

The Bathroom Knows You Best

Jordan T.



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As a space, the bathroom “sees” people and their everyday habits. The bathroom is a place where routines and personal rules are developed, but kept secret from others. The bathroom is the defining place for one’s lowest and most vulnerable life experiences.

These five oil paintings explore the setting of “the bathroom.” Each image shows a different relationship and, as a whole, the installation is about interactions one might experience in the bathroom. My research brought up many interesting facts about the bathroom. For example, bathroom privacy did not become normalized until the early 1800’s with the concern of religious modesty and economic growth. Another interesting sub-topic is the unspoken etiquette one follows when sharing a bathroom: “talking stops when you enter the stall” and “men cannot stand next to each other if it can be avoided.” I decided to focus on the bathroom as a sacred place, a place that it is the intimate stage of one’s life.

These paintings on wood panels are collaged with cloth and foil. Each is unique in its own way, and has the ability to stand alone, but they have all been painted in a similar style and installed in a diamond tile shape to allow the viewer to experience the collection as a whole. Here, several of the paintings depict positive interactions, while the others show dark or controversial interactions. Although interaction with a bathroom space is a completely normalized occurrence, the experiences are varied depending on the person and location.

The bathroom knows you best.

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INTRODUCTION:

The bathroom sees you at your best and at your worst. The bathroom protects you from the world but the bathroom cannot protect you from yourself. The bathroom sees you every day when you get up and every night right before you sleep. Does the bathroom know you best?

The bathroom is a reflection of us and how we treat ourselves.

PRIVACY (THE BATHROOM MIRROR):

Growing up, the only room that many kids have access to that has a lock is my room, the bathroom. I am often the most private room in a household. I am also the most intimate room of all. I am the room where you see yourself undressed the most, where you wash and clean yourself almost daily. I am the first room that you go to in the morning and the last one that you most likely go to before sleep. I am the room where people feel safest and protected for many reasons, you come to me when you're crying or when you're vulnerable.

The interesting thing about privacy in my room is that you all want to be in complete privacy. But in reality, every single one of you does these things but hides them away because you all think that coming into my room is a disgrace.

“Most of our feelings about the body, sex, elimination, privacy, and cleanliness are magnified in this context of “publicness”, for the fact that publicness, with its inevitable, territorial violations and loss of privacy, increase our apprehensions.” This is a statement by Alexander Kira, the author of the book *The Bathroom* that was one of the first studies about privacy and functions in the bathroom. I remember overhearing this line many years ago when Kira was first examining me and my possibilities. The “public” aspect of going to my room with others around or nearby creates anxiety and fear. These anxious feelings that are associated with you coming to me have been more popular in recent years when the push for more private bathrooms has grown. Humans have pushed for more modesty and privacy due to religion and economic growth recently. You have associated the bathroom with “shame and secrecy” from a very young age from your elders and teachers. This affects you deeper than you could ever think. For many of you, I may be the only place that you see your full body without clothing. My mirror shows you what you would not be able to see without me. It shows you your face and all of your beauty and imperfections. My mirror also gives you possibility to cover up your face with makeup to hide yourself even more from the world. Many of you use my mirror a great deal more than others. Some of you build huge mirrors in my room, while others only need small ones or sometimes none at all. Many humans admire and appreciate themselves and their bodies while others shy away from the mirror. I am a place where you can either love yourself or dislike yourself. When many come into my room, they avoid looking at themselves in the mirror. They avoid the intimacy while others appreciate and adore themselves. Although I can make many people feel safe and contained, some people fear me and fear the intimacy that I bring with one and one's self.

The lock on my door creates a barrier to the rest of the world so that you feel more “safe” when you are naked in my room than in any other room in a house or public area. In this culture, where humans normalize clothing, my room is an exception from other places in society, such as the outdoors or in public, hence the sacredness of my room. I remember a lady mentioning Harvy Molotch once in my room, saying that he called me the “backstage of life”. I am usually pushed to the outer parts of a house or tucked away somewhere, out of the way and out of sight. My door separates you from the rest of the world. Because if this, things can happen in my room that can't happen in normal “outside of the bathroom” life. Although these things are normal and almost all of you do them daily, you all do not talk about them outside of my room- which means nobody really talks about them at all because most people use the bathroom alone.

PEOPLE OF THE BATHROOM (GENDER AND AGE):

Different genders interact differently my room, both private and public. Girls tend to spend more time with me due to makeup and hair styling. There is also a difference in the products in that I keep in my room and cleanliness of my room in many cases. Many of the items perform the same tasks change based on gender. For example, shaving cream, razors, shampoo, conditioner, soap, deodorant, face wash, and hair products are all altered and packaged differently based on the gender of the buyer even though they are all essentially the same product.

Age also affects the use of my room. When kids are young, toothpaste is party flavored instead of mint. Their toothbrushes are designed with cartoon characters and sing songs while the child is getting ready. I tend to be more vibrant and joyful when you are young and as you age, the bathroom becomes dull and boring (just like many of you do).

There are two different kinds of people in this world (who have access to bathrooms anyway) and this difference has nothing to do with gender and sexuality. Humans who fold and humans who crumple their toilet paper. If you really think about it, you are all the same and you all interact with me the same way. As I see it, there are those of you who crumple and those of you who fold. I do not care if you are male or female or anything between or whatever you are, I just see you as you. There is no judgement or criticism from me. The harshness of my room is from you and how you view ourselves in my mirror.

Recently, a teenage girl seemed to have left a magazine in my room after using my facilities. Inside was an article called “Women vs Men Bathroom Habits” that analyzed some differences in gender uses in the bathroom. It opened up to a questionnaire created to analyze women’s complaints about men and men's complaints about women. The chart showed that many of the things that women complained about men doing was the same that the men complained about women doing. As this shows, you are all very similar in these “private rooms” that we refuse to talk about outside of me. Another interesting conversation that I overheard about me mentioned the slight differences between men and women in the public bathroom. There are many unspoken rules about public bathrooms that you all create and just blindly follow such as “no talking” or “men can not stand directly next to each other at urinals if it can be

avoided” or “do not look at another man while urinating”. Women do the same thing. Such examples are “Talking ceases when you enter the stall” and “hold the door for another when the latch does not function”. Some of these rules can be helpful, I guess, to give others privacy while using the restroom but many of them also seem dysfunctional. For example, if a human is in a stall and runs out of toilet paper, they usually panic and try to acquire some of their own instead of just asking another human in the bathroom to get the some which would be much simpler.

Another interesting thing about how humans interact with my room is based on a social test given. The magazine also concluded that women in a women's bathroom with other women feel more liberated and comfortable but when men are in the mens bathroom with other men, they tend to feel more anxious. There are many different social situations that come up in bathrooms that can cause anxiety and nervousness, which seems to apply more to men in this case. But my room can also be comforting and safe place to go. In the author's personal experience, when she or anyone else came into a public bathroom crying or upset, other girls or women would attempt to calm her or help her through. Women also share tampons, pads, makeup, and advise with each other when needed in my room. In a men's bathroom, if a man or boy came into the bathroom crying, he may get treated differently and not be greeted with humans trying to comfort him like the woman do. Interactions with humans in my rooms are heavily influenced by stereotypes in society and the culture today. Much of the graffiti in men's bathrooms is offensive and many times very homophobic which graffiti in women's bathrooms tend to be body and self positive. In both of these situations, women seem to have the upper hand on awkwardness and good experiences in my room. To go along with this, women also seem to wash their hands much better than men do. Women also tend to be reminded to wash their hands more often on posters and signs than men do. From what I have observed, only about 5% of you humans actually kill germs when you wash your hands.

PRIVATE VS PUBLIC:

Although my modern room has become a very private place, there is also the use of public bathrooms/restrooms. Although public bathrooms have stalls, they are in no way private in many cases.

When you are a child, your parents teach you these ways of bathroom “etiquette” because that's what everyone else does. In both men and women's public bathrooms, this type of ritual has been created where you all have certain rules and activities are created to make the public bathroom seem more private. The public bathroom is not actually private at all, other than the stall doors that are set up. My stall doors are meant to be a barrier between you and the world outside, although my stall doors do not actually touch the ceiling or floor here in America. My stalls act more as a social boundary from other humans than a physical wall. According to *The Private Lives of Public Bathrooms*, “Today, most people living in developed countries *expect* privacy in the bathroom. Paradoxically, most bathrooms outside of private homes are designed for multiple, simultaneous occupants.”. Humans *expect* this privacy from each other and the world outside. Is privacy a human right? In many countries there is no privacy about going to the

bathroom. In China, public bathrooms do not always have doors. In India, almost half of the country's citizens do not have access to bathrooms with toilets. Many bathrooms in other countries are not separated by gender either. In these places, the bathroom is not as socially sacred as it is here in America. The privacy and secretiveness of using the bathroom is taken out of everyday life, taking out the social and gender anxiety that goes along with public bathrooms.

In public bathrooms, the stalls become a temporary hideout for many humans. At work or at schools, they will come to the bathrooms to get away. My room can be a safe place for anxiety and stress where one can just relax and play on their phone. Actually, about 75% of people use their phones while using the bathroom. This makes the bathroom not so sacred after all. On the other hand, public bathrooms and bathrooms in public places can cause much anxiety for many people. "Paruresis" is the term used to describe being afraid to poop in public bathrooms. Although *paruresis* has not been deemed a real disease yet, it is still classified as a social anxiety disorder (Beck). Many of you suffer from it and avoid pooping in public bathrooms at all costs. To deal with it, many people turn on fans or play loud music to drown out the noise but in many cases in public bathrooms that is not possible. My rooms are usually loud and any sound can echo around the whole room. Public bathrooms cause much anxiety that could easily be avoided if people just normalized the bathroom and the actions that go on inside it. You all think that going to the bathroom is such a private act that you are afraid to do it around others even though every single person does it every day.

A few years back I heard some women chatting about a part of a book by Horace Miner. They said to emphasize how society has made the bathroom such a sacred and ritualistic place, Horace Miner wrote the *Body Ritual Among the Nacirema* that mocks the American bathroom habits. One of the passages from the book goes like this: "The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums would bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them.". This passage, although making fun of me, does show the strangeness of a few rituals and rules that have evolved with cleanliness and the bathroom. It compares your cleanliness to your social status and popularity in society. Many humans who use the bathroom more often than others have a higher ranking in society, it seems. Humans who do not care for themselves and do not clean themselves produce body odor which drives other humans away from them.

THE BATHROOM FLOOR:

When you hit my floor, you hit a low point. My floor is a cold sticky place that you end up at rough spots in life. For example, you may end up on my floor if you are sick, hungover, having a breakdown, panic attack, suicidal thought, or hiding from the world outside. The bathroom floor stands for throwing up, growing up, and giving up.

My floor is a gross place and I admit it, the tiles are usually cold, wet, and sticky. For the girl, she had ended up on my floor for many different reasons in her teenage years. Since she

tends to throw up when she gets anxious, uncomfortable or whenever she gets sick, there are many nights where she ends up hunched over my toilet on my cold floor. There are many nights where she falls asleep on my floor because the cold tile feels good on her gross, hot skin. Also, both at Oxbow and back at her home, I am the only room that she has access to that has a lock. Because of this, the bathroom has become a place that she can hide in. The bathroom is the only real room that she can make private if she feels the need to. This means that she usually ends up on my floor during panic attacks or mental breakdowns caused by school or friends or just life in general. When she cannot deal with life and the real world, she always ends up on the bathroom floor.

Although she seems to not be suicidal, my floor and tub is a place for self-harm for many people. My room can be a very dark place at times for many humans. The sad part is that I do not cause them to do these things in my bathroom, I am just there for them when humans think they need me in such ways. The society that you all live in treats you in such a way that you want to end your life because of it. Somewhat recently, the author had an experience where she walked into my room and found a loved one covered in blood on the floor. I remember her being frozen in shock and then attempting to take care of the situation. It made me sad because I could not help her or her loved one. The only thing that I could do is provide a space for this to happen, which makes it feel like it is my fault whenever situations like this happen. But in reality, I am just a room, like all of the other rooms. Your society has pushed me into this scary place, a place in the backstage of the rest of your life. I just want to be there for you when you need me! I was supposed to be a safe place for you to relax from the rest of society's standards and rules. But now, I have my own set of standards and rules. You think I agreed to this? Do you really think that I wanted to be the worst room in the house, the room where the you flush things away and known as the room that forbidden things are done in? I did not want to be a shoulder to cry on or carry the weight of your lives, but alas, I will be if I need to be.

THE BATHROOM (CONCLUSION):

As the bathroom, I would know you better than anyone else. Maybe even better than yourself. My room, basically, is a place for personal hygiene. It is a place of secrets and beauties that may not be seen outside of the bathroom. What I have noticed about the girl writing this is that I am the first place she goes when she wakes up and the last place that she visits before going to sleep at night. She visits me throughout the day, sometimes in the night time too. She does so just like all the other humans and their bathrooms, whether they are private or public or a whole in the dirt.

The idea of my room is shaped by society, you want privacy because it is what you have grown up with and what your parents taught you was right. My room seems to just be another example of how society shapes you and funnels you into flowing through life and functioning the way that we do. I am an example of how you all are stuck in this paradoxical life where we want society and civilization, but the price we pay is anxiety and rules. That creates your life and I, as

the bathroom, see you and the things that you do every day. I notice your routines and your personal rules. I see you at your lowest points and your most vulnerable ones. I know you best.