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Body; Broken Things

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Abstract

Body; Broken Things is a series of paintings that reflects on the cultural and social position of the female body in our modern society. In this essay, I observe and study the women's body as material, object, and as space. First, I discuss the female body as material; the female body as a source of indulgence, and as a vessel of pain. Then, I examine the female body's place in our world as a desired/desirable object, a fragile object, and as a commercial object. Lastly, I analyze the female body's role as space – a space that bears life, and a space that embodies life. *Body; Broken Things* questions the modern society's objectification, exploitation and manipulation of the women's bodies, and their identities. In my paintings, I use the female figures and their bodies to directly comment on the ancient philosophical text, *Phaedo* by Plato and its idea of the body. Moreover, I discuss the modern artists and their treatment of the female bodies in their works, and the idea of women as “weaker sex” connected to these imageries. Using the texts by Jane Nicholas, Naomi Wolf and Betty Friedan as a basis, and also using contemporary artists, Lisa Yuskavage and Ron Mueck for comparison, I speak of the constant pain and struggle that the female bodies must endure. Through *Body; Broken Things*, I aim to acknowledge all the pain, and all the sorrows the female bodies embody and encounter, and to reclaim the body itself and its place in this world.

Introduction

Our bodies are the first of everything. They're the first thing we encounter, and first space that we inhabit. Life ends when we leave the body behind. They're our only means to reach with the world, with everything. From the beginning of time, we have strived to interpret the body and its place in the world. However, the female body was never fully appreciated nor acknowledged. It is impossible to understand the body of women without considering the pain and violence they encounter, which is often easily overlooked.

In my body of work that I've produced this semester, *Body; Broken Things*, I study the female bodies and their experiences. *Body; Broken Things* is a series of work that discuss the objectification, the social exploitation and the manipulation of the female identity. As a woman myself, my body has experienced this world through pain; I have been subject to the male desire, and criticized for not catering to the feminine ideal. This frustration led me to explore what the various forms female bodies take, is forced to take, and their material identity. I will be discussing *Body; Broken Things* in the following order:

- i) Body as Material
 - Body as Source of Indulgence
 - Body as Encasement of Pain

ii) Body as Object

- Body as Desired/Desirable Object
- Body as Object of Fragility
- Body as Commercial Object

iii) Body as Space

- Body as Space of Birth
- Body as Space of Life

Body as Material

Body as Source of Indulgence

In Phaedo, Plato describes the body as a vessel for the senses; these senses, allow us worldly pleasures, turning our focus to the physical things rather than the spiritual. Socrates asserts that one must, “as far as he can, [get] away from the body and to turn to the soul,” as our bodies are susceptible “to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after true being: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery, and in fact, as men say, takes away from us the power of thinking at all” (Plato, 46). He considers the body as a source of pleasure, which, leads to damnation. Being the implied source of “loves and lust,” the female body becomes the target of blame. His claim makes the female body merely yet another worldly “thing” that exists purely to be enjoyed, making them problematic and thus villainizing their very existence.



Fig. 1 / Kay Lee, Kissing Girls (2018), Oil on Canvas, 30" x 24"

“Kissing Girls” (Fig. 1), is my commentary on the belief that ties the body of women to the idea of indulgence. For the longest time, female bodies were seen as things to be taken. The images of women and their bodies being forcefully taken by men are prevalent in art history; for example, “Hades and Persephone” by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, inspired by embellished tale from Greek Mythology, and “Rape of The Sabines” by Pietro da Cortona, which celebrates the scene of rape. Is the feminine body merely one of the pleasurable objects that exists to tempt human? Is it nothing but the source of indulgence? The question of the place of the female body in this world has always been disregarded and dismissed. “Kissing Girls” is my attempt to reclaim the female body and its pleasures. Depicted are two female figures, or perhaps a figure and her reflection, embracing each other, melding into each other. There is no act of “indulging”. They either belong to themselves, or to each other. They remain as sensual beings, yet refuse to be indulged, or taken, as they aren’t the purpose of their existence.

Body as Encasement of Pain

“For as far back as women could remember, something had hurt about being female” (Wolf, 219). Although Phaedo alludes to the female body as merely a source of lust, all women would agree that their bodies are not made of pleasurable things, but rather made of pain. Women’s bodies bleed for most of their lives. Their flesh bleed and fall apart as they menstruate every month, and break as it gives birth. Women and pain are inseparable. Their bodies are made to hurt, which is ironic considering how they’re seen as sources of bodily pleasures. The feminine pain is easily disregarded, masked by its sensuality.

“Girl on Period” (Fig. 2) is my attempt to counter Socrates’ idea of female body, that simply dismisses the pain that exists within the female vessel. I intend to acknowledge this pain, and moreover, embrace it. This work depicts the female body while menstruating and the pain and potential of birth that comes from it, but moreover, birth of another life that come with the struggle. Although the figure is in pain, suffering, she lies within these pile of grass, accepting



and embracing the presence of pain, as she is familiar with this pain. Life cannot exist without pain, and thus this pain lives within all women’s body.

Fig. 2 / Kay Lee, Girl on Period (2018), Oil on Canvas, 36” x 48”

Body as Object

Body as Desired/Desirable Object

The female body has always been objectified as a form of desire, and they've been portrayed as such. However, this desire is shaped in such way that, for their body to be desirable, women must fit and force themselves into certain social standards. This has led to the birth of another level of this desire: a desire to be desired; the belief that in order for one to be “feminine,” she must be desired by others.

This forced need to feel validated is directly connected to the status of women in the modern world. Although women gained more freedom, they also gained more restraints. Jane Nicholas, in *The Modern Girl*, speaks of the cultural and social demands for women; “Women were bound to be beautiful and simultaneously judged (on a number of grounds including morality, sexual availability, class status, and desirability) for either meeting the standards of beauty or not. Judgment was the constant” (Nicholas,555). Wolf contends that such ideas “took over the regions of the female mind left unpoliced”, and “exploited our willingness to heed an authoritarian voice” (Wolf, 219), which urged women to do as the male desire demanded, thus, the birth of desire to be desired.

Female desire to be desired, catered by modern technologies, led to women relying on various diet products, plastic surgeries, makeup and fashion – all products of desire that required us to lose chunks of our fat, cut off our body parts, put paint or even holes on our skin, all for the sake of beauty. Yet another form of pain added onto already existing feminine pain – the pain we started to give ourselves.



Fig. 3 / Kay Lee, *Butchers* (2018), Oil on Canvas, 32" x 44"

“Butchers” (Fig. 3) is the depiction of this desire towards desire itself, and the damage it causes. In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf discusses the aggressiveness of this desire. Desire to fit that “standard”, “[make] women’s bodies hurt them, and makes women hurt their bodies” (Wolf, 218). “Butchers” is a visual metaphor of that act of “shaping” the body in a brutal manner, which, often times, transforms into violence. “Studies of abusers show that violence, once begun, escalates” (Wolf, 218). The figures in “Butchers,” violently cuts into a chunk of meat. They blend into one another, making it difficult to distinguish the body from the meat. In the end, they themselves do not know what it is that they’re stabbing at. The act turns into an aggression towards self, leading to endless self-destruction. No questioning the purpose of this – there is only thirst for more. Through “Butchers,” I attempt to criticize this endless desire, and the aggression and the pain that comes from this.

Body as Fragile Objects

Oftentimes, women are considered as the “weaker sex” and thought that they can “find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love” (Friedan, 35-36). They were ripped off of their own identities, and labeled with their social roles; mothers and wives. They are expected to act within that boundary. In her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan speaks of how this “permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity” as an individual. “They can answer the question “Who am I?” by saying “Tom’s wife . . . Mary’s mother” (Friedan, 28). This lack of self identity is replaced by things that are expected from mothers and wives – obliviousness, lack of seriousness, and fragility.

“Brides” (Fig. 4) is my comment on what women are often conditioned to be. I was inspired by Marie Laurencin, one of the few female artists of Parisian avant-garde movement, and how she treats her figures; in the *Strength of the Weak* as Portrayed by Marie Laurencin, Bridget Elliot discusses Marie Laurencin, and the visual idea of a “weaker sex” portrayed in her work. Elliot argues that her art was often characterized as “feminine, weak and



Fig. 4 (Right) / Kay Lee, Brides (2018), 24” x 18”

Fig. 5 (Left) / Marie Laurencin, La Ronde (1925), 36.3” x 28. 5”



impure” (Elliot, 279), as the figures in her paintings, for instance, in “La Ronde” (Fig. 5) were “feminized bodies of commodified mass culture - bodies that are highly visible, easily accessible, attractively packages and available at affordable prices” (Elliot, 278) Similarly, the bodies in “Brides” reflect the idea of feminine bodies as domestically and socially accessible beings. The figures hide themselves – their identities lost from history, from themselves. However, the rest of their bodies are exposed and adorned with flowers and plants, made to look pretty, made to be passive, made to be bought. However, this attractive package that makes the bodies so appealing not only obscures their identities, but also kills them. They drown in and choke on flowers and on leaves. The elimination of one’s identity leads to the murder of the self. Women cannot survive on their nurtured, domesticated identities.

Body as Commercial Object



Fig. 6/ Alphonse Mucha, Job Rolling Paper Advertisement Poster(1898), Color Lithograph

Alphonse Mucha’s work gained fame for the images he produced for Job cigarettes ads. He still remains an iconic art nouveau/decorative art artist, as his images were and still are incredibly popular. Mucha showed how much an attractive imagery can

contribute to advertising – and often times, he sourced that attractiveness from female figures.

The women that are depicted in his work are specific: they're beautiful, slender – features that society saw as ideal feminine features. However, his work does not celebrate female body, as they are only props in the advertisement, “for the ‘ideal’ is not about women but about money” (Wolf, 232). This “sexual sell” not only appealed to men but also to women. Often times, the female sexuality was exploited in such ways that women were made to believe that making certain purchases were necessary for them to fit the ideal beauty standards. Use of Mucha's work in an advertisement appealed to women by selling the idea that the product can cater to the desires of women, by the image of “the ideal women”; what women should be, and what women could gain, if they bought the product.



Fig. 6 / Kay Lee, Smoking Girls (2018), Oil on Canvas, 30” x 40”

“Smoking Girls” (Fig. 7) in *Body; Broken Things* is a direct commentary of Mucha's images in Job advertisement, and the way he exploits the female body. Mucha's work was a form of democratic art, both as prints that were seen in every corner of the street. This allowed the female body in his work to be exposed in full – connecting to the public sphere. Such acts don't liberate the bodies, but make them vulnerable. The figures in “Smoking Girls” are turned away from the viewers. Similar to the “brides”, their

faces are hidden – once again, their identities are obscured, yet in this piece that obscurity functions as a shelter. Their identities and sexuality are left unexposed to the eyes of the viewers, as they are not the concern of the figures nor the work itself. They do not need to sell a product, or a certain idea, or sell themselves. Unlike in Mucha’s work, where the female body exists for the other, the cigarette, in “Smoking Girls,” the cigarette exists as a mere prop, while the body exists for its own sake. The body is liberated from its role to serve the purpose of selling.

Body as Space

Body as Space of Birth



Fig. 8 / Lisa Yuskavage, Travellers (2008), Oil on Linen, 77” x 62”

The feminine body and the notion of life and birth always come together. Life cannot exist without the female body, as all lives begins from female body. The body of woman is the first space we encounter. The idea of the female body as “space” can be seen frequently in various forms; in Lisa Yuskavage’s work, she often features enlarged female bodies that are seen and interpreted as landscapes. Traditionally, when a figure occupies space in a dominating manner, the goal is to emphasize its significance. However, in Yuskavage’s painting, they exist as the part of the environment – a space within space. For instance, in “The

Travelers” (Fig. 8), the woman’s (possibly pregnant) body dominates the space. With the smaller figures present, one cannot perceive the woman as yet another figure, but as a “body” of space.

“Pink Room” (Fig. 9), is my attempt to translate the body as space. This piece is a self-portrait, which portrays the inseparable relationship between my body and the body I



Fig. 9 (Left) Kay Lee, Pink Room (2018), Oil on Canvas, 40” x 60”

Fig. 10 (Right) Kay Lee, Green Room (2018), Oil on Canvas, 40” x 60”

was born out of. I speak of the space in which my own body is originated from, and the one that I forever belong to. There are two forms of body in this work: the “room” of flesh, not recognizable as a figure, and a feminine figure, that resides within this room of flesh. This piece was a turning point in *Body; Broken Things*, as I attempt to bring in another form of the body; the body of light. The canvas functions as the entrance to the space, which allows this light to

imply the tight relationship between the space inside and outside of the painting. This refers back to the idea of “space within space,” and that of “interior and exterior space exist[ing] as a single unity” (Bachelard, 232) – the painting itself becomes the metaphor for the female body.

Body as Space of Life

The female body bears life, and therefore is assigned a biological role to do so. It is both celebrated and violated for that reason. They're forced to do what is in the “nature” of women. Through *Body; Broken Things*, I pose the question: what is natural? Female bodies were often portrayed with nature, frequently seen in the Romantic era and in the works of the Fauves Movement. The widespread term, ‘Mother Nature’, directly compares the nature to a mother, as they're both give birth to life. So, if one lacks the ability to reproduce, to give birth, does that dissociate her and her body from nature? Do they not deserve to be “women?” Because one cannot give birth, or refuse to do so, that does not mean that she is less of a women. Even when the body isn't bearing life, it should be celebrated as it embodies life of its own.

“Green Room” (Fig. 10) is a celebration of the female body on its own, as a space itself where the life inhabits, without any connection to the body's reproductive function. It is the reverse of “Pink Room” as it is a translation of space into body. In “Green Room”, the space, and the life that exists within that space, becomes the body. Ron Mueck's sculptures and installations, for instance, *A Girl* (Fig. 11), is so large that it occupies the entire exhibition space. It forces the audience to go around it – they cannot perceive it as one “body” but rather as a landscape. However, because of its hyperrealistic characteristics, the work cannot be



Fig. 11 Ron Mueck, A girl (2006), Mixed Media, 110.50 x 501.00 x 134.50 cm

separated from the idea of life. Thus, the landscape, the environment itself becomes a living thing, a body. Then that body transforms into a non-body, that “something” that makes it impossible for one to perceive it simply as a body, yet still contains life – the environment. I wanted to portray the nature, the space of life itself in “Green Room”; the painting features two female figures in a natural setting; they lie between the forest and the lake. The trees, the figures and the school of goldfish – their lives coexist within a single space. The space and its components come together to form one body. Female body is nothing but the part of this space, and it exists only to live, not to serve its human-made purposes.

Conclusion

Will it ever be possible for us to separate the female body from the notion of pain and violence? Can they exist on their own, without having their material presence be tainted and manipulated? Can women be without their assigned identities, what the world calls them? Women and their bodies have always been subject to manipulation and violence. From the beginning of life until its end, the female body is taken, hurt and broken. They're subject to desire and violence. Their identities are taken away from them, and then they're labeled something else. Their beauty and sexuality is exploited for profits, and the biological function of female body replace the true female identity. My practice is my attempt to celebrate the female body, and all that its composed of, whether it be pleasure, desire, pain, or life. In *Body; Broken Things*, I separate the female body from its assigned nature, characteristics, purposes, identity and functions, and celebrate it simply as a body, nothing more. Going further, *Body; Broken Things* questions the viewers of their own bodies and its relations to the world; where do they belong, and to what and to whom do they belong?

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