

# DIGITAL AGNES

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## **Margaret, Jessie and I**

*Queering the Collection*

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### **KEYWORDS**

Contemporary Art, Queer Art, Photography, Collection Highlight

### **SPEAKER(S)**

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### **TRANSCRIPT**

#### **Background/Historical Context: Introduction (00:00:00)**

Hello, this is Akosua Dufie, the author of this *Queering the Collection* highlight.

Canadian artist Evergon's *Margaret and Jessie (Florida)* was created in 2001 as part of the artist's ongoing response to stagnant ideas about gender, sexuality, and age. In this audio component to this essay: "Margaret, Jessie, and I: Queer Aesthetics of Desire in Re-Presenting the Female Nude" my aim is to delve further into my understanding of queer aesthetics of desire and the homoerotic nature of the photograph. Here, I will unpack terms such as *sapphic yearning*, *homoerotic*, ideas of being simultaneously *nude/naked*, as well as *the (oppositional) gaze*, exploring how they contribute to what I have termed "Queer Aesthetics of Desire." "So how do these definitions: Queer aesthetics of desire, homoeroticism, sapphic yearning, the oppositional gaze and being concurrently nude/naked relate to "the prerogative of escape and flight" within the persona of Evergon, his work and his audience?<sup>1</sup> I suggest that my engagement with the work of a white gay man as a Black woman is generative because of our differences rather than any quest for similarity. This allows me to, like Evergon and his subjects Margaret and Jessie, take flight or escape stagnant self-definition and embrace an ever changing and unstable reality of queerness that through my understanding of his work has become boundless and ever more expansive.

Before delving into the examination of *Margaret and Jessie (Florida)*, it is helpful to first consider who Evergon is as an artist and a gay rights activist. In his work, he explores his queer identity in

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Francois Renard. Evergon, *Ramboys: A Textless Novel* (Ottawa: Ottawa Art Gallery, 1995), 11–12.

relation his collaborators and resists fixed, external definitions of gender and sexuality. Known at any given time as Evergon, Celluloso Evergonnni, Eve R. Gonzales, Egon Brut, the artist – referred to here as Evergon—creates ideological instabilities within himself and his audience. By adopting different pseudonyms, each tied to distinct personalities and aesthetics explorations, he continuously challenges static definitions of himself and his work. I also find that in engaging with his work, I can draw on his elusiveness to further own my ongoing self-definition. Ultimately, these pseudonyms reflect his desire to shape shift and release any attachment to a single definition of himself as an artist or of his work. The initial name Evergon, of which all the others are variations, literally means “*ever gone...* [as such,] the name implies an absence, and, by extension, the prerogative of escape and flight.”<sup>2</sup>

Evergon, born Albert Jay Lunt, in 1946 in Niagara Falls, Ontario has an extensive body of work that consistently challenges social and cultural conventions around gender and sexuality. From the beginning of his practice, Evergon overtly represents unconventional lives and sexualities through the medium of photography. He is not interested in totally idealizing his subjects, especially their bodies. He presents instead a variety of lives staged in a way that preserves a semblance of reality within the construction of an artistic image. In doing so, these bodies, marked by difference come to serve as examples of the ever-shifting nature of human lives and sexualities. In the case of Margaret and Jessie, the differences represented are old age, ample flesh with wrinkles and cellulite, as well as the ailing body, here indicated by the canes held by Margaret, and the homoerotic nature of their interaction.

I have come to find that change is inevitable, it can happen either as a gradual march towards personal progress that may lead to broader societal progress, or a regressive misstep that reinforces restrictive traditions affecting our lives or the lives of those who do not share our similarities. In representing two elderly women in a homoerotic photograph, Evergon’s work suggests to me that these two unconventional classical nude figures embody the fluidity of identity and experience. This element of Evergon’s work, the constant destabilizing shifts, resonates with me because it keeps me on my toes. It challenges the monotony of sameness and uses my own fear of instability as a way to push me beyond comfortable, dull routines. In this way, Evergon’s work, especially *Margaret and Jessie (Florida)*, becomes a transformative experience every time I look at it. While encountering a confrontational nude figure in the form of an old white woman leaning on two walking sticks and a companion can be disorientating, this sense of disorientation creates a critical dialogue between Evergon, his subjects (Margaret and Jessie) and his audience (you and me).

### **Analysis (00:05:38)**

The sculptural scheme of *contrapposto* that is often featured in classical art as a way of animating the human figure in paintings and sculpture is hinted at in *Margaret and Jessie (Florida)*.

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<sup>2</sup> Renard. Evergon, *Ramboys: A Textless Novel* (Ottawa: Ottawa Art Gallery, 1995), 11–12.

I want to briefly define *contrapposto*. *Contrapposto* is an Italian visual arts term that describes a human figure in a natural pose with most of their weight concentrated on one leg. With both feet on the ground, the body forms an asymmetrical shape—the shoulders and hips tilt in opposite directions, while the torso and pelvis do the same.<sup>3</sup> When I first saw this stark black and white photograph of two elderly fat white women posed like classical nude figures noticed the slight *contrapposto* as being demonstrated by Jessie. But looking closer, I see that *contrapposto* is also implied by Margaret’s stance. However, this was not immediately apparent to me because I had not considered Margaret’s walking sticks as part of her body, but as external apparatuses. But now I see Margaret as a sort of cyborg, a being consisting of both organic and mechanical body parts, in this sense Margaret’s stance demonstrates not just dynamism within a static image, but a transcendent and powerful animation that brings classical traditions into a more inclusive present and possible future.

When I came across *Margaret and Jessie (Florida)*, I was in the midst of personally considering how similarity produced monotony. Yet while I loathe routine, I also fear the instability of change. By seeing Margaret and Jessie as classical nude figures presented in the *contrapposto* stance and homoerotically sensuous, I was confronted with an image that shook loose the cautious monotony that I had faithfully hidden behind, it helped me explain why I despised routine but steadfastly held on to sameness. So, while I initially believed routine robbed me of adventure and of personal progress, and that instability and significant changes were a threat to my feelings of safety and freedom, I came to a conclusion fueled by the critical ambiguity of this photograph. I believe that routine and change can exist and thrive alongside one another. I now understand that because I have been marked by my body and race as an acceptable target for systemic and/or casual violence, I am cautious about significant changes to my environment, especially those stirred by political climates. Change and instability are not inherently dangerous, but I felt that way because I cannot control how things change. So, I have chosen, in the past, to stubbornly stick to well-worn routines. But the figures of Margaret and Jessie, especially Margaret, show me that sameness can exist as a stabilizing force during the gale winds of change. So, sameness, here showcased by the steadying shoulder of Jessie that lends itself to Margaret’s hand, and change, demonstrated by Margaret’s walking sticks, exist as companions, overlapping but not obscuring one another. This allows and creates room for the existence of difference and expansion. This is the foundation from which I developed my understanding of queer aesthetics of desire.

### **Queer Aesthetics of Desire (00:09:15)**

When I began reading and researching for my essay on *Margaret and Jessie (Florida)* the first question I asked myself was how could I express my initial impression that this image is implicitly queer, not because the artist is queer, but because I found in this photograph a striking sensuality that I did not expect to see in bodies not typically considered beautiful. This led me to further question: In a world where being white, male, straight, able bodied and thin marks you as deserving

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<sup>3</sup> [“Noticing contrapposto in Classical art and beyond.”](#) Saint Louis Art Museum. May 14, 2024,

economically, sexually, etc., what happens when you are not white, male, straight, able bodied or thin? What are the implications of being outside this supposed norm? The implication that the restrictive norms of being white, male, straight, able bodied and thin repeats with anxious fervour to maintain its status quo is: If you do not fit these norms, you and anyone else like you, are not worthy of being acknowledged as capable sexually desirable participants of society and are therefore thrown to the baying hounds of economic instability, systemic and mundane violence, as well as the constant onus to regulate and survey your difference as inherently deviant.

The more I looked at this image of two old women standing together, gesturing towards embracing, and yet not quite completing the motion, the more I saw value not only in their difference but in mine as well. Looking at Margaret, her belly a sagging apron of loose pale flesh, I understood that heteronormative ideals of desire will dismiss these women and shuffle them towards the margins of society. As such, the implicit mantra of maintaining a restrictive status quo rears its head again and discounts Margaret and Jessie as past their sexual prime because of their aging fat bodies that do not promise fertility. But when I see Margaret and Jessie, I see a sensuous force that shatters the delusions of the limited status quo. In the shards of the demolished heteronormative norms, I see disparate lives in which I exist, empowered by difference.

Queer aesthetics of desire, which is expansive and boundless, affirms these disparate lives and their spectrum of sexualities, genders, bodies, and races as sensuous and sexy *because* they are unconventional. Margaret and Jessie, aware of this, seem to celebrate their ongoing sexuality as it evolves with circumstance and age. Accepting these unconventional bodies as part of queer aesthetics of desire initiates a shift away from squeezing into external definitions of beauty and politics of heteronormative desire, an openness that welcomes-difference. In this photograph, I see three key elements that make this work an example of an ever-changing aesthetics of desire within queer communities that leaves room for change. The first is homoeroticism. Homoeroticism as defined by Merriam and Webster Dictionary is to be “marked by, revealing, or portraying sexual desire between people of the same sex”.<sup>4</sup> But Margaret and Jessie are not interacting in a way that explicitly portrays sexual desire between themselves. Rather, here in Evergon’s photograph, homoeroticism “takes leave” of this singular definition of homoeroticism by making the erotic nature of *Margaret and Jessie (Florida)* ambiguous, which I think is critical.<sup>5</sup>

Critical ambiguity here makes it difficult to pinpoint the nature of Margaret and Jessie’s interaction. It draws out any prejudices by contradicting the norms imbued in the presentation of the classical female nude. Namely it challenges ideas that the nude female must be, as always, youthful and sexually desirable, akin to idealized mythological female figures like Venus (as seen in Titian’s *Venus d’Urbino*). So, in centering the bodies of elderly women, when confronted with Evergon’s image, audiences are faced with comparing and contrasting Evergon’s photograph to images of the classical female nude. Here lies the tension: Will the audience acknowledge the visceral sensuous vitality of

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<sup>4</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “[homoerotic](#),” accessed November 7, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Renard. Evergon, *Ramboys: A Textless Novel* (Ottawa: Ottawa Art Gallery, 1995), 11.

Margaret and Jessie, or do they dismiss the potential sexual vigour and homoeroticism of the two women because they do not fit the normative ideas of the classical female nude?

Looking at Margaret's body and comparing it to how Jessie is presented, I am drawn to the blur of Jessie's hand as she moved to embrace Margaret. The blur is subtle but when identified, it ignites, in me, a desire for them to complete their embrace. This inability to know whether they embraced or not after the photograph was taken is reminiscent of the trope of *sapphic yearning* within the lesbian lexicon. In the essay, I define *sapphic yearning* as the expectant interlude between sexual attraction and consummation that creates an intense feeling of homoerotic desire. Here, I want to expand on that a little. While I note there appears to be a sapphic yearning between Margaret and Jessie, I acknowledge that there also exists a yearning within me to comprehend their relationship and in reading their interaction sensuously or homoerotically. Such yearnings leave me hesitant to fully define the relationship of these women – and my relationship with them also emboldens me to express my uncertainty and difference as a young fat Black woman looking at bodies that I initially saw as very different from my own.

### **Gaze + Nude/Naked (00:15:25)**

In my work as a self-defined intersectional feminist working within the traditions of Black feminisms and Transnational and Third World feminisms, I am deeply interested in how those long silenced by external definitions of their difference seek to reclaim their voices and, as Audre Lorde says, “define themselves for themselves”.

To this end, I draw on Black feminist theorist and writer bell hooks, whose concept of the oppositional gaze informs my examination of *Margaret and Jessie (Florida)*. The oppositional gaze challenges static definitions surrounding race and gender –and, I would add, sexuality. It seeks to dismantle restrictive, internalized perceptions of these identities, and re-presenting them in defiance of external hierarchies and binary structures.

In the essay, I also engage with writer John Berger's distinction between being nude, and being naked, asserting that Margaret and Jessie embody both. They are nude in that they display their bodies in a way that can be perceived as sexual, especially Margaret, and they are naked in their openness to the judgment of others, particularly their anticipated audience. But they are also naked because they are true to themselves in all their imperfections and blemishes without care of being judged.

### **Conclusion (00:16:54)**

As a young fat Black woman living and working in Canada, I am often made aware of my difference, especially when I am reminded that expressing my difference is an inconvenience to the maintenance of strict racial hierarchies that uphold the status quo. Microaggressions arise when people fixate on my unambiguous Blackness and my unconventional body, stirring in me a subtle yet constant need to prove my value within a social and cultural economy that expects my silent compliance to a rigid hierarchy of whiteness, thinness, and strict heterosexuality. As such, I am constantly balancing my indifference towards how others perceive me and remembering to define

myself *for myself*. in this way I cannot be neatly tucked away into categories that confine me to racial hierarchies, gender binaries, and heterosexuality. In Canadian society, a constant reinforcement of differences, whether racial, sexual and/or gender based, are often defined as static or one dimensional in order to uphold racial and gender hierarchies, which, in turn, reinforce heterosexuality as the norm. This narrow view of identities that deviate from so-called normalcy marginalizes unconventional bodies like Margaret's, Jessie's and me.

In affirming my worth, I lean on the words of Audre Lorde, a self-described "Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet" who in her essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" argues that true power lies in difference, not sameness. I take this to mean my power lies in my ability to accept, nourish, and love not only my difference but those of others. As I looked at the image of "*Margaret and Jessie (Florida)*," I began to see how my difference, alongside theirs – two women who initially seemed so distinct from me– contributes to our individual and collective power. The homoerotic nature of Margaret and Jessie's interaction expands into an erotic power, marking the space between self-knowledge and the recognition of my desire as it shapes self-definition and external perceptions.