not a girl. not yet a woman.

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Abstract.

I’m not a girl, not yet a woman, but I do have popular sensibilities. Pop music plucks ideas and symbols from wherever it pleases to create a new narrative. So do I. Reflecting on how I see women and how the gaze of others affects this. By mapping my magpie like collection of images, songs, paintings and films I tell the story of my girl gang. My ceramic sculptures are a physical manifestation of my research into different ways of looking at girls.

Key Words

Celebration
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Woman Pop Culture
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Welcome to my manic world, inhabited by the ultimate girl gang, obsessed with Britney. They are screaming along to ‘I’m Not A Girl, Not Yet A Woman.’ It is gaudy, sexy and immediate - it is what it is. The girls are expressive - made of lumpy, unreal shapes. My women are weirdos painted with garish colours and gangly limbs coming from oversized bodies. My work is filled with life, colour and femininity of both the world around me and the one in my head.

I grew up as a Disney kid, spending every holiday at Disneyland, walking around a fully functioning but entirely fake world. Rather than mice, my sun-drenched pop world is girl-centric. And like Disneyland it is a celebration of childhood innocence that can quickly turn creepy.

The girls wear sunglasses, instantly confusing the gaze, who is looking at who. They are watching you. Just like the Pink Ladies they don’t give a shit, at least outwardly. Everything sits on the surface. But behind the bright gloss there lies insecurity. Together my sculptures are safe and strong. They cast an intimidating shadow. Girl gangs work because there is safety in numbers. If I’m walking down the street in a group of girls I feel invincible, like I’m in a music video, I feel in control. We are silently saying ‘Don’t fuck with these bitches’. And like Sandy without my Pink Ladies I can feel alone, unprotected, fragile, an easy target. Each of my sculptures is an individual, unique, with their own presence. Like a choir this is amplified when they stand together. Alone they are singing, together they scream. The sunglasses unify them, each different but wearing a collective symbol so they become one powerful entity. They need each other, just as I need my girl gang to support me, my IRL friends, Beyoncé, Britney - the voices that empower me.
My research is centered around the question – How do I look at Girls? Coming from a personal standpoint, I am exploring femininity, girls and women in today’s society. In my making I am exploring different projections of woman through my own female gaze. I am a product of my environment. I define this environment as one heavily influenced by the media, celebrity and popular culture. My world is and always has been bombarded with images of how girls and women should be seen.

The pop culture I speak of is my pop culture, starting from my formative years in the late nineties/ early 2000’s, the parts of pop culture that are most popular with me. The girls and women I look at in this paper are all part of main stream western popular culture, I am referring to people, images, music, TV and film that I think have become unavoidable, you may not know much about Hello Kitty but I’m certain you have encountered her face before. These girls have shaped my view of the world, specifically the way I cast my gaze on other women.
2. She’s just a head, 2018, Amy Worrall
3. Bending over backwards, 2018, Amy Worrall
Of course I would be an idiot to ignore the power the male gaze has had on the way I look at myself and other women. Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist first brought the notion of the male gaze to attention in 1975. She describes women in art as being passive when seen by a (heterosexual) man, as objects of pleasure for the viewer. 1

This Wonderbra advert featuring Eva Herzigova from 1994 is although probably not my first encounter of seeing the world through the male gaze is my most memorable. When I see this image I am seeing it from the point of view of a man. Precisely what Mulvey describes in her breakdown of the male gaze. Herzigova has said that her Wonderbra campaign empowered women. But this is untrue, this advert is screaming example of the male gaze at work, HELLO BOYS is telling me as the viewer I am a man seeing a sexy lady. Her body is being used to sell an ideal to women by making them see themselves through the perspective of a man. Being sold self worth based on our image in someone else’s (male) mind is hardly my idea of empowering.

1. Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, Screen 16.3 Autumn, 1975, p. 6-18
John Berger, the English art critic writes at length about how this affects women. I am constantly confronted with the notion of being watched by men, to the point it becomes part of my nature. ‘A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping’

I’d always considered this feeling to be part of my self-indulgent tendency to imagine my life playing out as a Richard Curtis film in front of me, but this out of body phenomenon is not something unique to me, I’m not as self-centred as I thought, it’s the patriarchy not me! I have been conditioned to see myself through someone else’s male eyes, and believed that I was doing it for myself. Berger goes onto further explain this idea - ‘The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.’ Not only do I see myself in the third person through a male gaze filter, I also see other women this way. The viewer in my mind is male but the male gaze underestimates, constrains and objectifies women and I am literally making women objects. So I define my way of seeing as this:

This is a celebration of my gaze; of ‘my women’, in my imagined universe everybody is a girl. The girl in this world is a concept not of constraint but of freedom. My work depicts traditional ideas and imagery of girls and women, and is portraying a part of us all, a part that is celebrated not shamed. The world is mine but also belongs to everyone else: the image of the girl is both personal and collective.
The arts journalist Charlotte Jansen believes that if the male gaze addresses the idea of a woman, rather than the woman herself, then the woman under the male gaze is fantasy and the woman under the female gaze is reality. I ask why? My caricatures of women are a fantasy vision, an act of imagination. It is not my duty to portray ‘real’ women just because I am one. I believe the female gaze should move past the concept of realism. As Jansen states ‘I have the right to ‘self-objectify and to exploit without critique.’

The female gaze allows me to explore a world in which the power is no longer male; it creates an altogether safer environment for me to play in. There is inherent beauty in women that we all take pleasure from. When this pleasure is ‘Girl on Girl’ it forces us to look at our own bias and judgments of other women. Charlotte Jansen speaks about the male gaze as the so-called evil we collectively fight against. But when that doesn’t exist our relationships with one another become complicated. Women aren’t perfect as individuals why do we have to act perfectly together, lets celebrate our differences and our similarities and that we aren’t well behaved, especially towards each other. I’m not suggesting we all become female chauvinists overnight but I don’t believe we should gloss over the cracks and pretend that sisterhood unites us entirely and wholly. Just because women have been forced to see other women through the male gaze doesn’t mean the only image that I can create as a reaction to this is womankind flicking a collective middle finger up to the male gaze. Then the male is still in control. I am celebrating women, not women erasing the male gaze.

These are the ideas I play with I can be judgmental. My girls are performing an idea of a woman. Everything is turned up to 11. The clichés are maximized.
5. Venus - Glazed and confused, 2018, Amy Worrall
In Botticelli’s Birth of Venus a fully grown woman is born from the sea, she fits completely into modern beauty standards, she has long flowing golden hair, pale skin, not quite blue eyes but near enough, she is the picture of the innocence (the sea supposedly renews her virginity so she gets a clean slate over and over again) whilst still reminding us of her sexuality, the scallop shell is a symbol for the vulva.

6. The Birth of Venus. Sandro Botticelli. 1484-1486
The pop star Lady Gaga went to town with this idea, she amped up the sexual nature of Botticelli’s painting so it is inescapable. The subversion is total, owning her sexuality rather than staying ‘pure’. Just like the viewer Gaga is objectifying Botticelli’s Venus with all of her fragility and untouched beauty. Lady Gaga has pushed the objectification further by changing the narrative and becoming Venus, removing any power the viewer has, she is not virginal and she is shouting about it. We still objectify but she is encouraging us to do so, Lady Gaga is in on it. She has answered all of our curiosities before we had the chance to address them. The thing both these Venuses have in common is they are both centred on sex, Gaga’s Venus has it and Botticelli’s doesn’t, she is the goddess of love after all.

My Venus is dazed by this. She is neither the Madonna nor the whore.
The Madonna-Whore complex states that women are seen as either virginal or the whore. These being the only two categories men place women in. Women that a man can love being Madonna and women that are sexually attractive but ultimately devalued. 5

The mainstream media loves this categorization, mapping the careers of young women, morphing them from Madonna to whore as they grow up. Coinciding with the transformation from girl to woman.

Pop star Britney Spears began her career as an innocent girl, her virginity used as a marketing tool. As she took ownership of her sexuality and the content of her songs matured, she was branded a whore. The coverage of her very public 2007 meltdown completely devalued her, cementing her narrative in the public eye.

In 2001 Spears debuted her mature image with the song ‘Slave 4 U’ begging her audience to no longer see her as a little girl. Less than six months later ‘I’m Not A Girl, Not Yet A Woman’ was released, she is grappling with the control of her image. Asking for more time to figure out who she is, but her public persona was forever changed, there was no going back. I named my project after her song for this very reason. I am exploring narrative and gaze. I am making a moment that is mine.

5. Madonna-Whore complex was Identified by Sigmund Freud
10. *It's Britney, bitch*, 2018, Amy Worrall
Throughout this paper I speak through the words of other women, channeling the girl power of the Spice Girls and other pop stars who perfectly illustrate my thoughts in the lyrics of their music. If you wanna be my lover you get with my friends. Our lives have their own soundtrack that we curate; when you hear a song it can take us back to a specific moment in time, it can gives us confidence, these pop stars become our friends guiding us through heartbreak, it empowers us.

Not only has the music of these women literally become the soundtrack of my making, it has helped me to flesh out the world I have made, shaping the character of the girls by channeling the attitude of pop divas. ‘Who run the world’ Beyoncé’s call to arms to (independent) women globally, uses her influence and platform to ignite confidence, strength and of course to empower us.

Pop music plays with the idea of the girl and the woman. Normally when the term girl is used to describe an adult it is belittling, a way to exert power over something weaker than you but in pop music the word is reclaimed. It is no surprise girl power caught on the way it did. In an interview with the Guardian Spice Girl Mel C addressed this “We didn’t realise the impact we were having on people and what Girl Power meant to people. We were just expressing the things that we were feeling because of our experiences and because we did encounter some sexism within the industry.”

I talk about pop music from a personal and emotive point of view, I am not alone in feeling this way, we are still talking about the legacy of a girl group from the nineties in early 2018 shows the power pop has on us. Though pop is very much about capturing the spirit of the times, it has an emotional resonance that out lasts the zeitgeist. I cannot name another art form that I so quickly form an emotional attachment to. The world has changed, the spice girls may be no more, Britney may be in residency in Vegas rather than making edgy good girl pop but the emotive persuasion these songs have on me is the same as when I was 7 years old,

6. theguardian.com/music/2018/mar/10/we-caught-the-zeitgeist-how-the-spice-girls-revolutionised-pop
hearing ‘wannabe’ for the first time and wanting to be part of this super cool gang of girls having the time of their lives. Or at age 12 hearing Britney sing about the awkwardness of puberty on ‘I’m Not A Girl, Not Yet A Woman’ perfectly manifesting my first foray into teenage angst in song form. When I hear that song now those feelings return, I am on the cusp of something again.

In my own work this a feeling I try to replicate, of being on the cusp of something. The sculptures I have made are on the cusp of something, on the cusp of breaking into song and dance, on the cusp of judging the viewer. Pop music is a celebration, even of the bad stuff; we listen to sad songs because in some perverse way we want to celebrate, to commemorate our sadness, as well as of course to celebrate the good.

For me specifically that is the message of female empowerment I find so visceral in pop music. It is a sparkling, glittery, hyped-up version of reality. A caricature of reality, in the world of pop, complex thoughts and feelings become simplified cartoon versions of thoughts and feelings that scream at us so loudly they become more direct and more dramatic than real life. Just like The Spice Girls sang, it gives you everything. It might not be subtle but it is intuitive.

My work is a celebration of my icons of pop music but also the ideals that have had such a great impact on me. It isn’t subtle but it is intuitive, I really care about these characters, they are part of me. Like pop music the final result is aesthetically full of colour and high shine, along with the (often unsubtle) hidden messages of religion and endorsed products, in my case; Hello Kitty, Minnie Mouse and the Nike swoosh. But I handle these girls with care, I make with softness towards my subject which is reflected in the finished pieces. The spice girls are loud and brash but at the core they are singing about the importance of female friendship in a very sincere way, just as at the core of my making is a real sincerity about celebrating women.
Hello Kitty goods can form a nearly unbroken circle of consumption that begins in early childhood, morphs into the “tweens” (approximately 10-14-year-old girls), leaps over teen years into early twenties, and completes the cycle with items for mothers of newborns.

On a trip to see Father Christmas at Harrods in London I had my first encounter with Hello Kitty. It was the beginning of a relationship that has stayed with me for life. In the girls section of the toy department I found a mirror/comb compact adorned with the image of a cat, I was 3 years old.

I was told a mirror and a comb was a toy. I was okay with this. My image and appearance was sold to me as FUN.

From that moment to this day I have unfalteringly loved Hello Kitty, during my facial piercing, black haired teenage days I kept this relationship quieter but it has, and I suspect will always be Hello Kitty and I.

7. Christine R Yano, medi@sia, 2006, p.210
For the untrained, Hello Kitty is a white bobtail cat, but for us in the know she is in fact a British schoolgirl named Kitty White who weighs 3 apples and has a twin sister called Mimi (incidentally my sister also loves Hello Kitty). She was made as a voiceless mascot to sell greetings cards. She is a girl with no mouth. An active choice by her makers who say she is mouth-less so those looking at her, consumers can project their own feelings onto her. If you are sad she is sad, if you are happy, she is. This so she is always supportive, the reality is that she is a passive female forever-child, portraying a cutesy idea of femininity.

I have an all-encompassing love for her; I like her image, her cuteness, and her silence. I know that Hello Kitty is a selling tool encouraging the idea that female voices are unimportant, the way we look being the only thing that really matters.

Yet I proudly walk around everyday sporting her image on the back of my phone, on my keys, and at times on my clothes. Bitch better have my money.

You truly do never get over your first love.
14. Hello, Kitty, 2018, Amy Worrall
Fast forward to 2012 the first season of Girls has just begun. All of my friends have been waiting excitedly for this; we’ve bought into the media coverage of this new, supposedly groundbreaking show. Within a few hours of the pilot airing I’d received countless messages all along the lines of ‘LOOOLLLL YOU ARE HANNAH!!!!!!!’ Hannah being an entitled twenty something millennial living an artsy lifestyle in Brooklyn whilst she ‘is busy trying to become who she is’. Swap Brooklyn for the mean streets of South London and Hannah quickly morphs into 22 year old me.

I had seen myself before in pop culture, but not so directly and clearly. This TV show was holding a mirror up to my friends and me. Girls had shattered my pop fantasy. I can hear myself in Britney’s music. My self-image is reflected in Hello Kitty’s skewed version of feminine perfection, my imagination blurring the border between cat and girl. But now I didn’t have to use my imagination to project impossible realities I was living it, my life had become a pop artifact no fantasy necessary.

I am aware that many of the images and representations of women that I love have been created by the male gaze. Yes my girls are a projection of an idea but they are lumpy, voluptuous ladies, there is no ideal form here. The glazing isn’t perfect, the painting isn’t perfect, their proportions are ‘off’ but they are glossy and pink as hell. I can be a real lumpy flawed woman and love cutesy cat cartoons, glitter and pink. I acknowledge it all. I’m loud, whiny and entitled not some perfectly put together male vision of angelic femininity, but I still love the aesthetics that come with it. In her book Bad Feminist Roxanne Gay frequently writes about her guilt of loving ‘girly’ things and fear of judgment from other women because of it. She writes - ‘Like most people I’m full of contradictions, but I also don’t want to be treated like shit for being a woman.’

Through realizing my beloved pop culture didn’t have to project a vision of a woman and could be flawed and full of contradictions - my sun-drenched caricature world was born.
I am a Disney kid; there is no escaping it. Try as I might there is a part of me always walking right down the middle of Main Street. I have spent so much time in Disneyland that it has skewed my sense of reality, I see everything as a copy of Disneyland. Recently when looking at a ruin of a Greek amphitheater I found myself saying aloud ‘This is like Disneyland, but boring.’ It is both real and fake at the same time, it is a suspension of reality but you’re there so it is reality. Disneyland, whilst being one man’s fantasyland come to life, is an authentic experience in itself. Disneyland brings me back to a place that no longer exists, to girlhood, a purposeful, at times forceful nostalgia, it is no coincidence that this is also the place that Peter Pan now calls home. Here we are still those lost girls.

I gravitate towards the word ‘Girl’. It has power, it describes a state of transformation, it is suggestive of what is come rather than what has been. It is a word full of optimism, as soon as I use this word to describe myself it draws me back to moments of total teenage immersion even if the state is fleeting.

The Disney Pixar film Toy Story tells the story of a group of toys who come to life when their owner, Andy isn’t around. My girls are stuck in a moment too, it feels if you look away for too long their party will start again and these figures will jump into action. The world I have made is very much alive. Woody, Buzz and co. live a double existence; the one where they are actually living, moving, talking of their own accord and the other in which they are also totally alive and animated when Andy is playing with them, they are passive but somehow as real as when they are living beings.
20.

In my pink, shiny, lumpy world I am Andy, when I make these girls I am one of them playing in their universe, this is my party too. Anyone who looks at this world becomes a child playing with toys, using their imagination to animate the world they are confronted with.


The boundaries between real and fake are shaken. Drag completely shatters these boundaries with no regard for categories, serving whatever realness it so pleases. 10

Playing with desire and repulsion, young and old, cute and ugly, the female form and the shapeless, exposed and protected, vulnerable and dangerous.

In the world of drag you can quite literally be two things at once, to straddle two categories that cannot coexist but they do. It is a rebellion against the lines drawn in society and it’s also the best party you’ve ever been to.

My work is soft and hard, it is animated and inanimate, cute and ugly, shapely and shapeless, weak and strong. The pieces are both sculpture and bodies. They live in reality and fantasy.

Disneyland is an immersive experience using tricks to build itself complete even when it is not. To see it is to believe it. Forced perspective is used bloody everywhere. A highly effective illusion using scale and the vantage point of the viewer to make objects seem closer, larger or smaller then they really are. The diamond in Disneyland’s tiara being Cinderella’s teeny tiny castle that looks huge from just about every angle. They play hard and heavy with scale to make you magically become the same size as Minnie Mouse, filling the environment with oversized props shrinking us down to the size of a mouse. In my world I employ similar tactics to help the viewer fall down my rabbit hole, confronted with a larger than life Britney sitting alongside palm sized girls. All happily living in this paradoxical universe. Seeing is believing.

Drag and Disneyland inhabit the same world, the same world as my girl gang does. Make-believe that has not just leaked into reality but has formed a reality all of it’s own. The artificial has become real. Well baby, we’re all put-on-a-show kinda girls here.

10. drag term- Noun. The act of appearing convincing, authentic, realistic, or accurate
After drawing, my process breaks down into four parts - Skeleton. Skin. Clothes. Jewelry.

The clay is the skeleton, giving each sculpture her shape and final form.

The glaze is the skin; each sculpture is glazed in one colour.

The enamel paint is applied after firing and using this I paint on clothes, hair, finger and toenails, sunglasses and mouths.

The final stage is adding the jewelry, I adorn all of my sculptures with earrings, like their sunglasses they are another unifying symbol.

My work has always been centred around bodies of water. The hyper saturated images of British photographer Martin Parr's life long exploration of the way we behave at the seaside first piqued my interest in this as he is also fascinated by the interactions between us and water.

The beach is the place where public and private worlds intersect, a curious mix of defence and intimacy. Here, unstructured space is staked out and temporarily transformed, through artefact and ritual, into personal territory. In close proximity to others doing the same thing, a bit like being on a long haul flight, people let down their guard, revealing the secrets of their bodies, habits and relationships to anyone who cares or dares to look, as they dream and doze on the sand.

11. Susie Parr, martinparr.com/2009/a-day-at-the-beach-is-the-same-the-world-over
Parr’s view of the beach has informed my work, directly relating to drag, Disney and the idea of being two things at once - by the water we simultaneously play out our public and private lives. My sculptures are a ‘curious mix of defence and intimacy’. My world is saturated with colour, and along with their sunglasses and bikinis the girls also have painted noses, a little nod to my fellow (sun burnt) Brits on the beach plastering themselves with sun cream.

Another Brit who fled the dreary grey of the North Sea for sun, sea and sand is painter David Hockney. His dreamy paintings of Californian water capture the wanderlust I have for sunnier climes, and the weird sense of home I feel towards West Coast America thanks to endless visits to Disneyland.

The reason I feel a kinship with so few ceramicists is the limited muddy colour palate I associate with ceramics. My vivid, sunny colours are borrowed from Hockney. I flood my glazes with pigments to make them as bright as possible, I use enamel paint to give a further layer of bright gloss.

The ceramicist Betty Woodman whose work blurs the boundary between painting, sculpture and collage, speaks of her practice the same way, seeking out her colour schemes from painters rather than the colours that ceramics can offer. She too often adds painted colour after her pieces have been fired. 12
19. Sketchbook pages, 2018, Amy Worrall
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12. in conversation with Katherine Stout, Betty Woodman Theatre of the Domestic ICA London, 2016 Catalogue
Joseph Nye came up with the term Soft Power in the 1990s describing soft power as a way to attract and get what you want using culture and politics rather than hard power (force and weapons).  

My girls are exerting their soft power, tempting you into their word not forcing you. Just like the mythical sirens did to unfortunate sailors, their soft power comes from their beauty to lure us in. Instead of song it takes the form of bright colours and recognizable images.

Here symbolism is a powerful tool. ‘Hello Kitty is pure imagery’ she also holds a powerful message by lacking the symbol of a mouth.

This is the ethos of my universe, at first glance it all sits on the surface, it’s a load of images thrown together like the pop culture it takes it’s cues from. BUT pop culture is not only something that looks nice and neither are these girls.

In her 2017 Grammy performance Beyoncé throws around iconography like no one’s business. Making reference to several goddesses (all representing womanhood), Kali a Hindu Goddess, Oshun a female manifestation of God from the Yoruba religion, Venus the Roman Goddess of beauty and desire and the Virgin Mary. She takes symbols and dress from these deities to create a new narrative, becoming her very own God. What is perceived on the surface to be pretty clothes and accessories is telling a story of female strength.

23. Beyonce, Grammy performance, 2017

28.

Beyoncé is exerting her soft power.
If it’s good enough for Beyoncé it’s good enough for me.

Okay ladies now let’s get in formation. I borrow heavily from religious symbolism, arguably the OG pop culture. They clutch and carry snakes, a symbol of female fertility and the phallus (yet another contradiction in a world full of them). They sport crowns full of stars like the Virgin Mary. They have wings for Christ sake. Pop stars are the gods of this world, and these girls are created in their image.
24. She’s just a angel head, 2018, Amy Worrall
25. Talking to an angel, 2018, Amy Worrall
I used to think I had the answers to everything.

I started my Masters in order to explore how I look at my fellow woman through my making. For me ceramics has always been intuitive, making it up as I go along, my view of women has been the same. I’ve always felt empowered as a woman but never thought about how my view is formed. This project has allowed me to address both my gaze and my making head on. There is a clear link between the two, I just do and then search out the meaning later. Making in parallel to writing this paper has meant there is a direct narrative in each of my sculptures linked to different fragments of my gaze. So I’ve always celebrated women but now this celebration is informed. I’ve tracked my personal history through this project.

Britney was the catalyst for this project and has become the center of world in terms of what I’ve made. She is the only sculpture I’ve completely lifted from reality. She is the most powerful sculpture not only because she is the biggest but also because it’s where I feel I have most clearly addressed my gaze. In this ‘Slave 4 U’ image she was taking ownership of the media’s portrayal of her, holding both are sexuality and the male in her grasp in the form of the snake. She owns she label of the whore but in my gaze she is also the Madonna, I am protecting her with the gang around her.

Looking at girls, women and femininity is subjective. There is a wrong way to look at girls, but no definitive right way. Seeing my sculptures together in formation, as a gang will show how I look at girls at this point in time, my gaze will come together fully when the work does too.

The abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning reflects on his view of women, one that isn’t positive - “…I was painting the woman in me… Women irritate me sometimes. I painted that irritation in the ‘Woman’ series. That’s all.”

If de Kooning was painting the woman in him that irritates him then in contrast I have sculpted all the woman/women in me that I love and celebrate. That’s all.

15. Willem de Kooning ‘Interview’ Selden Rodman, Conversations with artists, 1961 p.102
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At: Artists own image

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Bending over backwards
At: Artists own image

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