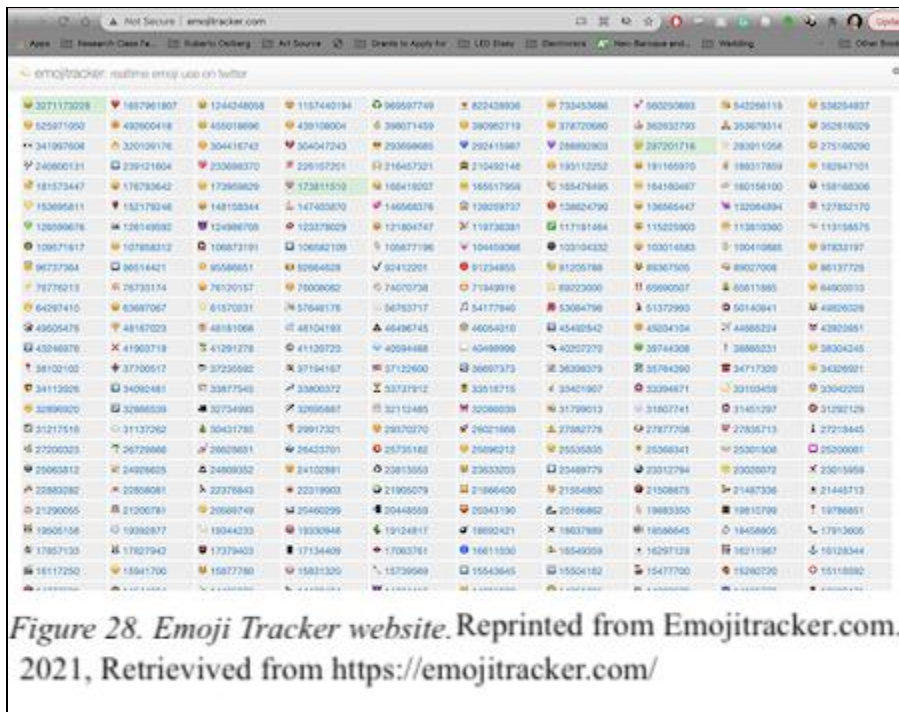
sensuality, distrust, thoughtfulness, and pain. The courtship questionnaire revealed words and themes that I used as inspiration for the symbolic floral choices in this artwork. The effect of surrounding the LED emoji with embroidered florals and emojis highlights both the material and subject-matter contrast between characteristics of courtship communication of the past and the present. Some examples of flowers and their symbolic meaning present in *Emoji Bot* are: Jasmine (sensuality), Pansy (thoughts), Peony (shame, bashfulness), Sunflower (adoration), Yellow Rose (jealousy), and White Rose (I am worthy of you) (Greenaway, 1884/1992). Several examples of the emojis integrated into this floral collage are: 🍑 The peach (butt), 🍆 the eggplant (phallic symbol), 🔥 the flame (hot; on fire), 💧 water droplets (sweat; wetness), and 🌶️ the chili (hot; spicy) (Gainsburg & Phillips, 2020).

Using layers of textiles, the assemblage in *Emoji Bot* consists of hand-embroidery, cross-stitch, found and machine-embroidered objects and applique patches, bridal lace, patterned fabric, and crocheted doilies. I arranged these materials as an overlapping and intertwining pile, placing it against an off-white coloured background. This artwork also includes several small embroidery pieces handed down to me from my grandmother, along with quilted squares created by my father (Fig. 27). The unexpected combination of textiles referencing emojis and the language of flowers surrounding this giant emoji, bursting out of its head, creates a theatrical sense of abundance, referencing an omnipresent visual excess in our digital era.

Tactility is another important aspect of my use of textiles, specifically textile's materiality. Investigation driving this attribute of the material relates to how an audience can consume art differently depending on texture, allowing me to also ask how I can engage the audience in a new way with this material. What role does the influence of texture play on audience engagement? And how does the tactile nature of textiles offer another way to connect with my viewer and pull them into my work?

5.3 The Age of the Emoji

In 2015, the same year I met my husband online, the Oxford Dictionary announced that the emoji known as "Face with Tears of Joy" 😄 was the word of the year (Danesi, 2016, p. 17). This was a significant recognition; not only was it *not* a word - it was a *pictogram* chosen by the prestigious dictionary (Danesi, 2016, p. 17). As noted in Marcel Danesi's book, *The Semiotics of*



Emoji: The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of the Internet (2016), this “word” was accepted without any pushback within culture, signalling what the author deemed “a veritable paradigm shift” that might have taken place in human communication, infiltrating our daily exchanges (p. i). Eleven years later, according to the website www.emojitracker.com, the

most popular emoji to date on Twitter is the “face with tears of joy”/“cry laughing” emoji 😂 clocking 33 billion times used at the time this was written, and it is accumulating by the second (Emojipedia, n.d.). Emojitracker “is an experiment in real time visualization of all emoji symbols used on Twitter,” in which visitors to the site can see the number counting up rapidly as it is updated in real time (Fig. 28). By clicking on any of the listed emojis visitors can also see the tweet updates stream as they are being tweeted out.

Emojis are rooted in emoticons, which are text abbreviations standardized by the American Standard Code For Information Interchange (ASCII) when the internet was entirely text-based. Emoticons “were read sideways, as the ‘smiley’ :-) or the ‘heart’ <3” indicates (Britannica Encyclopedia Online, 2014). Emojis as we know them today were invented in Japan in 1998 and the word *emoji* is an English interpretation of the “Japanese 絵文字 – the *e* of the *emoji* means ‘picture’ and *moji* stands for ‘letter or character,’ so essentially the definition is pretty straight forward ‘picture-word’” (Danesi, 2016, p. 2). Shigetaka Kurita, a Japanese telecommunications worker who “was (purportedly) an avid reader of manga comics,” adapted the text-based graphic emoticons into manga-style emoticon portraits, designed to be visually appealing (Danesi, 2016, p. 2). Over time, Kurita’s “picture-words” became widely used, starting

The rise of the Internet Age has contributed to widespread emoji use as a preferred digital communication style, undoubtedly spilling over into online dating, flirting, and contemporary courtship rituals. For many people today, using emojis essentially “constitute, above all else, a visual based version of ‘small talk’ used to establish connections and keep dialogue pleasant and open” (Danesi, 2017, p. 19). Emojis are ideal for flirtatious chat, as they imbue messages with a specific tone, promoting a connection, and providing lubrication to future text exchanges” (Danesi, 2017).

To illustrate how emojis function as signs in digital dating communication, Figure 30 shows emojis that could accompany the message “want to meet up?” via an online dating site

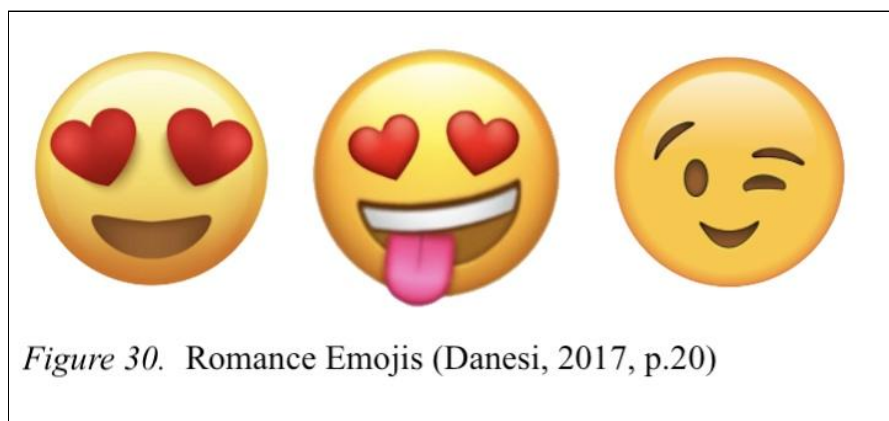


Figure 30. Romance Emojis (Danesi, 2017, p.20)

(Danesi, 2016, p. 20).

Each of the three emojis could indicate very different messages as they each convey a different romantic intent or mood. For example, the emoji with the

contented smile and heart

eyes on the far left communicates a romantic “infatuated face” of love. The middle emoji with its tongue out adds salaciousness to the expression suggesting a more ravenous or lustfulness tone. And, lastly, the “flirtatious winking” emoji on the right implies playful romantic intentions with a knowing impish smile (Danesi, 2016, p. 21).

In my courtship questionnaire, when the question was asked “How often do you use emojis when communicating with a potential or current romantic partner?” 44% of

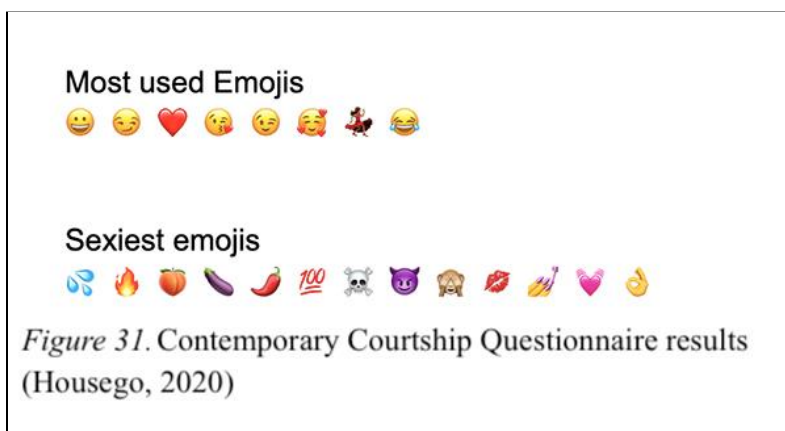


Figure 31. Contemporary Courtship Questionnaire results (Housego, 2020)


Chapter 6: *Flirt Bot*

Chapter 6 will introduce the overall concept and formal elements of *Flirt Bot* (Fig. 33). Additionally I will explain the research utilized to create the chatbot within *Flirt Bot*, which draws from nuanced flirtatious communication in both spoken language and AI technology.

6.1 *Flirt Bot's* Chatbot



Figure 33. *Flirt Bot* (Housego, 2021)


Flirt Bot is created from a combination of textile elements, computer programming, and AI technology. As with the four other works in , the piece is mounted on a 3 foot in diameter hooped frame with integrated LEDs situated amidst layers of fabrics and lace. Two 10 x 19.5 inch LED matrix screens are centred within the circular composition. The LEDs are diffused with layers of fabric and lace so

they are only visible when activated. Moreover, the LEDs are integrated into the overall artwork by being placed among machine embroidered florals inspired from samplers.

Conceptually, *Flirt Bot* expands on the themes in *Emoji Bot*, delving into the issues of digital communication in online dating. The work also highlights the effects of potential miscommunication between partners including feelings of frustration and discomfort, as well as unexpected humorous outcomes. *Flirt Bot* investigates the oddities of anonymous online communication by reflecting real-world experiences of individuals engaged in online dating. In doing so, *Flirt Bot* aims to facilitate the formation of participants' thoughts and feelings about online dating, furthering discourse on the topic and encouraging viewers to ponder their experience of exchange with the artwork.

Flirt Bot specifically focuses on the phenomena of people connecting solely on digital platforms via text message exchanges, dating app messaging systems, and social media communications. Using the knowledge gained from collecting and analyzing the data within my online contemporary courtship questionnaire, coupled with my personal heuristic experiences, the training and conversational topics for the *Flirt Bot* chatbot were similar to those used in *Emoji Bot*. The idea of including chatbot technology came from my motivation to directly engage with the viewers by replicating potential real-world experiences of online communication within contemporary courtship. The artwork directly engages with viewers digitally by providing a designated cell phone number that viewers can text their flirtatious comments. Like the *Emoji Bot*, this phone number is connected to a pre-programmed chatbot, which is a type of simple programmed artificial intelligence that will interpret the texts sent to it and send a response to the participant via their cell phone. These messages correspond to emoji animations displayed on the embedded LED matrix on *Flirt Bot*. The displayed animations visually communicate the chatbot's response to the participants by showing expressive emojis such as pink hearts, winky faces, angry faces, smiley faces, fire, and purple devil emojis. This chatbot is programmed and trained using the feedback collected in the contemporary courtship questionnaire. The artwork therein serves as an avenue for viewers to interact with and expand upon visual symbolic text and linguistic text in real time. The artwork's pre-programmed chatbot enables viewers to experience what it is like to flirt anonymously via digital communication, forming their own sense of meanings surrounding online dating and communication technologies, and, if it is new to them, introducing them to the experience.

6.2 Researching AI's Ability to Flirt

The seed for the creation of this artwork was germinated by conversations and ideas about the relation between art, flirting, and love. Would it be possible to create an artwork that could flirt with viewers and possibly encourage them to fall in love with it? Could an artwork ghost a viewer or come on too strong via a sexy text? *Emoji Bot* and *Flirt Bot* featured in  are my first attempts at working with chatbots and a test-run at working with the concept of AI. *Flirt Bot* is undoubtedly a prototype, and as such the chatbot will likely not be able to replicate the complex emotions and interactions to facilitate love or strong attachment.

The process of creating the chatbots compelled me to research other flirtatious chatbots used by scientists who experiment with AI to emulate human connection and emotion. Harvard scholar Moira Weigel studies the capacity of AI to make humans fall in love with robots, stating “as AIs get better at games like chess, Go and Jeopardy, investors have poured resources into the study and development of ‘affective’ or ‘emotional’ computing: systems that recognize, interpret, process, and simulate human feelings” (Weigel, 2016). This trend indicates that there is value in funding and building artificial intelligent computers which relate to humans in effective ways.

Weigel continues her argument by noting that flirting is actually a sign of intelligence. She quotes Sam Altman, co-chair of research group OpenAI with Elon Musk, who asserts that “feelings seem to be an inextricable part of genuine ‘intelligence’” (Weigel, 2016). Indeed, AI research is testing whether it is possible for humans to fall in love with machines by gauging if flirtation is possible. Weigel’s aptly titled article “Flirting with Humanity: The Search for an Artificial Intelligence Smart Enough to Love” (2016) is convincing. In it she notes that “for humans, flirting is a key test of emotional and social intelligence” and that AI researchers, as a result, “are trying to endow machines with the ability to generate feelings in others, and to understand context and subtext – or the difference between what a person wants and what a person says” (Weigel, 2016). To be sure, it is an incredibly complex process to replicate the nuances of flirting in AIs. The interactive chatbot in *Flirt Bot* however is a foray into testing the parameters of this AI technology in art. Envisioned as a research-creation artwork, *Flirt Bot*’s chatbot AI is unable to answer Weigel’s question of whether “Artificial Intelligence [is] Smart

Enough to Love”, but probes the question of whether I can produce an artwork that can express and invoke love.



The ability to express ourselves through nuanced language is an integral element in determining human courtship behaviour. Ethnologists Andrew Gersick and Robert Kurzban (2014) describe how flirting for humans may have evolved precisely because we have language (p. 1). Human “language makes all interactions potentially public” as opposed to say insects or animals (Gersick & Kurzban, 2014, p.1). The authors explain that flirting through language decreases the risk of rejection by claiming that humans evolved “a class of courtship signaling [verbal and non-verbal] that conveys the signaler’s intentions and desirability to the intended receiver while minimizing the cost that would accompany an overt courtship attempt” (Gersick & Kurzban, 2014, p.1). This is why, for example, subtlety is a feature of courtship, asking a potential partner if they “Want to grab a drink sometime?” will prove better than using an unfiltered approach such as “Are you sexually interested in me? Because I am sexually interested in you” (Gersick & Kurzban, 2014).

Minimizing risk on behalf of the admirer through the use of indirect language may also support the reason why the symbolism of flowers (or the language of flowers) were popular ways to flirt in the Victorian era. After all, the gift of a rose could be read as a flirtatious love tactic as well as an innocent gesture, leaving room for the admirer to divert their romantic interest should it not be reciprocated with the same sentiment.

This type of nuanced flirtatious communication is currently being tested by programmers who experiment with how AIs interact with humans. Although, all you have to do is try to joke with Alexa or Siri to quickly see that this type of verbal indirectness is a challenge for AI to respond to in a manner befitting a human. Bruce and Sue Wilcox, previous recipients of the Loebner Prize, an international competition for conversational AIs, have made it their goal to build an “AI capable of convincing someone [they] are being heard and understood” (Weigel, 2016, p. 10). To do so they minimize interactions in which their bot will say something that shows it does not understand what is being asked of it. The Wilcoxes’ two most famous chatbots Rose and Suzette, were not specifically designed to instigate romantic relations, although when asked if users flirted with them they responded “yes” (Weigel, 2016, p. 11). Interestingly, both of

these chatbots are programmed to respond differently, leaving room for the user to project different personalities onto the AIs. Suzette, for instance, will simply hang up or ghost a user who swears or is rude to her. Rose, on the other hand, has been programmed with sophisticated “deflecting material” if she is asked something deemed inappropriate by the Wilcoxes. She is capable of switching the conversation by using pre-programed responses (Weigel, 2016, p. 13). As with *Flirt Bot* and *Emoji Bot*, Rose and Suzette exist only online, accessed through a cell phone or computer. Each lacks the important nonverbal suggestive human behaviours used to attract the attention of prospective mates.

My main objective in creating *Flirt Bot* is to investigate online digital communication within contemporary courtship and facilitate discourse through direct viewer participation. The use of chatbots similar to the ones the Wilcoxes created, works conceptually for *Flirt Bot* because online dating communication is mediated through technology that also inherently lacks the nonverbal human element. Though unlike the Wilcoxes AIs, *Flirt Bot* includes an additional user/viewer engagement through the visual elements of text messages the participant receives, the physical artwork itself, and the LED matrix screen displaying colourful animated emoji elements.

Research into AI technology and flirting is relevant to  because it showcases two artworks that utilize simple AI technology. I regard chatbots as a technological art-making medium to explore online dating communications, rather than AI and romance per se. Perhaps in the future AI chatbots will be an important tool to assist humans with practicing the art of online digital communication within contemporary courtship. For  the use of chatbots in *Flirt Bot* and *Emoji Bot* essentially provide a digital and physical space to emulate and experience online dating textual interactions, as they are mostly conducted through apps, chat messages, and texts.

My hope is that *Flirt Bot* creates an opportunity for viewers to have a relational experience and to socially engage with the art through the chatbot, while at the same time highlighting the behaviour of flirting online through texting and messaging communication technologies. Ideally, *Flirt Bot* can facilitate discourse about this type of mediated online communication and the types of miscommunications that occur online.

6.3 Chatbots

My research into flirtatious chatbots revealed that Slutbot, a chatbot founded by Brianna Rader, CEO of Juicebox, was the most complex and comprehensive chatbot relating to relationships and communication (Juicebox, 2021). Slutbot was developed based on feedback

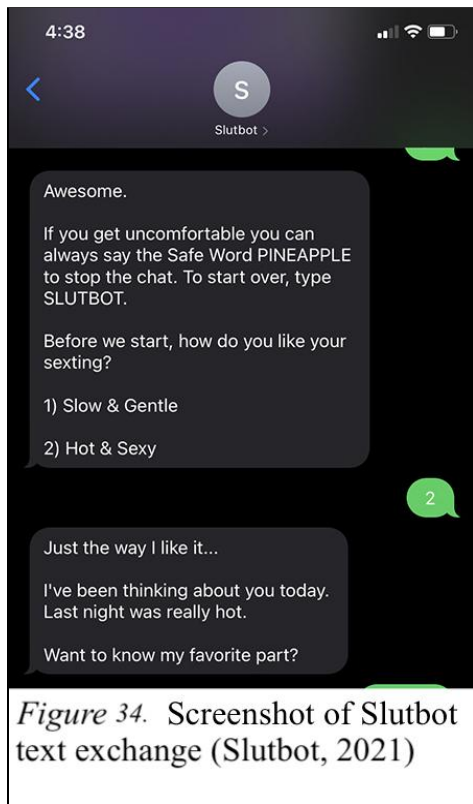


Figure 34. Screenshot of Slutbot text exchange (Slutbot, 2021)

received from their original Juicebox relationship application that offered advice on love and sex for a weekly or monthly price. Rader says "after we got the request repeatedly over several months, it shed light on the fact that, really, what people struggle with in terms of sex and sexuality is communication...people often don't have the language to express their desires. They don't have the skills..." and the creators of Slutbot believe that the way to learn is just to practice (Joho, 2019).

Slutbot is a free service all can access simply by texting the phone number on their website juicebox.com to get started. On the website Slutbot is described as a "free virtual coach

that shows you

how to dirty talk over text (also known as sexting)" programmed with the collaboration of erotic fiction writers and sex educators (Juicebox, 2021). This chatbot was developed for all genders and sexual orientations, framed as a "safe space to practice dirty talk and provide sexting examples as inspiration" (Juicebox, 2021). Users also have the ability to dictate their sexting style, and the chatbot gives two sexting options: slow & gentle or hot & sexy (Fig. 34). There is even a safe word (pineapple) if things start to feel too much for the user. The scripted scenarios are usually short

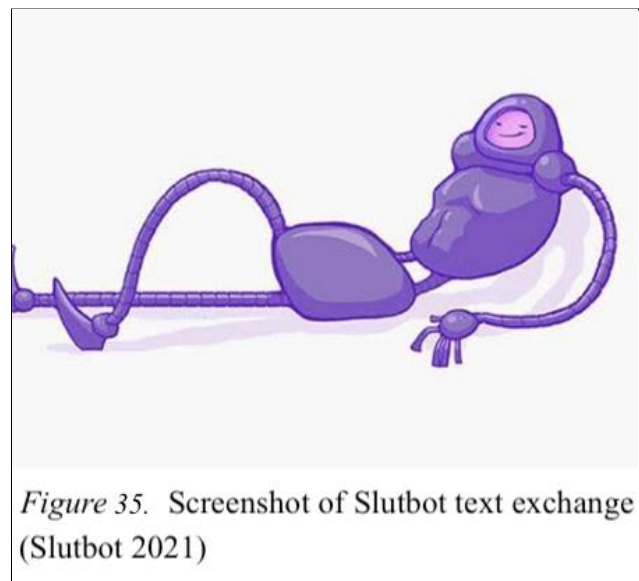



Figure 35. Screenshot of Slutbot text exchange (Slutbot 2021)

and playful. During the end of my first interaction with Slutbot, I was asked “Do you want me to send you a sexy pic to tide you over while you wait for tomorrow?” I answered “yes” and received “Great here’s a little something just for you” accompanied by a cute picture of a smirking robot (Fig. 35).


What is unique about Slutbot is that it is sex-positive and was developed as a model to promote the language around consent. Rader states, "The question format is an important way to model consent, and to show how consent is a great way to have dirty talk...it also gives the user a chance to practice" (Joho, 2019). Like most chatbots, Slutbot is not a true AI, as it doesn't learn or adapt from interactions. However, it is a complex chatbot, instilled with the goal to build online communications skills, supporting the sharing of desires, and hopefully helping “people have the sex life and intimacy they want in their lives" (Joho, 2019).


The Juicebox ethos around communication, consent and education resonate with me and my art practice. Like Slutbot, *Flirt Bot* is also not a real AI, rather both chatbots are about exploring how to communicate digitally with prospective romantic partners, the subject of my thesis inquiries into online dating communication. It is also worth reiterating that *Flirt Bot* is a new prototype for interactive artwork and vastly less complicated than Slutbot which has a team behind its development over the last several years. *Flirt Bot*’s goal, unlike Slutbot’s singular focus on sexting, is to emulate flirtatious online dating interactions. While sexuality is a part of these interactions as is romance, I see *Flirt Bot* as more tame in its conversational agenda. The chatbot interface within *Flirt Bot* may only be a prototype, but I believe this artwork touches on complex ideas surrounding how we communicate digitally when it comes to matters of the heart.

Chapter 7: Conclusion


The five part series of electronic and textile new media artworks in  are guided by a research-creation artistic methodology examining facets of 21st century romance, specifically online self-representation (visual and descriptive text), digital communication, and their relationship technology. The artworks juxtapose signs and signifiers that have been used in

courtship rituals historically and more recently to reveal the ongoing desire of humans to evoke love and attraction through symbols. This research has personally led me to believe there are parallels between Victorian and contemporary modes of dating, and that emojis are an extension of floriography in the visual vocabulary of courtship. By emphasizing chatbots and LEDs, my research-creation also reveals how technology has been harnessed as a communicative tool to embody expressions of courtship through visual symbolism and text in the online dating environment.

Primary Data and *Selfie Guy* address elements of digital self-representation within online contemporary courtship through text and visual images, respectively. *SEND NUDES*, *Emoji Bot*, and *Flirt Bot* explore aspects of online communication mediated through technology. Relational aesthetic artistic approaches were applied to *Selfie Guys*, *Emoji Bot* and *Flirt Bot* providing a way for viewers to participate with the art. Ultimately,  invites viewers to participate in the co-creation of knowledge about elements of online dating rituals, in particular digital communication and self-representation, and thereby create space for deeper discourse and understanding of the experiences of others.

Upon completing , I believe there is potential for further research-creation on the topic of contemporary courtship explored within this series. Pointedly, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in March 2020, as I was immersed in my research and had already distributed a major source to gather data, my contemporary courtship questionnaire. Future research would likely benefit from the development and distribution of a sequential contemporary courtship questionnaire, including questions that reflect the new world realities of dating during a pandemic. Additionally, in the first version of the questionnaire, I did not gather ethnic identifying information in its demographic section. Also, the addition of questions tailored to make space for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) to reflect on how their identity impacts and/or influences their online dating experience could lead to new inclusive and insightful data. As the goal of the original questionnaire was to gain textual data influenced by thoughts, ideas, feelings, or experiences related to contemporary courtship such as online dating, digital communication and miscommunication, ensuring that inclusiveness is front and centre to the structure of future research, would likely bolster its integrity. The combination of further

perspectives, artistic styles, stories, and ideas will build a broad interpretative framework for this multifaceted subject and help expand my overarching research-creation methodological approach.

The fusion of embroidery, textiles, and technology through the use of historically influenced patterns, LEDs, and electronics within this series was significant to my general art practice. Moving forward, I am eager to continue to push and explore alternate combinations of these art-making mediums. The culmination of my research-creation process proved to me that the combination of media in my art firmly supports my personal Neo-Baroque aesthetic, which highlights the lush opulence of the various textures, patterns of decorative embroidery, and the theatrical effect of LEDs and electronic sensors. I would particularly like to create a pendant for *Selfie-Guys*, featuring “Selfie-Gals”, which would also include the programmed camera flash mimicking LEDs and electronic motion sensors. Additionally, I would like to do further research on chatbots and learn more programming skills that would enable me to expand on the prototype version of *Flirt Bot*. Lastly, it is my hope that the originality of  , a five-part, two-dimensional mixed media series, will contribute to the discourse of contemporary courtship rituals and their relationship to historical modes of romantic communication.

This research-creation thesis is deeply personal to me and inextricably tied to life as I know it, specifically because my partner and I met through an online dating application six years ago, and we are now about to embark into the adventure of parenthood together. I cannot help but think of how Christian Rudder’s book *Dataclysm* (2014) describes the impact of online dating on society in personal terms. Rudder estimates that “tonight, some 30,000 couples will have their very first date because of OkCupid. Roughly 3000 will end up together long-term. 200 of those will get married, and many of them, of course will have kids” (Rudder, 2014, p.10). Soon my partner and I will have a sleepy, crying, and (I’m sure) very adorable newborn baby who will exist in the world because of the Internet, a dating website, and because I chose to answer a dating app message.

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Appendix A: Contemporary Courtship Questionnaire

Contemporary Courtship

Gender

☐ *Male*

☐ *Female*

☐ *Prefer not to say*

☐ *Other:* _____

Age How old are you? (in years)

Preference

What is your sexual orientation?

☐ *Heterosexual*

☐ *Homosexual*

O Bi-sexual

O Prefer not to say

O Other: _____

Q1 In one word, how would you describe dating in the last 10 years?

Q2 How often do you use emojis or other signs and symbols (IE. images, gifs) when communicating with a potential or current romantic partner? What are your most common emojis used and images that you send regularly?

Q3 What is the sexiest emoji?

Q4 Do you think sexting is sexy?

Q5 Do you have any memorable experiences related to sexting?

Q6 Can you tell me a memorable story that involves digital communication or miscommunication in regard to contemporary dating?

Q7 How have online dating apps changed the way you date, and what do you expect out of dating on digital platforms?

Q8 Share a memorable image or text message someone sent you?

Q9 What do you hate about contemporary courtship?

Q10 What do you enjoy about contemporary courtship?

Q11 From your experience (if applicable) do people who identify as men represent or misrepresent themselves online or during digital courtship?

Q12 From your experience (if applicable) how do people who identify as women represent or misrepresent themselves online or during digital courtship?

Q13 In your opinion, what are the common clichés that people who identify as women participate in regarding contemporary courtship?

Q14 Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about online dating, or contemporary courtship?

Q15 Is there anything else you would like to add concerning contemporary courtship and/or online dating?

Consent

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Q26 All participation is completely voluntary, individuals may refuse to participate altogether, may refuse to participate in parts of the study, may decline to answer any and all questions, and may withdraw from the study at any time. The questionnaire you completed will be destroyed, the artwork you created will be returned to you. Unfortunately, any recorded data from the meet up that includes you in the conversation cannot be destroyed. However, your comments will not form part of the aggregated data, and therefore will not be included in the artworks synthesizing this data.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

No personal identifying information will be collected in this study, and all participants shall remain anonymous. Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your gender, age, and education level. Some of the questions in the questionnaire are concerning romantic relationships. You are not required to answer any of the questions that might make you feel uncomfortable or upset you. Should this event or questionnaire cause any distress, you can stop and withdraw participation at any time. You can access mental and emotional wellness support by contacting the following:

- *Alberta Mental Health Help Line, 1-877-303-2642 (Toll Free 24/7)<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/> Confidential, anonymous service, crisis intervention, information about mental health programs and services, and referrals to other agencies if needed.*
- *Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse (CCASA) CCASA is the primary sexual assault and sexual abuse crisis and education service provider for Calgary and surrounding areas. 910 7th Avenue S.W. Calgary, AB, T2P 3N8 403-237-5888 <http://calgarycasa.com>*
- *Distress Centre Calgary Non-profit social agency that delivers 24-hour support, counselling and resource referral services to Calgary and the surrounding area. A national network of existing distress, crisis and suicide prevention line services. 999 8th Street SW, Calgary, AB, T2R 1J5 403-266-1601 <http://www.distresscentre.com/>*
- *First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line If you are FEELING SAD or DISTRESSED and want to talk, support is a phone call away. Service is available in Cree, Ojibway, Inuktitut,*

English and French. Callers may ask about the availability of services in the language of their choice.

1-855-242-3310<https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1576089278958/1576089333975>

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

I, as the principal investigator, will have access to all information provided, supervisors may also access this information. Your questionnaire will be anonymous. Participants are free to withdraw until July 31, 2020. Should you wish to withdraw your data the TCPS (the code of ethics that Canadian university researchers adhere to) advises that all data the participant contributed to the study be destroyed unless this is not feasible or there are compelling reasons not to do so. Your embroidered visual-research contribution will be returned to you. It will not be possible to return or destroy your questionnaire as it will be anonymous and cannot be linked to you. After August 2020 it will no longer be possible to withdraw information. While the audio tape of the event you participated in cannot be destroyed to remove you, your remarks will not be recorded in the transcription of the event. All audio recordings will be destroyed immediately upon transcription. No one, except me and my supervisors, will be allowed to see or hear any of the answers to the questionnaire or the interview audio tape and its transcript. There are no names on the questionnaire; they are anonymous. Only group information will be summarized for any presentation or publication of results. The questionnaires and transcripts of the event will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researcher until December 31, 2020, after which time it will be destroyed.

Q27 By acknowledging your consent on this form you indicated that:

1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project,

and

2) you agree to participate in the research project. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

☐ *I consent*

☐ *I do not consent*

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If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at 403.220.6289 or 403.220.8640; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix B: Questionnaire Data and Artwork Integration

Contemporary Courtship Questionnaire Summarized Data

109 people completed the contemporary courtship questionnaire.

Sex

- 25 - Male 24%,
- 68 - Female 66%,
- 2 - Prefer not to say 2%,
- 8 - Other 7% (Cisgender male, Transman, N/A, Goth, Nonbinary, Agender, Non-Binary, Genderqueer femme, Non-binary)

Age

- Youngest respondent was 20
- Oldest respondent was 53
- Average age was 31

Sexual Orientation

- 63 - Heterosexual 61%
- 5 - Homosexual 5%
- 26 - Bisexual 26%
- 3 - Prefer not to say 3%
- 6 - Other 6% (LGTBQ2, 3 - Pansexual, Queer, Demisexual)

Online Dating Applications Used

- 56 - Tinder 20%
- 47 - Bumble 17%
- 19 - Hing 6%
- 38 - POF 14%
- 22 - Ok Cupid 8%
- 7 - eHarmony 3%
- 14 - Match 5%
- 6 - Grindr 2%
- 11 - FetLife 4%
- 20 - Instagram 7%
- 20 - Facebook 7%
- 17 - Other 6% (2-None, Twitter, Pornhub, 2- Snapchat, Discord, 2- Her, Superdyke, Elite singles, Reddit, 2- Texting, Whatsapp, 2-Scruff)

How often do you use emojis or other signs (ie. images, gifs) when communicating with a potential or current romantic partner?

- 38 - Often 44%
- 30 - Sometimes 34%
- 7 - Not often 8%
- 9 - It depends 10%
- 3 - Never 3%

Most used Emojis

- 😊 😏 ❤️ 😘 😊 😍 🐼 😂

Sexiest Emojis

- 💦 🔥 🍑 🍆 🌶️ 700 🦴 🦋 🍑 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷

Do you think sexting is sexy?

- 20 - Yes 23%
- 10 - No 11%
- 33 - Sometimes 38%
- 22 - It depends 25%

Contemporary Courtship Questionnaire and Artwork Integration

The qualitative process of my data analysis for ❤️💔❤️ included reviewing the participants' completed questionnaires while making notes and writing about their overarching feelings, experiences, and perspectives and themes presented in their answers. The goal of the questionnaire was to gain textual data influenced by thoughts, ideas, feelings, or experiences related to contemporary courtship such as online dating, digital communication and miscommunication from people of various backgrounds, sexualities, and geographies. After reviewing these findings, my ideas germinated into the basis of the synthesis stage of my art-making. The following is a breakdown of how the Contemporary Courtship Questionnaire influenced each artwork in ❤️💔❤️.

Primary Data: The Language of the Red, Yellow, and Blue Roses

The central three primary coloured roses featured in *Primary Data* include a yellow rose that connotes jealousy, a red rose representing true romantic love, and a blue rose signifying all that is unattainable (Brick, 2008, p. 62). The words embroidered into *Primary Data* are taken from heterosexual men's dating profiles on the popular Plenty of Fish (POF) dating website. This text is situated around LED flowers that symbolize the associated colour of the rose used to interpret their meaning. The phrases included represent three main categories of meaning pertaining to love in floriography: "true love"; expressions of concern such as "jealousy" or "infidelity"; and, "the unattainable", which could allude to inauthenticity or ambivalence around commitment, or casual dating scenarios.

These categories were reinforced by the responses given in the contemporary courtship survey I distributed. When asked "What emotions come to mind, when you think of dating in the last 10 years?" Many participants used words such as *hopeful*, *joy*, *euphoria*, *lucky*, and *love*, supporting the category of "true love" signified by the red rose. Likewise, popular words like *fear*, *insecurity*, and *betrayal* could fall into the category of the yellow rose's symbolic meaning of "jealousy" or "infidelity." Lastly, words like *frustration*, *confusing*, *distant*, *doubt*, and *non-committal* to describe emotions surrounding dating reinforce the category emblematic of the blue rose – "the unattainable" (Housego, 2020). For me, the survey solidified my thesis about the symbolic significance of colours and how meaning is strengthened when combined with associated phrases. A large portion of my work pertains to how people make connections through dating apps, whether that be direct or indirect through text and imagery. Or by borrowing from historical motifs and text found in personal classified advertisements.

SEND NUDES

The unscrupulous attitude of the "send nudes" meme presumes that the sender is either rude, blunt, vulgar, cheeky or titillating depending on context, which creates a humorous association when considering how the work is composed of ornate gold thread, floral

embellishments, and delicately scalloped lace-trimmed borders. References to this meme, along with the infamous “dick pic” meme and sexting, came up multiple times in the responses to my courtship questionnaire. When asked to describe memorable experiences related to online dating, the responses ranged from negative and creepy to exciting and sexy. One man stated he was happily surprised when a woman sent him an unsolicited “send nudes” text while he was in a lecture, declaring “That was a trip!” One person shared that they “used to have a stash of dick pics to send back when...[they]...got unsolicited ones”. More than several individuals also claimed that sexting and sending nudes was how they knew an online relationship had started. Also, the “send nudes” meme was revealed to be a behavior, thought to be a common cliché, that people who identify as men participate in, along with dick pics of course.

The choice to use the “send nudes” meme allowed me to create my own ironic adaptation and poke fun at the mainstream controversy surrounding it. Also, as demonstrated from the responses received in the courtship questionnaire, the “send nudes” text is a real and common part of contemporary online courtship, be it a shocking message to receive or a surprising, sexy innuendo. My artwork *SEND NUDES* takes this declarative statement and softens its overt sexual implications through the use of delicate textile materials, detailed gilded embroidered letters, and floral motifs creating an ironic message.

Selfie Guys

The selfie images featured in *Selfie Guys* are signifiers of profile pictures on contemporary dating sites. These images were sourced from various internet locations including the Facebook group “The Tinder Profile,” along with selfies shared by contemporary courtship questionnaire contributors and acquaintances.

Questionnaire participants were asked about representation or misrepresentation displayed on online dating sites. The selfie, types of selfies, and selfie angles were mentioned by both men and women. One individual identifying as a woman confessed that women are “very specific on angles and making sure...[they]...show no flaws” in their online selfies (Housego, 2020). Another individual also supported this idea with regards to men, stating that they use

“lower camera angles to make themselves look bigger. Showing off their bodies” often in a mirror selfie (Housego, 2020). Many questionnaire participants also deemed specific types of selfies “cliché” for both men and women. Specifically, the cleavage (high-angled) selfie, “overly-filtered selfie,” and the “hiking selfie” shot for women. For men, the “profile image of abs,” “gym selfies,” the “bathroom shirtless mirror selfie,” and photos of them holding a fish (Housego, 2020).

The courtship questionnaire responders may regard “selfies” as cliché, however Christian Rudder, founder of *OKCupid* discovered that for both men and women, selfies most often equate to more incoming messages on dating websites than a portrait photo taken by someone else. Perhaps what selfies lack in expert photographic quality, they make up for with intimacy, approachability, and a sense of closeness (Rudder, 2010).

Rudder’s research into the most effective dating profile images, along with the data I received from my courtship questionnaire, solidified that for *Selfie Guys* I wanted to reference the infamous male bathroom mirror muscle/abs selfie in a mediated figurative way through embroidery.

Emoji Bot

Emoji Bot continues to look at visual communication and courtship analysis using information gathered about emojis from my research questionnaire (Appendix A). In this artwork I incorporate florals related to the historical notions of love, sensuality, distrust, thoughtfulness, and pain. The courtship questionnaire revealed words and themes that I used as inspiration for the symbolic floral choices in this artwork. The effect of surrounding the LED emoji with embroidered florals and emojis highlights both the material and subject-matter contrast between characteristics of courtship communication of the past and the present. Some examples of flowers and their symbolic meaning present in *Emoji Bot* are: Jasmine (sensuality), Pansy (thoughts), Peony (shame, bashfulness), Sunflower (adoration), Yellow Rose (jealousy), and White Rose (I am worthy of you) (Greenaway, 1884/1992). Several examples of the emojis integrated into this floral collage are: 🍑 The peach (butt), 🍆 the eggplant (phallic symbol), 🔥

the flame (hot; on fire), 💧 water droplets (sweat; wetness), and 🌶️ the chili (hot; spicy) (Gainsburg & Phillips, 2020).

In my courtship questionnaire, when the question was asked “How often do you use emojis when communicating with a potential or current romantic partner?” 44% of participants responded “often”, 34% said “sometimes”, while 10% said “it depends”, and 8% said “not often”. Questionnaire participants were also asked “Do you think sexting is sexy?” 38% said “sometimes”, 23% said “yes”, 25% said “it depends”, and 11% said “no”. Although the data is not definitive, it is clear that using emojis within the context of online dating communications is important. *Emoji Bot* physically features emojis identified in my research as either the most commonly used emojis or sexiest emojis. Listed below these emojis have likewise been included into the programming of the artwork’s chatbot.

Most used Emojis

- 😊 😏 ❤️ 🤔 😬 😍 🐼 😂

Sexiest Emojis

- 💧 🔥 🍑 🍆 🌶️ 🍷 💀 🐱 🍌 🍑 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷

Flirt Bot

Using the knowledge gained from collecting and analyzing the data within my online contemporary courtship questionnaire, coupled with my personal heuristic experiences, the training and conversational topics for the *Flirt Bot* chatbot were similar to those used in *Emoji Bot*.

The artwork directly engages with viewers digitally by providing a designated cell phone number that viewers can text their flirtatious comments. Like the *Emoji Bot*, this phone number is connected to a pre-programmed chatbot, which is a type of simple programmed artificial intelligence that will interpret the texts sent to it and send a response to the participant via their cell phone. These messages correspond to emoji animations displayed on the embedded LED matrix screen on *Flirt Bot*. The displayed animations visually communicate the chatbot's response to the participants by showing expressive emojis such as pink hearts, winky faces,

angry faces, smiley faces, fire, and purple devil emojis. Emojis that were identified as commonly used, or the most sexy by the contemporary courtship questionnaire participants. The artwork therein serves as an avenue for viewers to interact with and expand upon visual symbolic text and linguistic text in real time. The artwork's pre-programmed chatbot enables viewers to experience what it is like to flirt anonymously via digital communication, forming their own sense of meaning about online dating and communication technologies, and, if it is new to them, introducing them to the experience.