

By Whatever These Pink Things Mean

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
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By

Lissa Robinson

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Head of the Department of Art and Art History
Murray Building
University of Saskatchewan
3 Campus Drive
Saskatoon SK S7N 5A4

General Office telephone:
306.966.4222 or 306.966.4196

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

College of Graduate Studies and Research

SUMMARY OF DISSERTATION

By Whatever These Pink Things Mean was an exhibition of paintings and sculptures that played on ideas of abstraction ("pink things" are present but not named), the symbolic associations and psychological affects of pink, and to "pink's" other meaning: "to make light, repeated taps on a surface." Autobiographical in nature, the work was founded on my experiences of having a gay father who died from complications due to AIDS, and spoke to my struggle to reconcile a fatherly love that was both "maternalised," and tainted with darker feelings of shame, anger, grief and trauma. Through tropes of painting, sculpture and textiles, this body of work was an attempt to make visible the human necessity to temper (if not placate) painful emotions with softer expressions of humour, sensuality and love.

DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by

Lissa Robinosn

Department of Art and Art History

University of Saskatchewan

Fall 2005

Examining Committee:

Patrick Traer, Associate Professor; Alison Norlen, Assistant Professor; Susan Schantz, Professor

External Examiner: Lesley Biggs, Associate Professor, Women and Gender Studies

BIOGRAPHICAL

July, 1967

Born in Montreal, Canada

June, 1994

Diploma (4-year), Painting, Alberta College of Art and Design

June, 1999

B.F.A (Hon.), Painting, Alberta College of Art and Design

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The title of my thesis exhibition, *By Whatever These Pink Things Mean*, is a line taken from a Sylvia Plath poem, *Fever 103*.¹ Here, as in most of Plath's elegies², there is a palpable tension in her vivid expressions of love and anger, which are simultaneously climactic and destructive, taking their toll on the body and mind. All this is evidenced in the poem's feverish pitch and the pink spots the speaker sees. In the context of my exhibition, the title, along with its bodily inferences, plays on ideas of abstraction ("pink things" are present but not named), the symbolic associations and psychological affects of pink³, and to "pink's" other meaning: "to make light, repeated taps on a surface."

Although initially inspired by the repetition of "pinkish spots" stained onto the surface of an earlier drawing, my recent body of work is evidence of an intense, two-year focus on drawing and painting as a means to expand my visual vocabulary. Autobiographical in nature, my work is founded on my experiences of having a gay father who died from complications due to AIDS, and my struggle to reconcile a fatherly love that was both "maternalised," and tainted with darker feelings of shame, anger, grief and trauma. In a

¹ Excerpt from Sylvia Plath's poem, *Fever 103*:

*"... Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
All by myself I am a huge camellia
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.*

*I think I am going up,
I think I may rise ----
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I*

*Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,*

*By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean.
Not you, nor him...."*

² Excerpt from Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning*: "Though seldom read as an elegist, Plath joins and may even outstrip such contemporaries as Lowell, Sexton, and Ginsberg in enlarging the genre's affective parameters to include more than pathos, love reverence, and competitive camaraderie. ... Plath more than any of her forebears intensifies the mourner's aggression toward the dead, summoning a violent anger that earlier elegists had channeled into homosocial bonding, professional competition, and wars of patrilineal succession." (p. 262)

³ Pink is considered an emotionally soothing and calming colour (a muted form of red) that exudes a feeling of gentle warmth and nurturing. It placates feelings of irritation and aggression by providing an aura of love and protection. Symbolically it is associated with love, femininity and softness. Therapeutically, it also alleviates loneliness, despondency, over-sensitivity, and vulnerability. In contrast, red relates to sexuality, anger, violence and vitality.

sense, the work attempts to make visible the human necessity to temper (if not placate) painful emotions with softer expressions of humour, sensuality and love.

Although there has always been a theatrical and performative element to my work, the anxieties and compulsions driving my practice have often been obscured by the beautiful and tightly choreographed aesthetic of my objects. With this in mind, I was intent on finding ways of working that would embody my affinity for beauty, metaphor and the labour of craft while allowing me to work more instinctually in order to reveal the personal vulnerabilities and more sinister impulses driving my practice. Early in my studio investigations, it was suggested that I should try to approach drawing with less structure: i.e. Draw quickly, eyes closed; or work with material and gesture in non-representational and expressive manners—primarily because my forms were sometimes reading too generically. The "energy" or psychological states I was interested in expressing were at times being tempered by my conceptualist training and my affinity for beauty. I agreed with these summations and chose to focus on more immediate and gestural modes of making (i.e. Drawing, painting, video performance) and on materials that were less familiar, predictable or controllable.

At the end of my first year of study, I produced a large fabric sculpture in red velvet covered with black organza (Figures 1, 2) and a series of large-scale drawings using charcoal, molasses, and coffee on brown paper and mylar (Figures 4, 5). The images in the drawings were derived from illustrations of alchemical vessels (Figure 3) that were then transformed into large anthropomorphic forms, and engaged in various states of bodily transformation, exchange and play. Although the work shared a certain level of humour and material sensuality, it also revealed a darker side of human relationships, both paternal and sexual, expressed in suffocating expanses of charcoal/black fabric, splattering brown stains and a conflation of gender.⁴ The materiality of the work (its use of gestural lines, thickness of charcoal, layered fabric) was a continuation of my interest in exploring the emotional potency of a gesture and the play between surface and depth. Disruptions were used in an attempt to shift away from a strict adherence to appropriated images, like dresses or shoes, (Figures 6-7b) towards

⁴ The black charcoal, molasses and brown splash stains were intended to signify something being soiled or defiled, while also evoking beauty through their sensual surface and marks.

forms that were derived more directly out of my explorations with material and gesture. Although the work still showed some reliance on "literal" representations of the figure, I think that was indicative of the artists I was studying at the time and the stages involved in making such a shift occur.

The influence of Louise Bourgeois's oeuvre on my practice has predominantly stemmed from the psychosexual content of her work and its expression through textile-based, anthropomorphic 'vessels' that conflate the figure with images of domesticity, architecture and the trauma of familial relationships.⁵ (Figure 8) Her influences are expressed in the sexual/maternal interactions that occur between the bodily vessels in my own drawings, and in the conflation of male and female. I was also inspired by her daily practice of drawing, which is evidence of a compulsive drive to 'record' fleeting moments of intense feeling, sensation or thought (Figure 9), and to her perception that making art is an act of self-exorcism. (Figure 10)

Similar to Bourgeois, Nicola Hicks's work oscillates between her drawing practice and her sculptures. Her works are strange configurations of hybridized animals and humans (Figure 11) that are executed in plaster and straw, giving her work a rough and 'sketchy' quality that is reminiscent of her charcoal drawings on brown paper (Figure 12). Not necessarily concerned with mimetic representation, her semi-abstracted drawings and sculptures capture the physicality and psychology of her figures through a theatrical and densely textured use of material and colour. It is within the symbiotic nature of her drawings and sculptures that I was most inspired. It encouraged me to think more deeply about the role my materials and process play in the development of my images and their relationship to form and content. Rather than altering my approach to process—that is treating the paper as an affected or infected skin—I shifted my focus to exploring a new material, raspberry jam, because it was more viscerally connected to the memories, sensations and tactility of my body through its sweet, sticky and voluptuous properties.

⁵ Bourgeois's early "plaster" works are often described as "strange, lumpish confluences of landscape and body where Bourgeois seemed to be playing with oppositions of hard and soft, and the suggestion of a visceral interchange between opposing sexual identities ... made from plaster, and later latex, materials which begin life without form but require transformation through process." (Morris 13) In her later fabric works, the activity of sewing (eye-hand, the stitch or the seam as marks) could be likened to her daily drawing practice, and her use of fabric analogous to "plaster" in its beginnings as a formless material that needs to be given shape and substance.

In his book, *What Painting Is*, James Elkins uses the language of alchemy to explore what it is that a painter really does in her studio—the smells, the mess, the struggle to control the uncontrollable, the special knowledge only painters hold of how colors will mix, and how they will look. He describes painting as daubs of sticky oils and crushed rock or blobs that form and reform, expressing the full range of properties or qualities found in organic substances: warm, greasy, oily, waxy, buttery, viscous, glossy, earthy, watery, or inspissate. (Elkins 114) In articulating his experience of looking at a Rembrandt painting, Elkins describes it as "thoughts about qualities: I feel viscid. My body is snared in the glues and emulsions, and I feel the pull of them on my thoughts. I want to wash my face." (Elkins 115) In other words, "thinking in painting [material] is thinking as paint [material]." (Elkins 113) Elkins likens the body of an artist to the properties or qualities of his or her materials, suggesting that "what matters to an artist, is not to distinguish the substance, qualities, principles, or elements of a material, but to what is occupying their mind at the time." (Elkins 112)

My decision to use raspberry jam as a material originated from a memory I had of my grandmother in the late stages of Alzheimer's⁶, and to its properties as a dense, clot-like material that is not only prone to slumping or dripping, but contains a repetition of marks (seeds) agitating its surface and delineating its layers. The absurdity and poignancy of using jam as an art material was a reminder that food plays a significant role in our daily existence, for our biological survival, and as a vehicle for celebration, pleasure and consolation. Through the act of eating we not only nurture our bodies, but participate in a sensorial event that begins with our lips and mouth, and ends with its expulsion through our rectum—an orifice that is often associated with feelings of shame and disgust. John Berger refers to the mouth as the centre of the body, "as though the mouth were simultaneously the place of pain [and pleasure], and the only way by which consolation might be taken in." (Quoted in Simon 246) Paradoxically, these same words could be used to describe the anus. For many people, this particular orifice is as much a

⁶ As my grandma plunged back into time, re-experiencing her anxiety from the Depression era, she would sometimes pour jars of raspberry jam into my mother's dresser drawers. In her panicked and semi-delusional state she was attempting to placate her fears about an impending, but imaginary, food shortage.

source of pleasure⁷ (or consolation) as it is a source of shame or pain; and on a personal level it was a poignant reminder of the toll AIDS took on my father's body. No matter how much food he ate or how fattening it was, his incessant bouts of diarrhea (often hourly) eventually caused him to starve to death. And yet, despite his physical discomfort, my father took to eating lots of desserts daily because these rich sweets gave him so much pleasure.

The direct linking of "pleasure foods" to the physical ailments or more repulsive processes of the body was significant in tracing the trajectory of my work. Over the past 10 years there has been a consistent fascination with orifices, bodily masses and skin-like surfaces, as well as their susceptibility to external and internal forces like stimulation, gravity or disease. Yet, even though these 'forces' were vital to the context of my work, their presence was not always evident. Thus jam, for both its associations to bodily orifices and its susceptibility to external forces seemed an appropriate material to explore. I began smearing, pouring and layering the jam on an assortment of fabrics, drawing surfaces, and objects that included a long wooden plank (Figure 13), a pair of shoes and a previous fabric sculpture, *Fall from Grace*. I also used the jam, or thick red lipstick as a substitute, for three short videos using the body in repetitive gestures. In one sense these performative or defiling acts in my studio disrupted the "beautiful" or "precious" tendency in my work, and in another, revealed the emotional potency of my materials.

The video work was a critical marker in the development of my work because it opened the door to constructing images that were self-shaming. The images were also invisible to me during their making. Unlike the way I usually work, I had to "feel" my way through the gestures and materials, only to imagine what was unraveling in front of the camera. This element of surprise and its potential to reveal the unexpected (pathos) was dramatic, and invariably changed the relationship I had to my work. It freed me to be more "messy" and less self-conscious in my studio. Conceptually, I was also reminded that the body and art are messy and variable organisms; and if I was going to explore the subjectivity of the body—biological, social and otherwise—then I needed to stop inhibiting my process, thereby allowing my work to be both messy and sensual.

⁷ In Freudian terms, the 'anal stage' lasts from about 18 months to three or four years old. The focus of pleasure is the anus. Holding it in and letting it go are greatly enjoyed. (Kahn 44)

The “trope of painting as body” (Newman) referred to in Elkin’s text, is duplicitous in that the marking of those terms oscillate between material as signifier and immaterial as signified. It also makes reference “to an aporia in the discursive field surrounding painting, beginning in modernism and continuing in postmodernist and poststructuralist discourse”. (Newman) Greenberg’s reductionism was predicated on “valorizing (Newman) painting’s innate flatness, thereby eliminating whatever (i.e. emotion, symbol) was not particular to painting.” (Newman) However, as Elkins reminds us, such reductions in painting are absurd, if not impossible to make. In Greenberg’s usage, ‘flatness’ stands in opposition to depth, and remains a perceptual phenomenon that resists the “Cartesian dualism of exteriority and interiority, thereby eliminating any dialogue between surface and depth”. (Newman) However, it might also be worth considering that this ideology of ‘flatness’ may have been more indicative of a desire to obtain or express a consciousness that was more intertextual or expansive, rather than dualistic.

In fact, the work of many Abstract Expressionists—particularly ‘action or lyrical’ painters like Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler and Larry Poons— disrupted Greenberg’s notion of pure flatness through the spatial implications in their work, the bodily interactions required, and the psychological qualities inherent in these painterly expressions (i.e. The violence of Pollock’s drips or the tenderness of Frankenthaler’s stains). Although in one context, drips, splashes and stains can be read as the signs or referents of painting, in another, gesture, colour, material and pattern become the signs, expressions or properties of the body. The semiotic spaces that are created within these relationships only differs from the symbolic in that they exist within a discourse of animation, or by what Julia Kristeva refers to, as the *chora* (35): a pre-linguistic space pulsating with primal energies, anarchic impulses and sensory spasms (36). Through Kristeva’s definition of the *chora* we arrive at the idea that the symbolic realities of painting are to be founded within the rhythms of our bodies and its expression through painterly formations.

The “trope of body in painting” as a potential approach for making art became apparent to me when I was able to recognize how small pink stains could evoke subjective or biological states through their associations to tears, freckles, skin infections,

fevers, wounds, orifices, swellings or fluidic expulsions like vomiting, bleeding and orgasm. From there I observed the abstract qualities in raspberry jam (repetition and layering of seeds, colour, and viscosity) and re-expressed them through materials like paint, embroidery and fabric. Using these qualities and their symbolic associations to the body I began a series of abstract paintings using red washes on a variety of papers ranging in size (Figures 14-17). The figures that compose the paintings are formed through "splashes" of pink washes thrown onto its surfaces, which drip down, and are further formed through a repetitive layering of pink stain dots. Initially, I experienced this gesture of splashing pink washes over large expanses of tissue paper as both a violating and defiant act. I couldn't control what form the stains took or how they dripped, and I think intuitively I tried to displace these feelings of discomfort with the obsessive layering of dots.

In 1996 I produced *Ida's Secrets* (Figures 18a-18c), an installation inspired by an incident that occurred while I was attending an artist-in-residency program in Maine. The dormitory building was inhabited by carpenter ants that were frantically transporting larvae into my room via a hole in the wall. Their activity was incessant, and soon there were sticky little eggs piling up all over my floor. I'd sweep them up, and hours later would have to sweep again. Although completely repulsed, I was also seduced by their strange behavior and their repulsive little remnants. In his essay, *Resonating Chamber*, David Garneau writes about the work:

"To secrete is to hide or remove from observation; but secretion also implies a production, even elaboration, of the thing concealed. In this case the production is voluminous, a nightmare of over-production and the inevitability of a rupture. It is as if, using familiar psychoanalytic metaphors, the floodgates of repression have burst and the concealed contents pour into the light of day. And there they lie, in a pile--an embarrassment of riches." (Garneau 2)

This piece, for me, remains a poignant and relevant metaphor for expressing the disruptions of the body and psyche while also articulating the materialisation of "pink things" in my recent work that are erupting and swelling in their threat to seduce.

Garneau describes repetition as "comforting; an imposition of pattern in disruptive times; a working out; sexual; a necessity ..." (1) Eva Hesse often described

repetition as a means of expressing pathos or to point out what she viewed as the absurdities in life:

"If something is absurd, it's much more exaggerated, more absurd if it's repeated ... Repetition does enlarge or increase or exaggerate an idea or purpose in a statement." (Quoted in Lippard 6)

Repetition is comforting, yet, it is also an absurdity in that it necessitates a violating or neurotic disposition in order to carry out its act. Violence becomes muted and seductive—placated by what Garneau refers to as "an imposition of pattern in disruptive times." Here, a pile of pink things, lay inert, evidence of a "voluminous, nightmare of over-production and the inevitability of a rupture." An over-production implies a dysfunction of some kind, and in this case, it's the sign of a body-gone-wrong, implicated by the pile's relationship to an orifice and its penetration through a wall or a skin.

In *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman likens the surface of our bodies to that of a suit of skin:

"unlike fabric, it [skin] is alive, breathing and excreting, shielding us from harmful rays and microbial attack, repairing itself when necessary, regulating blood flow, acting as a frame for our sense of touch, aiding us in sexual attraction, defining our individuality, holding all the thick red jams and jellies inside us where they belong." (Ackerman 67)

Although nothing in this description of skin is incorrect, it fails to contain much of the disruptive or messy qualities that are inherent in the biological and social realities of our bodies—we urinate, bleed, shed, vomit, fornicate, and die. Despite our skin's ability to protect us and remain a portal to our pleasures, it also renders the body a permeable space, as vulnerable to violation and infection as it is to shame and embarrassment. When we are ill or wounded our skin erupts into rashes, discolourations or swellings; and in the case of bleeding, diarrhea or vomiting, our second skins, clothing or bedding, become soiled with the symptoms of our disease.

Painting in this context, then, becomes an apt and poignant vehicle for tracing the body's tactility—its pains and pleasures—and its orientation as both a permeable surface

and mutable space⁸. Although I was elated by this potential of painting, I also found myself in a terrain of production that was quite discomfoting for me. Very early in my art production I had renounced abstract expressionism as a viable approach to making art due to its patriarchal roots and my training in conceptualist art. As a way to alleviate this uneasiness and build a framework for discussing my production, I began looking at the work of Helen Frankenthaler, Joyce Wieland, Ross Bleckner and more recently, Laura Owens. Through Frankenthaler's work I was able to discern that a stain could function, conceptually and formally, as both surface and illusionistic space; and that relationships between colour and figure/ground could be used to reference the body. However, unlike Frankenthaler (Rose 32), and because of its association to the body, I loved the quality of the drip. I was interested in exploring the abrupt verticality of this mark in relation to the softer, expansive nature of a stain. Thus, through my explorations of the stain and drip, I found an intuitive way to play with surface and space through contrasts of colour, value, overlapping forms, and the lines or spaces articulated by the drips and my repetitive use of dots.

The relationship I was developing between the drip and stain might be better articulated through the paintings of Joyce Wieland⁹. In a piece entitled *Balling* (1961; Figure 19), the composition is characterised by a "looseness of paint handling" (Flemming 35) and an off-centre circular form (green) that is balanced by a pale pink stain placed to its left. The "structural simplicity" (Flemming 35) of the centralised form is disrupted by the "play of flecks, splatters, washes and drips of paint," (Flemming 35) which Wieland herself characterised as unconscious expressions of the erotic and biological experiences of her female body. (Flemming 35) Like many of her paintings, *Balling* had "a lot to do with imprinting [herself]" on a surface where she could record memories, emotions and traces of her body in motion (Quoted in Joyce 36). In *Facing North—A Self-Impression* (1974; Figure 20), Wieland uses an actual impression of her face on a lithograph stone for the image in her print, which she later "signs" with a

⁸ By mutable space, I am thinking of the inside of the body as a topographical organism (internal landscape) that is made up of cells, organs and other biological matter.

⁹And also in later works where her use of fabric and methods like sewing or knitting make connections between landscape and the body

lipsticked kiss, and impressions of her fingerprints marking the upper right and lower left corners.

My own splashes and dots (and even the stitches in my later works) have become tangible ways to impose or imprint the tracings of my body, as well as marking a shift towards using images that are more spontaneous and unconsciously generated rather than completely appropriated or contrived. Similar to Frankenthaler's use of figure/ground to reference landscape, and to Wieland's integration of abstraction with forms like genitals or hearts, I wanted to build painterly compositions that shifted between the pure abstraction of my earlier pieces and more articulated forms (sculptural) referencing the topography of the body. More specifically, I was thinking about anatomical topography because of the way it maps the surface of the body while also pointing to the parts that lay beneath.

In *Bloodwork* (Figures 21a-21b) the background of the painting is formed with soft pink stains derived from a series of splashes, drips and repetitive dots whose surface has been disrupted by areas of intense redness: a deep red orifice, an explosion of red splashes (centre front) and a hanging flesh-like form on the right side of the composition. Perceptually, these red "swellings," "spatters" and "cuts" provide varying points of perspective and allusions to forms in space. The oscillation between pinkness and redness conflate feelings of violation with opposing sensations of sensuality and conciliation. Are the soft dots meditative or evidence of a mild, but relentless attack on the body? Is the hole a wound or a quivering orifice of seduction? As the title might suggest, it's difficult to discern. The term 'bloodwork' evokes thoughts of healing through its inference to a medical intervention and to the violations such tests inflict onto the body.

The splashes, drips and dots (or stitches), similar to the stages of Alzheimer's or AIDS, mark themselves through space and time. Staining and piercing are violating acts. Similar to eruptions on the skin, they map or make visible the sources of our illnesses or shames. I still hold the memories of the internal spaces I inhabit when I have a fever, or even when I blush. It's disorientating and I often feel as though I am floating inside myself, barely able to stay in touch with my external environment. I remember the hallucinatory spots that I see, the sensation of heat and the feeling that my insides are

swelling up and out. Fevers are inward experiences. They take us deep inside our bodies, yet also produce external markers like flushing skin, red spots, sweat or irrational chatter.

In the paintings of Ross Bleckner there is a palpable tension between varying degrees of abstraction and representation; material surface and pictorial space; and to contrasts between lightness and darkness. Where light in Bleckner's painting seems to pulsate from within the darkness, in my pieces, darkness seems to press down or burst through the lightness. Much of Bleckner's work since the mid-eighties has been a personal response to the AIDS crisis. In many of his paintings, there is a concern with the mutability of form or in his own words "the idea of something beautiful, like a cell, mutating into something treacherous." (Quoted in Mar 1) The art critic Thomas Crow suggests that the "uncanny aspect of [Bleckner's] paintings begins in their confounding [of] the material surface and the picture plane." (Surface Tension 101) In *Throbbing Hearts* (1994; Figure 22) a pulsating pattern of red seems to be emerging (or floating), like a squad of sirens, from a foggy field of gray. As seductive as this painting is, it also reads like a warning of some impending doom. Similarly, in a much later work, *Generation* (2004; Figure 23), a similar juxtaposition of pattern and colour is used, but the red forms are transformed into flowerlike shapes in various stages of mutation that speak to the mutability of our bodies and its vulnerability to an invasion or disease.

Disease is often viewed as an invasion of alien organisms, which consume or attack its host. However, unlike most diseases, "AIDS has a dual metaphoric genealogy". (Sontag 105) As a micro-process, like cancer, it is considered an invasion; but due to the nature of its transmission, an older metaphor of syphilis is invoked: pollution. The unsafe behaviours that produce HIV infection are judged to be both indulgent and delinquent because of its connection to illegal activities like drug addiction or sexual practices considered deviant (Sontag 105). In thinking about these metaphors of AIDS and its relationship to topographies of the body, I wanted to construct a piece that negotiated the spaces both inside and outside our bodies, speaking to its tactility and spatiality as a site of mutual pleasure and possible infection.

Lecher's Kiss (Figure 24a-24c) is a piece that articulates itself as a series (or layering) of paintings and a fragmented sculpture. Although there is variance in surface

structures and embellishments, all of the panels are covered with some form of repetitive markings or orifices. Like *Bloodwork*, there is a play between inner and outer, and inferences to space and time. Time in the repetitive application of painterly dots, embroidery and lipstick marks, the panel containing pages from my journals, and to the interior "panels," each representing a separate period of time working in my studio. Space is marked in the distance between panels, the transformation of paintings into sculpture and the perceptual play between the dots. They both articulate the forms within their respective fields but then, individually, seem to move forward off the surface, and hang suspended, generating their own "sculptural" space. Although *Lecher's Kiss* does not contain any literal drawings of the figure (apart from those that may inhabit my journal pages), there is a conscious layering of the various imprints that trace the activity of my body and its exposure to outside forces. That is, the "open" presentation, "kiss" marks, text from my private journals, and the orifices all implicate a "body" that is vulnerable to invasion or touch¹⁰. The title of this piece suggests a "body" willfully engaged in human pleasures (relations), but ones that are tainted with an air of promiscuity (excess) and lustfulness.

Although the work developed initially through explorations in paint, I had a desire to further displace or disrupt the painterly "drips" and "splashes." In *Lecher's Kiss* I used drip forms as templates for embroidery and transformed these "drips" into decorative elements. Inspired by this process of conflating painterly and textile-based "tropes," I began to hybridize and play with the 'languages' of traditional painting and textiles through a series of sculptures. Similar to the paintings, the sculptures oscillate perceptually between surface and depth; lightness and density; excitement and repose; and incorporate a combination of materials and methods including sewing, crochet, embroidery and painting. In a piece titled *Swell* (Figure 25), I confound issues of high/low and body/paint through an absurd personification of a paint spill that has been "infected" with hundreds of holes that swell around a large orifice. Inspired by the red "pool stains" on my studio floor and the optical play of seeds in the raspberry jam, this piece is a humorous and sensual commentary on the inflammations of body.

¹⁰ "Vulnerability" is not being used here to suggest a state of passivity, but to an "opening" up of oneself to another for pleasure.

My use of fabric in both *Lecher's Kiss* and the sculptures intentionally invokes the layers of the body, and speaks to the history of dress and adornment through its surface textures and structural patterning. In *Looking at Textiles*, Wendy Landry discusses textiles as “objects of material culture [that] fulfill both real and symbolic purposes,” (21) in their material tactility or perceptual properties (density, reflectance or transparency). (22) For example, there are many ways velvet can evoke meaning through its visual, tactile and kinesthetic (drape and movement) properties as a soft, dense surface that simultaneously absorbs and reflects light. The richness of this material, historically, has been relegated to the upper class, which when painted, is then relegated to the status of kitsch.

This notion of kitsch is further explored in a series or grouping of fibre-based sculptures entitled *The Hanging Garden* (Figures 26, 27, & 28), which were constructed in response to the figurative nature of the splashes and drips in my paintings. Although derived initially from these “painterly” shapes, the personages also reflect the character or personality of their originating form, combined with a personal response to the fabrics or yarn used to construct them and to the associations they make to members of my family. They are an expression, in abstract terms, of emotions and various bodily states or conditions. Each one points to some “dysfunction” of the body that has been animated through intimate gestures like crocheting and sewing, thus conflating minimalist aesthetics with sentimentality and pathos. Similar to Bourgeois’s wooden personages of the early 1950’s, each piece exists as an individual entity, with strikingly different characteristics and dispositions, yet they also function as a group, setting up spatial dialogues between themselves and visitors to the gallery. The development of these personages can also be linked to a series of small paper works that I began producing both in and outside the pages of my sketchbook (Figures 29). *Tropes and Tribulations of the Body* is a collection of drawings and paintings that record various painterly explorations of pattern and form. Some are simple abstracted body-like landscapes with tubular growths, while others evoke organs, clouds or tumors that seem to be consuming or “secreting” human bodies or each other.

The analogy of fabric and skin is a common thread that runs through most of my work, and was established very early on in my art practice—mostly due to a desire to use

materials that were tactile, embraced popular craft aesthetics and were strongly connected to feminist art practice and theory. The use of decoration in my work is related to its association to both craft and visual linguistics (meaning and code) and to its viability as a tool for disrupting abstract or Modernist ideals of paint or form. This way of working is representative of what I see as a popular shift in contemporary art towards a valorization of the function of art as a signifier for subjective states, and speaks to the revival of romantic notions in art.¹¹ The prevalent use of craft and decoration as a carrier for subjective meaning points to what curator Shannon Stratton refers to as an increased affinity for the personal and the anti-heroic. (1) She asserts, however, that its popularity today is much “less about leveling an *old boys network* and more about dismantling the machine” (Stratton 1)—the machine as it refers to both the purity of modernist aesthetics and to the influence of modern technology:

“If technology is the latest heroic (art) form, than the handicraft must be the antithesis.” (Stratton 2)

In Stratton’s view, technology and its various “high-tech, polished or cerebral manifestations” (2) has created a longing for the unmediated, the simple and the authentic¹²; and it is within this definition of a desire for the authentic that I am placing my work.

In all the works that make up my recent culmination of paintings, collages and sculptures there is an overwhelming presence of bodies that are being violated and then assuaged by areas of “pinkness,” the sensual quality of materials and the intimate spaces evoked by domestic crafts. The repetition in all the works can be read as both a soothing presence (meditative optics) and one that invokes oppositional feelings of anger and shame through its jarring optics, relentless tapping of a brush and the ruptures of red. Although predominantly abstract in form, all the work uses a hybrid of painting and textiles to evoke or trace the activities of a body. The work also represents a significant shift in my art practice, speaking to traditional and contemporary trends in art production,

¹¹ That is, a search for the corporeal, and a desire for the beautiful and the emotional in art.

¹² Stratton considers the use of such techniques as a response to the “techno-utopian” or “techno-pessimist” nature of contemporary Western culture cited by economist Richard Florida (*The Rise of the Creative Class*)—practices that allow artists to exercise their corporeal presence. This “trend” towards the “tactile” or the “handicraft” is also evident in the revival of drawing in contemporary art practices.

and to a more conscious integration of the conceptual, emotional and formalist concerns that have occupied my art practice over the past 10 years. To return to the poem that began this essay, in *Fever 103°*, the speaker is literally burning, as she tries to free herself from “the sin, the sin.” But, as is typical of much of Plath’s poetry there is a feeling of redemption and the possibility of resurrection through a dissolving away of her earthly bondages. Comprised of a mixture of drama and kitsch, my recent exhibition of work focuses on the physical and psychological states of the body: its illnesses, its shames and its eventual metamorphosis into a lightness of being: *by kisses, by cherubim,/By whatever these pink things mean.*

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Figure 1

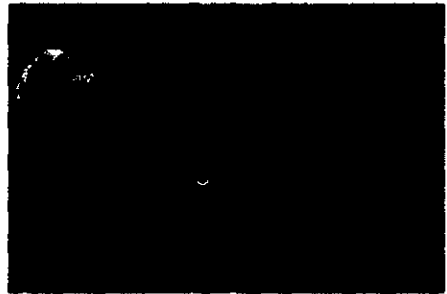


Figure 2

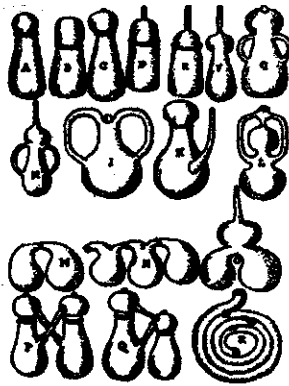


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

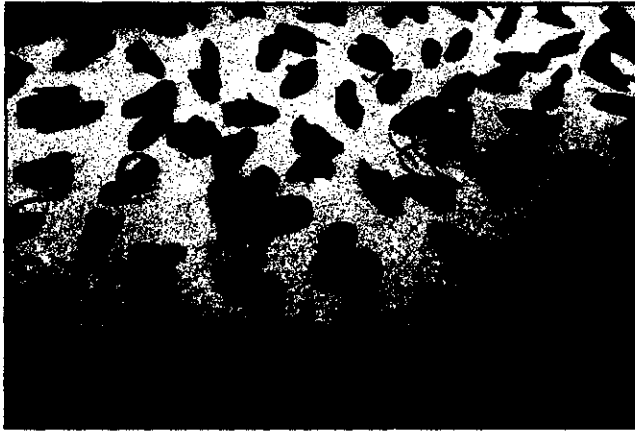


Figure 6



Figure 7a



Figure 7b

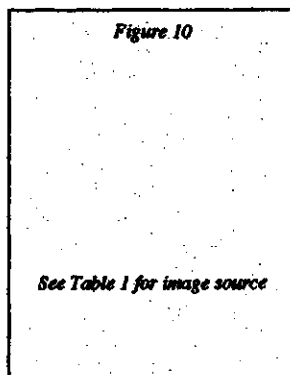
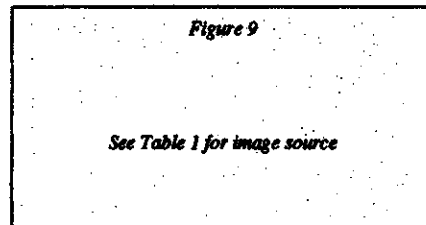
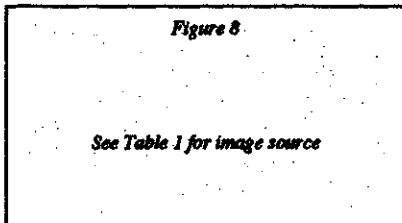


Figure 11

See Table 1 for image source

Figure 12

See Table 1 for image source

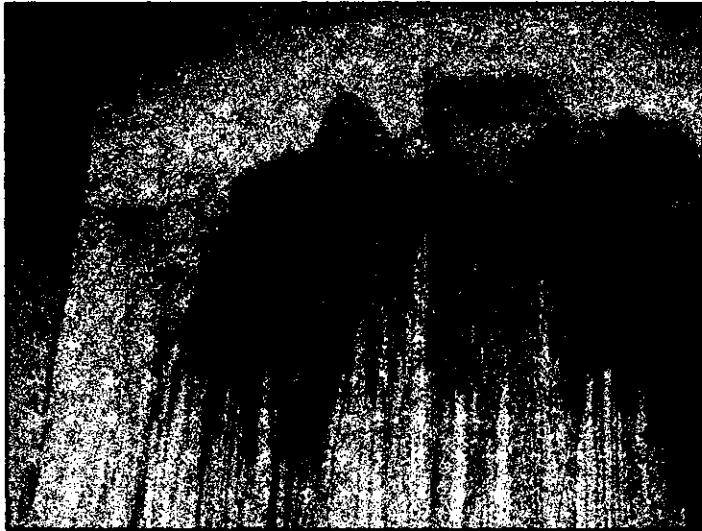


Figure 14a

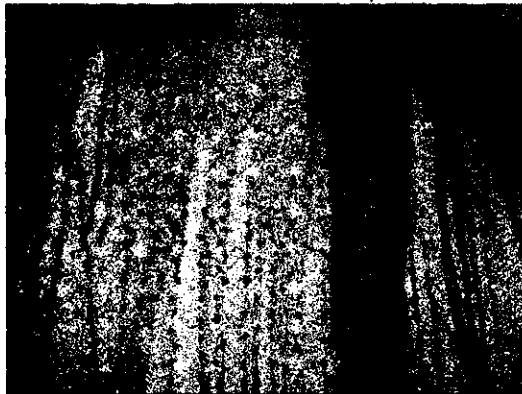


Figure 14b (detail)



Figure 15



Figure 16a



Figure 16b



Figure 17

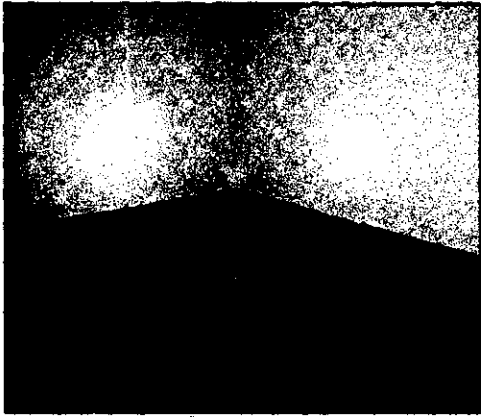


Figure 18a

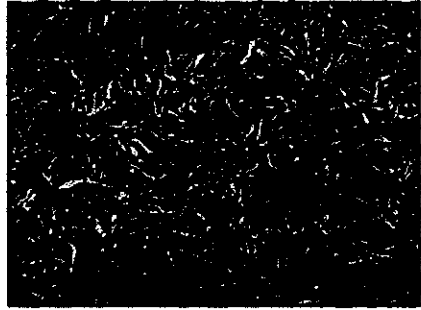


Figure 18b

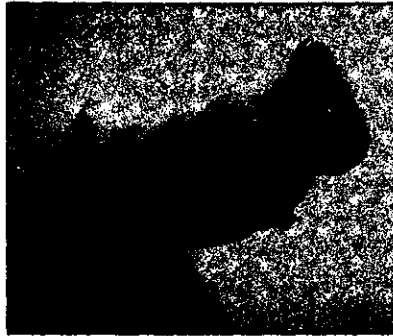
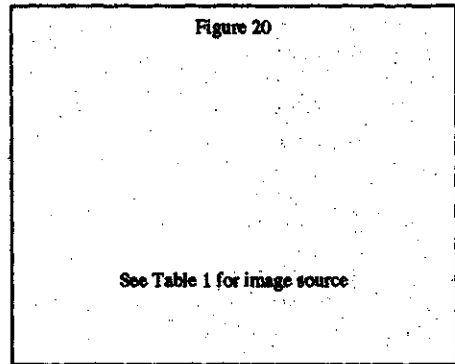
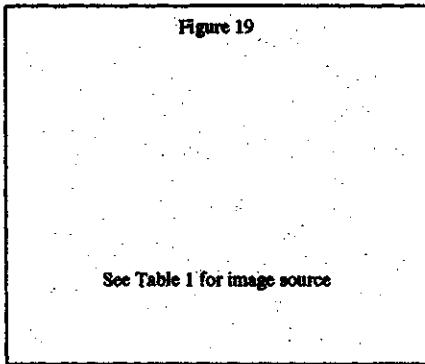


Figure 18c



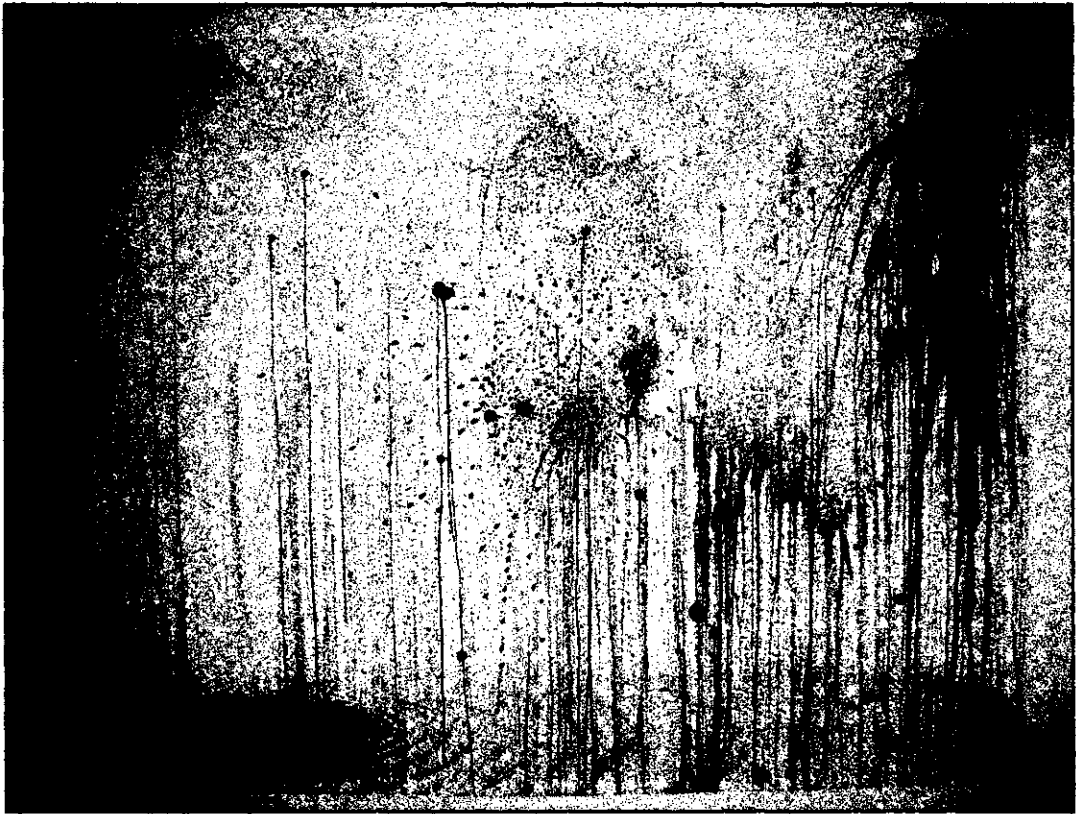


Figure 21a

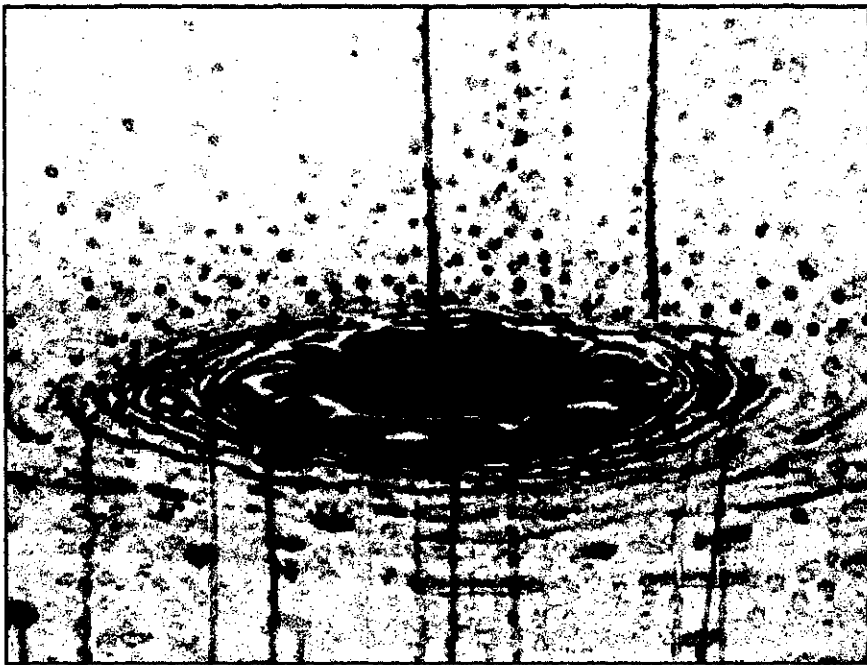


Figure 21b (detail)

Figure 22

See Table 1 for image source

Figure 23

See Table 1 for image source



Figure 24a



Figure 24b (detail)

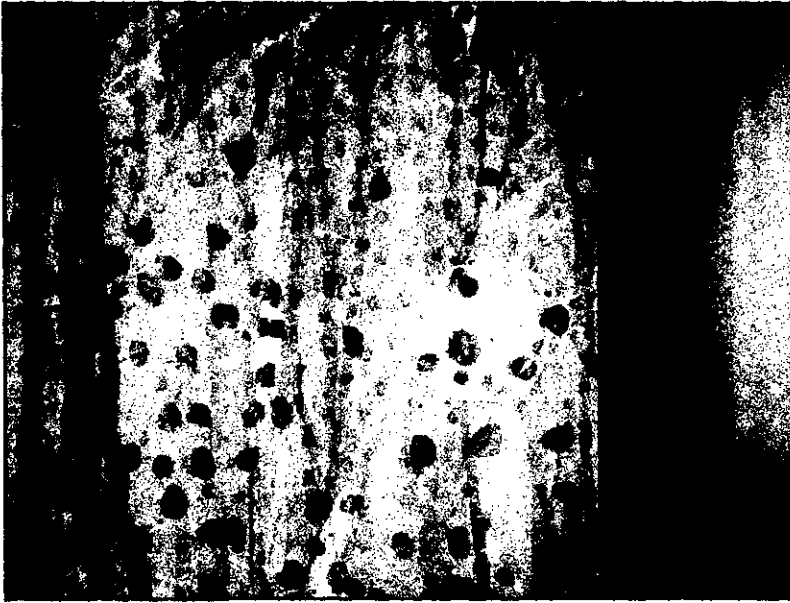


Figure 24c (detail of front and back)

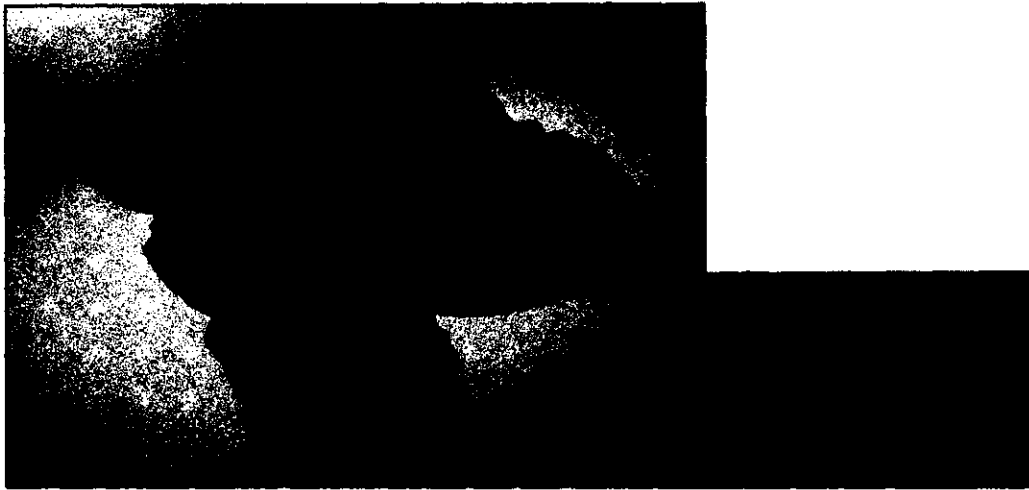


Figure 25 (full size shot and detail)



Figure 26

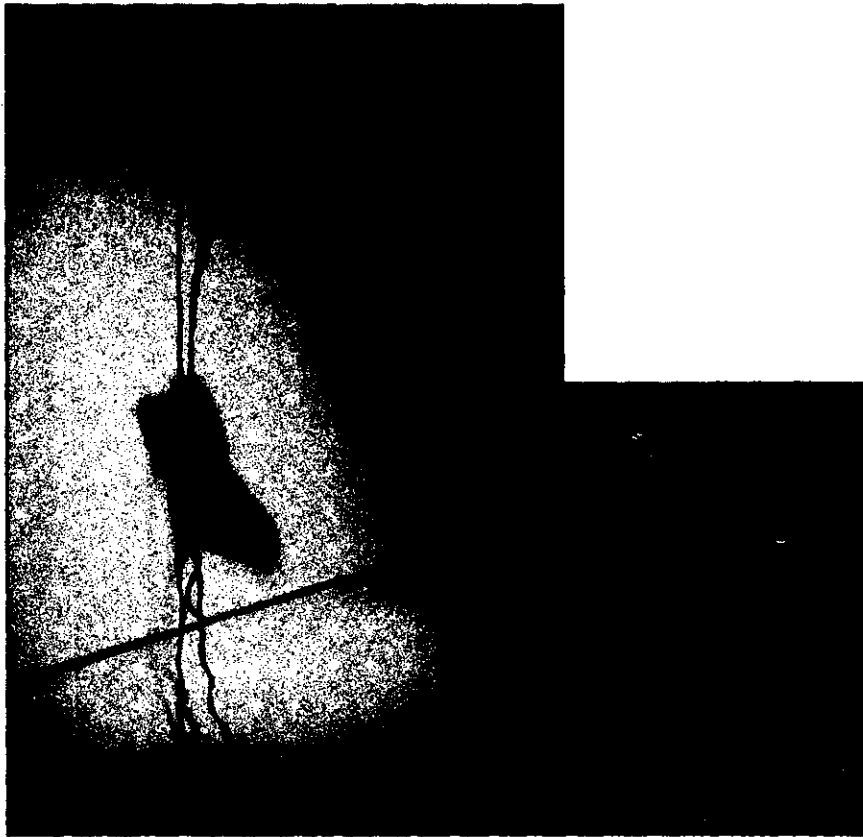


Figure 27

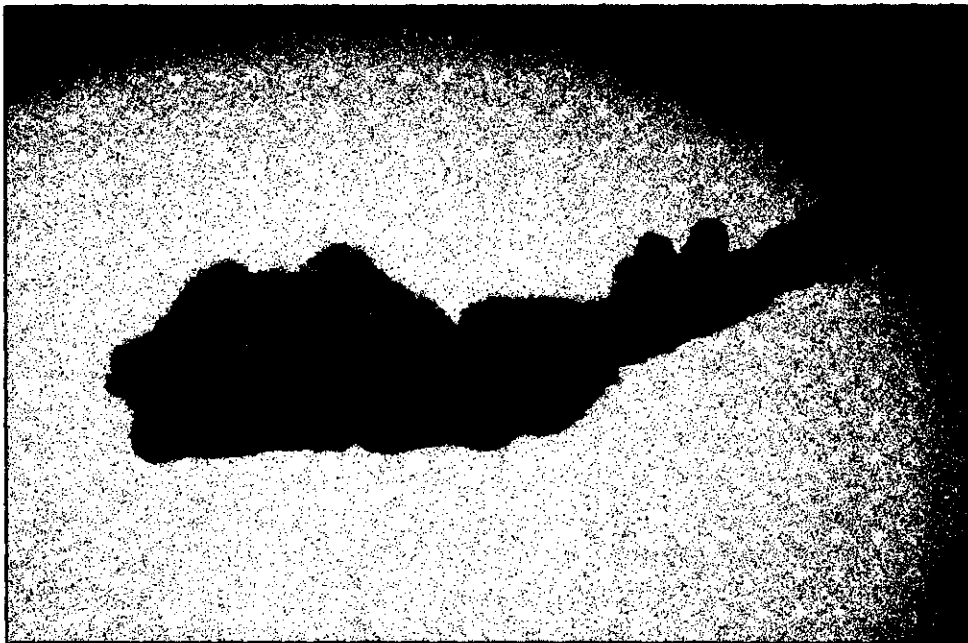


Figure 28

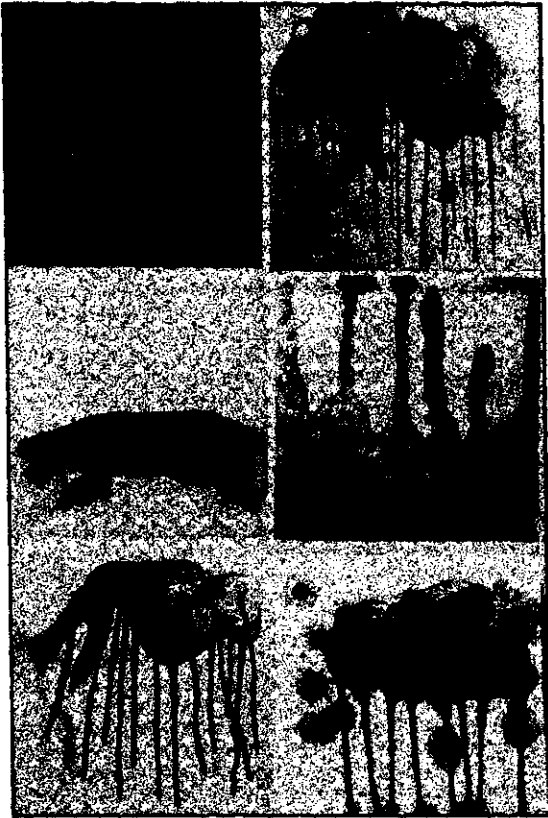


Figure 29

Table 1 (sources for cited art works):

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#2	Property of the artist
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#6	Property of the artist
#7a	Property of the artist
#7b	Property of the artist
#8	Front cover, <u>Louise Bourgeois: Stitches in Time</u>
#9	http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/bourgeois/lbpage48.html
#10	<u>p. 99, Louise Bourgeois: Stitches in Time</u>
#11	http://www.flowerseast.com/FE/Artists_Originals.asp?Artist=HICKS
#12	http://www.flowerseast.com/FE/Originals.asp?Artist=HICKS&OC=4
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#18c	Property of the artist
#19	<u>p. 33, Joyce Wieland</u>
#20	<u>p. 79, Joyce Wieland</u>
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