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Hidden in Humor: Redefining Abjection through Implication

Maddy Kish

BFA in Studio Art

Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Art

Washington University in St. Louis

May 3, 2024

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ABSTRACT

Abjection can whisper. It lies beneath the joke; you will find it there if you spend the time. Look at me. Come closer. Are you willing to discover? If you listen, I will confess, I will air out my dirty laundry, I will show you the inside of my body and its evidence.

My thesis is a consideration of my waste, an analysis of the bodily trail I leave behind. I explore indecency as a persistent feature of my art practice and a tactic I use to stimulate interest. My overarching unladylike sensibility is broken down into three categories – abjection, exposure, and humor – to investigate my conceptual basis and approach to art-making. These three seemingly incongruent themes are deeply interconnected within the context of my practice; this paper aims to reveal how they intertwine and find balance together. Throughout my work, and particularly in my thesis piece *Dirty Laundry: Publicly Erring*, I consider how abjection can be made digestible – an apparent oxymoron – through the insertion and overlay of humor.

INTRODUCTION

“A man can have an interesting past, a woman only an indecent one”.¹ My work is tethered to this idea of indecency, using humor as my approach to expose gendered, embodied experiences. This indecency is cultivated by engaging in the unladylike, a conceptual category that can be pinpointed in three aspects of my work: 1) the abject, as my work is inextricably tied to the female body and its taboo functions; 2) exposure, whether fictional or confessional, of private spaces and habits; and 3) humor, both formally and conceptually, particularly low-brow, male-coded humor as a persistent formal tool coupled with an overarching satirical attitude. The collision of these three – themes of abjection, methods of exposure, overlay of humor – makes the work sneaky; the intimately repulsive is made digestible, alluring. I will capture you with wit, and I will charm you to get close to you. Once you are near, if you are willing to discover, I will confess, I will air out my dirty laundry, I will show you what it is like to inhabit my body.

I. THE ABJECT: EVIDENCE OF BODY

Upon viewing Sophie Calle’s *The Chromatic Diet* for the first time, I found myself inside of her large intestine, wondering if the color of her feces matched that of each meal. While the dinner plate pictures do not visually depict anything grotesque, they embed a visceral bodily experience. I am prompted to think of the consequences – of the chyme as it moves through the intestines on the path to becoming shit. By transporting me to the inside of Calle’s body, *The Chromatic Diet* interrogates abjection; it reveals without making visible her bodily functions.

¹ Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*. (New York: Feminist Press, 2012), 18.

The food is simply the “before picture” of the shit, conjuring consideration of the digestive tract traversed in the space between. What will be and once was inside of the body is exposed; internal contents become available for public viewing.

My *Dinner Plate* paintings follow suit. I wanted to consider the input in the digestive process – the “before image” charged with fecal potential energy. While food is inherently gendered, the

proliferation of the “Girl Dinner” trend on TikTok makes the gendered humor of the *Dinner Plates* especially relatable and relevant. Over 400,000 videos have been posted under the original “Girl Dinner” sound,² featuring women sharing the snack accumulations and odd combinations they create and eat for meals. The trend has turned a private, previously shameful experience into a collective way to relate, and inserted the term “girl dinner” into contemporary colloquial vocabulary. The trend is not, however, without backlash; criticism points out that there is potential harm in “calling a grazing dinner a meal for girls, a demographic that already disproportionately suffers from eating disorders”.³ While my work is not about personal experience with disordered eating, it does touch on curious food habits, relating to a love of, or even obsession with, food and the accompanying gluttony, that is societally categorized within the unladylike. It is impossible to talk about gendered experience and food without discussing

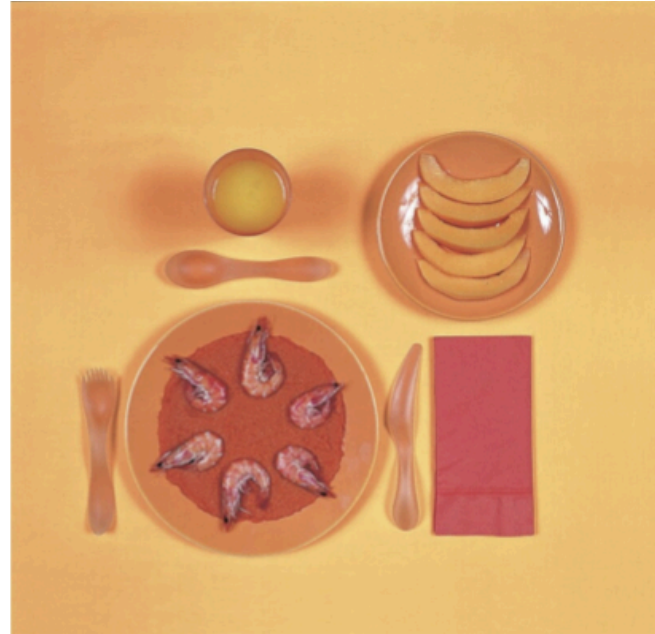


Figure 1. Sophie Calle, “Monday” from *The Chromatic Diet*, 1997. Color photograph.

² Karma Carr (@karmapilled), “Original Sound”, TikTok, audio page, July 5, 2023.

³ Nicole Fallert, “‘Girl Dinner’ Trend Leaves Some with Bad Aftertaste,” *USA Today*, July 19, 2023.



Figure 2. Maddy Kish, *Dinner Plate No. 1*, 2023.
Oil and acrylic on board.

the idea, so deeply ingrained in having a female body, that food is the enemy. “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection”.⁴ To loathe food is to reject the needs of the body, to kill that which is not self but is not other. Feminine confrontation with food is a consideration of one’s own mortality. This deeply feminine abjection reflects a dualist perspective,⁵ where “the body is experienced as alien, as the not-self, the not-me. It is

‘fastened and glued’ to me, ‘nailed’ and ‘riveted’ to me”.⁶ Women are expected to be, in many ways, bodiless; hunger is not for us. Female consumption and defecation – both components of the same bodily process – are impure, and are situated as abject because of this. Making art about either one is making art about both, and the body’s insides are turned out either way.

Abjection is usually associated with bodily viscera of flesh, fluid, and feces; Kiki Smith, for example, uses “abjection as a way to deal with socially suppressed attitudes toward sexuality, death, and vulnerability” in her affective figural sculptures.⁷ My work does not feature this visual explicitness but still finds itself rooted conceptually in similar ideas of embodiment. Often, rather

⁴ Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

⁵ Susan Bordo, “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathy as the Crystallization of Culture,” in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 144. Bordo’s conception of the Dualist Axis of anorexia is rooted in dualism, or the idea that body and mind are two separate realms of existence.

⁶ Bordo, “Anorexia Nervosa,” 144.

⁷ Eleanor Heartney, “Kiki Smith: A View from the Inside Out,” in *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art* (Prestel Publishing, 2007), 197.

than featuring the body outright, I imply its presence. I consider the implications of inhabiting a body, the effect of a body on the space around it, the evidence the body leaves behind. The evidence – the waste – is expansive, far beyond excretion. Waste is a mixed media trail of objects, dirt, snot, plastic, excess; it is remnants and it is history. The following excerpt discusses abjection and waste through the lens of Kiki Smith's sculpture *Tale*:

“*Tale* consists of a wax sculpture of a naked woman crawling on the floor. Her buttocks are smeared with a brown substance and trailing behind her is a long brown coil of what appears to be feces. Smith describes this sculpture as a representation of the feeling of being burdened with inescapable history. As she notes, it is as if "the figure trailing shit were carrying around a physical manifestation of the past, a story she can't let go of, or suffering the humiliation of having her insides, her past, out in public." ⁸



Figure 3. Kiki Smith, *Tale*, 1992. Wax, pigment, and papier-mâché.

⁸ Heartney, "Kiki Smith," 197.

Using a drastically different approach, my thesis piece, *Dirty Laundry: Publicly Erring*⁹ explores this same idea of exposing the insides, the past. The insides of my private spaces, my internal world, my material waste, are put out in public. Like Smith's long brown coil my trail follows me, sticks to my shoes and rubs off on my surroundings like shit. I call it The Slop. The Slop is not the body itself, nor the literal insides or feces, but rather the evidence of the body; The Slop is my waste in a broader sense. The implication of my body, the effect, the trail it leaves behind. The Slop, my filth, is what situates the dollhouse within the framework of abjection; I expose it intentionally, revealing my private spaces full of it as confession. It persists in its tangible form and fills the corners of my mind. It is a physical manifestation of my selfhood, my narrative, my history. It is my insides and my waste made visible for all to see.



Figure 4. "The Slop."

II. EXPOSURE AS CONFESSION

The exposure of private spaces and the things that occur inside of them is a broader theme throughout my work. In my experience of having a female body, there is a schism between

⁹ More on this in Part II.

the public and private self. I feel confusion in who I am because of the ways I am supposed to act. External expectations do not align with my internal reality. Despite feeling an inherent disconnection to my body that comes with not only being a woman but being a woman in the digital age, I feel desperately, relentlessly embodied. Perhaps this is why I cling to the bodily – the consumption, the waste, the evidence – because it is my proof of my own existence; it is the way I can identify myself when character and persona shift rampantly as I traverse between the private and public eye. Demeanor is temporary, shitting is forever.

A counter-narrative to this experience, *Self Care* visualizes a male body existing freely; he drinks a beer while clipping his toenails on the countertop with reckless abandon. He takes up space. You might imagine him loudly listening to the radio in the background, unconcerned with



Figure 5. Maddy Kish, *Self Care*, 2023. Oil on canvas.

whether or not the neighbors are disturbed. *Self Care* considers the relationship to a body that does not burden you, questioning what it might be like to be a man. The painting possesses a shamelessness; while it probes into private habit, the aspect of exposure does not feel severe, it does not feel invasive. Perhaps this is the result of a lack of public/private boundaries in male experience. He does not have to act differently in public than he does when he is alone, there is no schism in his sense of self.

While *Self Care* focuses on this male character and his body, the *Bathroom Paintings* focus on exposing private spaces rather than the people who inhabit them. The bathroom is the most vulnerable, private space in the home. We are most embodied in the bathroom, most aware of our physicality, our flesh, our excretions. The series of paintings features visible fragments of



Figure 6. Maddy Kish, *Bathroom Painting No. 2*, 2023. Oil on canvas.

bodies alongside evidence of inhabitation and presence – a partly-eaten sandwich, or clothing hanging on the door while the body is implied to be in the shower behind us, not visible within the image. While there are clues that imply gender – the sandwich-eating beer drinker, for example, might be presumed male – there is no explicit statement of the gender of the subject. This is left for the viewer to assume, filling in missing information with their own biases. Art, like writing, is “a craft that appears solitary but needs another for its completion”.¹⁰ The

Bathroom Paintings (and all other paintings, and all other artwork) rely on the viewer; they are finished by the viewer and made whole by their engagement. By leaving more out of the picture, I prompt the viewer to make assumptions based on implicit biases and societal norms; their engagement with the subtle clues reveals the implications of gendered embodiment more broadly.

While these works deal with exposure in a broader sense – of private spaces and habits, mental interiors – my more recent work has moved to deal with exposure in a more personal

¹⁰ Toni Morrison, “The Dancing Mind,” in *What Moves at the Margin* (The University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 189.

manner. My exposure has turned to myself as the subject. This self-exposure acts as confession. The *Dinner Plates*, for example, while being related to abjection as they summon the intestines and the embodied experience of eating, are also simply a confession of my ridiculous, haphazard



Figure 7. Maddy Kish, *Potty Training*, 2024. 229 resin cast gummy bears, five months, toilet paper.

meals in all of their embarrassing glory. *Potty Training* similarly is tied to abjection, making the private, internal process of excretion external and public, and is equally confessional. *Potty Training* is my call to childhood; I tracked my bowel movements for five months and cast 229 resin gummy bears to represent them, each one marked with the date and time. The piece exhibits ritual documentation and an obsessive logging of my

body. It is an exposure of my past, of my chronicled history that I have created with the intent to display. These works serve as personal confessions and acts of public indecency, inherently unladylike in their lack of boundary between the private and public self. The piece balances indecent content of shit with organized, sterile presentation, and its accumulation over time has a presence; the viewer gains an image of me, shares an intimate bathroom experience with me, through the buildup of five months.

The work of Tracey Emin similarly deals with time and accumulation, and is nothing if not confessional and intimate. In *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963-1995*, Emin lists the names of all the people she has slept with – literally, slept, not necessarily in a sexual context – creating a catalog of her own body in the form of a tent. She implies indecency with the sexual implications of the title phrasing, but does not give into our desire for sex and scandal. This

simple act is a consideration of intimacy, a different kind of confession. She exposes private, personal experiences, locating her body and creating an image over time. It is an intimate self-portrait, a tangible representation of self. This is not the only work where Emin commits an act of confession. More confrontational and more related to my conception of abjection is her

1998 sculpture, *My Bed*. After a period of bedridden depression, Emin made the evidence into an installation. Her unmade bed and personal items, including dirty underwear, cigarettes, trash, and more, were displayed as art,



Figure 8. Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998.

creating an “excruciatingly

personal” confession.¹¹ Like *Everyone I’ve Ever Slept With*, the bed is an exposure over time; the objects have accumulated and the result is a kind of intimate, confessional self portrait that confronts with its actuality.

My thesis work, *Dirty Laundry: Publicly Erring* is an intimate, confessional self portrait as well. *Dirty Laundry* is a diaristic dollhouse; a sculptural, spatial exposure of selfhood “more intimate than a nude”.¹² The dollhouse is cumulative, bringing together disparate symbols – the food, the toilet, the beer, the floral print – from throughout my art practice and locating them, contextualizing them around me, relating them to each other. I imagine the dollhouse to have an effect akin to reading my diary out loud (one day, perhaps). Using the miniature space, I bring the private contents of my personal spaces and psyche into the public eye; I display my

¹¹ Dr. Thomas Folland, "Tracey Emin, *My Bed*," in *Smarthistory*, August 5, 2020.

¹² José Garza, on *Dirty Laundry: Publicly Erring*, quote spoken at external reviews for *There Are Two Elephants in This Room*, April 19, 2024.



Figure 9. Maddy Kish, *Dirty Laundry: Publicly Erring*, 2024. Mixed media sculpture.

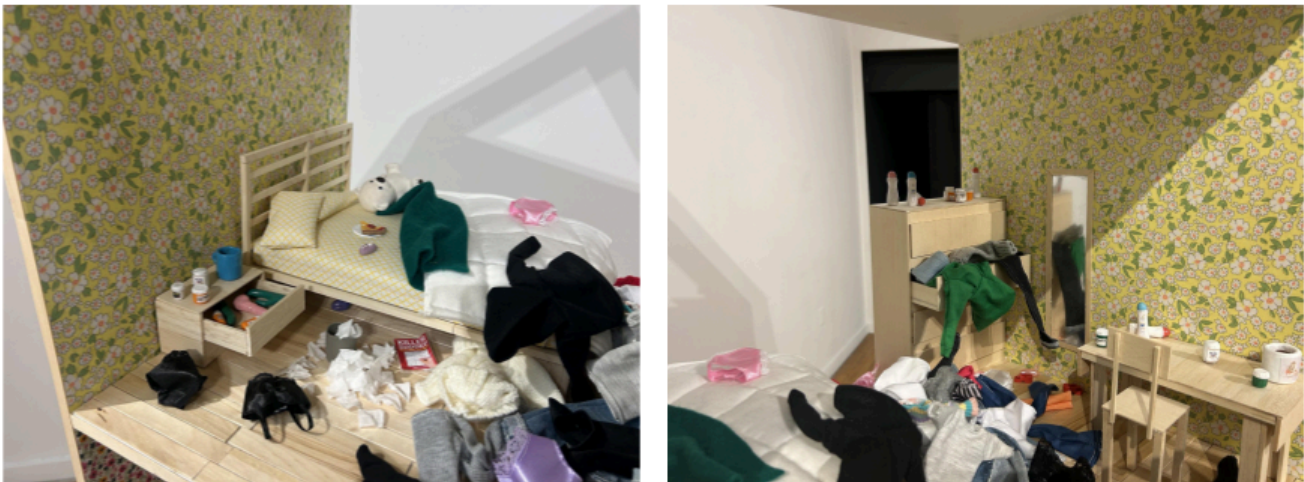
insatiability, consumption, longing, perversion, messiness, and slop. It functions as both image and object, window and door. My presence is tangible not only in what is depicted but in the process of creating the depiction. I am confessing, baring it all, airing out my dirty laundry. It is its own kind of public indecency, confessional and scandalous and deeply intimate. *Dirty Laundry* is bodily; there is no body inhabiting the space but the bodily is everywhere, the trail, The Slop, the insides are exposed. My indecency, my impurity; the

unembodied abjection will find you in my evidence, expose itself to you as you discover it beyond the allure of the joke.

III. HUMOR, HANDMADE, POWER

My work is infused with humor, both in distinct moments and overarching approach. The humor provides a lightness; weight is the contents of the river that separates Tracey Emin and I. This distinction is particularly clear in comparing Emin's *My Bed* and my *Dirty Laundry*. Both works are of course deeply confessional; they are tangible exposures of bodily evidence. However, they diverge in their method and resulting scale. Emin's installation is life-sized, it is an arrangement of real-life artifacts. Its scale and its realness result in a sense of gravity. It is

heavy and confrontational, with the viewer forced to face the thing itself. My dollhouse, on the other hand, is entirely handmade on a miniature scale. This is the key difference between my work and the work of Tracey Emin. We both lean into exposure, confession, diary, and the taboo, but Emin's work confronts in its bodily scale and use of the real object. Her work is confessional and heavy, while I insert lightness and whimsy to lean into the satirical. Like Emin, the I depict a sort of disaster, but *Dirty Laundry* maintains an awareness of its own ridiculousness that is made clear by the form of the dollhouse itself; it inserts a tragic yet comedic reality of female embodiment into a form traditionally representing perfect, clean, pristine girlhood. This overarching sense of making fun is coupled with formal humor that lies in the miniature, non-confrontational scale, along with playful and illustrative style; all of these elements are made possible through the handmade object.



Figures 10 & 11. Bedroom details from Maddy Kish, *Dirty Laundry*, 2024. Mixed media sculpture.

Humor is power over the viewer. Humor is allure. It is how I make you listen to me; it is how I make you interested enough to keep looking. I insert formal humor through the handmade. The handmade is another kind of power; it is control over the form. To make is to control and to decide. In *Dirty Laundry*, my crafting each object makes them controlled variables; I choose

exactly how it will look, read, and live within the piece. Found objects and the readymade are a surrender to the pre-existing, a decision that an object is “good enough”. I, however, desire to control every element in the work; I desire to speak with formal precision. This is clear in the dollhouse, a product of obsession, where every object¹³ is handmade to achieve my desired scale, visual cohesion, and the humor that allures.

To depict abjection and confession unabashedly is to challenge and to repulse. I employ an overarching tonality of making fun to combat this, making the work approachable and digestible. Through artistic hyperbole I craft a caricature of myself akin to other satirical representations of messy women, like *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (MYRR) by Ottessa Moshfegh and *Fleabag* by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Both of these representations, like my dollhouse, feature a messy, unladylike female protagonist, deeply, tragically, and hilariously embodied. Both are purposefully unlikeable, sinking into their own consumption, perversion, waste, and slop. Despite the clear intentionality behind this, both representations are criticized for their perpetration of “Dissociative Feminism”,¹⁴ an internet-age concept surrounding feminine nihilism and submission to patriarchal pain. This accusation – the suggestion that either Moshfegh or Waller-Bridge are submitting to the patriarchy by writing characters who do not fight against it – is a complete misread. It denies both narratives of their clever use of humor and satirical nature. I think that the Dissociative Feminism critique is, frankly, rooted in the age-old ever-boring belief that women cannot be funny. As such, the humor I use in my work is not only essential as a narrative element, but it is essential as an action. Just as I lean into abjection and exposure, I use humor; all are forms of indecency, all are unladylike. To make those who think I

¹³ *Almost* every object, with the only exception being the miniature clothing, which was, decidedly, good enough.

¹⁴ Sophia Peyser, “The ‘Fleabag’ Era of Dissociative Feminism Must End.” *Lithium Magazine*, Jan 19, 2022

cannot be funny laugh, to draw them close and get them to listen, is to have power. It is to point out the viewer's flaws as I confess my own.

CONCLUSION

There is an inherent self-deprecation that comes with pointing out the obvious. I must be able to look in the mirror and laugh as my art feigns profoundness in its mundanity. It is not revolutionary to state that girls eat and poop, I am of course aware of this. But despite this basic, widely accepted knowledge, female embodiment remains impure and abject. My work simultaneously makes fun of myself for talking about it, while emphatically making fun of society for making it relevant.

I work within the limitations imposed upon me as I defy them. I will entertain but I will not shock or startle; I do not want to push you away. I want you to do the digging, I want you to want to find. I want you to understand, to feel my abjection, to hold The Slop because I put it in your hands and you trust me. I have told you a joke and in return you carry my waste; it is yours to sort through, to consider. Cans of beer, toenails, the toilet, flowers, a burger, a red ribbon bow, a pile of dirt, my waste and my shit. The evidence of my embodiment approaches you slowly, gently, made digestible with a coating of sugar and farce. You will swallow it, swallow me as I reveal myself. My insides are inside of the insides of you; as I turn myself inside out again and again you are turned with me. We laugh together as you are churned out, as you are engulfed in the trail, the evidence, The Slop. Your implication makes me whole. This is my confession; I told you I would show you what it's like.

LIST OF FIGURES

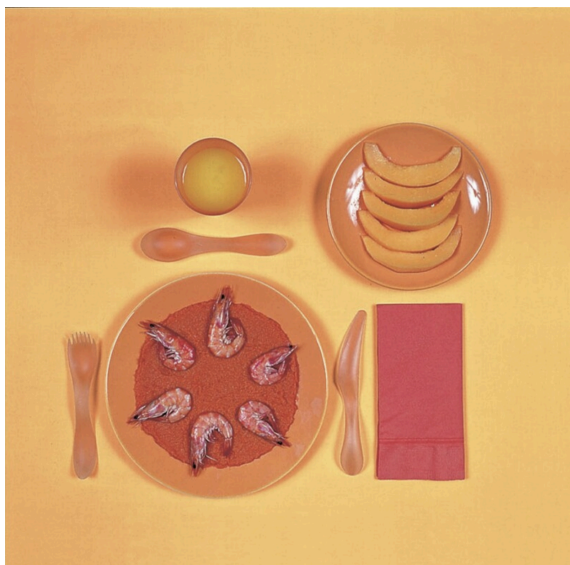


Figure 1.
Sophie Calle, "Monday" from *The Chromatic Diet*, 1997. Color photograph, 11³/₄ x 11³/₄ in.



Figure 2.
Maddy Kish, *Dinner Plate No. 1*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on board, 12 x 12 in.



Figure 3.
Kiki Smith, *Tale*, 1992. Wax, pigment, and papier-mâché, 160 x 23 x 23 in.



Figure 4.
Maddy Kish, image of “The Slop”, 2024.



Figure 5.
Maddy Kish, *Self Care*, 2023. Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in.



Figure 6.
Maddy Kish, *Bathroom Painting No. 2*, 2023. Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in.



Figure 7.
Maddy Kish, *Potty Training*, 2024. 229 resin cast gummy bears, five months, toilet paper, dimensions variable.



Figure 8.
Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998. Box frame, mattress, linens, pillows, various objects, dimensions variable.



Figure 9.
Maddy Kish, *Dirty Laundry: Publicly Erring*, 2024. Mixed media sculpture, 54 x 36 x 18 in.



Figure 10.
Maddy Kish, *Dirty Laundry: Publicly Erring*,
2024. Bedroom detail.



Figure 11.
Maddy Kish, *Dirty Laundry: Publicly Erring*,
2024. Bedroom detail.

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