

**THE MONSTROUS I: ABJECTION AS DISOBEDIENCE IN
CONTEMPORARY SELF-PORTRAITURE**

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
In the Department of Visual Art
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By

RIISA GUNDESEN

©Copyright Riisa Gundesen, September, 2017.

All rights reserved.

PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Postgraduate degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this thesis in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my thesis work or, in their absence, by the Head of the Department or the Dean of the College in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this thesis or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

DISCLAIMER

Reference in this thesis to any specific commercial products, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise, does not constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the University of Saskatchewan. The views and opinions of the author expressed herein do not state or reflect those of the University of Saskatchewan, and shall not be used for advertising or product endorsement purposes.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other uses of materials in this thesis in whole or in part should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of Art & Art History
University of Saskatchewan
181.1 Murray Building, 3 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A4
Canada

OR

Dean of the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
University of Saskatchewan
116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9
Canada

ABSTRACT

An examination of the abject danger associated with the female nude in the history of European painting. Once identified, is it possible to use this phenomena to counteract objectification in contemporary visual culture? An exploration of this theme is undertaken through a series of Self-Portraits and Natures Mortes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm grateful for the help and support I received throughout this degree from Alison Norlen (M.F.A.), and Allyson Glenn (M.F.A.), both of whom served as graduate supervisors during my time at the University of Saskatchewan. I'd also like to thank my graduate committee members, Joan Borsa (M.Ed., M.A.), Dr. Marie Lovrod (Ph.D.), and Graham Fowler (M.F.A.), for their help in the preparation of both my exhibition and thesis paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Permission to Use.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
<i>Looking, pleasure and control.....</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Performing and maintaining boundaries.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Abjection, infection and the non-thing.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Pollution and power.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Order from destruction.....</i>	<i>27</i>
Bibliography.....	35

I. Looking, pleasure, and control

My interest in self-portraiture began with considerations of the gaze, and comparisons of portraiture from the western art canon versus contemporary mainstream media. Essentially, I am concerned with who is doing the looking and who is being looked at; whose gaze is the image catering to, and what does this reveal of the culture that facilitates the making of a given image? I want to begin by examining, briefly, some of the visual arts theory around prevailing habits of seeing and objectification of the female body; this discussion will serve as a foundation for topics more pertinent to my current art practice. To that end, I'd like to first consider Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"¹ where she discusses formulae of objectification and fetishisation in classic film, as well as the uncertain danger that surrounds representations of the female body in classic western cinema.

"Visual Pleasure" coins the term the 'Male Gaze,' and deconstructs certain cinematic tropes using feminist psychoanalysis. The central argument is that (classic) film (and by extension, mainstream visual culture) caters specifically to the pleasure of (cis-gendered, heterosexual) men, and is therefore structured to reinforce their position as the cultural center of 'objectivity.' Outside that center, the film will be experienced differently; a woman watching a film is forced to watch it through the lens of her own objectification. John Berger addresses this phenomenon in broader terms; "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at (...) The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object (...) an object of vision: a sight."²

According to Mulvey, the male spectator's experience is guided by the competing erotic pleasures of scopophilia (pleasure in looking) and narcissism, aligning with Freudian theory on

¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2010), 57-65.

² John Berger, "Ways of Seeing," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2010), 50.

the components of sexuality and pre-genital auto-eroticism.³ There is first the straightforward voyeuristic pleasure of watching the beautiful starlet on the screen. In order to fully realize the scopophilic potential, she is positioned as passive, accessible, a sight. The camera lingers on her lips, her breasts, her thighs, in a protracted moment of contemplative fetishisation. She is still and exists entirely to be seen, containing no agency of her own; much like the female nudes canonized throughout the history of European oil painting.

This poses a problem for cinema however, as the voyeuristic object stalls the plot completely, having no power of her own by which to advance the story. Her only narrative relevance is as a vehicle for those things done to her, and those things she inspires to be done. Mulvey furnishes us with this quote from Budd Boetticher:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.⁴

As Mulvey outlines, it is the male protagonist who may advance the plot. He fulfills the two-fold role of driving the narrative and realizing the spectator's narcissistic desire for control. He becomes a more perfect ego substitute for the spectator, for through him the spectator gains control over the female lead, perfecting the scopophilic experience. These competing aspects (the advancement of the plot versus the stillness of erotic contemplation), Mulvey suggests, can be resolved in a classic 'showgirl' scene (a common trope in Westerns, wherein a dancer in a brothel performs some sort of titillating/erotic song and dance), during which the protagonist is himself lost in the voyeuristic show put before him. In that moment his motives and the spectators' are perfectly united.⁵

Mulvey's essay is not only a critique of blatant objectification of women, but also a dissection of what makes objectification pleasurable for the viewer - and that involves not simply beautiful women, but *control*. Indeed, Mulvey is suggesting that the exquisitely controlled nature of these

³ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 60.

⁴ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 61.

⁵ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 61.

‘sights’ is what makes them enjoyable. If the female body must be restricted and regulated in order to be enjoyed, this begs the question, what threat does it pose, that such endeavors must be made to contain it?

Although Mulvey’s analysis focuses on a specific era of cinema, the critical framework and language she introduces is readily applicable to wider discussions and criticisms of visual culture. With that in mind, I’d like to consider the contemporary institution of social media, and what has now been derisively termed ‘Selfie Culture.’ Selfies, in much of western society, provoke a curiously vitriolic level of scorn and suspicion. The subjects of these images are not altogether different from those of, say, catalogue advertisements, fashion photography, popular films, or allegorical painting; the young, beautiful, artfully almost-nude woman is a popular subject in all these media, yet selfies alone prompt snide remarks about the death of culture, ‘those dang millennials,’ and so forth. There are a few facets of this derision that I’m interested in, although I believe they likely all spring from the same issue. I should clarify here that although men also take selfies, the rhetoric I’m referring to is that associated with images taken by women and gender minorities - a rhetoric that seems to have much in common with certain tropes of allegorical painting.

One of the foremost examples of this can be found in the criticism of selfies and selfie-takers as shallow and narcissistic. The accusation clearly mimics much older sexist rhetorics, as the vanity of women is an ancient and self-fulfilling prophecy. I see a clear parallel to selfie-scorn in the common neo-classical trope of a beautiful woman admiring herself in a mirror as an allegory for vanity. John Berger addresses the concept in “Ways of Seeing:”

The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of women. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.⁶

⁶ Berger, “Ways of Seeing,” 51.

In the contemporary narrative, a woman is told that her beauty is her most valuable commodity, then mocked for using available platforms to display her successful gender performance.



Fig. 1⁷

⁷ Alessandro Allori, *Susanna and the Elders*. Between 1650-1700, 202cm x 117cm. Musée Magnin, Dijon. Available from: http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ARMNIG_10313259634 (accessed August 20th, 2017).



Fig. 2⁸

There is an element of blame attached as well; as Berger implies, the alleged vanity of women becomes a vehicle for deferring a man's culpability. This is borne out in one of my favorite allegorical subjects, the apocryphal story of Susanna and the Elders. It was particularly popular with the baroque painters; Rubens, Rembrandt, Tintoretto and Alessandro Allori (along with many others) all tackled it, sometimes more than once. The parable tells of two wicked village elders who spy on a chaste Jewish wife at her bath, then confront her and try to seduce her. When she refuses, they tell the town that she slept with them, a 'crime' which nearly results in her being executed, until a holy man notices inconsistencies in the men's stories and pronounces her innocent. The most popularly depicted scene is of course the moment of spying, which I feel quite neatly illustrates the politics of looking typical of the allegorical nude genre. As in

⁸ Tintoretto, *Susanna and the Elders*. 1555-1556, 146.5 x 193.6cm. Kunthistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna. Available from: http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/LESSING_ART_10310120399 (accessed August 20th, 2017).

Mulvey's analysis of classic films, where the protagonist functions as an audience surrogate, the elders become a proxy for the viewer, heightening the pleasure of looking, and the pleasure of scopophilic control.

Typical of these tableaux is the presence of a mirror. Susanna admires her own nude form, perhaps covered in pearls and jewels. She is sometimes oblivious to the elders spying; other times, as in Tintoretto's or Allori's paintings (*fig. 1* and *fig. 2*), she seems coyly aware of them, performing for her audience. The mirror (which is not mentioned in the original parable) signifies her complicity in her own objectification and assault, thereby exonerating the viewer. She is looking at herself, therefore establishing herself as a sight that others may have free reign to look at too. It's straightforward enough to draw a line between these parables of vanity and the young woman who is considered complicit if nude photos of herself are released without her consent; if she didn't want the photos to be public, she should not have taken them in the first place. I think it also worth noting that Artemisia Gentileschi, one of the few baroque woman artists still known today, also painted a version of Susanna. This is her treatment of the subject (*fig.3*):



Fig.3⁹

So, to return to social media, authors of selfies are mocked for images which in the context of an art photo or magazine spread - or a European oil painting - might be acceptable and admirable. The difference between the genres is one of authorship. The self-portrait is not subject to an obvious, exterior, controlling author, to the initial limitation of a regulating gaze. The limitation has been transgressed, representing a threat to other boundaries. The viewer is denied the

⁹ Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*. 1610, 170 x 119cm. Schloss Weissenstein, Pomersfelden. Available from: http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/AWSS35953_35953_31697604 (Accessed August 20th, 2017).

surrogate through which he may access control; he is denied what he has come to expect as a privileged looker.

The initial intention in my 'selfie' paintings was a juxtaposition of high vs. low cultural signifiers, where the oil painting medium serves to re-contextualize what is considered mundane or vulgar. Oil painting and/or portraiture not only holds a position of historical gravitas, but also remains a contemporary status symbol; government officials, deans and presidents of universities, the wealthy and the nobility all continue to have portraits painted for posterity. A selfie portrayed in such a context is lent this inherited respectability, while simultaneously mocking the dignity of an elitist oil painting tradition. It invites an awareness of implicit biases and forces a confrontation with underlying assumptions. (The concept of posterity is interesting here too, as both the internet selfie and the oil painting contain associations to the eternal, the immortalized, and the ephemeral - each with wildly different implications.)



Selfie #1 (2016), Oil on Canvas



Selfie #2 (2016), Oil on Canvas

Tracy Emin's practice frequently deals with this type of subversive juxtaposition, using her prestige as an acclaimed international artist (a recipient of the Turner Prize, her work has been shown in the Tate Modern and prestigious galleries worldwide) as a platform to infiltrate the upper classes with the most 'vulgar' aspects of her personal life. In her essay "Emin is

Screaming,”¹⁰ Clare Johnson describes the deftly crafted 2008 installation of Emin’s short film *Homage to Edvard Munch and All My Dead Children*(1998) in her first retrospective, at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. Only a minute long, it plays in a continuous loop, drifting back and forth between the Norwegian ocean and a wooden dock in the Oslo Fjord (locale for Munch’s *Scream*), where Emin is curled, naked, in the fetal position. As the camera pans away from her, back to the glittering ocean, we hear her give a series of heartrending screams. The video projection was situated in the furthest room of the gallery, with the sound playing loudly enough that it could be heard in all the other rooms; audiences would hear it for the first time upon entering the gallery, long before finally seeing the film. *Homage* deals with Emin’s distress surrounding events in her life such as abortion, infertility and (non-)motherhood - gendered recollections wherein the narrative’s objectivity and veracity may be called into question, (ie. is this woman a liar? Are her emotions getting in the way of the truth?). By dealing with autobiography, or more precisely, *memory*, in this way, Emin is addressing the lack of credibility afforded to women’s experiences and recollections. But the piece is part of a retrospective - one of the most enshrined memorials in the artistic canon. By couching the (ascribed) illegitimate within the legitimized, Emin distorts both, lending credibility to the former and satirizing the latter. The irony is one of things out of place, of the base and vulgar creeping in where it isn’t allowed.

¹⁰ Clare Johnson, “Emin is Screaming: Empathy as Affirmative Engagement in Tracy Emin’s *Homage to Edvard Munch and All My Dead Children*(1998),” *Parallax* 16, no.3 (2010): 96 - 104: <http://www.tandfonline.com.cyber.usask.ca/doi/full/10.1080/13534645.2010.486676?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

2. *Performing and maintaining boundaries*

While entrenched hierarchies of power within the politics of looking serve the maintenance of externally imposed boundaries, performance acts to preserve them internally. A successful gender performance enforces the limits of acceptable femininity and contains dangerous deviances. This performance is vital to the preservation of the female body within the patriarchal social structure, and it must be tirelessly maintained, even, as visual culture teaches us, when no one is (or seems to be) watching, lest the body descend into repulsiveness and require exorcism.

Performing one's identity as sight operates under the assumption of constantly being observed; it requires constant vigilance, and so, as Berger argues, women constantly observe themselves. He continues; "They (women) do to themselves what men do to them. They survey their own femininity."¹¹ The mark of a successful performance is when its viewers lose sight of its being performative at all, and come to consider it as 'natural' and 'normal.' This is borne out in the female nudes of Manet.

The realists (or early modernists) purported to be painting only what they saw: more specifically, everyday life, without artifice. In Manet's allegedly verisimilar tableaux, young women artfully undress during outdoor luncheons, or lounge nude, flatteringly posed, in their own private quarters. These women may not pretend to be goddesses, but they perform their particular role as exactly as in any Rubens or Tintoretto. Even Berger is fooled by the 'honesty' of the scenes; in his otherwise insightful essay, he brings up Manet's *Olympia* (1863). "(...) as in many other respects, Manet represented a turning point. If one compares his *Olympia* with Titian's original, one sees a woman, cast in the traditional role, beginning to question that role, somewhat defiantly."¹² But while *Olympia*'s gaze may evoke a certain self-awareness that separates her a breath or two from Susanna, she remains a still, performative and flattering sight. She threatens no boundaries, but rather adheres perfectly to the courtesan role she is meant to embody, the perfect picture of availability, however knowing. Manet may have caused some titillating waves in polite society by acknowledging the private existence of prostitution in a public sphere, but he

¹¹ Berger, "Ways of Seeing," 52.

¹² Berger, "Ways of Seeing," 52.

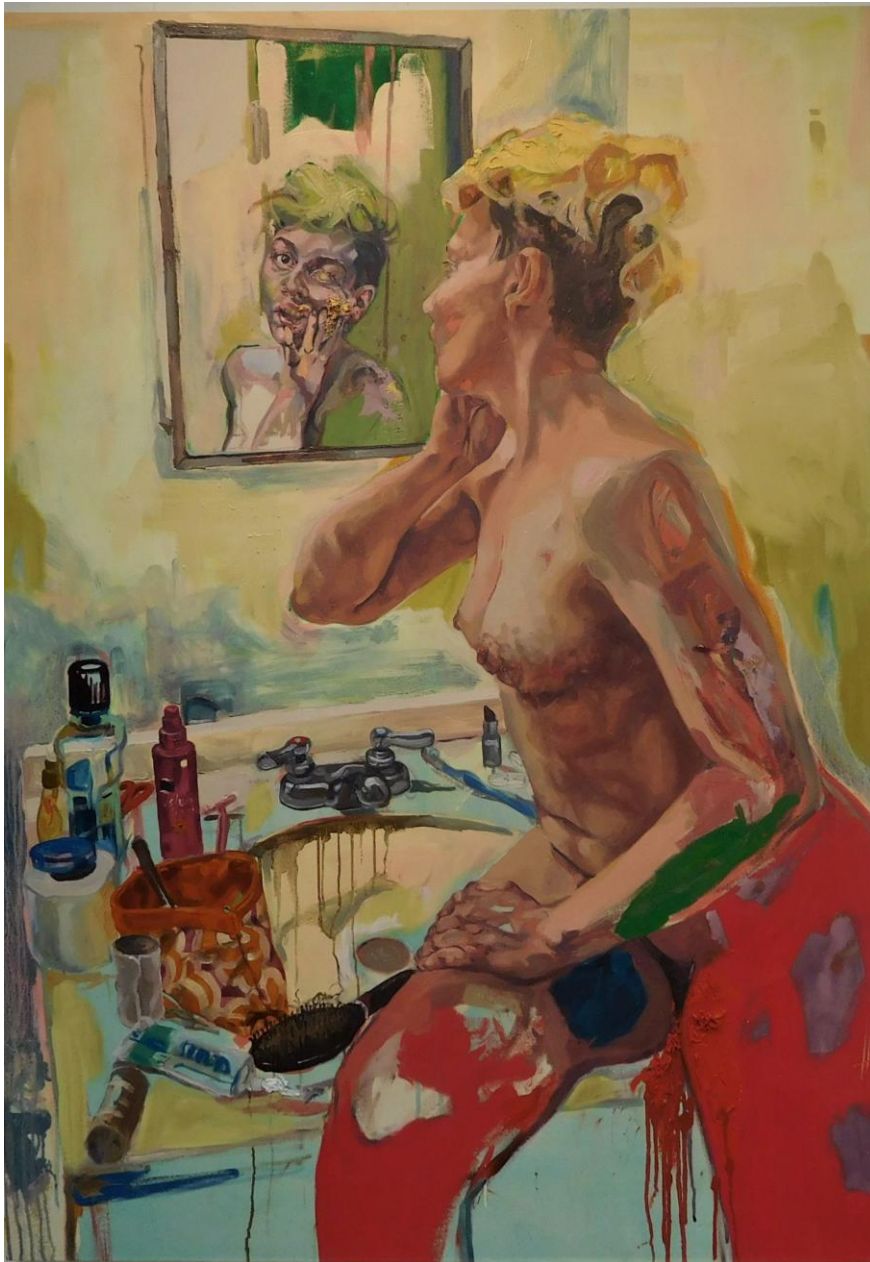
affords little or no agency to the models themselves. Though she appears to occupy an intimate/private boudoir, this is certainly not a woman who thought herself unobserved - she is carefully arranged, performing her role as the nude. This is a male fantasy of intimacy, of interiority; the truth would be repulsive.

For a less trafficked example of the enforced normalization of performative femininity, consider the 1937 comedic short, *How to Undress in Front of Your Husband*.¹³ The premise is of an (unseen) peeping tom, whose gaze functions as the camera lens, acting as a surrogate for the viewer, just as Mulvey describes in “Visual Pleasure.” There is also a disembodied narrator, separate from the voyeur, who addresses the ladies watching, styling this video as a sort of tutorial (a minimal lip service is given to chiding the ‘snoop’ for his bad behavior, which mostly amounts to warning women that they must guard themselves against this type of criminal, or face the consequences). Through the voyeur’s eyes we see two young women, returning from a night out at a Hollywood Party. One is petite and graceful (Elaine Barrie Barrymore); one is stout and awkward, played for comedic effect (Trixie Friganza). Their bedroom windows are conveniently stacked one on top of the other, so we might easily see them both at once. The narrator critiques the two women as they obligingly complete their nightly toilettes - Barrymore playing gallante to Friganza’s goofus. Barrymore is praised for putting on a demure show - a show that as far as she knows, no one is watching, which the narrator confirms when he reminds us that in all she does, she is unstudied, only doing what comes ‘naturally.’ Friganza is ridiculed for undressing and relaxing as she likes in the privacy of her home; the context and narrator make it clear that her behavior is repulsive and unacceptable. The scenario demonstrates that, firstly, a woman is at all times a sight, and therefore her being subject to voyeuristic invasion is simply a matter of course. Secondly, because she is a sight, she must perform the prescribed elements of her gender at all times, even in (the believed) absence of any audience, lest she risk being caught undone, unbounded and disgusting.

It is from this place that I begin when considering the possibilities of an anti-performance; not a non-performance, or a lack of performativity, but one twisted to invert the expectation, to present

¹³Hildegard Stadie, *How To Undress in Front of Your Husband*, directed by Dwain Esper (1937, Los Angeles: Roadshow Attractions), Film.

a deliberate, opposite reflection. The settings of the painted 'selfies' become a more true and intimate representation of the dirty, excessive state of my own living spaces. Referencing Tracy Emin's *My Bed*(1998), rather than arranging a purposeful tableau, the scene is left in medias res, in unbound disarray. The figure itself is painted on the verge of losing its integrity of form, dissolving into colorfields and abstraction, or being distorted, disfigured by strange, textural growths of paint and wax. The (my) body literally begins to transgress its boundaries. In this way, by approaching and breaching the margins, the abject comes into play.



Susanna and the Elders (2017), Oil on Canvas

3. *Abjection, infection, and the non-thing*

I want to return to the allegorical painting, where the female nude remained a staple for several centuries. Despite its featured position in the western art canon, the nude, as we have observed, is unstable and dangerous, should it be left unbounded by the regulating gaze, the circumscription of a gendered performance. Lynda Nead writes that it is, "(...) nevertheless, always under threat, for the nude (...) stands at the edge, where it risks losing its respectability and spilling out and over into pornography."¹⁴ Therefore, it must constantly be patrolled, and guarded against internal and external threat. By the strictures of representation, the nude is made whole and impenetrable; the body, easily breached through its' many orifices, freely excreting and absorbing fluids, members, children, is rendered inviolable.

The language Nead uses is one of purity and contamination, where within boundaries, there is safety, while marginal, indefinite states are dangerous. The transformation of the body into a nude is an act of regulation, which allows the nude form to become in itself a boundary, a vessel for the containment of dangerous influences. Nead considers the popular Renaissance allegory of chastity as an inviolate sieve. In Battista Moroni's *The Vestal Virgin Tuccia*(1555), a female nude holds in her lap a sieve full of water, leaking not one drop. The nude body and this impossible sieve have been transformed in the same manner, fashioning an ideal vessel.

Nead observes similar elements in Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of female bodybuilder Lisa Lyon. Her severely controlled body has been transformed by strict adherence to a particular ideal. She contains not an ounce of excess, and her form is a study in well-ordered, symmetrical boundaries. The construction of such a body suggests a process of purification, whereby all contaminants (fat, gluttony, laziness, excess leisure) are purged, leaving only the self-contained vessel, simple and pure.¹⁵

¹⁴ Lynda Nead, "The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality," *Signs* 15, no. 2 (1990): 325: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174488>.

¹⁵ Lynda Nead, "Theorizing the Female Nude," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2010), 521-22.

The female nude can almost be seen as a metaphor for (...) processes of separation and ordering, for the formation of self and the spaces of the other. If the female body is defined as lacking containment and issuing filth and pollution from its faltering outlines and broken surface, then the classical form of art performs a kind of magical regulation of the female body, containing it and momentarily repairing the orifices and tears. This can, however, only be a fleeting success: the margins are dangerous and will need to be subjected to the discipline of art again (...) and again. The western tradition of the female nude is thus a kind of discourse on the subject echoing structures of thinking across many areas of the human sciences.¹⁶

So, it seems clear that the feminine represents or contains a dangerous *something*, but the nature of the danger remains obscure, other than it risks polluting, and that it is disgusting, repulsive, abject. Abjection is itself a nebulous thing to pin down. To abject is, literally, to cast away, to throw off. The abject is not a thing, exactly, rather a non-thing that is repulsed, or repressed, excluded from the world of objects. It is closely tied to primal feelings of repulsion and disgust, and therefore food rejection is a helpful place to begin the definition. The sensation of the rising gorge, provoked by the sight, the smell or taste of spoiled food is familiar to any person; one might envision, in that moment of nausea, what should happen if the rot would touch your lips, your tongue and throat. The retching, the vomiting evacuation that would ensue represents a literal act of abjection, of casting the polluting, dangerous thing away from oneself. In *Pouvoirs de l'Horreur*, Julia Kristeva vividly describes that moment of throwing off:

Lorsque cette peau à la surface du lait, inoffensive, mince comme une feuille de papier à cigarettes, minable comme une rognure d'ongles, se présente aux yeux, ou touche les lèvres, un spasme de la glotte et plus bas encore, de l'estomac, du ventre, de tous les viscères, crispe le corps, presse les larmes et la bile, fait battre le coeur, perler le front et les mains.¹⁷

The immediate and visceral associations of rotten food informed my decision to include the still life paintings in this body of work. Depicting literal molding and spoiling extends the implication of rot, infection and decay to the bodies in the other works, heightening what is already heavily

¹⁶ Nead, "Theorizing," 521.

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'Horreur: Essai sur l'Abjection*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980), 10.

implied. This transference between works is also pertinent in and of itself, as it highlights ideas of pollution and contagion which are central to discussions of the abject. The food tableaux recall the tradition of European still life painting, where the brevity of immaculate, fresh food and flowers were meant to serve as a sort of memento mori - pointing again to themes of mortality and decay. The nudes and spoiled fruit form between them a sort of medieval 'Death and the Maiden' motif, which ties in well with Kristeva's theory of abjection - as will become clear below.



Devour, Oil on Canvas, 2017



Skin, Oil on Canvas, 2017

The text from Kristeva on food abjection continues as follows:

Avec le vertige qui brouille le regard, la *nausée* me cambre, contre cette crème de lait, et me sépare de la mère, du père qui me la présentent. De cet élément, signe de leur désir, ... *je* ne l'assimile pas, *je* l'expulse. Mais puisque cette nourriture n'est pas un *autre* pour *moi* qui ne suis que dans leur désir, je *m'*expulse, je *me* crache, je *m'*abjecte dans le même mouvement par lequel *je* prétends *me* poser¹⁸.

According to Kristeva, food abjection/rejection is tied to the abjection of the parental figures in the childhood stage of ego enactment. In order to become an 'I,' a subject, 'I' must abject myself, and create everyone/thing else as an other, as the abject. I must separate myself from my

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de L'Horreur*, 10-11.

parents, I must establish the boundaries of self, make everything 'not I' into other. Therefore, the abject is the non-object, the indefinable other that takes the role of a(ny) non-thing which threatens the 'I'.

We encounter a problem in this abjecting, rejecting, when we confront the corpse. The dead body (cadaver, which Kristeva reminds us comes from the Latin *cadere*, to fall¹⁹) is the most abject of abjects, the irredeemable deject, discard, cesspool - yet this is the one thing that we cannot successfully push away. The corpse is the limit of the I's existence as a living being, both the border of life and the abject that the border must push back. "Si l'ordure signifie l'autre côté de la limite, ou je ne suis pas et qui me permet d'être, le cadavre, le plus écoeurant des déchets, est une limite qui a tout envahi (...) La limite est devenue un objet. Comment puis-je être sans limite?"²⁰ If the corpse represents both abject and object, the limit and the non-thing which the limit is meant to guard against, then the corpse is death infecting life, the pollution, the castaway shit from which I am unable to extricate myself. I am entangled and confronted with the existential horror of the inevitable, the abject.

The problem here is not the rejected refuse, the cadaver, the fallen itself; rather it is the infection, the thing which will never obey circumscribed bounds. The abject is not the shit or the vomit, but the shit that is where it should not be, that disobeys and infects. Michelle Meagher's "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust" reiterates this: "Those things that cannot be controlled, those things that refuse to be bounded, are anomalies that cause profound cultural anxiety. In systems ordered by structures of pollution, things that are out of place are dangerous."²¹ The body, as the seat of the 'I,' must be the center, and those things which transgress its boundaries must be immediately re-enclosed by a considered, appropriate margin - otherwise they become abject. Even a single long hair, beautiful, desirable and acceptable on the head, becomes disgusting at the bottom of the bathtub.

¹⁹ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de L'Horreur*, 11.

²⁰ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de L'Horreur*, 11.

²¹ Michelle Meagher, "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust," *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003): 23-41: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810973>.

I also want to touch upon the relationship between the abject and the sublime, which have in common non-object qualities which make each very difficult to define precisely, with language. Where the abject represents some nameless, unknowable horror, the sublime represents a similarly nameless, unknowable awe; Mary Douglas, in her book *Purity and Danger*, writes about the duality of the profane and the sacred in a similar manner. Far from being two opposite poles of religious life, she classifies them both as part of an unclassifiable other, a disorder outside the margins. Where the profane threatens to pollute, the sacred is threatened by pollution, and therefore both must be limited, their borders guarded. But framing the sacred/profane duality this way suggests something of an oversimplification; the disorder cannot be permanently bounded and discarded. If disorder is all things prior to the classifying and differentiation of ordering, then disorder is the material from which the pattern, the order is constructed; it may threaten the pattern, but it is also the creative source for the pattern. It contains both destruction and potentiality, power and danger.²²

Kant, in discussing beauty and art, genders the poles of the sublime and the abject. Nead sites him in “Theorizing the Female Nude”: “The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and thus consists of limitation (...)”²³ Further, “(...) (the) merits of a woman should unite solely to enhance the character of the beautiful which is the proper reference point; and on the other hand, among the masculine qualities the sublime clearly stands as the criterion of his kind.”²⁴ Beauty, therefore, is defined by its boundaries, its limitations, which implies a process of ordering to keep the abject at bay. In this way the masculine is aligned with the sublime, or sacred, and the feminine with the profane, or abject.

²² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 196-203.

²³ Nead, “Theorizing,” 527.

²⁴ Nead, “Theorizing,” 530.

4. *Pollution and power*

We have yet to answer the question of why it should be the case that the feminine is more abject and marginal than the masculine. First, it is important to recognize the symbolic potential of the body, and its role as a model for society. A society is designed to promote conformity and containment and punish external or internal attack. The body is designed for much the same purposes. In terms of available symbols for complex social forms, a complex living organism is more appropriate than the simple or inanimate, and the human body, in our intimate familiarity with it, contains vast symbolic potential. From Douglas' *Purity and Danger*:

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its' boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret ritual (...) unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.²⁵

So, the symbolic treatment of the female body demonstrates how the feminine is treated socially. Social forms, attitudes and structures are played out in the symbolic microcosm. Perhaps this should go without saying, but I feel the need to reiterate it since I am discussing this in the context of visual media, where the symbol must take the equivalent weight of text. The symbol communicates not only what it is intended to signify, but context: the morals and position of the author, and the position society affords to the signifier.

But back to the question at hand; why should the feminine be associated with the abject? Why should the female body represent the threat of the non-thing that must be contained? Theorists like Mulvey and Kristeva identify this danger as Freudian castration anxiety. Mulvey describes the deconstruction and fetisization of the female body in film,²⁶ where the camera lingers on the starlet's tantalizing flesh, perpetuating a comforting eroticism that need not account for the wound, the distressing gash, the absence between her legs. Castration-phobia, allegedly pivotal

²⁵ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 142.

²⁶ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 62.

in the development of the male psyche, derives from the moment of discovery in which the young boy recognizes that his mother has no penis; that she is 'incomplete,' mutilated. It is a moment of horror - of abjection, in the manner that Kristeva defines the feeling. It is a thing out of place, a non-thing taking the place of a thing - the maternal phallus is nothing, the absence of what should be. To overcome his horror, the boy eroticizes the female body, replacing the death drive with the sex drive, abject with object. By this rubric, objectification of women is necessary in the healthy development of a young man, lest he be caught in the moment of terror, the fear of being un-manned, un-made.

Even after abjecting, throwing off the terrifying sight of the mother, the boy child still risks her polluting nature. Having overcome abjection through objectification, to be too closely tied to the maternal body, now an erotic object, would be to risk violating incest taboos. The mother, and the feminine that she stands for, must be separated anew. Kristeva establishes a further maternal danger in the eighth chapter of *Pouvoirs*, "Ces femelles qui nous gâchent l'infini..." Here she identifies the symbol of the biface mother, who seems to represent the twin aspects of birth and death: "(...) ce pouvoir maléfique des femmes de donner une vie mortelle."²⁷ Her position as life-giver is necessarily also that of death-giver, and the fertile mother becomes the *momento mori*, death and the maiden. The mother then also carries the pollution of the corpse, the ultimate abjection, infection of life. "La vie? une mort."²⁸

Kristeva therefore argues that much of pollution and margin-guarding behavior is related to the necessary separation from the mother, and the feminine by extension. For example, she examines the passage in Leviticus 12 dealing with parturition and the maternal sickbed. If a woman should give birth to a daughter, both will be unclean, and the mother must make a burnt offering and a sin offering (*holocauste et expiatoire*) to purify herself and her child. If she gives birth to a son, the son must be circumcised, and this will take the place of a purifying sacrifice; his circumcision will separate him from maternal impurity. Kristeva believes this puts circumcision in the same category as kosher - food taboos, in that it both takes the place of a purifying sacrifice, and renders one unnecessary. The placement of the text on circumcision within the text

²⁷ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'Horreur*, 187.

²⁸ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'Horreur*, 187.

on female/maternal impurity reinforces the intended separation from the other sex, “(...) l’impur, le souille.”²⁹ Because circumcision is a compact with God, a setting apart of the chosen from the infidel, Kristeva describes the ritual as a symbolic insistence that the identity of the speaking being - the speaker to his God - rests on the separation of son from mother, on the separation of sexes. All female impurity and danger can thus be attributed to maternal taboos.

I take some issue with this interpretation, mainly due to its reliance on a Freudian biological essentialism of sorts, and thus the assumption that follows of a singular psychological/developmental motivator forming the gendered psyches of all men(/persons). I find Mary Douglas’ hypothesis about purity and pollution more straightforward, and appreciate the allowance for cultural, sociological and individual differences. The model she adopts is subjective; by this rubric, nothing is inherently abject or polluting, except what is made so by cultural context.

Douglas’ theory on the purpose of pollution taboos states that pollution may not necessarily follow rules of morality, but rather that it will step in to enforce a just resolution where moral imperative fails. If a given culture holds adultery to be morally wrong, but most individuals, in practice, fail to punish adulterers, then a pollution taboo should make the adulterer unclean, until such time that restitution is made to the wronged party. Moral balance is then restored. When it comes to the impurity of women, Douglas argues that behaviors relating to sex pollution will crop up in any social/moral system that contains contradictory beliefs regarding the treatment of women. In a society that preaches male dominance, there will be some means of enforcing that dominance; if those are overt, violent and definitive, then pollution taboos surrounding menstrual blood, childbirth etc., are unnecessary. Where a man is allowed to beat or murder his wife with impunity, no other means are required to consolidate control. If, on the other hand, a society also values a woman’s right to be more protected from violence than men, or to hold some measure of independence, pollution associated with sex and femininity will step in to ensure the continuance of male control.³⁰ From *Purity and Danger*:

²⁹ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’Horreur*, 118.

³⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 188.

Sexual antagonism inevitably results(...) in the idea that each sex constitutes a danger to the other. The particular dangers which female contact threatens to males express the contradiction of trying to use women as currency without reducing them to slavery(...) Female pollution in a society(...) is largely related to the attempt to treat women simultaneously as persons and as the currency of male transactions.³¹

When examining our own society through this lens, examples quickly begin to crop up of sex pollution taboos set in place to enforce both feminine obedience and strict adherence to gender roles. Douglas identifies two types of sex pollution: internal and external, and both are present in western society's treatment of sex and gender. Internal pollution deals with dangers from inside the system, and usually manifests as male or female energies infecting and diminishing the other. While there are systems that demonstrate equivalent concerns for male and female pollution, in western society the danger seems mostly located in the female. For example, a woman who takes a job in a traditionally male sector may face resistance and discrimination, but her femininity is not considered somehow damaged or reduced by her profession. If anything, some aspect of her femininity might be suspected of infecting and depreciating the profession, and making it more difficult for her to be successful in it. A man, on the other hand, who becomes a nurse, a child-rearer, or housekeeper, may become the object of ridicule (ie. manny, man-nurse, etc.), or be considered emasculated, his masculine potency somehow diminished due to the femininity to which he has come too close.

Menstruation, menstrual blood, and the products associated with it are another source of shame, disgust, and secrecy; much is made of guarding tampons in secret purse receptacles, and many men react with horror at the thought of being made to purchase menstrual products for a relative or significant other. The fear of a new relationship with a man being tainted by his discovering (used *or* unused) menstrual products in a woman's home is a plot point in the 2003 romcom *How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days*.³² Little boys are harshly discouraged from playing with 'girls toys,' lest they become infected and diminished by femininity. Grown men may react violently when they suspect a gay man or trans woman of propositioning them, out of fear of this pollution; there

³¹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 188.

³² Brian Regan, Burr Steers, *How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, directed by Donald Petrie (2003; Hollywood; Paramount Pictures), Film.

is even legal precedent for Trans or Gay Panic being used as a successful defense for murder or assault.³³ As further proof that this violence is related to abjection, consider the popular television/movie trope of cis/het men spontaneously vomiting upon realizing they've had sexual contact with a trans woman (as part of the broader theme that paints LGBTQIA+ people as deviants attempting to trick heterosexual men); examples include Leslie Nielsen's character in *33 1/3 Guns*,³⁴ Jim Carey's character in *Ace Ventura*,³⁵ and, most recently, Brian the anthropomorphic dog on *Family Guy*.³⁶

External pollution involves, of course, those threats that come from outside of a system. Women, as symbolic entrances and unstable margins, become the symbolic vehicles for this invasive pollution; practically this plays out as a preoccupation with female virginity and chastity, since paternity uncertainty leaves room for the possibility of low/unclean blood entering the lineage. In patrilineal structures, the husband must guard against the possibility of unknowingly raising another man's child. In matrilineal structures, the brother and father must guard against the possibility of inappropriate blood entering the lineage through their sister's or daughter's children.³⁷ In western society, we can easily see this reflected in the attitudes towards male virginity (shameful and unnecessary) versus female virginity (insurance of purity, a desirable marriage trait in any conservative society - necessitating enforcement and surveillance). In conservative America, fathers and daughters take purity vows together (in ceremonies evocative of child-marriage), sealed with a ring, as a symbol of his commitment to guard his daughter against external pollution, and to act as a stand in for her future husband, who will then take on the responsibility (from Jessica Valenti's article on the topic; "(...) a father tells his braces-clad daughter, 'You are married to the Lord and your father is your boyfriend.'" ³⁸) The gendered promiscuity double standard is well documented and victim-blaming and rape cultures are also a

³³ "Gay and Trans Panic Defense," *lgbtbar.org*, accessed August 20, 2017, <http://lgbtbar.org/what-we-do/programs/gay-and-trans-panic-defense/>.

³⁴ Pat Proft, David Zucker, Robert Lo Cash, *Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult*, directed by Peter Segal (1994; Hollywood; Paramount Pictures), Film.

³⁵ Jack Bernstein, Pat Shadyac, Jim Carrey, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, directed by Tom Shadyac (1994; Hollywood; Warner Bros.), Film.

³⁶ Tom Devanney, *Family Guy*, "Quagmire's Dad," Season 8, Episode 18, directed by Pete Michels (May 9, 2010; 20th Century Fox), Television.

³⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 155.

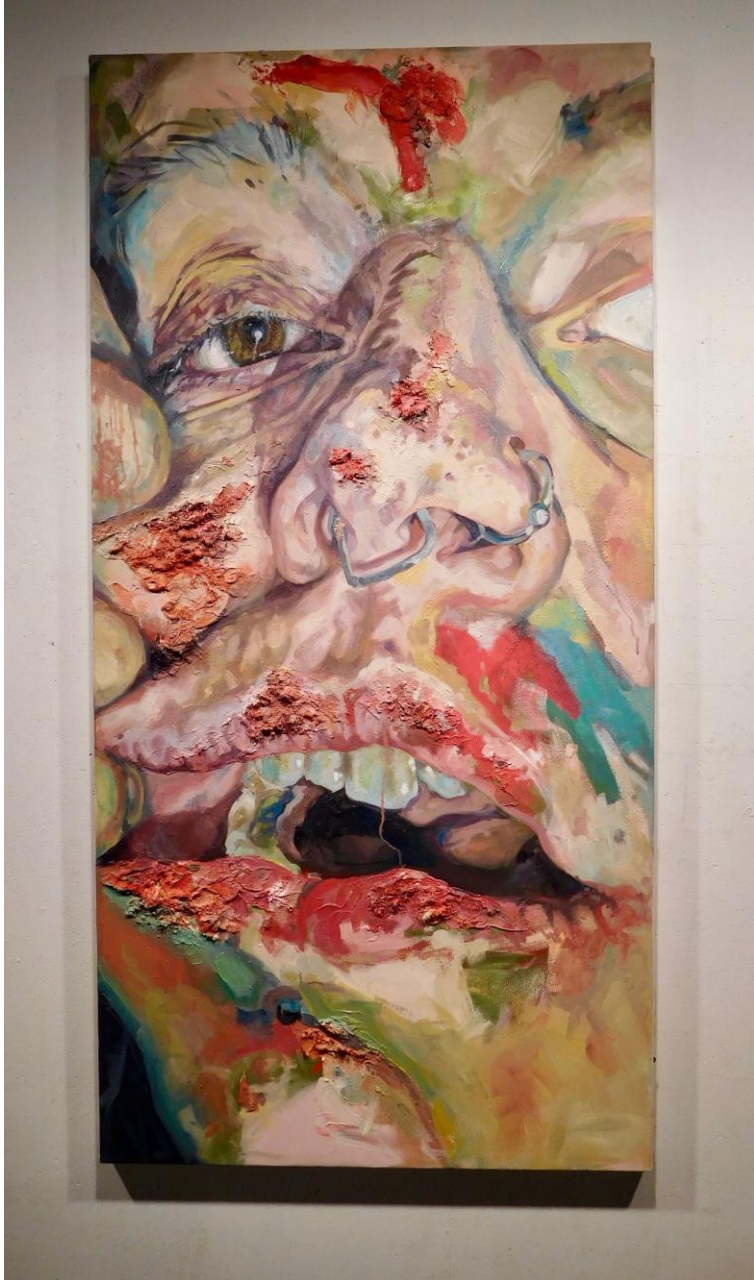
³⁸ Jessica Valenti, "Purity Balls, Plan B and bad sex policy: inside America's virginity obsession," *The Guardian*, May 5, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/05/purity-balls-america-virginity-obsession>.

result of such external pollution taboos. If a woman is assaulted while wearing something 'promiscuous,' or otherwise 'misbehaving,' then the assault is deemed her responsibility for failing to sufficiently guard against that pollution; in not doing so she has endangered not only her own purity, but that of the system to which she belongs. A woman who is assaulted is forever tainted, damaged, polluted - and the infection is catching.

These are mechanisms of control; as Douglas hypothesizes, sex pollution is used to ensure feminine subordination and enforce strict gender roles. Where violence and other overt methods of control become illegal or untenable due to conflicting morality narratives, sex pollution fills in the gaps. The dangerous female body, the monstrous feminine that must be marginalized, is no more or less than female agency and autonomy. Uncontrollable women, the LGBTQIA+ community, and other social 'deviants' threaten patriarchal hegemony by crossing vulnerable boundaries, and so society attempts to throw them off, makes them abject.

5. *Order out of destruction*

The anti-performance I brought up earlier, in slightly different terms, accesses the abject in order to force a kind of confrontation, though it need not be an abrupt or violent one. My aim is to deny the comfortable scopophilia that allows for a thoughtless, unstudied objectification as a matter of course. By introducing the repulsive, the abject, the presumptive heterosexual male gaze is denied an idealized reflection of its' own desire. But the destruction and mutilation of my own image is also an expression of vulnerability, of removing a mask as much as putting one on. There is undeniably a pleasure in conforming to gendered expectations; there is a satisfaction in being called pretty, in succeeding at what is expected of you. That tension, between the desire to please and the creeping, curdling instinct to disobey, I attempt to articulate visually in the push and pull between figuration and abstraction. There is a pleasure too, in demonstrating the skill required to carefully articulate the flesh, then deny with abstraction or erosion the beautiful sight that could have been.



Pull, Oil on Canvas, 2017

Inside, Oil on Canvas, 2017





Bite, Oil on Canvas, 2017

The paintings depicting close ups of my face, twisted and manipulated, I think are perhaps the most confrontational, and the most vulnerable. Here, the textured deconstructions and areas of

lost form begin to read as decay, injury and disease, scabby patches and masses emerging from the nose, the mouth. The scale helps to abstract and fragment the features, subtly recalling (and subverting) the cubists and the action painters, De Koonings and Picassos slicing up the female body into colorful grotesques. Confronting abjection elicits bodily feeling - be it disgust or revulsion, or sympathy/empathy; so by looking at the painted body, the viewer becomes aware of their own body. As with Kristeva's corpse, they are made aware of the precariousness of the boundary between object and abject, the constant, sustained effort necessary to throw off, and keep the rot at bay. This serves to disrupt the standard one way mirror of the viewer/viewed equation - already problematized by the self-portraiture format. The viewer looks at the subject/body, and in turn must look to/feel their own body, forcing that self-confrontation. I observe this tactic in artists such as Ana Mendieta and Carolee Schneemann, where they perform vulnerable and uncomfortable displays in which their own nude bodies are central; for example in Mendieta's *Untitled (Rape Scene)*(Fig. 4), or Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (Fig. 5). The ease of objectification is thwarted by the unfamiliar, the repulsive, the traumatic. The viewer may feel sympathy, intrigue, or a bodily empathy; even if they do not, the perfect mirror of desire is twisted and made unappealing.



Fig. 4³⁹

³⁹ Ana Mendieta, *Documentation of Rape Scene*. 1973, documentation on 35mm film. Western Art Teaching Collection, Iowa. Available from: http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/SS7729458_7729458_8487443 (accessed August 20, 2017).



Fig. 5⁴⁰

There is something intriguing but also rather pessimistic about the abject being used to destroy the objectifying. The concept seems to necessitate an unmaking of the self, a destructive, entropic process - for if I am deconstructing the gendered self, a self that is a part of me, I am certainly deconstructing myself in the process. What is the alternative? Only continued obedience to a repressive symbolic?

I found a parallel to this in personal experiences of mental illnesses, where intrusive thoughts and anxiety become impossible to cast off (*abjere*). I'll find myself scratching and picking at my arms, my feet, my face, sometimes unconsciously, literally destroying the flesh in an effort to stave off the psychic invader; here, self-destruction becomes self-soothing. I thought for a long time of this behaviour, and of abject transgression, as intrinsically destructive, entropic. In re-

⁴⁰ Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann: Up to and Including her Limits* (photos, drawings and text from *Meat Joy*). 1996 (original performance: 1964). New Museum of Contemporary Art Exhibitions, Manhattan, NY. Available from: http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ANEMUSEUM_10310359214 (accessed August 20, 2017).

examining, however, I've come to view it instead as a compulsive ordering, in the face of an entropy that is difficult to address head on. Pimples, ingrown hairs, other imagined or real invaders into the body are picked and peeled away, cast off in an attempt to repel pollution - order-building behaviour. In the same way, deconstructing an established symbolic need not be destructive, but rather a process of re-ordering. Laura Mulvey calls the destruction of pleasure a radical weapon: "It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article."⁴¹ Transgression, disobedience, these can be ends in and of themselves. I'm not sure that's exactly the case in my work. There is a productive purpose, a generative activity, with the motive of taking back control.

⁴¹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 58

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, 49-65. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Berger, John. "Ways of Seeing." In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, 49-52. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Johnson, Clare. "Emin is Screaming: Empathy as Affirmative Engagement in Tracy Emin's *Homage to Edvard Munch and All My Dead Children*(1998)." *Parallax* 16, no.3 (2010): 96-104. <http://www.tandfonline.com.cyber.usask.ca/doi/full/10.1080/13534645.2010.486676?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

Nead, Lynda. "Theorizing the Female Nude." In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, 519-534. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Nead, Lynda. "The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality." *Signs*, Vol.15, no.2 (1990): 323-335. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174488>.

Kristeva, Julia. *Pouvoirs de l'Horreur: Essai sur l'Abjection*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980.

Meagher, Michelle. "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust." *Hypatia*, Vol.18, no.4 (2003): 23-41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810973>.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. New York: Routledge Classics, 2002.