Spring 5-15-2015

"Am I Winning?"

Diana J. Casanova
Washington University in St. Louis, dianajcasanova@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/samfox_art_etds
Part of the Art and Design Commons, and the Fine Arts Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate School of Art Theses by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
“Am I Winning?”

By

Diana Judith Casanova-Chaney

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis

Thesis Advisor
Monika Weiss

Primary Advisors
Buzz Spector
Jessica Baran

Graduate Committee
Heather Bennett
Angela Malchionno
Abstract:

Mesmerized by horror, my artistic practice investigates traumatic stories of history, myth, personal narrative, and fiction. The serial narratives are imposed upon two decapitated historical queens, Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn. Represented through opposing sides, the women’s facial planes fracture and stretch and erupt in oral infestations. Stories of rage flood the compositions, fabricating an epic battle and argument. Through influences of Catholicism, I construct disputes over the feminine body. Monstrous forms are the effect of combining opposing terms, formulating humanistic and sympathetic symbology. Mirror Theory and the myth of Medusa defend a destruction of self through reflection.

Influenced by comic book graphics and historical depictions of horror by artists such as Goya and Kiki Smith (among others). I create large ballpoint pen drawings, with blood-pigmented ink. Within numerous minute details, the lines illustrate tiny eyes and ears along the jawlines, lack of neck. Drawn beads transform into infestations, vomit, diagrams, and clothing accessories. The absence of body is explicit to horror and violence.

This thesis document is an expansion upon storytelling, narrative, trauma, theory, and the feminine body while developing an argument about sex, penetration, and accusations.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... 2

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 4

Chapter 1: Transformative History .............................................................................. 5

Chapter 2: Trauma-mama: Relationship between Mother and Trauma ..................... 10

Chapter 3: Medusa-ism: Conversation with Kristeva ................................................. 16

Chapter 4: Post-Post Issues (After Catholic Feminism) ............................................. 21

Chapter 5: Illustrating Horrors, Influences ............................................................... 24

Chapter 6: Off the Edge of the Tower/ To Be Put In Place ...................................... 27

Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 30

Epilogue: “Am I Winning?” ......................................................................................... 33

Endnotes ...................................................................................................................... 34

Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 36

Illustration Citations ................................................................................................... 37

Illustrations .................................................................................................................. 39
Introduction:

In my artistic practice, I deal with traumas, narratives, histories, and the feminine. I do so through creating images that are both unsettling and reassuring in their highly representational and surreal character. In this thesis document I invite readers to consider the biographical, psychoanalytical, poetic, literary, and historical context for my practice as well as my choices of Medusa and imaginary, which influences my stylistic graphic approach.

Circulating around storytelling, my studio practice researches and narrates the horrors of being human, chaos of trauma, and results of post-situational harm. Through multiple interjected histories with personal narrative, I layer traumas; simple yet harmful, complex yet everywhere. I reinterpret and reconstruct segments of the body. I seek to organize hurt while avoiding numbness.

In the thesis document I explore personal narrative relationship to storytelling. I focus on specific context of trauma, monsterfication, influences of Catholicism, and our understanding of the female body. Among connections to other artists and theories that pertain to my practice, my thesis also describes my work, especially the thesis project, *Off the Edge of the Tower/ To be put in Place* in which I explore oppositional terms relating to the feminine.
Chapter 1: Transformative History

Prepare to be burden with personal memories, terrible histories, and tear soaked pages. Endless daydreams, I emerge into consciousness for brief period of time. Upon awakening, I encounter a necessary stumble in catching up with my surrounding peers.

As an artist, I am interested in the horrors of being human, in the things I cannot control, and the harm I cause. I am interested in the storytelling form. Storytelling is the most influential form of communication, when narrated right, stories can convince, form shape, and manipulate anyone. Stories are as old as human beings. Humans created stories. Some adults believe they are too old and wise to be listening to fables, yet majority of communication is that of fiction and storytelling. A story rarely begins with “Once Upon a Time” or “A Long Time Ago in a Far Away Land”. Rather most stories come in from everyday conversation.

As a child my daydreams did not result from written literature. I was a slow learner, left behind, and then proceeded to be passed forward in the public school system. This could be the result of quietness and being extremely introverted. It took until the fourth grade where I was taught to read. My teacher, Ms. Ruggie realized my illiteracy. Her solution was to exchange reading lessons for recess. During this frustrating time, my young self hated every moment. I felt dumb, I felt picked out. It was until years later, I did appreciate her efforts into my catching up. For the rest of my teenage years, I engulfed myself in the world of fiction. Books allowed my body to stay fixated in a
particular point in space-time, while allowing my mind free to ramble in the land of make-believe.¹ Any fairy tale could grab my attention. I love books.

The printed series, titled Headlessness [Figure 1], is an encyclopedia-like book. The project was an expansive exploration of the female history of beheading, decapitations, and other head-like alterations. The head is both the brain case and portrait. The traumatic stories range from biblical, mythological, historical, fictional, and folk traditions. The pronto-plate lithography method allowed an exploration into the drawn line and a re-introduction on ballpoint pen draftsmanship. Through the research leading up to the completion of this project, I plunged myself into the written word. I reread and studied these stories, while I reimagined the representations. This series is an important milestone in my practice. The prints foreshadowed the development of beheaded queens and the conversion of Medusa. The prints were a strange transformation from my previous work of hyper-sexualized monstrous headless bodies [Figure 2] into identifiable fractured portraits [Figure 1].

As I was immersing myself in fiction, I became scared of growing up. I desired to be young forever. I played with Legos, held on to my dolls, rolled around in mud with the boys, yet never backed down from a fight. I desired for this youth to always last. Earlier circumstances stole my childhood and innocence. I lacked a positive influence of adulthood due to abandoning parental figures and my older sister of fourteen being pregnant pretending to lead the pack. Then unwanted touch became a lack of control over my own body, coinciding with puberty. I hated my breasts. I wrapped them through my teenage years. In sports practices I wore three sports bras, to keep the fleshy glands flat against my ribs. I hated becoming a woman, I desired to be just a kid again. I
did not ever desire to be a boy; I had no interest in having a penis. I did not have what Freud calls penis envy. In these fictions, I could engross myself into a different world. I could take someone else’s hurt and problems and solve them page-by-page. In *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, by Jonathan Gottschall, beautifully states:

> “We daydream about the past: things we should have said or done, working through our victories and failures. We daydream about mundane stuff, such as imagining different ways of handling a conflict at work. But we also daydream in a much more intense, storylike way. We screen films with happy endings in our minds, where all our wishes—vain, aggressive, dirty—come true. And we screen little horror films, too, in which our worst fears are realized.”

Stories are chronological segments of words that tell (oral) or illustrate an event. This act of storytelling is an engaging process, often embellishing details to educate, persuade, and entertain to instill a moral value. Storytelling can range from historical events to fictionalized fantasies, sometimes overlapping. The history of storytelling is as old as mankind. Storytelling began as an oral tradition, which would be passed down from generation to generation. It eventually evolved into the written text. His-story, is defined as the story of humanity. “Homo fictus (fiction man), is the great ape with the storytelling mind.” When a story is experienced, the audience allows us to be invaded by the teller. Through language, storytelling violates the mind and alters thoughts to hallucinate a reel of images imposing onto our consciousness. The human mind tells stories to itself, through daydreams, nightly hallucinations (sleep), conversation, and reading. Daydreams are the minds default state. Daydreams can reconfigure alternative
solutions to the most mundane issues. Dreams or nightly hallucinations are extremely difficult to study, which occur independent of REM.⁴

The act of reading is often seen as a “passive act: we lie back and let writers pipe joy into our brains.”⁵ Reading is an invasion into our consciousness. Storytelling and reading is an escape into alternate worlds. In my own discovery of reading, I began a new life, one filled with possibility. Each page, I could glimpse into my memories and choose ideal characteristics to the “adult” I desired. Through the morals of the stories I read about, I took character traits I found admirable and applied them to my own life. Reading became an act of the intellect. This use of language is one the most influential instruments in a world crowded with images. Leading to the world of comics, the combination of both the written word and glorious imagery spread across shiny pages caught my imagination.

Amidst my research of traumatic headless stories, I created another series titled, Headlessness. In [Figure 3] Headlessness: The Green Ribbon, I depict an abstract version of the short children’s horror story, The Green Ribbon from the book In a Dark Dark Room by Alvin Schwartz.⁶ The small-collaged paintings emphasize my own placement within the written words: I am either the victim or the victor. Through this short series of six paintings, I understood I did not want to be the subject of my work in the literal or pictorial sense. I did not want to stare at my own self-portrait, as a symbol. This consciousness did not feel correct within the traumatic context of the literature. I became extremely aware of what “I did not” want my work to talk about, and I began to adjust it accordingly.
The work I had created before graduate school, which I continued throughout my first semester, came to a nervous halt. In the beginning of my second year of graduate school, I appropriated two of my researched subject characters and began a dialogue between them. My work switched from headless monstrous figures [Figure 1] to drawings of heads [Figure 4].

My personal narrative is just one level of my work. Using history as another story, I reveal truths and alternative perspectives. Although the act of reading is enjoyable, my work focuses on the characters in stories that are overcome with obstacles of slander, fear, and death.
Chapter 2: Trauma-mama: Relationship between Mother and Trauma

My queens, my women, my mothers, are a complex and compound relationship. The identification of the mother figure, her position has changed over the centuries. The origin of these vessels is of a womb, the in-between of the father. This is a gateway for male inheritance as the child and heir. The mother, homemaker is trapped within the constructed walls of a shelter. A home is such a strange place of belonging symbolizes family. A structure can only be a home for duration of remembrance, a level of history embedded into the walls. A mother is home; she is the connection between belonging and remembrance. She remembers her children and her children remember her. Regrets, pain, trauma, and guilt can break this balance. I become consumed with guilt when I think of my mother. I never want her to feel neglected. She gave her womb, her organs to host my ungrateful soul. She created an imperfect human. I have come to call myself a falsified adult, a terrified intellect, a broken person, a fraud in my own skin, but most importantly a bad daughter.

Within my artistic practice I collage stories of queens and my mothers. These two queens are represented through the two icons of Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn. I imply these two queens are my two mothers, Helen Constantine (Birth) and Tamara Casanova (Step). But in reality these could be any two women battling out their problems. I am not interested in depicting these two women as either victim or villain, but as both. They are both human, horribly flawed with a sympathetic hand remembering and organizing their hurt.
When the second year of graduate school began, the first pieces [figure 4], I developed were slightly larger-than-life, portrait-style drawings of Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn. I distinctly chose these women for their historical backgrounds. The commonalities between the two queens were beheadings, false accusations, and their well-known iconographic status. The dynamic duo, I will call them, created a conversation about power, sexuality, and appearance. Upon researching Anne Boleyn, she was well known for her sharp tongue, intelligent conversation, temper, and being Henry VIII’s other woman. Anne Boleyn convinced Henry to leave his wife, and change the church, and subsequently gave her head for her daughter: Queen Elizabeth I. Marie Antoinette is commonly known as the teen idol and the last Queen of France. Marie Antoinette was thrown into marriage at a young age, causing rebellion, exuberant spending, and a flirtatious appetite. Within my research of the two women, I studied the multiple points of view of their lives. I became determined to view these women with an open heart. I became sympathetic to their situations; I was determined grant these human beings the benefit of the doubt.

The conversation between the dynamic queens convinced me that if these women lived during the same time period and knew of one another, they would loathe each other. Since these women were from two different countries, with two different personalities, I came to the conclusion that a war would be inevitable. *American History X* [Figure 5] (title courteous from my own mother) created a violent scene just before impact. Marie Antoinette is about to let go of a cinder block to smash in Anne Boleyn’s head. This one cell comic scene is of a distinct memory between my mother and stepmother. Although the action never took place in reality, the imposed narrative was of my mother
threatening to “bash in my stepmother’s face”. I purposely chose to depict Anne Boleyn’s head detached from her body, indicating breaking an already broken woman. Overly aware of the power of gossip, I have witnessed and will continue to witness multiple women taking part in ridiculing others, in the purpose of either boosting one’s ego or as a defense mechanism. Within my own life, I try not to take part in these festivities; I believe it is a monstrous act.

It became apparent that my relationship with my mother felt abnormal. My entire life, I placed my mother on a pedestal, as a heroine. Although I know my mother to be human and flawed, I could not disconnect myself from this image. My adoration for my mother is exceedingly guarded; in a way I believe I am still a part of her.

Daughters mirror their mothers, whether wanted or not. The motherly figure is literally doubled, features are inherited and personality traits are acquired. The mirroring effect gives offspring fragments of their parental genetics.

“This development is experienced as a temporal dialect that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The Mirror Stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation- and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extend from a fragmented body-image to form its totality that I shall call orthopaedic- and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development.”

"7"
Jacques Lacan’s explains in *The Mirror Stage* the relationship between infant and mother as one being, indistinguishable from the other. The infant assumes identification with the mother. This doubled image plays with a mirroring disposition of an image of one’s own body presented in dreams and hallucinations. A short period lasting approximately eighteen months in the child’s development. I believe this emotional state can be continued throughout adulthood due to trauma. This psychoanalytical conversation begins with Freud, a man I find myself in multiple arguments with.

My first memory of a mirror takes place in my dining room. A panel of mirrors spread across one of the walls. All I can recollect is staring into my own face, my eyes in particular. I noticed my eyes were green. Startled by this realization, I had always known my eyes to be blue. I do not remember looking into a mirror and seeing blue eyes, but I just knew they had changed. After this awareness onto my consciousness, I ran to my mother to show her my eyes. My mother, the person who had looked into my little face for two years at this point, passively responded, “Yes your eyes.” And that was it. It was the first of many changes to my constantly changing body observed in a mirror.

For example [Figure 6], I use symmetry and mirroring effects in my work to balance the compositions as well as to insure equality to my subject matter. As stated earlier, my characters are both victim and villain in a monstrous form. In the printed series *Falling Apart* [Figure 6], I etch fragmented representations of Anne and Marie portraits placed upon a hive like pedestal. The pedestal represents an untouchable status, personal motherly qualities, and domain. Historical context states these women were privileged, idealized, and chosen by god. Queens were to be gazed upon; their sole purpose was to produce an heir. They were to represent their country and government.
There queens, conversely, depicted broken expectations. Both pushed fashion further: Marie Antoinette indulged in lavish dresses and Anne Boleyn showed the front of her hair. In addition into this printed series, I introduced another element of wrapping cloth. As a symbol for memory, shelter, and concealment I used a ghost mono-print process. The entire plate printing process can be closely related to the effect of mirroring. An image is pressed or embedded into a flat surface (paper), always in reverse, echoing the original plate.

In addition to the Mirror Theory, abandonment is another shattering state between mother and child. This lonesome state of being left behind and neglected produces depression and a lingering anticipation of return. Abandonment is a significant trauma in my biographical history. In one sense, my narrative is invested in the displacement of mother and lack of parental figures, altering a young developing mind. In another sense, my work creates the effects of trauma, destroying and altering an individual. Dr. Seymour Keitlen states, “adult behavior is greatly decided by events which take place during childhood.” From my childhood experience, I dispense extreme depression and explosive rage. I funnel excess energy into the highly elaborate and detailed drawings.

Often my research encounters and unexpectedly collides with the Oedipus complex, where trauma and fear originate. The relationship between parents and children is frequently compared to the Oedipus complex, in which Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. “The complex is unconscious because its conscious perception would produce painful feelings of anxiety and guilt.” Freud named this theory after the Greek tragedy. Sigmund Freud argues that this trauma occurs from the ages two to six. The child develops two emotional ties between parents, especially to the parent of the
opposite sex. In Lacan’s *Mirror Theory*, development of self-recognition occurs at eighteen months, upon separation from one’s mother. Lacan uses the term “abjection which is the process by which the infant separates from the mother. The feelings of revulsion and horror, and the action of expelling the mother, shatter the narcissism and result in feelings of insurmountable horror.” Although this is a shattering state of fear within a toddler, Kristeva’s argument is that it begins at a child’s suckling and the rejection of breast. In my opinion, I believe you cannot truly determine where trauma starts because then it could be the moment of birth or even when sperm fertilizes the egg. Trauma is all significant emotional and physical events that are abrupt and intrude within anyone’s story. *In the simplest terms, taught in Buddhism, ‘life is suffering’.* Jonathan Gotteschall states,

> “Most memoirs are strewn with unhidden falsehood. Crack opens the average memoir, and you will find the story of a person’s life. The story will be told in a clearstory grammar, complete with problem structure and good-guy, bad-guy dynamics. The dramatic arcs are suspiciously familiar; the tales of falling down and rising up, suspiciously formulaic.”

My experience of trauma is a subjective position. In my opinion, no story can be told truly accurate is in a chronological order. Due to the storytelling mind, I continuously force words and memories into orderly format. My mothers, my queens are just two layers of the story I am interested in. These traumatic experiences start from early childhood and continue into adulthood.
Chapter 3: Medusa-ism: Conversation with Kristeva

In the book, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, Julia Kristeva explains the story of Medusa as tragedy with multiple traumas. Through storytelling, she defines Medusa’s stages of transformation from human form into monster. I find Medusa’s transformations correspond with certain alterations to my drawings and a perception of my own life. The multiple states of Medusa’s story are chronologically as followed: birth, beauty, rape, monster, hunted, death, and afterlife.

Medusa was born mortal; she was doomed to die. Medusa’s birth was traumatic. I experience trauma to be the result of an end or death. This could be the death of innocence, childhood, virginity, etc. The parallel between birth and beauty is that of innocence and virginity. Within my drawings I consciously use the elements of pearls, lilies, and blank space to symbolize cleanliness and purity [Figure 8]. Also I use various tactics to compromise this space with fleshy components, blood, and fragmentation. My work is invested in creating a beast or monster while together illuminating segments of a human head.

The monsterfication process has been evident in my work ever since I can remember. I am fascinated with altering an image in a horrifying state. This frequently results from segmenting the human body into grotesque forms. On occasion I find my audience repulsed by the imagery. I play between the boundaries of formally pleasing and iconically ugly or in simpler terms morbid and beautiful. For example in [Figure 7] R Test 01-03, the segments of collage, printed matter, and monsterfication transformed the imagery from the solo-morphed figure [Figure 2] into fragmented planes. This
Frankensteainian approach to the subject matter incorporated cutting and sewing paper into a newly configured surface. The original source of the linoleum plates was ribs, breasts, and clavicle of the torso [Figure 7]. The intent of this exercise was to observe and question the audience perception, similar to a Rorschach test. My analyzed data served inconclusive, but was amusing in duration. There is a consistent theme of interest in psychology.

When Poseidon rapes Medusa, Athena punishes her, transforming her into the monster. Captivated by this abrupt trauma within Medusa’s story, I am obsessed with her mutation/monsterfication, shift in power, and gaze. The myth of Medusa has been studied numerous times by historians, anthropologists, feminists, etc. There are different interpretations and retellings of the myth that displaced guilt. Some writers will translate this horrific event into Medusa as temptress, seductress, and purposely desecrating the Athenian temple. Since the myth describes Medusa as beautiful, virginal, and pure, it suggests that that sexist thought, “she asked for it”. I believe Athena altered Medusa to be more powerful and to never allow violation to occur again, perhaps a defense mechanism against additional destruction. Kristeva explains Medusa’s new appearance as follows,

“Anthropologists and art historians have not failed to point out that this slimy head, surrounded by coiled snake hair, evokes the female sexual organ—the maternal vulva that terrifies the young boy if he happens to “eye it.” Freud discerns there the fascination and horror that female castration prompts just as much as the genital power of the mother, original valley of humans. In unpacking the medusan symbolism, however, we cannot forget to pause at the eye: Medusa-Gorgon cannot be viewed, her look petrifies, her eye brings misfortune; an evil
eye, it kills. Female vulva, Medusa’s head is a slimy, swollen, sticky eye, a black hole, its immobile iris surrounded by ragged lips, folds, pubic hair.”

She becomes female genitalia; Medusa’s monstrous form is what lies between women’s legs. Although my queens are depicted in monster states, consciously I do not view their heads as the female sex organ.

The metamorphosis into a monstrous beast has influenced my work. *In Which You Lack* [Figure 8] a book of etching prints bound in leather is placed into a wooden box. The book is my own interpretation of the two drawn characters deaths. Anne Boleyn morphs into a monster, monster into Marie Antoinette, the images are layered on top of one another. This transformation does not resolve in the images and there is no solution. The monster and woman are both beheaded. The book is placed in a skin; the leather is not sewn into the pages. It is contained in a simple wooden box, which constantly keeps the book open. It is a dedication to the treatment of death that occurred. Both the bodies of Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn were thrown into mass graves. Their coffins were not embellished in gold or adorned. The title ‘*In Which You Lack*’ originates from one of the letters Marie Antoinette received from her mother. This striking phrase was intended to be hurtful and directed towards her beauty and intelligence. Furthermore, I believe insults, slander, and gossip can destroy one’s image, to be perceived as a monster.

Another example of transformation, power, and gaze is in the large ballpoint pen drawing, *The Family Jewels* [Figure 9]. It combines the use of horror, symmetry, and conflicting power. I create the conflict of purity and sex through symbolic elements. The drawing is a profile confrontation on one pictorial plane. Through my consistent
characters of Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn, I create an argument once more. Drafting strings of pearls surrounding the characters, I create a Venn-diagram shape. In certain areas where the pearls overlap, I depict gossip (tiny eyes, ears, and slime) and genital like folds of fabric. The pearls and singular lily are symbolic of purity while the paper is with symbols of disgust (the fabric, unhinged jaws, and blood.) In this piece, I want to create an argument over sex: purity and destruction. Most importantly there is the introduction of blood containing a multitude of symbols. Medusa’s blood is both poisonous and medicinal; it contains the same power within her eyes, the power to petrify. *The Family Jewels* blood is exclusively on the ripped grotesque unhinged jaws of the queens. Blood is symbolic of violence, passion, death, loss of virginity, or even monthly menstruation. When placing portraits into segmented portions, the women become more incomplete. It is destruction that results from the violence within my personal narrative.

“This development is experienced as a temporal dialect that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The Mirror Stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation- and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extend from a fragmented body-image to form its totality that I shall call orthopaedic- and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development.” 16
I believe there is a symbolic connection between Medusa’s reflection and the Mirror Theory. According to the Mirror Theory, the recognition of self outside the parental figure is altered when the child sees himself differently. Medusa looks into Perseus’ shield and gazes into her own reflection a moment before death. Perhaps her perception of self is shattered in this moment. Within my drawings I do not include the iris in the blank eyes because of directed gaze. Besides being a stylistic choice, the blank eyes can symbolize a blind war fueled by rage or a mask quality. The heads represented as a mask allows for me to input my parental stories in disguise.

Medusa embodies both victim and villain. She is powerful through horror. Even when decapitated, the gaze is forever powerful. Too powerful perhaps, since Perseus has to return the shield (mirror) and head (horror) to Athena. Medusa in her monstrous form is a result of dirtiness, the destruction of her virginity. She is a constant victim, through which Medusa evolves into a villain. Upon her death, her constant suffering comes to an end.

Stories of horrendous acts encompass my artistic practice. Heavily influenced by the myth of Medusa, I use a monsterification process rooted in both power and beauty. The shattering moment of perception is represented in both Lacan’s Mirror Theory and Medusa’s reflection. Both traumatic events are perceptions of self: Medusa loosing her head and a child no longer being one with its mother.
Chapter 4: Post-Post Issues: After Catholic Feminism

Perhaps one of Medusa’s poisonous snakes slipped from her bloated head, slithering into the Garden of Eden. The poison of its tongue can both be venomous and medicine.

“Mary’s role…an exemplary woman, for Catholics she performs multiple functions. She is the embodiment of perfect motherhood, the compassionate intermediary with God, Queen of heaven and hence bride of Christ (a pair of functions which would seem to be in conflict with her role as Christ’s mother), champion of the oppressed, protector of the church and worker of miracles…This manifests itself in her lifelong virginity and her “Immaculate Conception,” the miraculous circumstance by which she was born without the stain of sin which infects the soul of all other humans born since the original transgression of Adam and Eve.”19

Raised as a Catholic, I am reddened with guilt. My current religious status remains unknown, agnostic. This unsureness developed simultaneously during my teenage years. The disruption of puberty and religious input engrained in my subconscious manipulated the perception of my body. The female representation within the Catholic religion cursed women as either virgins or whores.18 Women are classified as either the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, Eve the temptress, or even Mary Magdalene the whore. My combining and blurring the boundaries of victim and villain create a humanistic and feminist/equalist approach. I do believe in constant parallels of good and
evil, virgin and whore. The argument of op-positional terms is considered within my practice.

During the Medieval and Gothic Periods, religious paintings of biblical figures and events were a common theme. A frequent subject, The Annunciation [Figure 10], depicts the Virgin Mary’s immaculate conception. Mary is frequently represented reading a book, an educated woman and scholar. When the archangel speaks the word of God, Mary becomes impregnated. She is ear-raped, forced to conceive a child without any sexual pleasure or consent. Her womb hosts Christ. Some depictions of the Annunciation indicate rays of light falling on her, similar to the gold coin shower upon Perseus’s mother, Danae [Figure 11]. Rape is a violent and intrusive act creating shames within the victim.

A shameful persona infests young female’s mind, creating an impossible mission of being perfect. Desire creates shame. In the TEDTALK by Brene Brown, Listening to Shame, the psychologist states, shame is guilt, “highly correlated to depression, violence, aggression, and bullying.”\(^\text{20}\) It is a mark of pain and suffering. Shame can manipulate the brain into believing, ‘I am a mistake!’\(^\text{21}\) Angered, I think about Eve, she ate fruit from the forbidden tree to gained knowledge. Eve wanted to share this knowledge with Adam, but given the consequence of banishment and mortality. Eve is frequently shamed within the Catholic religion. She is the person who introduced shame and original sin. I was taught not to be like Eve, yet I too desire knowledge. My entire practice is embodied in reading and further education. I too would be guilty; I would eat the apple.

As a woman, I examine my body as dirty. My flesh has been tampered with and my soul compromised. I want to reject these notions upon my skin, yet I am consumed by
Catholic guilt and rage. Rage begins as a clinching feeling right below my ribs and moments above my genitals. It fills my lungs, pressing them down. I stop thinking and only react, breaking anything within grasp. There were literal holes within the walls of my childhood home.

The cult of the Mother Mary within the Catholic Church is a symbol of unattainable female perfection.\textsuperscript{22} Instead I have come to idolize my own birth mother. She is human, hardworking, and my hero. Helen is a single mother who put herself through school with hellion children to feed. She worked two jobs. As the provider, she did not bake cookies, she did not clean, and she did not show up to school events. As a child, I rarely saw my mother. I would stay awake at night praying for her return.

My practice is a way of remembering. In *Fallen Women: Anne Boleyn and Marie Antoinette* [Figure 12], the drawn heads are grounded by gravity in a quarter turn. The sympathetic hand emphasizes details. During the process of creation, I listened to every available movie and documentary. In search for a universal truth, I listened to the multiple perspectives. Determined I believe the good in these women, before manipulating the horrible imagery.

Creating work as a post-Catholic, I contemplate shame and guilt. The Catholic religion places women into the boundaries of whore, temptress, and virgin. Limitations dehumanize women into being the second sex. These contrary terms good and evil, victim and villain, and superhero and criminal, create the argument in my work.

\textit{“It was necessary to reject that image of Mary in order to hold onto the fragile hope of intellectual achievement, independence of identity, sexual fulfillment.”}\textsuperscript{23}

–Eleanor Heartney, “Postmodern Heretics”, 2004
Chapter 5: Illustrating Horrors, Influences

My practice encompasses the multi-narrative stories and interpretation of horror, monsters, and trauma. Through the act of reading, storytelling encourages my investigations within two-dimensional pictorial planes. On the personal level, my work is an organizational tool for sorting hurt into transformation process. Within my studio walls, I allow for pure emotion and empathy to wash down my face. I remember childhood trauma while avoiding numbness. My selfish compositions allow for psychoanalytical confrontation.

In the painting *Saturn Devouring His Son* [Figure 13], by Francisco Goya, he used monsterification, fragmentation, and horror. The imagery is absolutely horrifying with violence, fear, and death. Goya dealt with his own struggles through the “Black Paintings”. He illustrated stories of mythology and political events. His subject matter commented on his state of mind. Goya’s mental and physical breakdowns would coincide with his artwork. Both Goya and I address horror and mental situations in our work.

Similar to *Yard with Lunatics* [Figure 14], I research environments and scenarios that can create a destroy a human being creating a monster.

The literal graphic line is developed in my stylistic drawing style. Comic books have invaded my work since I was a little girl. My mother worked at a comic book store as part time jobs when returning to school. To this day her basement is filled with boxes of Marvel, DC, and Dark Horse comics. Before I could read, I would stare at the action filled pages. The heavy dark lines are permanent and fixed. The dense outlines capture action and horror. The comic book industry is a male dominated arena. The graphics
themselves are made for the male audience. One of my favorite male comic book artists is Jason Shawn Alexander.

Jason Shawn Alexander started his career in comic books with a flourishing career as an artist. He has worked for Marvel, DC, Dark Horse, and Oni Press. Although his comic books are beautiful and dark, I am more interested in his paintings and mixed media work. *The Mourner Series* [Figure 15] is a series of seven large works on paper with ink and oil. Alexander fractures the human body, emphasizing loss and grief. Both Alexander and I are invested in morbidity and horror, using graphic draftsmanship. His use of line carries through all his different series of work from painting, drafting, and printmaking.

Kiki Smith uses lines, etchings, and collage elements to create serial narratives. Smith’s *My Blue Lake* [Figure 16] is a photographic landscape, outlined by an etching, then hand colored. The body is flayed like an animal, turning her image into a fleshy surface. The work is surreal and violent. My flesh cringes at the thought of detaching from my bones. Kiki uses horror, beauty, and representations of the human body to tell stories, often fairytales [Figure 17]. I adore the line work, the graphic quality of her etchings and drawings. The linear spaces are stylistic creating new versions of the myths. Kiki questions mortality and abjections, with the fragility of flesh. Her work is greatly reactionary to her parental figures, her father Tony Smith. Her work is representational filled with symbolic references.

Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Susanna and the Elders* [Figure 18] uses biblical stories to reveal truths upon female roles and sexuality. The character Susanna is often portrayed as the temptress and the seductress. The old men tested her loyalty to her husband/ fiancé
by pursuing her. Being a biblical story, Susanna plays one of three parts, virgin, whore, and temptress. In Artemisia’s version, Susanna is awkwardly posed, twisting away from the elders. The elders demand that Susanna have sex with them or they will tell her husband she has been unfaithful. This is attempted rape and blackmail. Artemisia uses the female perspective and portrays Susanna as terrified and repulsed by the elderly men. The way a woman represents another woman is often embedded with sympathy and insight to the characters state of mind.

Whether that story is in comic book form, or a painting, I will be attracted to its aesthetics. I find myself in comparison with other artists that use horror, monsters, and traumatic experiences in their work.
Chapter 6: Off the Edge of the Tower/ To Be Put in Place

My most recent drawing series is in direct conversation with the myth of Medusa. In each composition, I work systematically through the themes of Medusa, especially monsterfication and the power of horror. My queens are monsters: filled with highly elaborate details. The faces of Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn are fractured, unhinged into petrified screams. This gesture is similar to the way Medusa’s gaze petrifies those who hunt her. Medusa’s gaze is quite different from the male gaze. The male gaze possesses a woman as if she is property, a sexual object. Medusa’s gaze kills, turning her victims into stone, freezing them in time. The downfall of Medusa’s gaze, is the moment she sees her own reflection in Athena’s shield.

My art uses symmetry to balance the overall composition, but this mirroring effect is in addition to the equality in figures. This is my ideological perception of the embodiment of victim and villain, good and evil.

Off the Edge of the Tower/ To Be Put in Place, is to be displayed in the Kemper Art Museum at Washington University St. Louis. A monumental piece, [Figure 19] it depicts two enormous unhinged profile portraits of Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn. The divisions within the faces are different from any previous work. Around the eye, segments are detached along the bottom and top eyelid. Fragments in drips and ooze are painted with blood colored ink. Deep within the mouths of the characters are small beaded infestations, implying the infectious gossip and slander that would spew. Eventually pouring from their mouths, like vomit, multiple strings of beads crash into the bottom of the drawings. Encased in black frames, the drawings are displayed on vinyl
wallpaper silkscreened. The large hive of beads is blood red and approximately twelve feet tall. Hung only inches apart, the characters of Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn are divorced into two separate picture frames. A symbol of containment is the black frames. The near touch of the drawings originated a title called, ‘Butthead’. They are so close, as if they were to “butt” heads, creating a pact of face to face combat. Upon watching late night television, World Wrestling Federation invaded the screen. I noticed within their staged fighting scenes, the head-butt was a standard move. Also the term ‘Butthead’ is known to be an immature and childish name calling term. This juvenile term added a level of humor to the work, but it degraded the subject matter and emphasis on the battle.

The official title, *Off the Edge of the Tower/ to be put in Place* is describing the two beheadings within their locations. The deaths of Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn took place over two hundred years apart. They have the commonality of same continent and being European white women.

The *Off the Edge of the Tower/ to be Put in Place* [Figure 19] is referencing a violent dispute within a home or territory. In this work, the two women are presented as queens similar to the insect, the queen bee. When a hive grows too large, the hive creates a new queen bee and splits up the family. The wallpaper, as a hive of beads is overwhelming in slight irregularity and repetition. My work creates the personal narrative of a broken home, between two mothers. My mothers are two women who loathe the core of the other. Much gossip, rumor, and slander has been said against each mother, creating a division within the children. An apology would be the only solution I can perceive in settling this war. Admitting wrong and fault, a suppression of pride, I have found to be one of the most different acts for strong-minded adults. “*I am sorry*”
Therefore this work is about the rage and hatred between the two queens. I feel the women have become a hybrid of both human and infestation. I created a hive of beads so large it consumes the queens. The highly detailed scene is the moment before the climax, the head-butt. My graphic composition uses repetition and symmetry to create balance. Complete in blood and infestations, the work includes morbidity, disgust, and beauty. While the piece is monumental in scale, the symbolic purpose is larger. Created as a therapeutic process, the work examines counterparts of Catholic themes.
Conclusion

My women are flawed. I believe winning and perfection are myth. Real stories rarely consist of the good guy/bad guy dynamic, and the problems are often confusing and complex. When dirtying and mixing the multiple narrations, morals are hard to decipher and resolution impossible. The stories reveal a truth, new worlds, and alternate perspectives.

Submerged in storytelling, my practice investigates history, myths, biblical tales, and personal narratives. I explore the meaning of story through manipulative and formulaic structure. Segments of words are forced into chronological order through the storytelling mind. When exploring a story, I attempt to read multiple versions to expose a truth.

Remembering my childhood, I reflect upon the hatred between my mother and stepmother. Their disgust develops the initial argument. Through my artistic practice I impose their loathing on two queens (Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn). I explore perceptions of self and mother. Jacques Lacan theorizes the moment a child and mother is no longer a perceived singular unit creating the origin of trauma. The traumatic shattering recognition of self is in both Mirror Theory and the myth of Medusa.

Medusa’s grasp of self is removed multiple times. The first being raped then transformed into the beast. Next captured by her own gaze, Medusa becomes petrified as a severed head. Monsterfication becomes the removal, morphing the hybrid between human and beast. Horror is made through beauty and repulsion. Symbolism of purity and shame are presented through beads, pearls, lilies, blood, infestations, etc.
Deconstruction of the feminine body is influenced by Post-Catholicism. Guilt washes over the female body, a dirtying response. I examined the female icons representing virgin, whore, and temptress. I use these terms as basis for the fights. Religion uses fear and horror to impose their ideals over humanity. The absence of the human body within my work is symbolic of horror and violence.

Stylistic choices of the literal drawn line are from comic books. Dark imagery such as Francisco Goya’s “Black Paintings” use stories and myths to decipher horror and traumatic harm. Attracted to the paintings by Jason Shawn Alexander, he uses the graphic line to expose loss, fear, and trauma. The Mourners Series digresses the face, identity is lost, fracturing any recognizable representation. Kiki Smith uses myth and religious influences to construct body and perception. Artemisia Gentileschi uses biblical story to explain damage to her feminine body, imposing her own personal narrative.

*Off the Edge of the Tower/ To be put in Place* piece is the battle within the home. Two territories encased in black frames divorce the monstrous queens. The argument is developed through the word vomit splashing to the bottom of the drawings. As a territory, the hive creates a struggle over power, rage, and repulsion. My work fractures bodily image into monsters, meshing ideals of victim and villain into a petrified balanced moment.
In the past year, I returned home to my mother’s house for a weekend. After helping around the house and going through old boxes of childhood toys, I confronted my mother about my work. I told her, she was part of my subject matter, along with my stepmother and the queens. Explaining the battle between my stepmother and mother, my mother became very quiet and distance. She made small comments about, “Never get on your bad side…” or “Does it look like me?” I explained to her part was a sub-story, in the collection of stories layered within the script. Her image was being presented through a queen, frequently alternating identity. I narrated the battle scenes, and their original context. We talked about the horrible things gossiped about her from my stepmothers mouth and neighbors.

After a bit of the awkwardness, my mother simply asked, “Am I winning?” Although I place my mother upon a pedestal and view her as my hero, she is not winning nor is she losing. Her illustrated story is infinitely layered, and is the symbolic draw. The drawn mother is in checkmate, not necessarily with my stepmother, but with herself. The drawings are embellished with rage and anger avoiding actual collision. It is similar to the preying mantis; they expand and flail arms and wings, enlarging dimensions to ward off enemies.
Notes


2. Ibid, 217

3. Ibid, 61

4. Ibid, 212

5. Ibid, 147

6. Schwartz, Alvin. *In a Dark, Dark Room and Other Scary Stories.* (Harper Collins Publishers Inc. 1984) p. 34


8. Dr. Seymour Keitlen. *Oedipus Complex: A Philosophical Study.* (Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc. 2003) p. 3

9. Ibid, p. 2

10. Ibid, p. 2-6

11. Rina, Arya. *Abjection and Representation; An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film, and Literature.* (Palgrave MacMillian 2014) p.18


17. Ibid


23. Ibid


**Bibliography**


Keitlen, Seymour, Dr. *Oedipus Complex: A Philosophical Study*. Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc. 2003


Illustration Citations

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.
Diana Casanova. *Face off: Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn*. Ballpoint pen on paper. 22x30 inches. 2014.

Figure 5.

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

Figure 8.
Diana Casanova. *In Which You Lack*. Etchings on Japanese paper, suede and wood. 13x18x3 inches. 2014.

Figure 9.

Figure 10.

Figure 11.


Figure 14. Francisco Goya. *Yard with Lunatics*. Oil on tin-plated iron. 43.8x32.7 cm. 1794. <http://www.actingoutpolitics.com/francisco-goya’s-“yard-with-lunatics”-1793-4----obsessiveposessed-side-of-conventionalconformist-mentality/>.


Figure 19. Diana Casanova. *Off the Edge of the Tower/ To be Put in Place*. Ballpoint drawing on paper, silkscreen on vinyl. 2015.
List of Illustrations

Figure 1

Figure 2

Diana Casanova. *Amputee*. Oil on Canvas. 72”x 48”. 2013.
Figure 3
Figure 4
Figure 5
Figure 6
Figure 7
Diana Casanova. Details from *R Test 01-03*. Linograph and Colligraph prints on paper.
2013.
Figure 8
Figure 9
Figure 10
Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi. Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus.
Tempera and gold on panel. 120 x 104 inches. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. 1333.
Figure 11
Gentileschi, Artemisia. Danae. Oil on Copper, 41 x 53 cm. Saint Louis Art Museum.
1612.
Figure 12
Figure 13
Francisco Goya, *Saturn Devouring His Son*, Oil mural transferred to Canvas, 1823, 143cm x 18cm
Figure 14
Francisco Goya, *Yard with Lunatics*, Oil on Tin-plated Iron, 1794, 43.8x32.7 cm
Figure 15
Figure 16
Figure 17
Figure 18
Figure 19
Diana Casanova. *Off the Edge of the Tower/ To be put in Place*. Ballpoint drawing on paper, silkscreen on vinyl. 2015.