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### Eager to be Accepted

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## Eager to be Accepted

Kalimah Muhammad

An intimate theater box in the Wadsworth Athenium Museum of Art allows viewers into the enchanted world of *Eager*, a unique animated film that explores the journey of dejected creatures torn between the joy and despair of their world. Allison Schulnik creates a world in which the “rejects” and the “out-siders” are embraced for their oddity. Typically, the main character or subject of a film is beautiful, admirable, and strong. As a society, we are not used to seeing the outsider as the primary character of a story; the rare occasions in which we do, the character changes throughout the film by rejecting their weak attributes to become the hero. Through *Eager*, Schulnik challenges society to expand its perception of beauty, and encourages us to appreciate the bodies that we are given despite the imperfections we may have. She takes her “little monsters” that are full of strange imperfections and puts them at the forefront of her film.

The theater dedicated to *Eager* in the Wadsworth isolates the viewer from the outside world. The intimate size of the theater box makes you feel as though you have become a part of Schulnik’s fantastical world. Being in the theater allows the viewer to forget about all their concerns with the real world, which is exactly what Schulnik wanted to achieve when she created *Eager*. While watching the film, the viewer’s mind travels through Schulnik’s fantastical world. Reality becomes erased, and the viewer’s attention becomes fixated on the fluidity and grace in the movement of the sculptures. Schulnik combines her dancing background with her painting technique to create an animated ballet that consists of sixty-five solo-sculpted figures. Throughout the film Schulnik creates human-like facial expressions on the faces of her “little monsters” using clay, fabric, wire, wood, glue, and paint. Schulnik collaborated with Aaron M Olsen and Helder K. Sun to compose the eight-and-a-half-minute film over the course of 13 months. *Eager* takes the audience through a seamless cycle of excitement and devastation by juxtaposing concepts of: light and dark, harmony and chaos, and life and death.

At the beginning of the film, a soft humming melody gets interrupted by the roar of an acoustic guitar. From there, a single mermaid fades in from the vacant black background, the mermaid is folded over into a praying position with her twine-like textured hair sweeping the floor. The mermaid is faceless, her hair and body are the color of pastels, blended with blue and pink. As the first scene progresses, two other mermaids emerge from the first one and are staggered behind one another. All three of the mermaids perform a slow synchronized ritual dance with painfully rigid movements, only moving their torsos, arms, and occasionally their toes. In the upper right-hand corner of the background a dancing blue goddess emerges. The goddess has a pastel-colored fabric draped over her body with her nipples protruding through the fabric. The rough texture of her hands make them seem like a decaying corpse. Towards the end of the first scene there is a close-up of the goddess’ face, she turns around and grazes the back of her head with her hand. The center of her head splits open, a red and black flower blooms from the opening, and from there the viewer travels into the mind of the goddess.

A significant aspect of the first scene is the juxtaposition between the beautiful movement of the mermaids and the goddess and their decaying appearances. Society holds beautiful depictions of goddesses and mermaids. Both creatures are thought to be incredibly

beautiful, seductive, powerful, and desirable. Mermaids and goddesses are not supposed to have any imperfections or limitations. Women often work to attain the idealistic body images that both groups possess. For Schulnik to take two mystical groups of women and cast them in a completely different light from their traditional roles demolishes the pressure that is placed on women to obtain unrealistic levels of beauty. While Schulnik's use of texture and color in her sculptures of the mermaids and goddess give them a dreary essence, they still evoke beauty and are mystical through their movement. Schulnik's mermaids and the goddess are able to fulfill the same mystifying and hypnotic purpose as the conventional mermaid and goddesses, but with a different sense of beauty; one that embraces flaws and imperfections rather than rejecting them.

In the next scene of *Eager*, the mystical world transitions into a utopian setting. The three mermaids become the focal point again; all of them have identical posture, body shape, and texture, however this time each of the mermaids are a different color. The background matches the color of the mermaids and their respective positions from left to right. The music is synonymous of a continuous shriek; it is unpleasant and alarming. The first mermaid on the left is yellow, she walks over to the pink mermaid in the middle and splices open her torso. From there the yellow mermaid takes the hide of the pink skeletal mermaid and drapes it onto her back. The blue mermaid on the right-hand side stumbles towards the yellow mermaid and repeats the same thing, splicing open the pink mermaid and placing the hides of both the other mermaids onto her back. She then stumbles off to the left and exits the scene.

The second scene highlights the willingness people have to compete against one another to achieve a sense of self-worth. All three of the mermaids are identical, they all have the same imperfections, the same capabilities, and the same features that make them beautiful; however, they each want what the other mermaids have and are willing to kill one another for it. This exemplifies the competitive nature within our society by demonstrating the lack of humanity that is growing traction in the real world. The dominant mermaid takes the hides of the dead mermaids and wears them on her back, the hides become trophies for her by showcasing her dominance. The dominant people in our society are encouraged to continue their destruction of people that are just like them in order to maintain their power. In the United States our competitiveness against one another is championed. Those who are not willing to sabotage or kill to get power are left to die.

During the third scene, a skeletal horse enters the black background from the right and staggers across the floor. The music becomes calmer and more peaceful than that of the previous scene, yet the energy of the music is not as light or melodic as the first scene. One can hear the build-up of tension in the music. The horse has a pathetic look on his face and his eyes sockets are empty black holes. His tongue, tail, and penis move back and forth as he walks across the floor. The texture of the horse's tail matches the texture of the hair of the mermaids. While his facial expression seems morbid and lifeless his movements are blissful, light, and almost happy. The horse slowly continues to exit the scene to the left. The blue mermaid from the previous scene glides over to the horse; still wearing the hides of the pink and yellow mermaid; and climbs onto the back of the horse.

The horse signifies the idea that people do not necessarily need beauty or power to be happy, they can seem pathetic or weak and still have joy. This demonstrates the concept of inner beauty versus physical beauty. The horse has very hideous features varying from his empty eye sockets to his bodily deformities, still his movements are light and happy. The horse appears to

be miserable, yet is unaffected by his appearance; instead he is enamored with his own reality. The blue mermaid climbs onto the back of the horse to achieve the same level of bliss as the horse. The mermaid cannot attain her own happiness so instead she chooses to feed off the happiness of a creature that is inferior to her. The mermaid sees the pathetic persona of the horse as an opportunity to take advantage of him. Despite her power the mermaid must eventually face her shortcomings, the rejection of her imperfections prevents her from being happy.

The fourth scene transitions into the garden scene. The garden is full of beautiful flowers blossoming with human-like expressions of devastation and despair on their faces. The horse, with the three mermaids lying on its back enters the garden with a happier expression on his face. As the flowers begin to perk up from the ground, the horse walks over to them and sniffs them, and this fills him with joy and tranquility. There is a patch of dead flowers that sway back and forth attempting to dodge the horse, who leans down and eats a group of them. The flowers move with an agonizing pain as they are defenseless against the horse. At first glance, the garden seems like it is a representation of heaven, yet the viewer sees the miserable lives of all the flowers and plants, and can recognize the chaos that is present in a seemingly peaceful setting. Schulnik juxtaposes the concepts of peace and chaos to declare that one cannot exist without the other. As the horse enters the garden, his expression completely changes from one of distress to one of bliss. The garden is the place where he can be free of his flaws.

The scene continues onto a mischievous dark purple tulip who stands over a group of blue tulips, plucking one from the center and consuming its nectar. A depressed sunflower becomes the next subject of the scene when it shields its face from the viewer as though it is crying. The garden of flowers and the music both become increasingly violent as the flowers wave spastically with their faces transforming from human-like features to monsters. The scene ends with a few of the flowers wilting and the music returning to its initial melodic state. The flowers represent beauty and the birth of tranquility, but the terror on the faces of the flowers indicates the violence that occurs within nature. We often see nature as something peaceful and magnificent, but we do not pay attention to the intensity of the processes that nature undergoes. Through this scene, Schulnik gives the viewer a glimpse at the world from the opposite perspective.

Another important feature of the fourth scene is Schulnik's literal incorporation of herself into the film. There is a transition to a blue goddess with the head of a pedal performing the same ritual dance as the goddess from the beginning. Three other blue goddesses then join the goddess as they all dance in unison with one another. In the final transition the viewer sees a single goddess dancing and Schulnik adjusting the camera. By including herself in the film, Schulnik emphasizes that her work is a part of her being. The world of *Eager* was her creation, and with creation comes mistakes. While having a shot of Schulnik adjusting the camera in the film may seem like a mistake, Schulnik did this intentionally to drive home the message that within imperfections lays art. Schulnik always embraces the imperfections that occur when she is creating her works. It is a way of making her work unique.

*Eager* concludes with the scene in which the mermaid returns with the ritual dance just as the beginning scene. The camera zooms in on the vacant face of the mermaid who turns to the viewer. Her face melts into a disturbing black mass and the film ends with the title word "*Eager*" written in flower petals. *Eager* encourages us to take the time to escape the pressures of society and appreciate ourselves for who we are and what we are given. Schulnik's film pulls us

away from the real world and immerses us in the emotional cycle of the creatures in *Eager* so that we can see ourselves as those creatures. Whether we choose to accept or reject our imperfections, they are a part of us and they serve purpose. Learning to accept this will allow us to start to develop our own inner peace.

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