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Sonali Menezes

Salvation & Absolution

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Gestural Solace: A Reflection on Menezes' *Salvation* and *Absolution*

Salvation and *Absolution*, two video works by Sonali Menezes presents the body as a carrier of the past, as a place of love, and a place of conflict between the other and the self. In everyday rituals, the body partakes in acts of service, participating both actively and passively in forms of cleansing. In both pieces, the body is anonymous, framing the feet and hands to focus on the functional and symbolic purposes of these body parts within the context of social status and skin colour. The act of washing hands and feet presents two different perspectives; both in its place of service and purpose of action. Whereas our hands bridge our connections with others through giving and receiving, our feet are in service of ourselves; moving us forward and carrying the weight of our history through the world.

In *Salvation*, Menezes is influenced by the holy and sacrificial act of Jesus washing his Apostles feet. She sits passively as a white woman bathes her feet, only her hands shown within the frame. Carrying the weight of personal and generational history,

Menezes' feet are symbolic, obscuring the boundaries between privilege and authority. In allowing herself to be bathed by another, she establishes autonomy while interweaving the historical and hierarchical context between the white and Brown body. Menezes reclaims and reverses this dynamic while also critiquing the white hegemonic hierarchy deeply embedded in Catholicism as Jesus partakes in an act of humility by washing the feet of those below him. *Salvation* reinforces this shifting sense of authority and equality between the self and the other in an intimate act of service. How does the colour of our skin change our worth? How can we reclaim and empower ourselves and the generations before us? What does it mean to be beautiful and desired? In switching hierarchical roles through acts of respect and care, a process of healing is formed by giving oneself up to be entrusted and cleansed by another.

In comparison to *Salvation*, *Absolution* is an internal representation of resolution in identity, performing a kinesthetic dialogue of meditation for the self rather than the other. The brown body partakes in an active role of self-care rather than a passive role. At 27 minutes in length, Menezes washes her hands until a soap bar completely dissolves, revealing an intimate movement of inner dialogue between the object and the self directly. Around the soap bar and the sink, her hair tangles into the soap residue. Standing strikingly clear against the whiteness of the object, her dark hair entangled within floats amidst the water as time moves forward. Passed back and forth between Menezes hands, the soap acts as an object of thought in the process of cleansing and healing itself through feelings of jealousy created by white supremacist standards. In longing to restore power imbalance and injustice embedded in the narrative of her skin, Menezes washes her hands until the bar of soap disintegrates, bringing a sense of urgency to her intentions. In this movement of rumination, a question is formed in the shape of a soap bar; is jealousy a sin? Through this process, her hands dance in a conversation between each other. As the soap dissolves into the water, the same thought

disintegrates down to whispers, finding stillness and empowerment in a narrative etched beyond her skin.

The dialogue between the body, water and movement is a fundamental component to *Salvation* and *Absolution* as a part of Menezes expression of her healing process. Both pieces reflect each other as external and internal reactions of being othered within white hegemonic social structures; a parallel in response to the gestural movement of hands in service of washing. Easily moved by outward phenomena, water shifts violently and silently, mirroring an image in its emotional state. In the act of giving oneself the time and love to process pain and trauma, Menezes confronts the reflection of her past through its transparent and solitary nature. The softness of its energy reflects the powerful imagery of time and movement, altered by the dynamism of a performative gesture and gathering it back towards stillness through repetition. The emotional nature of Menezes expressions in rumination shows through the malleable, shapeshifting qualities of water. Pulling the viewer into the cyclical movements of thought in its process of contemplation, Menezes isolates fragments of everyday rituals, creating a space of intimacy and solitude for both the performer and viewer to experience.

Through the repetition of these gestures Menezes stitches together memories and pieces of speculation to the surface of her skin, confronting wounds from her past and tending to them with integrity and sincerity. In this process of healing, she reveals these injustices by expressing perseverance through the physicality of her body, piecing back together the wholeness of her being through forgiveness.

- Nima Salimi