

LATHER RINSE REPEAT: THE ITERATIVE PRACTICE AND PEDAGOGY OF HAIR CLUB

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Abstract

HAIR CLUB is an interdisciplinary research-based art collective whose work is centered around the multivalent topic of HAIR in wider culture. Co-founded in Chicago in 2014 by Suzanne Gold, Kelly Lloyd, and Michal Lynn Shumate, HAIR CLUB operates as a platform for discussion, dialogue, research, exhibition, and publication. The founders of HAIR CLUB are artists, scholars, and educators, committed to rigorous academic inquiry in concert with the indelible mark of the anecdotal.

HAIR CLUB's ongoing collaborative work stems from a study of hair as a vehicle for meaning in contemporary

art, art history, and visual culture. Through the development of Hair-based curricula for community workshops and internationally accredited university courses, we have developed systematic ways of cataloguing and harnessing personal narratives related to hair. By stewarding narratives that touch upon issues of identity, ethnicity, spirituality, and culture, we have formed a socially-engaged methodology which we use as the foundation for an emerging discipline.

With the singular, continually generative subject of Hair at its root, HAIR CLUB practices a pedagogy and mode of inquiry that is both expansive and iterative. Considerations of the issues that Hair raises – of care and cruelty and symbolic meaning and identity – are carried out across fine art and popular culture, across material, visual, and literary texts, across wide geographical and chronological strata:

yielding new images, perspectives, and juxtapositions with each inquiry.

Key words: hair, pedagogy, art, design, literature

Introduction

HAIR CLUB practices a pedagogy and mode of inquiry that is both expansive and iterative. [Figure 1] In this chapter we would like to elaborate on one topic that has blossomed specifically due to our iterative and social treatment of it: The Mermaid. This topic is discussed briefly in a case study on the emerging discipline of Hair Studies for *Socially*

Engaged Art History and Beyond: Alternative Approaches to the Theory and Practice of Art History (2020) and was developed in part for a conference paper, "Wet Hair: Visual Culture of the Mermaid" for Liverpool's Centre for Port and Maritime History Conference: Art and the Sea (September 2019) and we are pleased to expanded on its findings here. [1] What was initiated in a HAIR SALON conversation about wet hair became a lecture, a syllabus module, and a multivalent research vector into the nineteenth-century origins of our contemporary understanding of the mermaid as equal parts aspirational magic creature, anti-feminist trope, and queer allegory.

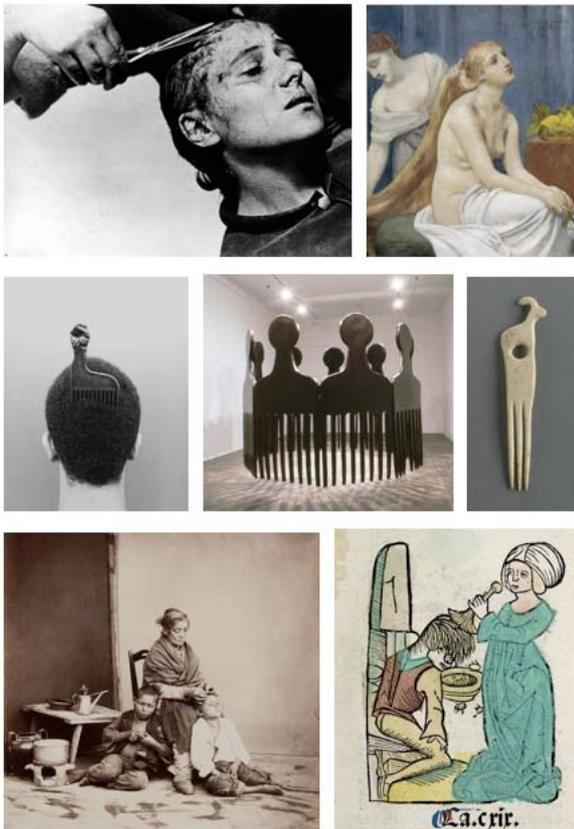


Figure 1. Collage of iterative research vectors as represented in various HAIR CLUB lectures and syllabus modules. Left: still from *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928; Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Woman at Her Toilet*, 1883, Musée d'Orsay; Black Panther afro pick, photo

credit @SonofBaldwin, 2018; Kori Newkirk, *Legacy*, 1999, polyurethane foam, pigmented resin and brackets, 74" x 100"; ivory Egyptian comb of the Predynastic Period, Boston Museum of Fine Art; photograph of de-lousing scene from nineteenth-century Naples; de-lousing scene from medieval woodcut. Right: Agustina Woodgate, *Brush Series*,

2007; "Il copricapo degli eroi omerici, Da G. Ferrario, *Il costume antico e moderno*, Firenze 1828"; nineteenth-century Bluebeard story illustration.

Wet Hair: Mermaids

We happened upon mermaids almost by accident in a 2014 conversation about wet hair, about how hair's wet state is central to hair care logistics as the way that many of us wash and cut our hair. But just as central is the need to then dry your hair because wet hair is inappropriate (very disrespectful to go out like that!) and dangerous (you'll catch pneumonia!). Wet hair is inappropriate because it's so intimate, because it implies bathing and all other connotations of the private, bodily realm. And it was in this discussion that an attendee pointed out that mermaids' hair is always wet.

1498; *Luttrell Psalter*, c. 1325-1340, British; *British Bestiary*, 15th century; Diego Gutierrez, *Map of the Americas* (detail), 1562; Greek Attic Red Figure *Stamnos*, c.480-470 BCE, British Museum; *Ashmole Bestiary*, c.1170; *Noah's Ark*, Anton Koberger, Nuremberg Bible, 1483, German; Bodleian Library, MS. Bodley, 602, folio 10r.

Around the same time, we had picked up Roberta Milliken's *Ambiguous Locks: An Iconography of Hair in Medieval Art and Literature* as part of research into the hirsute depictions of Mary Magdalene, and came across a short chapter on "Sirens and Mermaids." [2] Milliken traces the development of the siren into the mermaid during the medieval period: from sky-creatures carrying musical instruments to feminized water-dwellers equipped instead with combs and mirrors. This transformation was due in large part to the adaptation of the siren figure by the church:

Early on, church authorities identified the siren – both the image of her as well as the stories that surrounded her – as having a significant metaphorical value that was therefore didactically useful. They therefore recycled the mermaid to serve their own purposes, namely to teach basic important Christian morals. In the church's hands, the siren came to represent the lure of sin. And since the siren was female, that temptation to sin naturally involved lust... Whereas the siren was considered a knowledgeable demigod, the mermaid was then flattened into the image of yet another remarkably lustful feminine creature to be avoided because she was sinful and may tempt men to sin. [3]

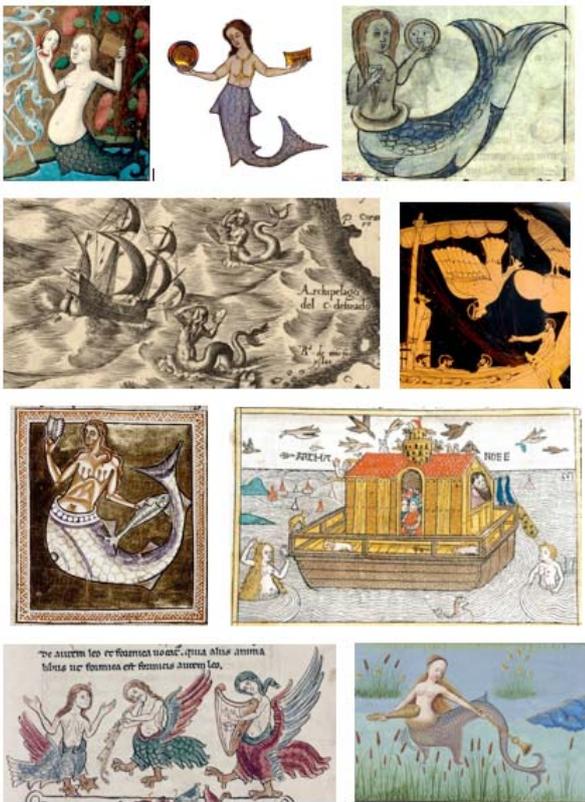


Figure 2. Collage of siren/mermaid evolution as described in Milliken's 2012 book and collected to facilitate student participation and discussion. Left to Right: Besançon, BM MS 69, Rouen, before

Hair features prominently in this shifting iconography, with the mermaid's long, prominent locks remaining a visual trope today. The topic of wet hair and mermaids as understood in Milliken's genealogy was presented in a conversational lecture and further developed in the discussion following.

Not long after, we began teaching the interdisciplinary studio/seminar *HAIR! HAIR! HAIR!* at Oxbow School of Art in Saugatuck, MI and later Humboldt University in Berlin, in which we consistently assigned Milliken's chapter on mermaids. Because the publication itself only includes a couple images, we began to compile files of Greek vases, medieval manuscript marginalia, and early modern maps to be able to illustrate the pieces of her argument and open up discussion once we were all together in class. [Figure 2] In an affective, rather than strictly art historical way, we worked with students to consider these different iterations in the visual transition in bodies and in accessories, from bird women with musical instruments to fish women with a comb and mirror.

Among other avenues, the mermaid helped students think through how tropes and accessories and hybrid forms might be employed to visual effect in their own work. Students took to the mermaid quickly and incorporated its themes and visual culture in their work; their enthusiasm was infectious and the mermaid became an ongoing research vector.

Filmic depictions of the mermaid have dominated the twentieth-century's visual culture, with Ariel from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) becoming an iconic representation for American audiences. There was of course also *Splash* (1984), part rom-com, part buddy comedy from the same decade that in turn has its own precedents in a series of romantic comedies such as *Miranda* and *Mr.*

Peabody and the Mermaid, both from 1948, and *Mad About Men* from 1954. In all of these iterations, the approach is by no means feminist but the mermaid is at least an actual distinguishable character. But the protagonist or co-protagonist mermaid with a heart of gold is more the exception than the rule. As exemplified in Disney's 1953 animated *Peter Pan* and its 1924 silent, live-action precursor, mermaids are not portrayed as individuals but rather as one of many in an exotic species. In later iterations of *Peter Pan*, including *Hook* (1991) and by extension the similarly-themed series *Pirates of the Caribbean* (*On Stranger Tides*, 2011), the mermaid is part of an anonymous side show that is above all things overly sexual, while managing to be both completely silly and quite dangerous. From 1924 to 1953 to 1991, this silliness or vapidness manifests in tropes that we are now all familiar with: the gestures of waving, especially enthusiastic waving at men; in primping generally and combing their long hair in particular. It is only in *Pirates of the Caribbean* and in an earlier *Odyssey* adaptation, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) that the siren song is featured, and in both instances it is used to emphasize the mermaid as an essentially dangerous set-dressing or plot interlude.

In these first iterations of the mermaid syllabus module, we tended to gloss over the nineteenth-century in the visual culture timeline, treating it as a kind of bridge between the medieval solidification of the dangerous lusty fish-lady with her comb and mirror and the more familiar twentieth-century mermaid. The Pre-Raphaelite painters were always featured due to their industrious production of dead-eyed naked water-women, but we had presented the period as a continuation of Milliken's thesis, rather than a break from it. What we were missing in skipping across the nineteenth-century was the deep ambiguity that is inherent to understanding the mermaid in

contemporary culture, which driven in large part by the importance of hair in Victorian culture.

In recent years, it was current events that brought the mermaid and specifically the nineteenth-century back into focus: The end of 2017 saw the publication of Emily Wilson's translation of Homer's *The Odyssey*. [4] Her uniquely lucid style (the first translation into English by a woman) shed light on how twentieth-century translators have embellished and gendered the siren, and in turn, how this kind of creative license can be seen starting only in the mid-nineteenth-century, once the water woman craze is in full swing and the language becomes more gendered, with word choice emphasizing *lips* over *mouths*, for instance. Wilson herself posits that the Victorian preoccupation with mermaids could be the result of this, but there's still much more detailed work to be done.

Just last year, John William Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* was removed from Manchester Art Gallery as part of a feminist museology project by artist Sonia Boyce, and then promptly returned following public outrage. [5] Later that summer, Waterhouse's *The Siren* was auctioned off at Sotheby's for more than £3.8 million. The auction catalogue discussed the removal and re-installation of *Hylas and the Nymphs*, using it as a launch pad to argue that "rather than subrogating women or casting them as dangerous and untrustworthy, these pictures are enigmatic" :

The subtle eroticism in *Hylas and the Nymphs* inspired Waterhouse to paint a series of depictions of female water deities, including *A Mermaid* of 1900 (now in the collection of the Royal Academy of Art) and finding its most powerful resolution in *The Siren* of 1901 which will be offered in the sale of Victorian, Pre-

Raphaelite & British Impressionist Art on 12 July. Rather than subrogating women or casting them as dangerous and untrustworthy, these pictures are enigmatic and we are unsure what the intentions of these women are. In *The Siren* the pale maiden looking down at the drowning sailor has an expression of curiosity rather than murderous appetite and it is just as likely that she may at any moment hold out her hand to help him from the surging torrents, as push him under to a watery grave. [6]

Enigmatic woman certainly sells better than 'dead-eyed non-human' but in considering scholarship on women's hair in Victorian art and literature, this more fluid nature of the mermaid gains some credence:

More intensely and self-consciously than any other generation of artists, [Victorian painters and writers] explored the symbolic complexities and contradictions of women's hair, at the same time developing and deepening its multiplicity of meaning. For them, Arachne, whether she spun a web of flax or hair, was an intriguingly ambiguous figure: victim and predator, trapped and trapper, Penelope and Circe, angel and mermaid. [7]

However, the most prominent re-emergence of the mermaid in popular culture came with the hashtag #NotMyAriel trending on Twitter in July of 2019 in response to Disney's selection of African American actress Halle Bailey to play Ariel in their live-action remake of the 1989 animated classic. [8] Just as immediate was an outpouring of fantastic fan art celebrating Bailey, and it only took

a couple days for queer and literary focused platforms to inform (or remind) the rest of the internet that: my friends, if you're bent out of shape about a woman of color playing the little mermaid, just wait till you hear about Hans Christian Anderson. As discussed in a 2016 article by Maddy Myers,

“The short story, which was published in 1836, lines up with a series of love letters that Andersen wrote in the mid-1830s to a young Duke named Edvard Collin. Many historians have concluded that the two men were engaged in a romance, rather than just a platonic friendship; their adoring correspondence in letters lends credence to this interpretation. Much like the Prince with whom the Little Mermaid falls in love, Edvard Collin also faced pressure from his family to marry a princess. Anyone who has read Andersen's original short story remembers the heart-wrenching conclusion, in which the Prince chooses to marry a princess rather than the mermaid.” [9]

And so not only was the original author likely a queer person, but the entire story

speaks to the queer experience (or at least a queer experience) – of being silenced and of existing between worlds. Sacha Coward, the Community Participation Producer for the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich and self-proclaimed ‘mermaid hunter,’ has produced various media and events in the past couple years to bring these stories to the forefront. Of particular interest to this perspective are his writings that point to queer literature and artistic production from later in the nineteenth-century, including Oscar Wilde's short story *The Fisherman and His Soul* (1891), a mirror narrative of sorts to *The Little Mermaid* which Wilde stated was directly inspired by Anderson's original story.

Without these important elements, i.e., without a research practice that involves exhaustively examining through multidisciplinary means every iteration of the mermaid in history, art history, and culture, HAIR CLUB's formulation of the mermaid might have remained interesting but somewhat simplified, seen only through the anti-feminist tropes of hand-waving and hair-combing. With these iterative, social investigations the mermaid blossoms also into queer allegory and vehicle for projection of identity, in addition to protagonist with a heart of gold or overly-sexual anonymous side show.

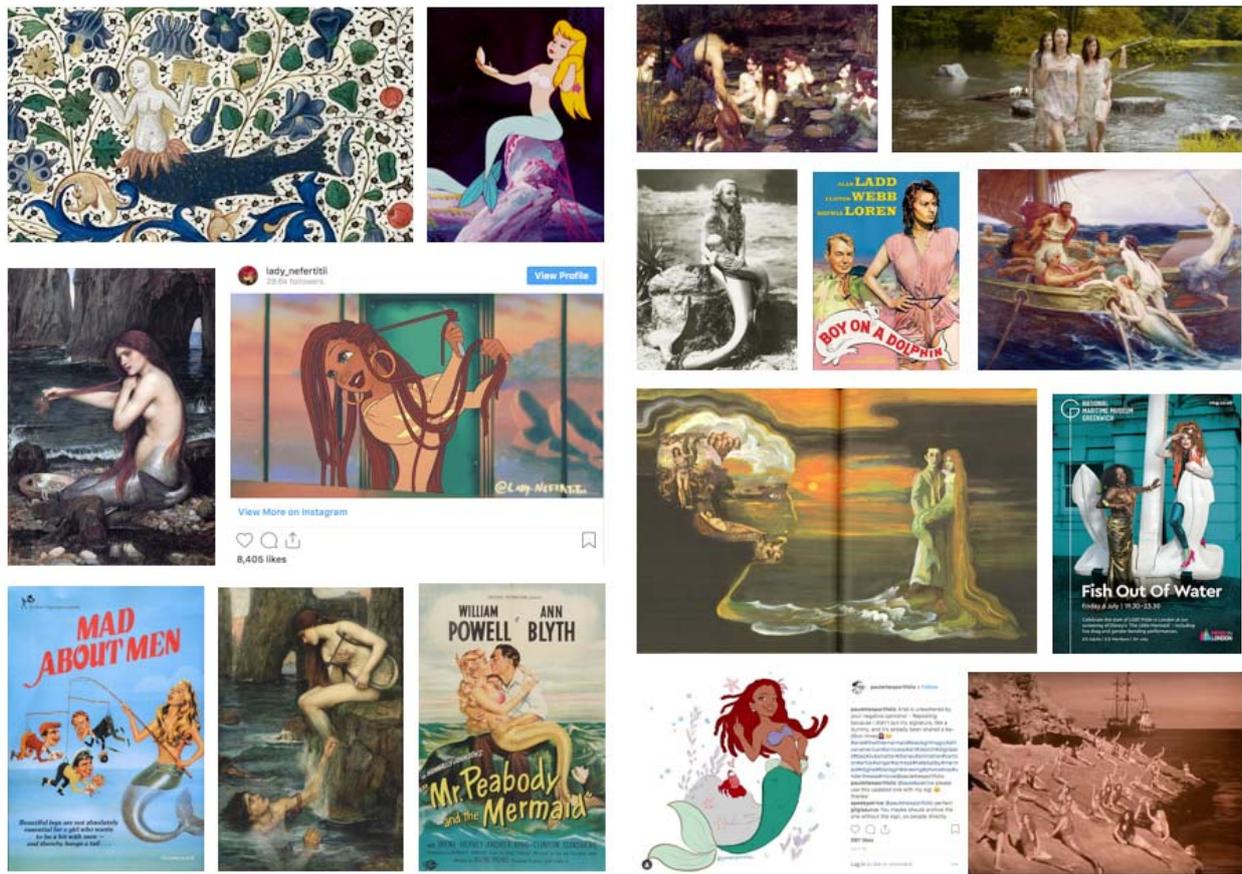


Figure 3. Selection of thumbnail images that speak to the iterative nature of HAIR CLUB's research into contemporary mermaid visual culture.

Conclusion

The mermaid and its meandering, ever expanding path through the last couple millennia of western visual culture (one canon among many) has much to teach us. But the approach to the subject is as important as the subject itself. [Figure 3] We close here with HAIR CLUB's statement on the development of a Hair Studies discipline:

HAIR CLUB's expansive, associative, and iterative methodology for examining how Hair is performed and how it achieves metaphorical meaning in art, history, and wider culture, has led to the

development of an academic discipline that defies genre, category, and discrete definition. Hair Studies relies at its root on a process of socially-engaged, socially-driven, and socially-minded inquiry, where the anecdotal is processed with the same power of place as more traditional, disciplinary research practices. The historically significant, the ritualized, daily, inhabited, and pre-determined conditions for having hair in society broadens our understanding of what it means to be basically, meaningfully human. [10]



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