

a disappointed client & a disappointed professor - a personal, critical essay (draft)

I have a client who is becoming increasingly disappointed that I will not go further with him outside of my established boundaries, but he still respects me enough to pay me—and more than what I ask for. I would expect the same dignity, empathy, and humanity from an influential, educated professor teaching at a large university, the basic respect that even a disappointed client can offer. Instead, fueled by misogyny and pervasive sex work stigma, my identity was reduced to harmful stereotypes, highlighting a sad, enduring ignorance and bias against sex workers, erotic laborers, affective laborers, care workers, SWers, or whatever the scholarly term is at the moment, I will rotate them to reflect the evolving and shifting discourse around this labor, which is a huge part of my personal research, life, and scholarship.

The stigmas surrounding this kind of labor, which have been permeating, historically, forever, continue to manifest in both subtle and overt ways in the academic art world, a world that can pretend to be inclusive and progressive, and for the most part, it is in my chosen communities. I am writing about one particular incident with a former colleague that serves as a microcosm of the broader systemic and interpersonal issues faced by erotic workers in professional environments. To clarify or ease any possible concerns—this is *not* about choice feminism or empowerment rhetoric; it is about addressing the intersectional perceptions of professional and social value.

As a white, blonde, skinny, physically-abled, blue-eyed person, I must acknowledge, for my community, the privilege that has allowed me to work in “high class,” high paying, safe(r) work environments for many years, compared to what others in my industry might face in terms of race, class, or gender. I always like to acknowledge the privilege I have in terms of identity, safety, community, and the ability to conceptually integrate erotic labor into my practice, but this incident highlights the pervasive discrimination that still exists. This labor has not only sustained my entire adult life but also my art practice, enabling me to create, take care of myself, do residencies, and remain debt-free. It is irrelevant why I started or the many complexities surrounding how I feel about this labor; I am out with it, I’ve done every form of it, it has been nearly 10 years now, and I am in constant renegotiation and reconciliation with it. Regardless, it simply keeps me, and has kept me, able. In her book *Working Girl: On Selling Art and Selling Sex*, Sophia Giovannitti discusses how being open about one’s life as a sex worker through art can create a protective, speculative barrier, offering a form of privileged safety. This openness allows for critical dialogue about the commodification of both sexual and artistic labor. Giovannitti highlights the overlapping and often exploitative nature of both industries, emphasizing that art and affective labor are deeply intertwined within capitalist structures. It’s an important, canonical read for a deeper understanding of workers in these mutual ecologies.

About a year after graduating from my MFA and attending Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, I worked as a visiting artist at that large aforementioned university for one semester. What followed Skowhegan was respect and opportunity, including the beautiful community, support, mentorship, and friendships that would lead me to organize an inaugural gallery show that is still open. These accomplishments gave me a deep sense of internal self-worth and fulfillment — things that can be hard to have, build, and keep. I was so thrilled to feel valued in this way and get my first teaching position so soon, something I have always wanted to do: be a teaching artist.

On Friday, May 24th, the day after the opening, I received a text message from that former colleague that read, “*btw (redacted artist name) doesnt wanna be a client, so stop trying. thnx!*” This professor, “Professor S,” who sent me this text message—we had a fraught relationship from the beginning. Before this text message was sent to me, many months after teaching at the same institution, we couldn’t seem to come to a place where she understood me or my intentions, and initially, I did not at all attribute her

behavior to my work background, but her final message to me exposed her bias. After receiving this, I would retell the story to trusted friends and blame myself. “Maybe it was because I didn’t show enough support for her work?” A trusted friend, over a panicked phone call, would tell me that I was giving reasons as to why she might not have liked me, offering excuses for her behavior not rooted in the same scary moralizing judgment on misogynistic Reddit forums, believing that I had done something to deserve this message.

This message is a microcosm of a SWer navigating space. I had shown “too much admiration” for this professor’s then-crush (*redacted artist name*), her now partner, asked for a studio visit/coffee, engaged on IG, tried to make connections, tried to make community— all normal actions misconstrued based on her own biases of sex workers’ intentionalities. I do not want to think I am incapable of existing in the art world normally. There is no excuse for her behavior; the only excuse would be if I was actually trying to make this artist my client. I was not. This is not how SWers typically even operate; it wouldn’t be safe. I am tangentially minorly concerned that Professor S or her partner might be spreading harmful information about me, portraying me as whatever— trying to steal her partner, which, yeah, further perpetuates damaging and unfounded stereotypes prevalent within “whore” history.

Despite the privilege I acknowledge in terms of art-making, safety, and community, this discrimination underscores the enduring stigmas that remain. The text from Professor S is a clear example of how these distorted prejudices manifest. There is an immediate and damaging impact of such biases, not just on my professional reputation but also on my sense of self-worth and belonging within the academic community. Despite my fear of further misogynistic stereotyping, I will say that this message immediately made me cry— a lot. I’ve spent a significant amount of time thinking about earning respect through accomplishment and hard work to evade both this very stereotyping and my own personal struggles with self-worth. This experience is far from isolated; and reflects a broader societal issue where SWers are often dehumanized and their professional contributions are undervalued. The stripping (pun intended) of being an equal the day after a decent achievement is part of the reason for the proud promotion in this essay, to somewhat viscerally solve the overshadowing and dehumanization. Her actions showed her insecurities and highlighted how she and so many others see us.

In the teary aftermath of this incident, the support from my community has been invaluable. Messages from friends provided much-needed immediate support and validation. One friend wrote to me, *“there’s no way “Professor S” would send anyone else a message like that - to strip u of being an equal to her and to target you like that is soooo fucked, it was condescending and incredibly cruel, it also showed her own insecurities & how so many ppl claim to support SWers but view them as the enemy/as a threat/view them as less-than but as someone/something that’s always scheming against everyone else and shouldn’t be trusted – “(redacted artist name) doesn’t wanna be a client so stop trying” is SO HEINOUS ldk there’s so much to unpack wiith that comment alone*”, and another friend: *“Omgggggg, Dahlia that ^^ is so fucked up, That person seems like she has serious issues, Thats so upsetting, l/m so sorry”*. **There is so much to unpack in her short text message.**

After finding out that she also had been awarded a Skowhegan residency, I asked more friends to exchange thoughts on what to do. I was close with the faculty, the former director, and the community—what do we do in terms of harm reduction? There are preconceptions and judgments people hold that present varying levels of danger to others. I became concerned about the potential harm this attitude could cause within the Skowhegan community and to her future students. It is imperative to stay cautious, vigilant, and aware so that no one in the current or future cohorts experiences this kind of open dehumanizing. This situation calls for discourse, harm reduction measures, and the creation of a safe,

inclusive environment for all participants. I hope for growth; because a residency like Skowhegan can make you grow as a person.

In conclusion, my experience with Professor S and (*redacted artist name*) serves as a reminder of the work that remains to be done in addressing hostile intolerance against affective laborers. By writing this personal essay, I hope to shed light on the systemic issues at play and advocate for more inclusive and respectful professional and interpersonal environments. I remain full of hope for these critical intersections of art, work, and academia to evolve. I believe in the full potential for upward growth and understanding, provided we are willing to confront and dismantle the biases that persist. Take care.

****As I reflect on these personal struggles and systemic issues in place, I am acutely aware of broader injustices. The ongoing conflict in Gaza and the plight of Palestinians serve as reminders of the pervasive nature of oppression and the urgent need for solidarity and systemic change in all forms. We must remain vigilant and committed to addressing these issues, locally and globally.*