

SWAPSWIFTER

Terminal Project Report

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Acknowledgments

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My parents, I couldn't have done any of this without their unwavering support.

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Taylor Swift, for the endless distraction and empowerment.

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Shapeshifter

A Transcendence from Woman to Slug

Ellen O'Shea

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Introduction

This text serves as a companion to my terminal creative project, *Shapeshifter*, which documents the transformation from woman to slug and elaborates on the sociopolitical and cultural contexts that inform my artistic practice. This writing is a cultivation of the three-year journey of research and production that has culminated in this body of work, drawing connections between my visual art and the realms of feminist studies, consumer theory, and contemporary art.

My work investigates the intricate trappings of societal influences that shape identities, particularly through the lens of female consumerism. In a world inundated with messages designed to manipulate desires, I survey the pervasive phenomenon of being brainwashed by the allure of paraphernalia. As a female artist, I have an acute awareness of how corporations capitalize on women, feeding them a constant stream of superficial ideals and materialistic desires. I am in a unique position as both an outside observer and an inside participant, critically examining the dynamics of the beauty advertisement industry.

With the rising popularity of ‘slugging’—a routine involving excessive layers of moisturizer applied to the face—I find myself drawn to this trend while simultaneously questioning its underlying impulse.



Installation view, *Shapeshifter* Ditch Projects

Springfield OR, May 2024



Slug, 2024
Ceramic, chain, charms, 14 X 4 in.

Traditionally, women are conditioned to covet shiny, glossy things, often equating them with personal worth and fulfillment. Yet, they are bombarded with conflicting messages about empowerment. The act of slugging transforms one into a sticky object, conforming to a social trend, yet potentially becoming a source of repulsion. This body of work confronts these paradoxes, adopting the notion that embracing the grotesque nature of slugging may lead to enlightenment.

Feminine iconography is the starting point. The mudflap girl dressed in reflective material stands as the point of origin. She is shiny, new, and full of promises. As the narrative progresses, the metamorphosis takes place, a moment of chrysalis. AI generated faces covered in a sheen melt slowly into goo, decomposing. The images are cut close in, obscuring a sense of space and time.

The final phase is the slugs. They have transfigured into their final state of gloss, just like the skincare ethos intended. They are coded with patterns and colors, a homage to individuality. Adorned with jewels and keychains, they resemble how I'd embellish an outfit, adding layers of charm and depth. In the labyrinth of societal expectations, the female must be a shapeshifter, a canvas for endless manipulation. It bends and twists under the pressure of degradation. Women morph into fleeting ideals, existing between the lines of conformity. Yet, the period of change from the male gaze to bodily acceptance brings a sense of peace. We are witnessing not the cliché transmutation of a caterpillar to butterfly, but a transcendence from female to slug.



Installation view, *Shapeshifter* Ditch Projects, Springfield OR, May 2024

**“There’s a reason we are drawn
to gazing at the ocean.
It is said the ocean provides
a closer reflection of who
we are than any mirror.”**

The Creative Act, Rick Rubin

Origin: The Reflection

In 2015, Rizolli published *Selfish*, a book of Kim Kardashian's selfies taken over the years. Laura Bennett wrote in an article for Slate that, "Through her shapeshifting selfies, she records milestones like birthdays and pregnancies and births." She goes on to analyze this strategy by urging viewers to forget the male or female gaze, but insisting the only gaze that matters is Kardashian looking at herself.

We have these parasocial relationships with celebrities where we extend our emotional care and energy towards them, while they continue to exist in their own world, unaware of our existence. The public looks to the celebrity for love and guidance but what they receive back is just a reflection of themselves.

Marilyn Monroe wrote in her memoir that, "People had a habit of looking at me as if I were some kind of mirror instead of as a person. They didn't see me, they saw their own lewd thoughts." Monroe was known for her flirtatious aura and curved features. This voluptuous hourglass figure was a common ideal for women to strive for. This unrealistic standard can be seen copied in advertisements, media, and on the back of trucks. The mud flap girl is the silhouette of a woman reclining with her feet out in front of her. She is relaxed, her breasts are cartoonishly perky, and her hair is flawlessly stirring in the breeze. It was said to be designed by Bill Zinda in Long Beach, California for his friend Stewart Allen to promote his line of truck and auto accessories.



Mud Flap Girl, 2024, 76 X 96 In.



The image has also been used on accessories not truck related. You can purchase one in the form of a neon light, lapel pic, or toilet handle. It can be seen as simply nostalgic of another time or can be utilized for critical commentary. I am using this figure to point to the mold in which most feminine bodies strive to fit, a farcical layout.

For my terminal project, I have had a sculpture fabricated of the logo in a larger than life figure, standing over six feet tall. A production company laser cut a 3mm one sided mirrored acrylic and used a ¾” plywood backer with a 4” wood base to keep it standing alone. The back is exposed, revealing the illusion as the viewer further enters the space. The piece sits in the direct eye line of any person entering the room, confronting the audience with their own image.

The spectator can continue past their reflection, avoiding the simulation, or take the occasion to document their portrait, creating a “selfie moment”. The mirrored surface distorts the viewers appearance like a fun house mirror at a carnival, making the proportions of the body shift awkwardly. With the popularity of social media, the opportunity to take a picture of yourself has multiplied with some companies capitalizing on this trend. For example, the mirrors that line Glossier’s store, a cosmetics company infamous for their moist looking models and millennial pink marketing strategy, adorn phrases like “You look good,” and “Objects in mirror are dewier than they appear.” This creates incentive for consumers to document their visit and spread awareness of the brand.



Mud Flap Girl, 2024, 76 X 96 in.

In contemplating one's reflection, the act can be perceived as an exercise in vanity, a moment of introspection where we engage with the constructs through which we perceive and define ourselves. John Berger's observation in "The Ways of Seeing" talks about the intricate dynamics at play, suggesting that the portrayal of a naked woman in art, often labeled as "Vanity," serves as a moral condemnation of both the subject and the viewer.



Mud Flap Girl, 2024, 76 X 96 in.

By placing a mirror in the hand of the depicted woman, the artist shifts the focus from the subject's supposed self-absorption to the viewer's own gaze and intentions. This reversal of assumed self-regard challenges traditional interpretations, prompting reflection on the act of looking itself and the power dynamics inherent in the act of observation.

In the context of the mud flap girl, the selfie reflects viewers' images through this symbol of sexuality. The object itself is straightforward and pristine, commissioned to be meticulously engineered by a company to ensure top-tier production quality. I have rarely made my work beyond the confines of the studio, without my hands being a part of the process. While this entails a loss of control, it offers the advantage of attaining an aesthetic that diverges slightly from my usual repertoire. This piece maintains a standard of excellence, an ambiance of industrial manufacturing, engaging in dialogue with the commercial realm.

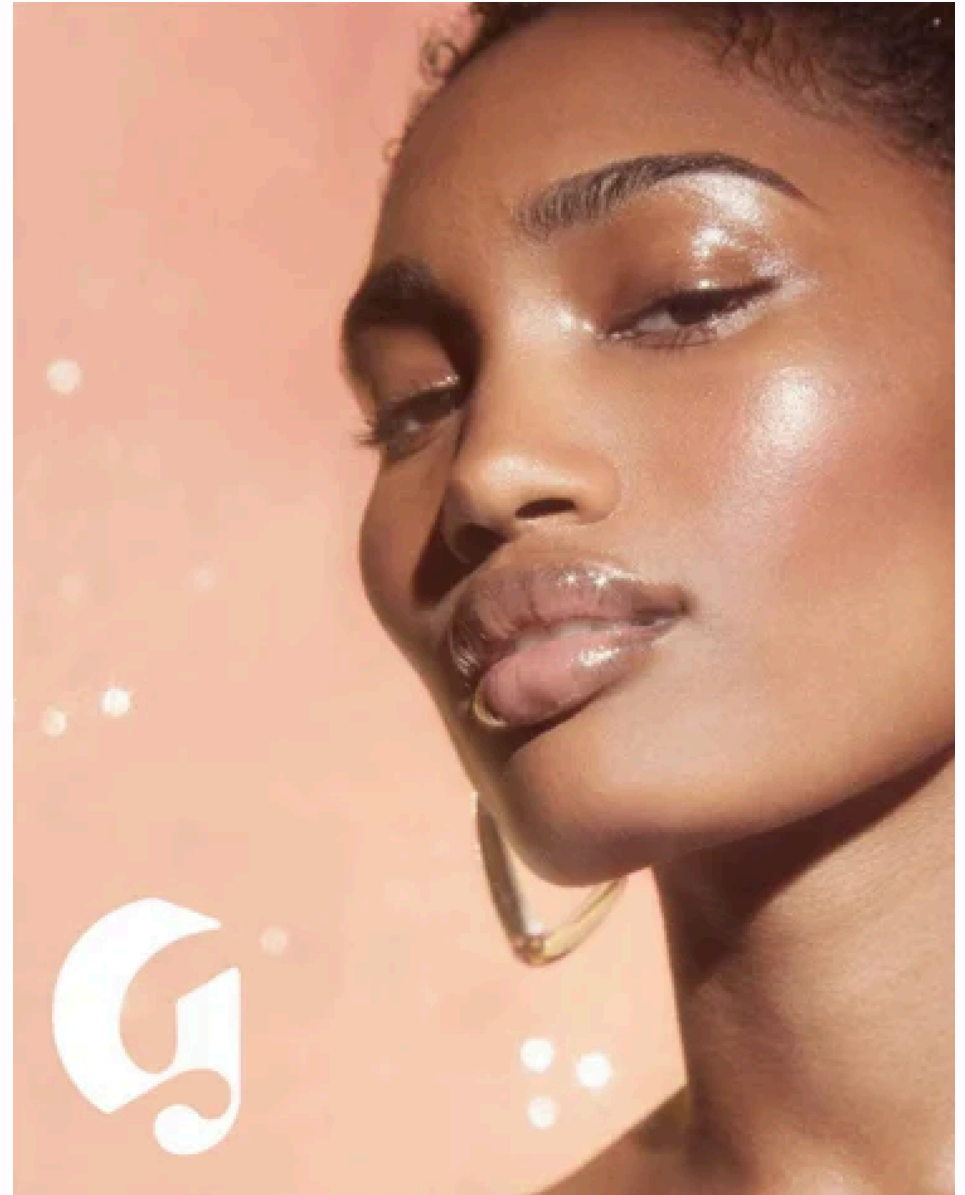
Therefore, she is shiny, new, and full of promises. She is the predetermined mold of attractiveness. She encapsulates what it means to be flawless, an unattainable standard to strive for. She reinforces the notion that a woman's worth is contingent upon her physical appearance and ability to fulfill male fantasies. I believe, also, that her confident posture is reclaiming female sexuality from societal taboos, celebrating it as a source of power and autonomy. Nonetheless, she stands as the origin point, marking the beginning of the metamorphosis.

Chrysalis: The Gloss

When the beauty brand Glossier premiered its first collection of makeup and skincare products in 2014, it was accompanied with the tagline, “Letting your personality shine through glowy dewy skin.” In the past decade, the obsessive desire for one’s skin to shine has engulfed the skincare communities. Not oily skin, but a gooey slimy moisturized complexion is understood to be the ideal. A label for this look is ‘glass skin’.

Sarah Lee and Christine Chang told the magazine Allure that the term means “crystal-clear, poreless, translucent, [and] luminous — like a piece of glass.” This need to look moisturized could be because of our primitive need for water. Our instinctual desire to quench our thirst could explain the longing to surround ourselves with glistening objects. Or it could be just a general preference for shiny things. I think it's a combination of a couple of different factors.

Writing in 2015, the editors of e-flux journal’s Politics of Shine issue noted that, “Shine and shininess are characteristic of surface effects, of glamor and spectacle, of bling-bling contingency, of ephemeral novelty, value added, and disposable fascination.” Psychologically, we are hardwired to be attracted to shiny objects. With evolution, glossiness often signified ripeness, freshness, or purity—traits desirable for survival.



Advertisement for Glossier, 2017



Screen grab from *Metamorphosis*, 2024

This primal instinct lingers within us, manifesting in our modern-day attraction to glossy finishes, shimmering surfaces, and radiant displays. The ideal Glossier model essentially resembles a doll, reflecting light as if they are made of plastic. When I started feeding photos of skin care advertisements into AI generating software, the system would automatically smooth out the skin and enhance the features to look artificial.

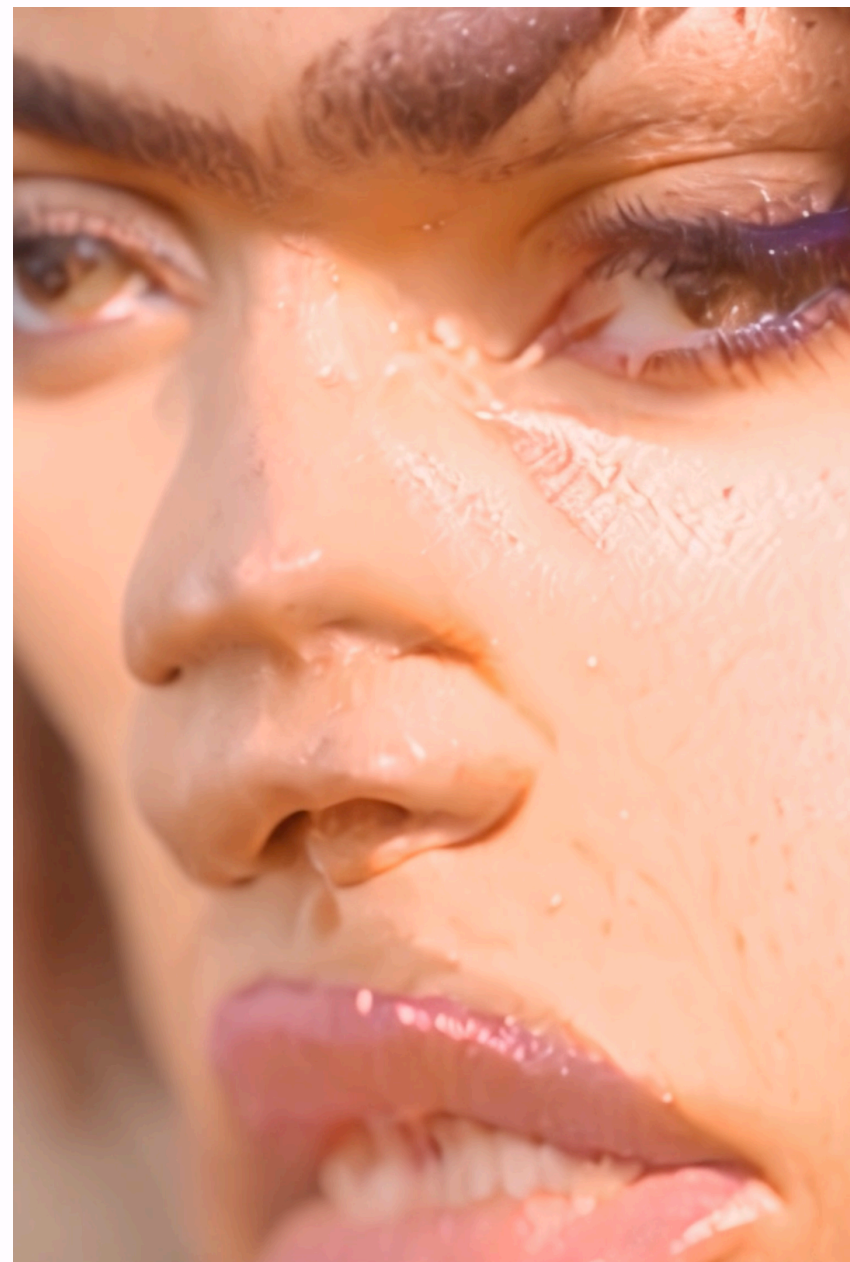
There is a fakeness that people can recognize when looking at AI generated images today, the software not being quite advanced enough to fully trick its viewer. Technology is gaining ground rapidly though, so this won't always be the case. That is why I find it beneficial to use this software now, with its imperfections, to encapsulate this time in development. The faces of the models are uncanny, the eyes looking in two different directions or morphing into something else and the mouths are too big or expressive. These glitches encapsulate the internet's desires and shortcomings, always wanting something more, resulting in something else grotesque and uncanny.

In her manifesto "Glitch Feminism," Legacy Russel explores the notion that we can only truly understand the implications of something when you disrupt the function of it. By disrupting the task of the advertisements, I am redefining the limits of glossiness.

The images used are sourced from skin care advertisements, characterized by their solid backgrounds and well crafted lighting, accentuating the luster of the models' skin.

Some images directly depict the trend of excessive moisturization, featuring layers of vaseline or similar substances on foreheads and cheeks. The videos generated are repetitive, the women in them turning in the same robotic way but morphing into something otherworldly. As I prompt the system to melt the faces of the individuals, the computer responds inconsistently. Sometimes parts of the skin sag slightly, but never enough to feel effective. In order to produce an effective reaction, one must be very specific with the wording fed into the mechanism.

Prompts such as, "Woman covering face in goopy clear slime dripping off of her," will sometimes generate a vivid image with heavy movement but will only register the request for slime and assume the goo must be green and discard the description of clear coloring completely. But after an excessive amount of research and attempts, the results ooze the gloss of over moisturized skin.



Screen grab from *Metamorphosis*, 2024



The aesthetic I am striving to convey must be aligned with the original advertisements displaying the trendy effect being commented on. This is a moment of metamorphosis, the models shed their outer layers and begin the transformation. They are morphing into something else, a state of chrysalis. This transitional state is gradual and the images are cut close in, obscuring a sense of space and time.

The screen showcasing this event is positioned vertically, aligning with the orientation of our phones. Through this technology, people observe themselves and others, gradually assimilating into its materiality. Online we often inadvertently distort our sense of self and blur the lines between reality and fiction. Through carefully crafted images and curated content, we present idealized versions of ourselves to the world, projecting an image that may not always align with our authentic selves.

In her book, "Trick Mirror," Jia Tolentino observes that, "Even as we became increasingly sad and ugly on the internet, the mirage of the better online self continued to glimmer." Being an online persona requires a certain degree of self-delusion. This transformation speaks to the shift that occurs when we enter the digital realm. In this pursuit of perfection, we risk losing touch with the imperfections that make us human, leading to a fractured understanding of our true identities.

In May 2017, Cindy Sherman started posting on Instagram a series of caricature portraits. They consist of mock selfies manipulated to be disproportionate and overdone, resembling someone who over did a couple too many filters on their phone, leaving themselves unrecognizable. Parul Sehgal wrote for The New York Times that, “Their vulnerability pains me — how badly they want to achieve some kind of glamour, how magnificently they miss the mark.”

This series was at the forefront of my mind while generating the AI videos of women’s faces melting. Sherman has always been an artist I have appreciated for her ability to use her own image for mimicry, shapeshifting in order to impersonate a variety of complex female personalities. I couldn’t handle the uncanniness of the facial features and how grotesquely they had been manipulated. It was too eerie and too real for my pleasurable viewing. That is why when using AI, I chose not to use any videos that felt too unrealistic, or too digitally worked. I want the viewer to be grounded in the resemblance to flesh and bodily goop oozing from the portraits. Their desire for glossiness has gone too far and it has transformed into a new level of amorphous absurdity.



Cindy Sherman, 2017, Instagram

Transcendence: The Slug

For some, the cult of glossiness represents a quest for validation and belonging—a desire to be accepted and admired. In the pursuit of shiny objects, people seek to align themselves with symbols of affluence and success. The collecting of skincare products becomes a means of self-expression, a declaration of identity amidst the clamor of consumerism. We are enticed by the promise of transformation or enhancement. “After a pat of stinging expensive foam, the effects of which were unconvincing, I thought ‘Huh? That’s funny.’ By the stroke of moisturizer, I was dewy and resolved. I had nothing to lose but my chains.” Lauren Oyler describes this process of transcendence after a forty-five minute skincare routine for her book “Fake Accounts”.

Tolentino explains that in circumstances where there's a constant pressure to meet artificial demands, it's common to shape one's life around practices that seem absurd and potentially unjustifiable. Oyler chronicles indulging in this ritual as a way to achieve enlightenment. The skincare industry promises to reverse aging, diminish imperfections, and reveal radiant skin, but perpetuates the notion that our worth is tied to our appearance. Therefore, achieving enlightenment through self care becomes intertwined with the commodification of our bodies. In this cycle of consumption, we unwittingly transition from consumer to the consumed, becoming a commodity to be bought and sold.



Slug, 2024
Ceramic, chain, charms, 15 X 4 in.



The viral skincare trend known as "slugging" has gained significant popularity in recent years, particularly within online beauty communities and social media platforms. This trend involves applying a thick layer of petroleum jelly or a similar moisturizer all over the face as the final step in one's nighttime skincare routine, resembling the shiny trail left by a slug.

The brand Future Wise has centered its marketing strategy around this fashionable practice, naming its most popular product "Slug Balm". This connection to the slug is predestined by the route of glossy pursuit. The slug represents this over moisturized being. Unlike the snail with its identifiable shell, the slug is vulnerable and exposed. It is at our disposal for consumption. The slugs I have created are representative of the thing in which the skincare ethos unintentionally intends us to transfigure into. They are simultaneously a refusal to please and a gesture of absurdity. The slugs are at peace with their transition, having shed their expectations to fit a mold. They are formed from clay, painted, and covered in a clear glaze.

Their bright colors and patterns are a cry of joy, each one expressing its personality freely. Some are adorned in glitter and jewels, some wear keychains as a mark of human characteristic. I see these markings as a branding of identity or betterment of something already good. Yassification is a slang term which means to give someone or something a glow-up or makeover. The yassification of the slugs is necessary because they are not just small collectible items but the

character that collects its own memorabilia. These elements call back to the interest in shiny objects, the reflective silver in conversation with the mirrored surface of the mudflap girl, connecting the two.



The slugs invade the space, climbing the walls and pedestals. They leave a trail of iridescent slime behind, mimicking the sticky substance real life slugs exude. As they move along, they leave a trail of goop behind them. They are often unwanted pests in gardens and leave a mess of decay wherever they congregate.

In the foreword to Christopher Michlig's book *File Under: Slime*, Jan Tumlir explores the nature of slime, describing it as something we instinctively recoil from yet are sometimes strangely drawn to. She explains that defining slime as an object reveals its true nature as an, anti-object. Slime's significance is found in its formlessness and inherent stickiness.

This notion parallels the unrealistic expectations in skincare, where women are encouraged to have a glossy appearance that suggests an impossible inner flawlessness. Such standards overlook the reality that, like slugs, women have imperfections—bumps, spots, and missing parts. Bennett encapsulates Kim Kardashian's multifaceted persona in her selfie book, highlighting her ability to embody contradictory traits: from wholesomeness to scandal, self-awareness to obliviousness, and highbrow to gauche. Women are expected to be everything and nothing at once, navigating life as ever-changing beings and leaving traces of their true selves. This journey is not a clichéd metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly, but a transformation like that of a slug—embracing inherent worth and authenticity while resisting societal pressures to conform.



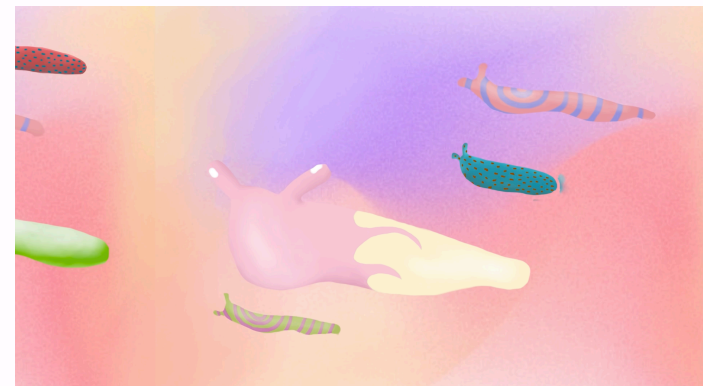
Slug, 2024
Ceramic, chain, charms, 15 X 4 in.

Conclusion

The final piece is an animation that encapsulates the narrative at play. A female figure, resembling the mud flap girl, appears on screen and winks to the audience. She picks up a slug and bites its head off, revealing an ooze of green slime. She smears the slime onto her face and begins to transform, becoming a slug. The slug moves along and joins the other army of slugs that are celebrated with patterns and colors replicated in the physical ceramic slugs adorning the walls around the video.

This animation is included to guide viewers through the work, but it doesn't aim to provide all the answers or dictate their interpretation. It's crucial that my work doesn't conclude neatly but is instead left open to unravel and expand.

Where will the work continue to grow from here? If I had to guess, I would say the form of the slug will continue to make appearances. It's a potent and resonant symbol not just for me, but for many people, particularly women. I have received countless memes and videos about slugs appearing in various contexts, from medical drawings and elaborate shoes to song titles. This widespread resonance makes my creative process feel worthwhile, connecting with people through this strange creature that seems to reflect how we perceive ourselves.



Screen grabs from *Shapeshifter*, 2024, animation

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