

# *Sapiente*

An Exhibition Statement Submitted to  
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Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art & Art History

University of Saskatchewan Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

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## Abstract

Lessons in life are vast. Throughout our lives we are presented with a series of events, situations and people that I believe are necessary in developing our purpose, deepening our connection with others and most importantly ourselves. Some of these are devastatingly hard and others profoundly blissful. The emotions we are presented with during these experiences however intense, remind me of the beauty of our humanity. The fact that we can feel, express and exists in all states, is the momentous gift of life. I have attempted over the course of this degree to speak as truthfully and candid as I can. There is sincerity and truth in vulnerability, something which I hold in the highest esteem.

Change is constant and inevitable in life, yet one of the hardest to accept in the human experience. Narratives have been presented to me since I was a little girl in the form of stories, fairy tales and expectations for how life is supposed to go and how I am to exist within it. Throughout the years my desire for control has grown as I desperately tried to cling to those narratives.

For this thesis and exhibition, I take an in depth look at nature as my source for inspiration and education. Through attentive observation, research and experimentation I have developed an extensive body of work to represent my experience and its relation to the natural world. There is a beautiful surrender in nature as it humbly accepts the changes of life's passing seasons. It is through this observation I have learned that life is a series of choices. I may choose to struggle against the current, or allow myself to remain open to the flow of life's changes, leading me to the deeper waters I seek, and although it is nice to hold the hands of another it is my hands I will use to stay afloat.

I painted with my blood until it stopped. My brush was put down and I was angry. Frustrated with the hand I was dealt and powerless in the events that were unfolding in my life. Through artistic practice, we can work through emotions using the catharsis of artistic expression to aid in healing. Sometimes we are not ready to delve into ourselves and pay mind to the process. We separate our minds from our bodies and choose to live in our heads rather than wholly in a mind and body connection. Knowing I needed a change I applied into the University of Saskatchewan to both the MFA program and the College of Education.

I was accepted into both, choosing the latter after listening to all the voices that were not my own opting for the practical instead of my passion. This was an agonizing process, and everything about that decision felt off. One night, I was sitting on my balcony and heard a knock on the banister. I paused. It happened again. I called out, assuming it was my partner Otis, when a young black magpie appeared. It had one of the seed pits I had been drying on my banister in its beak and dropped it at my feet. I found it odd that a magpie would be out this late, as the sun had since set and the moon was out, equally as odd that the man I was awaiting had a strong association with the creature. It approached closer, and began to squawk. I sat staring, as it spoke. I heard footsteps on the stairs approaching as the bird perched on the empty chair next to me before flying away.

*\*Magpies remind us that our obsession with the material does not give way to spiritual growth and that contentment can be found when we take risks and follow the path of our true calling.<sup>1</sup>*

I called the department head the next morning to ask if it was not too late to accept my place in the MFA program. Unfortunately, it had been filled by another student. Frustrated with myself for listening to words not my own, my brother took me for sushi to lift my spirits. At the end of our meal, we broke our fortune cookies and mine read out, “Your future endeavor in arts will be successful.” I laughed at the irony of the whole thing, feeling a huge slap in the face from life, a clear reiteration. I put the fortune in my pocket and went home. The next morning, I received a phone call from a professor in the arts department, Alison Norlen, stating a space was now open in the program and offered me the opportunity. I jumped at the fortunate turn of fate. So here I am, at the end of a process of creating an entirely new body of work and sharing with you my journey.

The work I create is autobiographical and based on personal experience. It is a visual narrative of my life. During the process of my thesis development, I have encountered challenges, a series of ups and downs, and insights on how deeply my work is influenced by those experiences. I believe strongly in listening to ourselves and reading the signs life gives us. I am an empath. I possess a strong sense of intuition and a capacity to feel immense emotions. As empaths are hypersensitive to those around them, this constant awareness of others can be extremely taxing to one’s psyche, creating bouts of exclusion to recharge and re-centre. This empathy brings about a

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<sup>1</sup> Farmer, Steven D, *Animal Spirit Guides*. Hay House Inc, 2006, 239.

profound desire for shared connection; it is through this connection that I find my greater purpose.

I believe artists are unique in their ability to translate the unquantifiable. They say “art imitates life; life imitates art.” I often see how the future is foretold in the creative. In my life, the creative process is rather serendipitous. Signs and symbols appear often in the form of animals; you will see them listed, reinforcing the necessity of each piece I create and the lessons that come with that phase of my life.

So, excited to be in an intensive two-year program with a beautiful empty studio to call my own, rolls of canvas and boxes of clay, I blanked. In attempts to break free of this static state, I began going back into a familiar creative mindset, working where I was most comfortable. I did a series of watercolour paintings, which did nothing for me; I was bored, uninspired, and I realized, afraid. The constant criticism I had heard over the years of the validity of my work, the vulgarity of my subject matter and all the “poor personal choices” I had made, suffocated my creating, leaving me fearful of my own expression.

I took time to research artists I had encountered over my career who resonated and inspired me: Marina Abramović, Ana Mendieta, Judy Chicago, Kiki Smith, Marlene Dumas, and Frida Kahlo. In my study, I realized that the pieces that profoundly affected me were performative.

Performance work is a genre I have studied extensively throughout this degree, one that can transcend emotional experience beyond the capacities of traditional art making. The idea of its vulnerability alone challenges our ways of considering art. It is viscerally raw, hauntingly ethereal, a limitless realm of artistic expression and possibility. Roselee Goldberg writes the following:

Performance—whether autobiographical monologue or personal ritual, dance theater or artist’s cabaret—provides incomparable material for examining contemporary viewpoints on such issues as the body, gender or multiculturalism. This is because live work by artists unites the psychological with the perceptual, the conceptual with the practical, thought with action.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Roselee Goldberg and Laurie Anderson, *Performance: Live Art Since 1960*, Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1998, 9.



Figure 1 (Webster 2017)

My work was begging to break free from the confines of traditional art making, and in this genre, I found my inspiration. *Internal Narratives* consisted of myself centered in a dimly lit space with speakers in each corner, relaying the negative, painful, and enabling things I have heard from people throughout my life. These words have developed into my personal narrative, a hindrance to my own creation that was manifesting as my creative block. I was to be naked covered in thick clay, scrapping it off my body in disgust—a metaphorical removal of these crippling thoughts. I approached the professor teaching the course to discuss my idea and the parameters for the performance, but was advised against pursuing my creative concept in the public forum. The professor was concerned that it would become a “therapy session,” and that it might be “too heavy” for my colleagues, unaccustomed to seeing a naked body in an academic institution. For a moment, I retreated, giving into my insecurities and trying to find ways to censor myself in a way that still allowed the work to be experienced. In my desperate attempts to rework my art to make it acceptable for others, the work was becoming less about me. Then it hit me: this is exactly what this performance was about: breaking free from the narrative of being “too something,” too much, too intense, too heavy. This “heaviness” is the impetus behind my work, and the work of the women who inspire me. I have been pressured to believe that much of women’s art is disregarded as vapid—silly emotional bleeding notwithstanding the weight of its actual heaviness. It is fluid, messy, and often deemed frivolous, sustaining no value other than selfish expression. But I have come to realize that it is so much more. It is relatable and it is necessary. I did my performance in the way it was intended, and in doing so, propelled myself fully into my studio practice. I felt liberated by the embedding and physical removal of the clay. The piece resonated with my colleagues, bringing to tears for some, a shared experience that was all too familiar. What I hadn’t prepared for was the discussion that came after my performance. People lingered, wanting to talk to me to share their experiences. Through this discussion, I saw the connection I had made with my audience. I was surprised at the number of men present who wanted to thank me for bringing awareness to their own words and actions, realizing the effect it

has on others, particularly the women in their life. Walking home that night from my studio, I encountered a grey horned owl. It was sitting on the lamp post in front of me, facing the opposite direction, still very aware of my presence as I moved closer. As I approached, it turned its body to face me, before stretching open its vast wing span, swooping down. A large gust of wind followed its path. The leaves swirled around me as I watched it perch on the rooftop above my studio window.

*\*Owls show us the necessity of silent observation. They often appear to those who need to part with something that is no longer serving them, reminding us to listen to our inner voice as guidance.*<sup>3</sup>

What I realized about performance was that, as an artist, you are not just creating a visual but provoking a physical experience in which you and the viewers exist in, a brief moment of intimacy, never to be repeated in the same way again. Traditionally, as painters, we are extensively reminded of the need to work with archival material to ensure physical longevity of the work, but performance was different. It was ethereal and natural, without editing, fixing, fine tuning, or guiding the outcomes. In my undergraduate studies, clarity was stressed in our works, that a work of art must be able to stand on its own, depicting our intention clearly as we would not have the luxury of standing next to the piece to decipher our intention. In performance, there is a letting go of the control I found freedom in and reveled in. I became more consciously aware that reality and experience is different for each individual based on their own perception and something we inevitably have no control over.

This performance also influenced my teaching practice. One of the biggest challenges in a foundational drawing class is the desire to control outcomes. Students look to replicate what they see, then get discouraged in their inability to do so. They restrict their movement in the act of drawing, becoming afraid of purposeful mark-making. A large part of art making for me is the expression itself. While in academia it is important to learn the basics of composition and theory, I am cautious of the impediment that comes from focused ideals. Drawing is a skill. Like anything else, it takes significant practice and investment. My intention for first year students, along with the theory, is to encourage the benefit and pleasure brought out through uninhibited artistic expression. During my performance, I noted the marks that were left on the floor, echoes of movement and beautifully fluid. I took this reference to the classroom. Before the students arrived, I covered the entire room in paper including the floor. I told them to remove their shoes and take a piece of conté. I asked them to list songs that brought out emotional response. For some, it was loud with heavy base; for others, it was soft and classical. After compiling a playlist, the lights were shut off and the students began to draw. Dark and unable to see the work in front of them, the students could work from emotion, using the sound to evoke a state to draw from. Removed from their desire for perfected outcomes, they were free to express themselves without the pressure of perceived vision. Often, our vision deceives us. It is closely connected to our mind and susceptible to judgement. Drawing, like all art forms, is a bodily experience, and through this exercise, the students could see a broader vision of mark making and the pleasure of its process. After an hour of sounds and frenzied marking, the lights were turned on and we beheld the piece in its entirety. The room was filled, ceiling to floor with an elaborate display of mark and line. The students and I were pleased with our collaboration.

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<sup>3</sup> Farmer, *Animal Spirit Guides*, 281.





Figure 2 (Webster 2018)

Giving up our desire for control is hard for many of us, including myself. Marina Abramović, called the “grandmother of performance,” works with this concept extensively. As she noted, “I only learn from what I fear most.”<sup>4</sup> In her piece *Rhythm 0* (1974) Abramović places herself within the gallery space beside a table with multiple items used for inducing pleasure and pain—a whip, a rose, honey, a gun, and written permission to use these items as they wished—taking upon herself full responsibility for what happened within the six-hour performance. At first the audience was subtle, apprehensive to approach, and gentle; they were uncomfortable with this newfound freedom. This soon shifted to a complete abuse of power. Her skin was pierced with thorns, cut with a scalpel, and she had her blood sucked from her body. Her clothes were cut and removed, a man tried to rape her and eventually threaten her life by loading the gun with a single bullet and placing it against her head until someone intervened. All the while, she stood, stoic yet shaken, tears falling from her eyes. Her willingness to assign herself this horrifyingly passive role, giving up all control, placing her body into the hands of others was terrifying, but bold. To me, it speaks of the resilience of strong women and the courage it takes to be vulnerable. When the performance was over, no one stayed to confront her. They all left, with no consequences for their actions. In discussing this work, she mentioned her desire to investigate the lengths others would go to when offered the control of another, especially without fear of consequence. Abramović and her work pushes the limits of the body through strength of mind. Our minds are powerful and play a pivotal role in how we translate emotion and in turn, experience life.

I feel that expression of self cannot negate emotion because we are emotive beings. Our experiences in life, our actions, and our inactions are fuelled by emotional response. We have

<sup>4</sup> Goldberg, Anderson, *Performance: Live Art Since 1960*, 125.

been translating our emotional experiences from birth. This translation develops our habits as we become more aware of our emotions and their ability to render us without agency. Negating through life, our experiences are initiated through the body. This information is then transferred to our brains expressed through our emotional reactions. Our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system (hyperarousal, or the acute stress response) are responsible for our fight or flight instinct, our psychological response to a perceived threat or fear. Biologically, this is how we are designed. In earlier times, this was essential to our survival. This system prepares our bodies to react to the danger at hand. Hormones are released into our bodies, our hearts start to beat faster, endorphins kick in, and we prepare to face the danger or run to safety. But what happens when these threats are not just momentary? We are no longer simply primitive beings; our threats, fears, and anxieties are much different and more constant now. Our responses are triggered daily and our competency in processing becomes strained. We are suspended in a constant state of high anxiety, which takes a toll on the body. I believe that unprocessed emotional turmoil and stress become physical ailments and disease. This is referenced in nature. Our bodies, like the flow of a river system, have their rhythms and cycles.

In the first year of this degree, I took a class thematically based on water. I created a politically inspired response piece, commenting on the havoc hydro power and dams cause in Cumberland House, Saskatchewan, and beyond. Saskatchewan is home to the largest inland freshwater delta in North America, which is crucial to the ecological environment surrounding it. Water falls



Figure 3 (Webster 2018)

from the glaciers, and travels into our province where it splits in two becoming the North and South Saskatchewan river systems. Dams block the flow of crucial sediment needed for nourishment and superficially control the flow of water, creating extreme drought and flooding. Nature knows what it needs to work properly, creating its own rhythms necessary to flourish, much like our bodies. While in Cumberland House, I found the rotting carcass of a young moose in the forest. After being granted permission, I took the bones home, and laid them out on my deck. I realized I had the entire vertebra with the sacral bone intact. The structure responsible for housing the sympathetic and para sympathetic nervous system, this system runs along the spinal column and splits at our vertebra and down our legs. To me, this not only displayed the physical body, but the body of our Saskatchewan river system. Taking red willow, native to the riverbanks of Saskatchewan, I wove the blood-red branches together and through the bones, splitting out at the sacrum and along the floor, like a geographical map of both water and nervous systems

Witnessing the strong association to the body and nature, this piece reflects the necessity for flow, both in the physical and spiritual sense. In this class, I learned that water holds memory, much like our bodies, so much so that the two influence each other not just metaphorically but physically. Scientist and water researcher, Masaru Emoto believed that human consciousness had an effect on the molecular structure of water.<sup>5</sup> His research suggests

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<sup>5</sup> Masaru Emoto, *The Hidden Messages in Water*, Simon and Schuster, 2011.

that, through proper care and attention as well as through positive affirmation and speech, we can influence the quality of water and in turn the life forms it effects. This concept mimics the tantric philosophy of eastern religions and the necessity for self-awareness through spiritual practices to allow for physical and spiritual well-being.

We cannot prevent bad things from happening to us, but we can take the proper steps to prevent those experiences from becoming engrained into our bodies and negatively affecting us throughout our lives. Being aware of our bodies is crucial to understanding our emotional selves. When we find ourselves in situations that trigger intense emotion, we must stop and pay attention to where we feel it in our bodies; this is often the key to physical suffering. We must be attentive to our physical selves, the same as one would care for any form of life. A friend once told me that we are basically house plants, only with more complex emotions. A comical metaphor but a strong one. We need to water ourselves every day, allowing ourselves the nutrients needed to grow into our full potential. My plant installations are a commentary on this narrative.



Figure 4 (Webster 2018)





Figure 5 (Webster 2018)



Figure 6 (Webster 2017)

For these installations, I gathered plants from my garden and arranged them into floral sculptural depictions of the female reproductive system. These plants were chosen specifically for their medicinal purposes in uterine health and womb healing. The flowers, when left unattended and without nutrients, wilt and die, very much like us when we have neglected our body's needs. The sculptures, left over time, begin to rot; insects often gather at their base and an infestation of mold takes over. Although rotted and lacking in vigour of colour and form, these pieces hold beauty for me. In discussing these works with colleagues, it was suggested that I should use plastic flowers to prevent them

from fading. However, as the poet Wallace Stevens wrote, "Death is the mother of beauty."<sup>6</sup> Only the perishable can be beautiful, which is why we are unmoved by artificial flowers. As a form of *memento mori*, these works become an offering to the inevitability of change and the acceptance of reality. To see beauty in their decomposition changed something for me; I was

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<sup>6</sup> Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning," *Poetry Foundation* (1954).  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/13261/sunday-morning>

able to witness the sorrowful metaphor they beheld seeing value in their life and their inevitable fate. I learned to see beauty in myself in whatever state my body took, and gain the confidence to speak about my current reality.

I suffer from polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), which occurs when the ovaries create too many follicles due to unusually high insulin levels. One in ten women have PCOS,<sup>7</sup> many of whom go undiagnosed due to lack of awareness. Our health concerns can be amplified by lack of attention to physical health, a disconnect, and in my opinion, more deeply rooted than poor choices and genetic makeup. For example, I have a history of sexual abuse. In speaking with other women, I have found a great deal of correlation between sexual trauma and obesity. Often, victims of sexual abuse will gain weight as a means of physical protection, a literal barrier manifested in soft comforting and repulsive flesh. I say “repulsive” not to demonize fatness, but to point out the reality of its perception in our society. Fatness is undesirable, unlovable, and in small pockets, fetishized. It keeps people at bay and brings comfort in its physicality.

PCOS is brought on through excess weight carried in the body, creating more weight gain due to the imbalance of hormone levels, worsening one’s symptoms. This hormonal effect creates an excess of testosterone, creating hair loss, excess of facial and body hair, diabetes, heart disease, lack or loss of periods, and infertility. I live each day fighting my body, which contradicts itself. I am a plus size woman, full breasts and belly, wide hips and long hair, but I also have body hair and can grow a beard to rival that of most men. I do not ovulate, nor do I bleed once a month. My hormonal imbalance is male dominant, and I am said to be infertile.

This reality is ever present in this body of work. I did not want to face the reality of my situation, feeling powerless in its effects. I was always known for having thick, flowing red curls and now my hair was falling out in handfuls. Regardless of how little I would eat, I would still gain weight, and though I shave my face each morning, the stubble around my face would itch that evening. I was exhausted with efforts of keeping up my femininity. I became fearful of intimacy, never wanting anyone to touch my face, and avoided people, feeling undesirable due to my symptoms and inability to bear children.

This was the hardest for me. I lost my self-esteem in that diagnosis. To hear it broke me. Women are creators of life, and I am a creator. For my mother, it is the reason for her existence. In the church, women are great because they bear the children of great men. Our bodies were designed to do this, but mine wasn’t? I was ashamed, frustrated, and angry at my body for betraying me. Why would a man want an infertile woman? In *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, Sandra Lee Bartky discusses Foucault’s theory of internalization:

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<sup>7</sup> Bradley Trivax, and Ricardo Azziz, "Diagnosis of Polycystic Ovary Syndrome," *Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology* 50, no. 1 (2007): 168-177.

I have described elsewhere how a generalized male witness comes to structure woman's consciousness of herself as a bodily being. This, then, is one meaning of 'internalization.' The sense of oneself as a distinct and valuable individual is tied not only to the sense of how one is perceived, but also to what one knows, especially to what one knows how to do; this is a second sense of 'internalization.'<sup>8</sup>

This struck a chord with me as I realized my self-esteem was effected by the way I was perceived by others, especially men. An infertile woman is likened to a plague in fairy tales: an ill omen or curse. I felt shame and unworthiness that I couldn't admit to anyone, even Otis. Its secrecy weighed on me and I found this shame to be part of my inability to create after I had enrolled in this program, so I painted it.

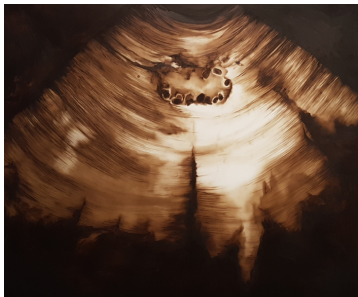


Figure 7 (Webster 2018)

In my *Ultrasound Series*, I used ultrasounds of myself to create oil-painted self-portraits on vellum. I loved the velvety texture the first portrait gave and choose the warmth of a sepia tone to mimic the safe environment of the womb. Ultrasound images are usually quite happy: they represent big changes in people's lives and the excitement of new life. Mine was not. It is an image of heaviness, black holes of cysts consuming my reproductive organs like a pustulous plague. It hung in my studio, out for everyone to see. I stared at it for a long time; it was hard to be in the studio with it, but identifying this was pivotal to my artistic growth, as I was able to move from it rather than let it stunt me, so I did a second one. The image pays homage to a miscarriage of the past and the grief that comes from life gone too soon. The third is of my deepest wish for the future, images of great expectation, and disappointment. Christina Fisanick, in her article in the *Fat Studies Reader* notes,

It is in the arenas of negation and contradiction that the PCOS body excels. The PCOS body is at once a condition of excess—too much hair, too much fat, too much testosterone—and a condition of lack—too little hair, too little progesterone, too little ovulation. It is at once the body of the fertility goddess, the mother (large breasts, wide hips, round belly) and infertile. It has too much facial hair and not enough head hair. It is both male (excess testosterone) and female (genitalia). Is there a possibility then, in this state of

<sup>8</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. Psychology Press, 1990.



excess, being both hyper-feminine and unfeminine, for women with PCOS and their bodies to subvert the dominant regime of normative femininity?<sup>9</sup>



Figure 8 (Webster 2018)

As we grow up we are placed and conditioned by roles based around our gender. I was taught what it meant to be “lady-like” and to excel in household tasks. My identity was largely placed in how other perceived by competency in these abilities. Often, I hear people say “well, women are just naturally better at those things,” where I see it more as competency in habitual training rendered since birth. Although hormonally I am more masculine then feminine, I fight to stay in the normative ideals of what it means to be a woman. We are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement, “a mode of enacting and re-enacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh.”<sup>10</sup>

It is commonly believed that women are more emotional than men due to our femininity and as such are relegated to domestic tasks. To type this even feels archaic in its wording. *Naturally* nurturing and well versed in emotional expression—is this inherent to femininity or is it a role we are systematically socialized into? Although there are some exceptions to the rules, women are housekeepers, homemakers, and mothers.

In Judith Lorber’s “‘Night to his Day’: The Social Construction of Gender,” Lorber states,

When gender is a major component of structured inequality, the devalued genders have less power, prestige, and economic rewards than the valued genders. In countries that

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<sup>9</sup> Christina, Fisanick, "Fatness (in) visible: Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome and the Rhetoric of Normative Femininity," *The Fat Studies Reader* (2009): 106-109.

<sup>10</sup> Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 132.

discourage gender discrimination, many major roles are still gendered; women still do most of the domestic labor and child rearing, even while doing full-time paid work; women and men are segregated on the job and each does work considered 'appropriate'; women's work is usually paid less than men's work. Men dominate the positions of authority and leadership in government, the military, and the law; cultural productions, religions, and sports reflect men's interests.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout history, women's voices have been silenced. Our creations are disregarded due to their emotional intimacy in an ever-present fear of their expression under the patriarchal dominance of the art world and the societies they represent. Constructions of gender have always played a role in my life and work. I am constantly aware of my position in society as a woman. Burdened by the requirements set out for me to embody and the exhausting efforts it takes to reign it all in, so to speak: to constantly be aware of my effects on others and to not be too loud, too demanding, too sexual, or take up too much space.

I reminisce on my own upbringing and my mother's role in the home. While she was responsible for memorizing events and birthdays, sports games and practice, even where we misplaced our things, my father was granted a detachment from the home that she herself could not enjoy. This role was not authentic or natural; it was merely a requirement to prevent the household from falling into dysfunction. Our upbringings influence who we become in adulthood. Gender roles are molded by those closest to us, and as a young girl, I looked to my mother for her example. Due to my Catholic upbringing, many things were left undiscussed, especially sexuality.

Sexuality is a big part of my work, as it has been a source of great pain and pleasure for me, because of my past trauma along with the restraints that came with ecclesiastical ideologies. I was kept from exploring human sexuality and in turn my own body and its capabilities. In the church, the body is a vessel of god and although I align with the notion of treating ourselves with respect, I do not agree with the aversion to sexual exploration and pleasure outside of the constructs of heterosexual marriage.

These roles play a part in all forms of daily life, including sexual authenticity. Sexual inequality still exists in a post-pseudo-sexually-liberated world. Some women still feel the need to view sexual intercourse in a phallocentric way, faking orgasm to attend to the male ego rather than their own pleasure. There are implications of repression that come with our decision to opt out of sex or deserving of disrespect in our desire to have as much as we choose.

As a child, I was pushed to analyze and re-live the event of the trauma experienced continuously in the hopes of finding answers to what happened. It was awful as my memory of that part in my life was completely void. This is often the case with trauma. Our minds block out the event as a survival instinct. Because of this event, along with my mother's own fears and apprehensions, a

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Lorber, "'Night to his Day': The Social Construction of Gender," *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States* (2004): 54-64.



large gap exists for me. I was pulled from all sexual education classes in elementary school and left with no one to answer my questions. My curiosity began to swell.

This curiosity soon led to a fascination with my own body and its capabilities. I developed a new appreciation for my body and became obsessed with the imagery I was kept from. I found myself traveling in search of individuals and places open to sexual expression, studying the body through depictions in art, and spent a lot of time looking into a compact mirror. This exploration continued when I traveled extensively through Europe, finding myself in Amsterdam and loving the freedom it granted me. I found myself fascinated with the city's underground sex scene, particularly the kink world and all its unique forms of sexual expression and being. The knowledge I attained from my experience in the BDSM community led to my work in sexual health in Saskatoon. I met women of all ages and races, whose biggest issues were discomfort in their own skin and being unable to express their desire simply from not knowing their own. This is no wonder due to the lack of research on female sexuality:

Out of 14000 publications done on sexual disorders, only listed 5000 affecting women. That's almost 3 times those experienced by women, even though many experts characterise women's sexuality as more complicated.<sup>12</sup>

Only within the last two decades has more research been done on the female genitalia, with the discovery of the full anatomy of the female clitoris happening in 1998. The small compacted bundle of nerves actually runs throughout the length of the outer labia, packed with over 8000 nerve endings, is likely the only human organ whose sole purpose is pleasure, unlike the penis which is responsible for procreation and urination.<sup>13</sup>

Women's bodies, along with their genitalia, have been a playing ground for many, shrouded in myth and suspicions. To this day, practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) are pervasive throughout the world, including North America. Over 200 million women and girls who have been cut are alive today.<sup>14</sup> FGM is a violation of human rights, and its logic is beyond deplorable. There are those who believe the clitoris and labia are male parts on a female body, their excision is thought to enhance femininity and beauty and, more crucially, reduce the possibility of sex outside marriage. The belief that women must submit to these crippling procedures is archaic. It stems from fear and superstitions surrounding lesbianism and gayness, foolishly believed to be brought on—heaven forbid the babes head touches the clitoris in childbirth. The procedure is done to uphold family honour, demoting women and young girls to mere property, a sad and very present reality.

I created a series of paintings during my undergraduate studies called the FGM series: four paintings depicting the female vulva and the major types of circumcision preformed. At the time,

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<sup>12</sup> Sarah, Barmak, *Closer: Notes from the Orgasmic Frontier of Female Sexuality*, Coach House Books, 2016, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Unicef, "Female genital mutilation/cutting: a global concern, 2016," (2016).

the work was created to draw awareness to the omnipresent oppression of female sexuality. I was younger and hopeful that the influence of bold displays of reality could affect change. I find these works amiss now, subtle and created in the ideals of aesthetic painting, detached from the horror of the trauma they depict. As I continue to work with vulva as the content in my work, I approach it differently. Aware of my tendencies to subtlety, and still in awe of its many unique forms, I come from a place of sincerity and reverence rather than overtly stylized depiction. My intimate sculpture works are small altars, sacred honouring's to the deities, odes to women and the different forms they embody.

In dreams, a writing tablet signifies a woman, since it receives the imprint of all kinds of letters.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 9 (Webster 2018)



Figure 10 (Webster 2018)

The *pussy* is an obsession, a sentiment that is not just my own. A symbol of life itself, where people are either coming out of or driven by the desire to be in one, they say it rules the world. I take comfort in the cavernous shape of the yoni, its representation as a receptor of things I find to be fitting of women who, not just in coitus but in life, take on and into themselves the energies that exist outside of themselves.

Is the vulva a thing or is it an absence? Is what lies between a woman's legs an organ, with emphasis on what protrudes: the clitoris, the labia, the eight thousand nerve endings, flesh? Or is it a void, a vessel, an opening, an orifice, a place that exists to be filled by something else.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Sue Best, "Foundations of Femininity: Berlei Corsets and the (Un)making of the Modern Body," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (1991): 191-214.

<sup>16</sup> Barmak, *Closer*, 29.



Figure 11 (Webster 2018)



Figure 12 (Webster 2018)



Figure 13 (Webster 2018)

In my research of the female form I found a number of artists working with the vulva. *Femalia* by Joani Blank is a collection of photographs depicting women with different shapes and sizes of vulvas. Jamie McCarthy sculpted his *Great Wall of Vagina*, a series of casted vulvas from over 400 women. I love these works because of their broad depiction of the variety and forms a woman's sex can embody. If I had a dollar for every time a woman has asked me, "is my pussy normal?" I'd be a wealthy woman. The vulva is fascinating because it is unique. I see its likeness represented in nature daily, the bark of trees, flowers, the flesh of fruit, seedlings, and shells. I began collecting. I made a note each week to buy a fruit I had not yet tried. To my delight, every fruit I cut into reflected this imagery. Fruit already had a sexual relation to me in its physicality, covered in tight outer skins, with juicy plump flesh that is sweet to the taste. I created a short video series filmed intimately close as I pierced the flesh of fruits with my hands, prying them open to reveal the apparent reference inside as the juices dripped. Once opened with flesh removed, I would save the skins and press them with found leaves and flowers. This collection has grown into a catalogue of inspiration to draw from. When I was a child, I would walk with my grandmother along the banks of the river, collecting plants and flowers that fascinated me as she listed their name and properties they held along with their folklore.

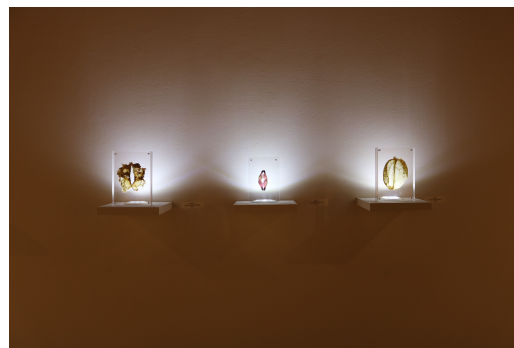


Figure 14 (Webster 2018)



Figure 15 (Webster 2018)



Figure 16 (Webster 2017)

Some of my favourite pieces in the collection are those that compile *Of the Sea*, shells that have been embellished with exaggerated flesh-toned lips using sculpting clay that is heated and hardened into a porcelain-like state. Attention to detail is evident in this work, with the use of iridescent material to juxtapose elements that blend in and stand out purposefully. This work is inspired by the oyster, with its marine-like, mucosal and alien form, which is assigned aphrodisiac properties due to its physical reference. The shells are chosen for their magical uses in both practice and intention, and speak to our innate connection to nature, which to me, is undeniable.



Figure 17 (Websrer2018)

As I've stated, our biggest fear is that what which we cannot control. It is an obsession of society and breeds false senses of security. The largest life force, which has the capacity to destroy everything that man has built in a matter of moments, are natural disasters. We have spent centuries trying to study and understand them. I believe woman's association with it is a fear of men.

Life is given through water, which is controlled by the gravitational pull of the moon. It is the same moon cycle that aligns women's flow and ovulation. The connection is inherent and powerful. In order to gain control of that which has power, we demonize it. We see it throughout history: women who pull strength from their spiritual selves and tap into the powers of the elements are cast out from society and labeled as "witches." They are called "nasty women" and "hags," enchantresses out to pervert mankind. In the world, hundreds of thousands have been mutilated, hung, or burned at the stake under accusations of being a witch. These wise women were mothers, healers, and midwives. They were the doctors and anatomists of ancient history. They were the gifted of society and can be found within different cultures across the globe. These were and are women who have been persecuted for the very gifts they bestow. These gifts of ancient healing and wisdom are the birthright of women and my source of strength.

Throughout the course of history, a daunting segregation between the sexes has developed: men's identification with culture and women with nature. Under the dominance of the patriarchy, the ever-growing development of our planet through cultivation, agriculture and city development gives way to the destruction of our Earth. Ecological disasters, pollution, damaging effects to the earth's water supply—all outcomes of man's greed and mass consumption. We have lost our respect and reverence of the matriarchy and in turn mother earth. In her discussion of prehistory of feminine art, Lucy Lippard states,

The contemporary artists renewed interest in natural process can in part be traced to a prevalent anxiety. Our civilization has placed cement between us and the earth, pollution between us and the sky, technology between us and the seasons. We have lost our rural/matriarchal connection with natural phenomena, and its resurrection seems less and less likely in an increasingly urbanized world.<sup>17</sup>

This connection to the natural world has become my central focus, and the last summer of this degree has been characterized by much introspection. It was recommended that I look to rock formations as sources of inspiration. I had met with a man who sold natural rock formations in

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<sup>17</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.



the hopes of finding materials to work with. As soon as I entered the building, I was drawn to a large pink crystal formation in the back of the room. It was the first thing I saw and I had to have it. I purchased the piece not knowing what it was or its properties. Upon further investigation, I learned that it was pink halite, a sedimentary mineral formed near oceans in North America and parts of the Dead Sea. In metaphysical and healing practices, it is associated with the heart chakra, aiding in self-love and heart healing. Halite or rock salt is the most commonly found mineral and is crucial to life forms on this planet. It is the stone of personal power and associated with the element of water.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 18 (Webster 2017)

That summer I spent a great deal of time in water. Therapeutic and healing, it is an element I am fond of both working with and referencing in my art practice. I began creating impressions in the mud, recalling the fondness I had in my earlier performance work with clay. Embedding myself in the earth was healing for me. Considering this work, Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Series* (1973-78) comes to mind. Connecting her own body to the earth, the ephemeral presence of her absence in the silhouette, once removed. It was a way for her to find herself, cast from her home in Cuba as a refugee, attempting to intergrate herself within the vast contrast of America to her homeland. Mendieta describes this work as follows:

I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculpture I become one with the earth...I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs...in(an) omnipresent female force, the after image of being encompassed within the womb, is a manifestation of my thirst for being.<sup>19</sup>

The “thirst for being” expresses the cravings of countless women. There is an innate calling to our maternal selves, like a return to mother earth. As human beings on this planet, we are made up of matter, from the earth we are born and into the earth we shall return. As previously discussed, when trauma is experienced, anxieties develop

<sup>18</sup> Melody. *Love is in the Earth: A Kaleidoscope of Crystals: Update: The Reference Book Describing the Metaphysical Properties of the Mineral Kingdom*. Earth-Love Publishing House, 1995, 309.

<sup>19</sup> Tracey Warr, and Amelia Jones, eds, *The Artist's Body*, London: Phaidon, 2000, 168.

that cause us to disconnect from our bodies out of fear of feeling. This state is a coping mechanism called fragmentation. Breath-work and earth grounding are healing techniques that can be very fruitful when fragmentation occurs. The earth is a limitless source of energy, like a battery of electricity to which everything is connected. Earth grounding is as simple as placing ourselves in nature, removing our shoes, and walking barefoot on the ground, allowing the matter to flow through both connected bodies as a form of recharge.

Lippard states,

Art itself must have begun as nature—not as imitation of nature, nor as formalized representation of it. But, is simply as the perception of relationships between humans and the natural world. Visual art, even today, even at its most ephemeral or neutralized, is rooted in matter. Transformation of and communication through matter—the primitive connection with the substance of life, or *prima materia*, is the rightful domain of all artists. Add this to the traditional, and ambivalent, connection between woman and nature, and there is a double bond for women artists.<sup>20</sup>

During the making of my mud works, a snake poked its head through the sculpture I was creating and slithered across my hands.

*\*The serpent is a symbol of rebirth, transformation, healing and wisdom.<sup>21</sup>*

The serpent is represented in many cultures in relation to wisdom or a higher state of being. *Tantra* in Sanskrit means ‘to weave’; it is a system, theory, or practice that focuses on the body. The human body is connected energetically through centre points called *chakras*. When this energy is aligned, it rises through our seven chakras to create what is known as *kundalini rising*, a state of awakened consciousness and connectivity. Kundalini energy rests in our bodies at the base of our spine and sacrum, represented symbolically as a coiled snake. We see this imagery in the sciences in relation to human health: the double helix of human DNA and the serpent entwined around the rod yielded by the Greek god Asclepius.

Biblically, the serpent also symbolizes the fall of mankind, the cursed animal damned to spend eternity slithering on its belly. However, this was not always so. Serpents are regenerative and adaptable, withstanding all kinds of climates and their ability to regenerate an entirely new body of skin. In my second term of the program, I took a class called *Helpmates and Harlots*, an in-depth feminist interpretation of the history and stories of women from the Old Testament. We studied the book of Wisdom, one of the Seven Sapiential books from the Old Testament. *Sapiente*, a derivative of *Sapiential*, the Latin word for *wisdom*, is referenced in Scripture as the embodiment of God’s counterpart, Sophia, or Lady Wisdom. Looking closely at Michelangelo’s “The Creation of Adam,” we see next to God, a woman believed to be that Sophia. The

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<sup>20</sup> Lippard, *Overlay*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Farmer, *Animal Spirit Guides*, 353.

obtainment of wisdom and the fall of man was at the hands of a woman. In this discovery, I learned women were never gone from religion, just left out of and put into a narrative that suited man best. She was always there. This class was enlightening as I began to see my Catholic upbringing in a new light. Asserting the dominance of patriarchs in religion was an attempt to rule out worship of the feminine, the goddesses of ancient cultures, and their teraphim.



Figure 19 (Webster 2018)

reminder that life is ever changing, that we too are made up of matter that shifts through-out our lifetime and reinforces healing capabilities of water in my life. Wrapped around both is a porcelain snake, the embodiment of the wisdom gained in letting go and opening up to the natural flow of lifes processes.

The snake I saw revealed to me the process that was unfolding in my life with a focus on my health, physically, mentally, and spiritually. I had met with a new doctor and naturopath who put me on a natural regime to address the issues that come with PCOS. I was given hope from my previous diagnosis of infertility after an ultrasound showing the formation of not one but two eggs in my ovum. At the end of summer, I bled. I was ecstatic. I felt rejuvenated and hopeful of my future, and my work reflected that. In my sculpture piece *Sapiente*, I reference the elements and symbolism of my transformation and healing that summer. At the base is found driftwood from the beach at Poplar Bluffs here in Saskatchewan. A magical place of intense energy, it symbolizes the earth upon which I was grounded. Above the wood lays the pink halite I found, heavy and overbearing resembling the immense weight of the emotional hardship I carried and needed healing of. The halite salt is in solid

rock form but is completely dissolvable when placed in water, a



After that summer, inspired and hopeful I began researching fertility figurines, dating back as far as 28,000 BCE. Many of these figurines represent the female in affiliation with the serpent. *Wadjet* of ancient Egypt, the snake goddess of the ancient Minoans, *Coatlicue*, the Aztec lady of the serpent who gave birth to the moon and stars and *Astarte*, the Hellenized form of *Ishtar*. These all tell a very different tale than that of the biblical scripts around the power of the snake, or the feared *Medusa* of Greek mythology. One was the *Sheela na gigs* of the British Isles, their purpose remains a mystery to this day. Thought to be a symbol of fertility, she contrasts with the usual fertility goddess in her figure. With her protruding rib cage, bald head, and slender frame, she spreads her protruding vulva in her hands. Her physical depiction is that of the crone in the triple goddess formation an embodiment of death, decay, and destruction, but without death there can be no life. She represented for me the many forms a fertile woman can embody.

One night in the studio while drawing ideas, a bat flew through my studio window and nestled itself in the corner. Unable to get it out, I left for the night and returned home. As I walked through my front door, I was met with another bat, this time flying in my front foyer.

*\*Bats are a symbol of rebirth and depth, creatures of the darkness from the caverns of earths belly. They are highly sensitive and a symbol of intuition and vision.*<sup>22</sup>



Figure 20 (Webster 2018)

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 25.

I began to create a self-portrait, an almost life-sized sculpture of myself as a figure of fertility sculpted with air-drying clay and my own hair saved over the years as a result of my syndrome. She lays on her back cupping her belly with animals embedded into her flesh depicting a landscape of sorts, flourishing as life grows and crawls upon her surface. The creatures are strategically placed in areas of association for me. Pigs on my sides and upon my thighs, for their association with fatness and insecurities throughout my life; cows along the breasts in reference to lactation, cats along the mound of my sex in reference to the slang *pussy*; the ram on the head noting my headstrong Aries tendencies and upon my heart, a gorilla for Otis.



Figure 21 (Webster 2018)



He is the sun to my moon, the day to my night, my twin flame. He held my hand through this journey, and swam through these waters with me, both lifting and dragging me asunder. He was the man I imagined my future with and upon his shoulders came my expectations. They say expectation is the root of all heartache. When we love someone; we put ourselves, our dreams and hopes, into our perceived narratives with that person. When those actions are not fulfilled or the relationship ends, so does that narrative. Expectations die and mourning takes place. While making this piece, he left me. I was devastated. I went to the studio in the hopes of working through my anguish. Upon arriving that night, I removed the cover on the piece to find that the entire abdomen had collapsed, leaving a gaping hole where once a rounded full belly lay. The piece embodied the accumulation of everything I have been working towards over the past two years: my long journey and determination to regain my health, the focused attention of my desires, and the hope for my future with the return of my cycle. I avoided the studio for weeks, shut myself away, and separated my mind from my body, defeated by my lack of agency in the events unfolding in my life. My mother always used to tell me, “Maria, not to decide, is to decide.” And although our connection was profound, this story is not about him. I went back into the studio to face myself, lying on the ground, body broken and exposed, when I removed the sheet, preparing myself for the corpse that lay at my feet, hundreds of spiders scurried out from the gaping hole of my womb.



Figure 22 (Webster 2018)

*\*Spiders, ancient symbols of patience and the mystery and power that comes with growth. They represent the shadowed self, the dark aspects of nature and life and show us that the choices we*

*make construct the webbing of our lives. They are ultimate symbol of feminine energy and creativity.*<sup>23</sup>

I have expressed the perspective from my side as a woman, and I feel the need to state that I am not against or hate men. As a practising witch, I believe in the duality of all things and value the balance that ensues in the manifestation of opposition, the sun and moon, day and night, interior and exterior, body and mind, life and death.

Frida Kahlo uses this concept often in her work. In my final month of study while finishing the final piece for the show I began to read her personal journal and came across her piece *Double Portrait of Diego and Me*. In this work, she represents the union of the masculine and feminine. This piece embodies the dualism in lifecycles through the union of the sexes. It touches on reproduction and fertility through depictions of life's first stages represented in the fertilized ovum and the conch and scallop as metaphors for the male and female sex organs. Passionate about her Mexican heritage, she references pre-Hispanic mythology in which the sun was worshiped as *Huitzilopochtli*, the personification of day, summer, the south, and fire, and *Tezcatlipoca*, the god of the setting sun, personification of the night, winter, the north, and water, ensuring the equilibrium of the world, since one could not exist without the other. Looking closely at the painting, we see that, although the two halves are together, they do not achieve a true union. The lines of the face are disjointed and the expressions are vastly different. Diego is relaxed and smiling while Frida is tense and serious, perhaps even suffering. As Andrea Kettenmann notes,

It is a confession of her great love, but also of her demands on her partner, demands which could hardly be satisfied by one person and which necessarily entail the disappointment reflected in the expression of the artist's half-portrait.<sup>24</sup>

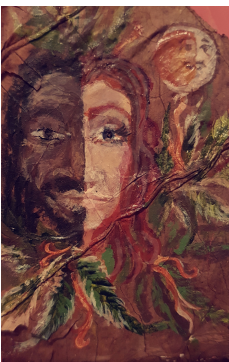


Figure 23 (Webster 2018)

This miniature painting contained for me all the sentiment at that time in the relationship I shared with Otis. I recreated the work in a rendition titled, *Double Portrait of Otis and Me*. An acrylic portrait on tobacco leaf of Otis and myself, two individuals so beautiful together but never quite lining up, emotionally and metaphorically. Suspended in a deep ruby red background entwined in the cannabis plant, rooted in the infinite. Twin flames with their duality expressed in the presence of both the sun and moon. At the base, contained within the frame lay a scallop and auger shell, symbols closely linked to sexuality for me, a representation of our intimate connection and to the right an ovum, almost consuming. The piece is placed within a tiny tin frame, that held the lover's tarot card within my home. I recreated this piece to bring context to my final piece *Leaking Something So Strong They Can Smell It in the Street*. This work consists of an anatomical heart, sculpted out of clay and cast in alginate. Using unfiltered beeswax and propolis (sought after for its

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 359.

<sup>24</sup> Frida Kahlo, "Kahlo 1907-2007: Homenaje Nacional," 2007, 262.

effectiveness in wound healing) as my medium, due to its rich amber color and potent smell. This was an intentional use of material to expand the sensory experience within the gallery as well as a visual reference to the works title. Heartache is agonizing. With most wounds, we seek medical attention or apply pressure to aid in healing and fast recovery, but with heartbreak the wound is internal. Although the pain of heartbreak is emotional its prominence and depth can be felt throughout the physical body, so much so that the obviousness of its existence seems detectable by those around you. In heartbreak, there is no set duration of its suffering, just a bleeding out, a constant ache that is always there until one day, it isn't. I created this piece similar to how you would a large pillar candle, only most candles are designed to burn inward. For this work, I wanted the piece to collapse within itself. To do so I braided the wick from the base to the center breaking off into five points towards the surface of the heart. The piece was lit at the opening reception and remained burning for the entirety of the show. The smell of the propolis filled the gallery and a beautifully intricate pouring of wax dripped from its surface, to witness the physical representation of my broken heart was both extremely painful and cathartic.



Figure 24 (Webster 2018)



Figure 25 (Webster 2018)

I've always loved Frida's work. As a painter, I was fond of her brushwork, the deep rich colours and imagery, latent with symbolism. She was a woman who overcame much, burdened with a lifetime of hardships and struggled with her health her entire life. Physically, her crippled body brought her great pain, but none compared to the pain she held in her heart. Unable to bear children herself, her passions were her work and Diego. I came across one of her paintings, *The*

*Love Embrace of the Universe*, early in my relationship with Otis. I printed it and showed it to him, slipping it into my journal, completely unaware of the sentiment it predicted and importance it held in reference to our relationship. In this work, she is depicted cradling Diego in her arms, blood pouring from her chest, enveloped by the eternal goddess figure symbolizing the earth and the greater life duality of night and day, divided by the sun and moon in the night sky. Plants flourish around them and milk drips from the goddess's exposed breast. Diego is holding a flame, with the third eye on his forehead. As Andrea Kettenmann explains,

With this piece, Frida explores themes of duality and the connectedness of all living things. She is rooted in the landscape, personified as a nurturing mother who, like her, is willing to endure pain to protect her loved ones. It is a radical image representing feminine divinity, although it seems the entire purpose of the female figure is to shelter the male genius who holds the creative fire and the third eye of wisdom, requiring sacrifice from the female protectors.<sup>25</sup>

Women go through much, when we think of our mothers we often think of sacrifice. Frida revered life, fertility, and nature. Her relationship with Diego grips at the core of my being. Her works are wrought with symbolism so familiar to my own that I feel a kindred connection to her aching soul: the duality of the sun and moon, latent with his constant presence in her heart and mind regardless of his physical inconsistency; her admiration for the natural world, plants in particular and their representation of all physical life; her ability to see the overt sexuality in their shape and form, and their symbolism of both male and female counterpart, and of course, her ache and mourning for a child she could not have. Diego was that child in many ways, and I understand that now so intensely.

Diego beginning

Diego constructor

Diego my child

Diego my fiancé

Diego painter

Diego my lover

Diego "my husband"

Diego my friend

Diego my mother

Diego my father

Diego my son

Diego= I=

Diego Universe

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 263.

Diego in unity

Why do I call him my Diego?

He never was nor will be mine.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Fuentes Carlos and Sarah Lowe, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-portrait*, 1995, 235.

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