

Jessica Pleyel
Artist Statement

My work is an exploration the powerful connections of family, intersectional feminism, and art-based activism's role within communities. The themes of interpersonal connections, mending and creating mythologies transcend the media I use which include performance, sculpture, storytelling, installation and video.

For years, my father and I have struggled to communicate. In an effort to mend our relationship, we began carving decoys. These objects became a both a literal and metaphoric decoy—not only were we making these to lure ducks closer while hunting, but we were also using them as a decoy for conversation, discussion and to bring us closer. Throughout these projects, I began to hear stories of my father's family, most of whom I never met as they passed away many years ago. The Pleyel family consists of hunters, farmers and fishers. Whether it was paintings, metal work, carved decoys, pirogue canoes or taxidermy, the Pleyel family often made objects. This practice was communal, and conversations would happen as my family whittled away on the front porch. This is also how my father and I began mending our relationship, and started discussing our shared familial history, and particularly, my grandmother Beulah.

After Hurricane Katrina devastated Louisiana in 2005, my father's remaining family struggled to survive. My Aunt Eileen lost everything in the flood, including most of our family's records, heirlooms, her home – and her mind. She subsequently fell into a deep depression before sinking into dementia. In her state, she told her daughter that she had sold my grandmother's grave years before so she could purchase a new van. This meant that my grandmother Beulah was extracted from her family's gravesite, and put in a grave with over five hundred other people. Through a desire to connect with my grandmother, who was known for her excellent cooking and her hospitality, and to deepen my relationship with my father I have been researching our family's recipes. Through this research, I create art experiences for community members and friends centered around food, storytelling, and discussing the meanings behind food's intimate connection to family.

As an activist and survivor, much of my practice is creating safe spaces for victims and survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault to share, ignite and create discussions. I have often felt there was not a space for me to voice the many emotions that come with my experience. After creating and sharing autobiographical work about my story, many women have shared their stories of survival with me. Through these conversations, I knew that we needed to create a place to share these stories. An example of this is the *To(get)her* project. *To(get)her* is a collaborative live performance and installation in which women from a variety of backgrounds destroy and transform wax guns with kitchen and cosmetic tools like waffle irons, hair dryers, high-heeled shoes, curling irons, and meat tenderizers. These wax guns act as a metaphor for the violence that happens to many women on a daily basis. One in four women will encounter domestic violence and one in six women will be raped in their lifetimes in the United States. Not only are many of our bodies attacked mentally, physically and sexually, but the government also stakes claims on our bodies.

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With 138 representatives and 31 senators voting against the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and many of those same politicians voting against stricter gun regulations it is apparent that these politicians do not see it as problematic that women's bodies are so often targets. There have been four iterations of the *To(get)her* project, and over 75 self-identifying women have collaborated on *To(get)her*, sharing their stories and igniting discussion about violence against women. When women come together, their connections are empowering, fierce, sometimes gentle and always meaningful.

Another project in which I created a space for survivors to share their experiences is through the exhibition *We Are Survivors*. *We Are Survivors* was an art show I curated at the alternative art space Public Space One in Iowa City. The exhibit included 16 artists from across the United States who were discussing their own understandings of sexual assault. Along with the closing of the art exhibition, there were numerous dialogues that occurred in the space including: artist interviews, roundtable discussions, and multiple Art and Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies classes visiting the space, and learning about the artwork and what diverse ways survivorship exists. This exhibition brought up pivotal points of discussion on sexual assault, as well as bringing together a community of survivors to create impassioned work, and collectively discuss their experiences.

Through collaboration, igniting discussions and activating art and public spaces alike, it is my intention to create communities, whether it be connecting intimately with my family, or on a larger scale with survivors across the United States. Change happens in varying degrees. It can be as simple as connecting a father to his daughter over carving decoys, or a granddaughter sharing the memory of her grandmother through cooking traditional Cajun food or as complex as bringing together a group of fifty women to share their powerful and difficult experiences of sexual assault and domestic violence. When we come together, and our voices are in unison we are empowered to create community, discussion and change.