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Finding Cathartic Beauty in Trauma and Abjection

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Finding Cathartic Beauty in Trauma and Abjection

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**A thesis presented to the
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Graduate Committee

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

I. INTRODUCTION

II. BEAUTY AND THE BODY

III. ART AND ABJECTION

IV. TRAUMA AND CATHARSIS

V. FEMINISM AND VIOLENCE

VI. CONCLUSION

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

VIII. NOTES

ABSTRACT

Inspired by the dichotomy of beauty and the grotesque in relation to the female body, I set out to both find a balance and interrupt the balance between the two with my artistic practice. Defining beauty as something more significant and meaningful than a pretty image and the abject as something that inspires repulsion, I sought to find connection between the two. Through creating abject textures surrounding nude female forms, I discovered an underlying trauma latent in the artistic expressions of my work. The process of creating abject works of art has lead to catharsis and posttraumatic growth in my personal life and artistic practice. Through the work I have found beauty in the abject and abjection in beauty.

INTRODUCTION

The human body is a literal and metaphorical vessel in which both art and society store beliefs and emotions. We decorate it, abuse it, and objectify it until it physically deteriorates and becomes empty again. The female body is most often rendered by representational artists as “beautiful.” Curves and soft, supple skin entices viewers with their titillating youthfulness; alternately, the body is also strangely titillating as it inevitably ages, decays and withers. The core dichotomy of the abject body and the “beautiful” body is where my artistic perspective lies. The body is more than just a physical form; there is an emotional component to depicting it, as well, as human experience informs the representation of the body. In my work, emotional trauma that is held in the language of the body is presented more abstractly, creating a juxtaposition between not only the physically abject and the “beautiful,” but the emotional, as well. The poignant viewpoints of women in relation to their bodies has become a charged political topic.

Depicting the human form in a realistic manner, usually via drawing and painting, has always been a primary focus of my artistic interest. The body intrigues me as a subject and has inspired me greatly whether the figure is delicately rendered in a classical way, captivating the viewer in to explore the subtle details and nuances of the flesh or even when it is depicted abstractly or grotesquely in attempt to disgust viewer. In my recent work I have sought to find a balance between these two responses. At first, my practice seemed rooted in the superficial dichotomy of beauty and disgust, but it soon developed a layered and deeper investigation of trauma and catharsis. My quest is to find beauty and significance in the abject aspects of life and the body.

BEAUTY AND THE BODY

When the subject of beauty arises, it is often followed by this cliché: “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” While this is true to some extent, it is also a gross generalization. Our individual beliefs are shaped by cultural norms that define what is beautiful and what is disgusting regarding the body. Advertising is an especially powerful tool used to author these norms, and it tends to portray the human body as a pristine, beautiful, and over-sexualized object.

Our ideas of beauty were originally inspired by nature. Experiences with nature have, though, decreased in Western industrialized society. We mostly experience grid-based cities, sculpted suburbs, and landscaped parks. Raw, organic nature is usually only presented in digitally crafted images. These exaggeratedly pristine images are what we commonly associate with beauty: a crystalline waterfall, snow-capped mountains over a still lake. Author Eric G. Wilson discusses these false ideas of beauty:

“ When I say beauty, I don’t mean the Hallmark beauty, prettiness, really: those perfect sunsets on the coastal horizon or those tranquil panoramas from the rounded top of a mountain or those perfectly airbrushed faces, wrinkle free and vacant. The beauty I have in mind is something much wilder: the violent ocean roiling under the tepidly peaceful beams or the dark and jagged peaks that bloody the hands or those unforgettable faces, striking because of a disproportionate nose or mouth that somehow brings the whole visage into a uniquely dynamic harmony. Think of it. All pretty things are almost exactly alike, while all beautiful events are distinct. Prettiness, the manifestation of American happiness, is devoted to predictability and smoothness. The pretty view has no dangerous edges; the pretty face features no unexpected distortions. Don’t all postcards give off a similar idea, that nature is a tranquil scene merely to be enjoyed by humans? Don’t all supermodels look almost exactly alike, as if they were produced on some perfumed assembly line? ...So, it should by now be obvious you can’t discover beauty when you join the vacationing masses in search of poster aesthetics. Indeed, these folks-almost all of them happy types- can’t really perceive beauty at all. All that they see is their expectation of the picture-perfect shot, pretty and presentable. They go to the mountains

or the coast with numerous images downloaded into their heads. When they reach their destinations, they're not out to experience the strange terrain, the uncanny upsurges of gorgeous weirdness. They're rather in search only of occurrences that match their paper-thin minds. In this way, these scenery freaks don't get the world at all. All they notice is what they expect to witness, static shots of a Photoshopped globe."¹



Fig. 1: The Greek statue of Doryphoros by Polykleitos, Fig. 2: Photoshopped image before and after, Fig. 3: Stock photo of nature scene

Our ideas of beauty are spoon-fed to us, especially now with the ubiquity of technology and social media. We are constantly bombarded with images. These images subconsciously inform us of what is and isn't accepted as "beautiful" in society. I want people to understand that this kitsch reality *is not* reality but merely a tasteless experience that does not challenge us to have our own opinions. In my work, I try to create a challenging experience, something with substance. The experience of beauty should last longer than an ephemeral sunset. It should move us or change us in some way. Beauty is organic and untamed; it can be horrifying— in destruction and chaos; in raw, organic beauty; in sublimity that inspires awe. Awe is an overwhelming mixture of dread and wonder. The experience of awe elicited by the sublime is a complicated emotion that fills one with terror and amazement. Sublime beauty is a powerful and not wholly pleasant quality found in imagery not readily placed on the dining room wall. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl has described it as such:

"Beauty is a willing loss of mental control, surrendered to organic process that is momentarily under the direction of an exterior object. The object is not thought and felt about, exactly. It seems to use my capacities to think and feel itself...An experience of beauty may be intense, leaving a permanent impression, or quite mild and soon all but forgotten. But it always resembles a conversion experience, the mind's joyful capitulation to a recovered or new belief. The-merely attractive (pretty, glamorous) and merely pleasing (lovely, delectable) are not beauty, because they lack the element of belief and the feeling of awe that announces it."²

The perception of beauty in regard to the body in art and culture has evolved over time. Aristotle's philosophy of beauty is that it derives from nature, and to imitate nature is to imitate beauty. The Ancient Greeks were the first to systematically define their views of what was considered a beautiful body and created a set of rules to construct their ideal figures in art. Proportion and symmetry of the body were at that historical moment, very important aspects of

beauty. To this day, the ideals set forth by the Classical Greeks of Antiquity are consistent with contemporary Western society's standards of beauty. When a body is not symmetrical or proportionate, it loses its appeal. If it is extremely asymmetrical or disproportionate, it may verge on being "uncanny" or unsettling. Healthy bodies, in general, have been a consistent measure of beauty throughout history. Youth, strength, cleanliness, and health are often found to be aesthetically pleasing qualities to the viewer of an individual. In contrast, Western culture tends not to identify beauty with elderly or obese people; bodies that are aged, excessively large, or dirty are found unappealing. I find that artists who challenge others to see beauty in these bodies very inspiring in my own work.

Artist Jenny Saville creates large, exaggerated paintings of culturally strange or unattractive bodies. She has said that she paints these bodies because *she* finds them beautiful. Her active brushstrokes and use of color draw the in viewer at the same moment that her subjects pushes the viewer away, leaving them at a standstill. This confusion occurs when the audience is not sure whether to look closer or turn away from the overwhelming images; this is a balance I try to achieve in my work, as well. In her 1993 self-portrait, *Plan* (fig.4), Saville exaggerates the curves of her own body to appear large and fleshier than she actually is. She references plastic surgery by depicting topographical markings drawn on her skin making one question their ideals of beauty. These topographical marks make reference to the 3D and layers; this also connects to my work, as I focus on layers of material on the canvas.



Fig. 4: Jenny Saville, *Plan*, 1993 Oil on canvas 274 x 213.5 cm 108 x 84"

Beauty is often involved with desire: a desire to obtain beauty for ourselves as well as to have others find us beautiful. One could even push it further and say that our desire for beauty is lustful. Our most primal need is to procreate. Our desire for flesh is what has caused the media to objectify and over-sexualize the body. This constant bombardment of exaggerated, Photoshopped bodies shifts our societal perspective on what is considered beautiful. It causes us to look at what is natural about our bodies and find it disgusting. In Jenny Saville's self-portrait, she exhibits herself in a somewhat sexual manner by appearing to thrust her hips forward toward the viewers' face. The closest part of her body to the picture plane is her pubic region, while the top portion of her body appears to be above the horizon line. Her crotch is the focus of the image; it is the first thing we see. She looks down on the viewer with teeth bared, smashing her breasts closer to her body. She appears to be judging us for judging her body, creating a feeling of unease as we stare at her furry nether-regions.

Pubic hair also creates a bit of confusion, as a point where desire associated with genitalia and contemporary standards of beauty collide. For the female population, the subject of pubic hair and whether or not to have it has discreetly marched in and out of style in recent history. The pornography industry can be blame for the shaving fad; men have even come to expect women to shave their "downstairs" (and some have obliged). This image of Saville's wiry resistance to culture further suggests that she isn't interested in popular hetero-normative standards.

Body hair, both from the head and the crotch, is a significant aspect in my work. Hair is also an important aspect of beauty. Many cultures decorate, cut, color and shape their hair to make themselves beautiful. When hair is detached from the body, it changes its association and shifts toward abjection; in most cases, it ceases to be beautiful. Pulling hair out of the drain is an

example of abject hair. Alternately, some hair is valuable when detached from the body. If it is long, clean, and held together by a band, it is bought or donated to make wigs and hair extensions.

Similar to Saville's *Plan* (fig. 4), my painting, *Fetal* (fig. 5), depicts the genital region of the female body depicted in a way that allows the viewer to objectify the body without the figure staring back. The figure lies in the fetal position—a position of protection, exposure and vulnerability. The title also refers to the tangled cord near the figure that drops to the floor and is attached to an abject rounded form that could represent an abstracted fetus or internal organ. The figure is painted in a realistic way and is surrounded by an abstract background of brown textures. This surface surrounding the figure is especially abject in comparison with the classically beautiful figure, which is delicately depicted.

Beauty is both a universal and personal experience. There are many types of beauty, but the type of beauty I am most interested in creates a sense of awe and challenges the viewer to take in more than what is visually pleasing to the eye. There is even beauty in the grotesque. The human body is a beautiful subject to me, both physically and psychologically. I want my work to be more than simply pretty images of nude figures; instead, I want it to challenge the viewer to empathize with the figure and have a visceral response.



Fig. 5: Christy Kirk, *Fetal*, Oil on canvas, handmade flax paper, latex, coffee, rust, urine, foam, gold leaf, cheesecloth

ART AND ABJECTION

The abject can be any form or subject that creates disgust. The term abjection literally means "the state of being cast off." In common usage, it connotes degradation, baseness and meanness of spirit;³ it has been defined in post-structuralist theory as that which inherently disturbs conventional identity and cultural concepts.

In art, as in everyday life, the abject evokes a powerful emotional response. As such, the abject can be an incredible tool to invoke internal dialogue and challenge preconceived notions. Contemporary theorist Julia Kristeva writes about the abject subject in *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. Kristeva describes it as a physical, violent reaction of the body. She describes in detail how witnessing the abject turns her own body against her, and how it, too, becomes abject as she perspires and experiences nausea and dizziness. The response to the abject becomes more than just emotional disgust but a physical response to that disgust. The body speaks. Not just through its coded and territorialized outsides, but through its gleaming gut, chimera of bump and ooze. Biological "ab/objects" include byproducts and excesses of the body: excrement, blood, mucus, menses, vomit, pus, sometimes semen, and ultimately the corpse.⁴ Cultural abjections include sexual taboos, prisons, disease wards, freak shows, anything that threatens to confront the leakiness of order and other, the liminal, the borderline that defines what is fully human from what is not.⁵ When successfully utilized as an artistic motif, the viewer's subconscious prejudices toward what is vile, disgusting or taboo are overridden by an imposed curiosity to more deeply examine the piece, rather than the conditioned response of disengagement. The urge to pull away in disgust, when viewing an abject artwork, is counteracted by the impulse to see what "should not" be seen.

Art provides a bridge that allows the viewer to safely walk into an abject space and observe it without unsafe degrees of fear and anxiety. There are moments when it can reach in and feel real to the viewer, but in the end only acts as a window for the viewer to experience the subject without actually interacting with the subject. Much like a horror film, abject art elicits a definite emotional response that is quickly mitigated when the viewer recalls that what they're witnessing is "make believe." It isn't real, it is only made to look real and make you think about the subject without getting your hands dirty. Art allows a safe space for the viewer to explore the abject: the art is both a passive object hanging on a wall and a prompt for the observer to participate in.

Critic Dave Hickey insists that in cases where we witness art that doesn't agree with contemporary views of beauty, we "transcend the gaze", see with our hearts and acquiesce to the gorgeous authority of the image.⁶ Sometimes the beauty of a piece allows transcendence of the terror within a subject. When the "real" is present, it creates more of a discomfort and a more powerful response from the viewer. Art allows the person viewing the piece to feel the power and discomfort of the abject. As it does this, it invites the subject to see the beauty in the abject. Because art allows viewers to willfully experience the discomfort of the abject, it seems that art is a successful avenue through which to transcend uncomfortable subjects, create a visceral experience of them, and lend a palatability that would not be present otherwise. Through interpretation of the abject via the rules and principles of art, art transcends limitations and has the capacity to inspire new associations with and interpretations of the abject. For example, in Hickey's essay *Enter the Dragon*, he describes Robert Mapplethorpe's series, *Portfolio X*, as having a sense of light comparable to the work of Caravaggio. Mapplethorpe's *Portfolio X* was

not originally seen by the public as “beautiful,” due to its depiction of homosexual bondage. The images were graphic in nature and showed genitalia in an invasive way that made the viewer feel uncomfortable. One of the images, (fig. 6), showed a man holding his penis and shoving his finger into his urethra. In contrast to its controversial content, Mapplethorpe’s photographs have a keen aesthetic quality and sense of light that transgress the disturbing aspects of the image. From this example, Hickey explains that if the quality of the work is beautiful, then the abject subject matter can transcend the image.



Fig. 6: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Portfolio X*

Subjects that are seen as horrifying or controversial can also be seen as beautiful. Things that are considered disgusting or culturally taboo and unclean can transform into something beautiful. As Julia Kristeva: it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order—what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The abject transforms itself through the viewer and becomes a thing of beauty via its affective potency. A mother giving birth is a perfect example of something abject transcending into something beautiful. The process of expelling a child out of the body through the vagina is bloody and painful; however, the result is also the life of a child and is emotionally beautiful.

The abject balance the beauty in my work. In my studio, one can find a slew of grotesque little objects that appear to resemble body parts but are mutilated and decayed. I obsessively collect hair (my own or donated to me from others) to add a human element, something real and recognizable from the human body. This authentic signifier situated amidst clusters of other materials chosen for their resemblance to the corporal add a horrifying aspect to the work that counteracts the delicately painted nude female figures. The figure is sometimes layered with these materials to create the illusion that it is either being covered up by these abject textures or the textures are receding to reveal the figure underneath.

In the first painting of my current series, *Her Cathartic Decay* (fig. 7), the figure is completely covered in layers of grotesque textures of handmade flax paper, latex, and peeling gauze. The title suggests there is a female presence in this textured surface. If the viewer stares long enough at the peeling and sagging surface, the figure emerges from the decay. As a material, the latex constantly changes and deteriorates; it is not permanent and is meant to fall apart along with the rest of the painting. The fragility of the surface is epitomized by the piece's lack of

framework; the canvas is free to wrinkle and move, creating an ever-changing surface for the materials to attempt to cling to. The decaying materials are even more likely to fall and sag off the canvas due to its lack of stability and strength. All of these aspects are chosen to symbolize the fragility of the body itself and the shifting emotional states of an individual.



Fig. 7: Christy Kirk, *Her Cathartic Decay*, 2013, Handmade flax paper, oil on canvas, latex, gauze, hair, wax, twine (176"x 60")

TRAUMA AND INSPIRATION

Artwork that has been inspired by tragic human experiences generates intense emotional responses. War, disease, death, destruction, famine, and loss pull on the souls of those who survive it. What better way to process these emotions than to regurgitate them onto a canvas or transform them through sculpture? Not all art is meant simply for pleasure. Subconsciously or even consciously creating artwork to cope with past trauma is not an uncommon act in the art world according to Amy Stacey Curtis, author of *Women, Trauma and Visual Expression*. Curtis describes in her book how beneficial this can be not only for the artist but for the viewers as well; Unfortunately, the subject seems to be frowned upon.

“Another prominent theme in this book is the stigma trauma holds though it impacts us all. Many women artists who exhibit imagery communicating their trauma do not feel supported by the general public, nor the art world. And some artists who have experienced trauma choose not to exhibit related imagery because they feel their overall work will not be taken seriously, that the act could be damaging to their careers. A common survey response: ‘It is already difficult for women to be successful in his art world without the context of trauma.’”⁷

Tragedy translated through art has many purposes for both the artist and the audience and some traumatic historical events have found their way to canvases and museums without stigma. After World War II, many artists questioned the aesthetics of destruction and chaos. Destroy the Picture: Enter the Void, 1949-1962 was an exhibition that focuses on the experiments of artists related to destruction during that time. Many male artists destroyed the canvas by cutting, layering, or even burning materials. Paul Schimmel, Chief Curator of the exhibition states:

“...for these artists, destruction was not just a nihilistic act, and the void was not just a black hole of despair and anxiety: destruction was in a dialectical relation with creation, and the void was a space of potentiality. From the embers of the destruction of the picture plane emerged a medium reborn that powerfully registered the complex experience of living in

a world perched on the brink of self-annihilation.”⁸

I had a chance to see this exhibition in Chicago and felt emotionally connected to the work. I discovered that my work was very similar in its texture and sepia-tone color palette. I continue to explore artists inspired by loss and destruction who were included in this exhibit.

Anslem Kiefer is a German artist who has embraced loss as a rudimentary theme in his work. His practice is largely motivated by the emotional and cultural aftermath of World War II and his feelings of guilt for being German. The Holocaust was a dark moment in both German and world history. Millions of lives were lost due to hate, which created a deep wound in the world. Kiefer's work permits the healing of these wounds through catharsis. His landscapes appear like crusted-over fields of ash and decay. Their massive scale overwhelms the viewer in their melancholic abstract world. His thick layering of earth-toned materials on canvas seem to bury something beneath it. The paintings are more organic than realistic, becoming less about rendering forms accurately than the emotional aesthetics found in the way materials cling to or fall off the canvas. His work naturally decomposes as he intended – constantly changing and transforming over time.



Fig. 8: Anselm Kiefer 1984-87 *Burning Rods*, oil, acrylic emulsion, and shellac on canvas with lead, copper wire, straw, iron, and ceramic, 130 1/4 in. x 18 ft. 3 in. (330.8 x 556.3 cm)

My own work is similar to the textural surfaces of Kiefer's landscape paintings: organic earthtones slither off the canvas or cling to and wrinkle the fabric underneath. Abstract forms layer around and on top of the figure in the image. Unlike Kiefer, though, my depictions of the figure are usually handled realistically, allowing the background or external materials around the figure to symbolize internal emotions.

Although I have not had the experience of living through a devastating war, I have had my own personal brushes with the chaos of life. When my recent series of work started to come together, it was the first time I had created work from a subconscious level. I really didn't *know* what it was about. It was so different from the paintings and portraits I had made previously, where I would begin with a concept and then try to illustrate it. I was inspired on a visceral level

by the new materials I started using: handmade flax paper and gauze. I was casting skulls and dildos with paper and hanging gauze off the wall like flesh. It appeared archeological. At the time, I was also taking a course called “The Social Construction of Female Sexuality,” which encouraged me to look at my own sexual history. I felt that my work was a combination of sex and death, but I couldn’t figure out how the two aspects related.

One night, as I was conducting research for this course, I felt this subtle urge to cry. My eyes started to water. I briefly tried to ignore this urge to cry and continued reading, but I then wondered *why* I felt that urge to hold my feelings back. Maybe I *should* cry and let something out.

Once I started I couldn’t stop: I was suddenly sobbing uncontrollably. *Why? Why am I crying?* I began to realize I was releasing something that had been lying deep within me for years. Something I had refused to acknowledge as trauma and tossed off as something that most people go through. I started to cry even harder. I was purging. The harder I cried, the better I felt. It was a religious experience. I could suddenly feel within me this ancient thing that had withered up inside me and was festering like a corpse; it was seeping out of my pores. It was leaving me—this rotting thing I didn’t even know was there and was finally leaving my body. Things began to click in my mind as I twisted in this cathartic state with tears and snot streaming down my face. I connected all the dots in my life to this experience. Epiphany: *That’s why my art is the way it is. My art is festering because my subconscious is attempting to process a traumatic experience.* It was beautiful. I felt cleansed. Cleansed of a past trauma. We all experience trauma. Therefore, we can all process these emotions and learn and grow from them. This is called posttraumatic growth.

I chose to symbolize posttraumatic growth in my recent pieces by adding a little bit of gold leaf into the mixture of abject elements around my figures. I chose gold leaf due to the Japanese practice of kintsukuroi, which means “to repair with gold”. When pottery is broken or cracked, it is seen as more valuable and is repaired with gold. Just like this pottery, the human body/psyche is vessel that can be repaired. That wisdom and experience is valuable and prevents from further wear and tear. This application of gold leaf in my work is subtle and is minuscule in comparison to the size of the work and is “hidden” within the layers of grotesque textures. After psychological stress and trauma we can go through and process those emotions and shift through them until we find some positivity from that negative situation; we learn from it. From this process we can grow and heal which is a beautiful and powerful thing.



Fig. 9: Kintsukuroi example

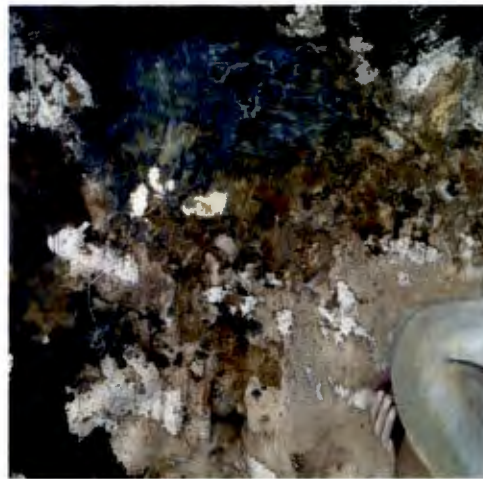


Fig. 10: Christy Kirk, *Fetal* detail of gold leaf

FEMINISM AND VIOLENCE

The history of art has been completely dominated by men, with female artists being almost unheard of or unrecorded until the 19th century. In Linda Nochlin's "Why are there no great women artists" she explains that if women could somehow avoid her duties as a wife and a mother and attend art school she could perhaps learn the fundamentals of drawing still life or animals as a hobby but she was not allowed to take a class on the figure because it was considered inappropriate for a woman to see nudity. Oddly enough she was allowed to model nude for the class... in the arts as in a hundred other areas, [it is] stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class, and above all, male.⁹

Both the lack of feminine perspective and the accepted misogyny of the cultures producing art have led to a male consensus-driven depiction of women that reinforced chauvinistic stereotypes. Men would often glorify their role over women through paintings and sculptures in European art. Women were shown as the male ideal of subjugated beauty. One topic that the male artist had the privilege of depicting is the subject of rape. Paintings and sculptures describing the aftermath of a huge battle or war when the victors celebrated or further destroyed their enemies by taking their women. The artwork that narrates these events depicts them as this heroic action in which a strong muscular man would scoop up a woman into the air showing off his strength and valor. These art scenes of rape are depicted as a passionate struggle that appears romanticized and inaccurate of reality. This is an external view of a male perspective of rape in this culture. However in today's society, Contemporary women have a different internal perspective on the subject matter and depict the horror of the act in its abject realness.

During the past half century, the feminist art movement has made great strides in challenging the accepted standards and roles of women. With the depiction of the grotesque, women used their bodies to express themselves often to the shock of the viewer, for the

grotesque also describes the aberration from ideal form or accepted convention, to suggest the misshapen, ugly, exaggerated, or even formless. Their art wasn't meant for the male gaze; it was a way for women to reclaim and own their bodies. Artists like Jenny Saville, Marina Abramović, and Kiki Smith take the female body and present it in these "controversial" ways. By utilizing abject female figures, they were expressing the constraints, abuse, and damage done by the gender roles imposed by a male hierarchy. The abject became a form of retaliation, a response to the confines of idealized beauty. It became a way for women to show that they are not a symbolic manifestation of male ego, but human beings, and thus made of the same traits that humanity comes with however flawed and disgusting it may seem. Abject art... is precisely this desire to break with resolution and categorization through the paradoxical use of categories of the abject. This strategy is subversive insofar as it manifests the failing of a subject to correspond to the predictable, disciplined, coherent body of contemporary discursive formations such as medicine, law, and psychology.¹⁰

Feminist artists depict women as both victims of psychological and sociological oppression and it was not pleasant to observe. They forced the viewer to acknowledge the reality of the body and of savage acts forced upon women. This intense emotional response is translated through the art of these women either through their own victimization or through an empathetic transgression. These works revealing the body as these twisted wounded forms translate through to the viewer stronger than any male depiction had before.

In my recent body of work, there is a violent residue present represented by abstracted textures that imply decay and blood splatter. The persistent use of female bodies in contrast to a deteriorating textural environment denotes a feminist context, and the initial reaction to the

subject matter also seems to imply violence done unto them—that they are the victim of the violence. Each piece has its own specific meaning in relation to the female body. It would be easy to construe my work as violent, though I don't see it as such. It is much more passive—akin to the slowness of aging or decay—rather than the expedient nature of violence and aggression. My work forces the viewer to look at the female form both as a praised object of conventional beauty and the naturalistic, morbid aspects of the conditions of decay. The content of the work is not violent, it is passive, but it does connote some controversial situations; such as abortion.

Of my recent work, *Fetal* (fig. 5), is the piece that is the least vague in regards to the intentions behind it. The title refers to both the position of the figure and the abstract sculpture that sags to the floor. I intended this piece to represent several situations at once so that anyone who had ever experienced pregnancy could relate to it. It depicts a female whose identity is covered by cloth and lies in the protective fetal position and yet her genitalia is exposed to the viewer. The audience can look at her in whatever way they choose be it lust or disgust. Our judgement of her body would be extended to the sack on the floor leading to questions. Did she have an abortion? A miscarriage? Did she have a healthy child but suffers from postpartum depression? There are many issues that this image could address. The two aspects that stand out the most are the painted figure and the rope-like sculpture that droops to the floor off the surface of the canvas. This rope or cord obviously makes reference to the umbilical cord. The material is twine wrapped in handmade flax paper and latex. Artist Kiki Smith also uses ropes and cords expelling from the female body in her work. Her three pieces *Train I* (fig. 11), *Train II* (fig. 13), and *Peabody* (fig. 12), depict sculptures of the female form dedicating a long trail of feces, menstruation, and urine. The menstruation and urine piece are formed by strings of red and

yellow beads to symbolize the bodily fluid. Unlike Smith I did not connect my cord to the body for fear that it would read too obviously to the viewer; instead, I disconnected it to also suggest an emotional disconnection.



Fig. 11: Kiki Smith, *Train*, 1993, Fig. 12: Kiki Smith *Peabody*, 1993, Fig. 13: *Train II*

In some ways, I do allow objectification of the female body to balance out the grotesque and to address that as a culture we commonly allow objectification to happen like in my piece, *Rupture* (fig.14), which seems to be focused on the breasts of the female body. The objectification is in a way abject. I would want the viewer to eventually discover the beauty in the abject and conversely the abject in the beauty. I intend to inspire empathy for the hidden and fractured figures. She is both interrupted by the cloth and her despair. She is broken. The viewer can either chose to judge her or relate to her potential experience. I have also chosen not to depict the face of the women in my work as identity of the female is not important but the general idea of the female body and the idea it represents in the context like in my *Untitled* (fig. 15) piece in which the face is veiled. American poet and literary critic, Susan Stewart, says this on the importance of depicting the face:

*“What remains invisible to us becomes the primary subject of figurative art: the head and shoulders of the portrait and the bust. Because it is invisible, the face becomes gigantic with meaning and significance. Hence, in the style of the pornographer, to blindfold someone is enough to make him or her less than human, to make him or her ‘only a body.’”*¹¹

The power of showing female bodies realistically defecating is it removes the element of male objectification. Making this kind of art about female bodies is a form of reclamation of their own bodies showing the viewer that an honest portrayal of the female form can be as beautiful or even more sensual than the idealized male vision. Kiki Smith says: When people are dying, they are losing control of their bodies. That loss of function can seem humiliating and frightening. But, on the other hand, you can look at it as a kind of liberation of the body. It seems like a nice metaphor, a way of thinking about the social, that people lose control despite the

many agendas of different ideologies in society, which are trying to control the body(ies)... medicine, religion, law, etc. Just think about control; who has the control of the body? Does the body have control over itself? Do you?... Does the mind have control over the body? Does the social?¹²

By removing the traditional ideals of beauty and portraying female figure as grotesque and raw there is a sense of beauty and desire that somehow occurs at the same time. It manages to convey beauty and desire while at the same time breaking from conventional standards of feminine beauty, of the desire to own or occupy the body of another. The abject body is the flesh that cannot be desired or consumed in a sexual manner, instead meant to be consumed by the eyes and thoughts. Abject beings are pushed beyond the margins of subjecthood, but they may also push back, challenging the stability of readable and enforceable norms.¹³ In that lies the beauty of the abject body.

The use of the grotesque in feminist art forces the viewer to acknowledge the boundaries they have placed women in. Positions and beliefs they hold on women's place and role in their lives and within society become challenged; as Julia Kristeva said in her seminal work on abject art: it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.¹⁴

We are repulsed because we are challenged. Women's forms have traditionally confined to roles exemplifying fertility, matrimonial nurturing, happiness, submission and desire. As we are repulsed by our challenges we must find the beauty in that repulsion, turn the abject on its head.



Fig. 14: Christy Kirk, *Rupture*, 2014, Oil on canvas, coffee, rust, urine, handmade flax paper, latex, charcoal, hair, nylon, gauze.

CONCLUSION

The beginning of the beauty and abjection series started unplanned and chaotic. There was no original idea that I wanted to take form, it was simply the act of intuitively creating that developed into these concepts of attraction and repulsion. I did not try to force the material to portray an idea but merely the idea was born from the combination of materials, creating a natural gateway from my subconscious to the work. The trauma that I had experienced seeped into my work as the coffee I poured seeped into the canvas. I layered it and covered the stains with materials as a subconscious symbolic representation of my inner psyche. The archaeological decay that arose from my experimenting with materials caused me to break down the walls I had built in order to discover my latent intentions.

The process in my recent paintings usually begins with coffee and raw unstretched canvas. I splatter the coffee all over and let the coffee spread where it wants. I try not to have too much control over this, the coffee has unexpected patterns as it dries especially as I add elements like gauze and steel wool. It will absorb more in some areas and pool in others; it will mix and stain differently with the steel wool. This process is mostly done on the floor. Puddles of liquid-coffee, urine, and ink- spread and dry in patterns and resemble blood. It often looks like a massacre has taken place and that the canvas is merely the drop cloth for the destruction. At this point I become attached to certain stains that have developed on their own. I work around and with them when I add textures and then draw out the female body. I want the stains to communicate with the figure, though it is sometimes separated from the stains and the textures, sometimes they engulf her.

In the paintings there are many dichotomies at work. There is a layering of destruction and healing, chaos and order, acceptance and anarchy, - the obvious- beauty and abjection. Just as I explore my own desires to depict a commonly beautiful form -the female body- and juxtapose it with the abject and trying to make it beautiful in a sublime way. I wound the canvas and then attempt to bandage it/her and heal it. There is a symbolic approach between the figure and the abstraction in the work in the way I render them in different ways. The figure is rendered with a delicate hand, with meticulous detail and realism. The abstract texture surrounding the body is worked on with much less precision and almost violent. Textures may appear wet, translucent and fleshy or cracked and peeling like leaves or mummified skin, layer on the surface of the canvas. This juxtaposition of classical painting and violent surface making comes from my desire to both glorify the beautiful body and the raw emotional aspect that comes from the tactility in how I get into my work.

When an artist presents us with a subject we would normally be repulsed by, and yet we find ourselves willingly drawn in, engaging and communicating with the piece, they have successfully communicated a metaphor of aesthetics and role. Due to the participation of the viewer in the experience of the abject combined with the beautiful, and the power of these seemingly opposed aesthetics, beauty becomes the result of the juxtaposition, and our experience of that beauty is visceral and personal. It is easy to apply beauty in aesthetically symmetrical or organic shapes, but when we apply symbolism and context to subjects, we can perceive beauty in subjects that we would not describe as beautiful. Is beauty inherent in objects or is beauty the result of the interplay between what is portrayed and the resultant experience of the viewer? One finds that just because the subject or the content may be fearful or abject to the observer it does

not mean that beauty can not be found there. Beauty exists in nature and nature can be a very abject place but if we understand nature, we see it as a constant cycle of life intertwining the abject with beauty. Both perspectives can be seen through nature and through art. Human experience is in itself beautiful and should be recognized as such in both the pleasant and not so pleasant aspects of life.



Fig. 14: Christy Kirk, *Untitled*, Oil on canvas, coffee, handmade flax paper, latex, gauze, hair, urine, rust, graphite, gold leaf

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¹ Wilson, Eric. G. *Against Happiness*

² Schjeldahl, Peter. *Notes on Beauty*. Pratt Institute. 1994.

³ Childers, Joseph/Hentzi, Gary eds, *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press 1995)

⁴ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982, trans. Leon S. Roudiez

⁵ Jones, Leisha "Women and Abjection: Margins of Difference, Bodies of Art" in *Visual Culture & Gender*, Vol. 2, 2007

⁶ Hickey, Dave. *Enter the Dragon: The Vernacular of Beauty*. 1993.

⁷ Curtis, Amy Stacey. *Women, Trauma and Visual Expression*. 2005.

⁸ Destroy the Picture: Enter the Void.

⁹ Nochlin, Linda. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews* January 1971: 38-39

¹⁰ Ross, Christine. "Redefinitions of Abjection in Contemporary Performances of the Female Body" in *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (Cambridge U.K.: University of Cambridge Press 2003) 152

¹¹ Stewart, Susan. *On longing : narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press. 1984.

¹² Winters, Robin "An Interview with Kiki Smith," in *Kiki Smith* (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1990), 127

¹³ Jones, Leisha "Women and Abjection: Margins of Difference, Bodies of Art" in *Visual Culture & Gender*, Vol. 2, 2007, 63

¹⁴ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press 1982), trans. Leon S. Roudiez, 4