

5-7-2016

Dysfunctional

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Dysfunctional

by

Gina Thompson

Under the Direction of Ruth Stanford

ABSTRACT

Dysfunctional examines the relationships and experiences that contribute to my art. I grew up in an unsafe environment, with dysfunctional people. This work serves as a peek inside some of those emotions and explores issues of codependence and abusive family systems that suffer but endure. There is no victim in this story only a strong survivor who wants to cultivate awareness through her work. I have revisited this subject as a way to overcome shame. By being vulnerable and sharing my experiences I am able to heal.

INDEX WORDS: Dysfunctional Family, Abuse, Photography, Sculpture, Process Art,
Childhood, Dollhouse, Installation Art, Video

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Gina Thompson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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2016

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2016

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my own dysfunctional family. I love you and all of your flaws.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my sister Jodi for being strong enough to speak up about our abuse for the both of us. Without your courage this body of work would not exist.



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1 Introduction

Dysfunctional explores issues of codependence, sexual abuse and dysfunctional family systems that suffer but endure. Through sculpture, installation art, fiber art, photography and video I examine the relationships and experiences that contribute to my art making process. I grew up in an unsafe environment, with dysfunctional people. This work serves as a peek inside some of those emotions and the cracked lens I now view life through as a result. There is no victim in this story only a strong survivor who wants to cultivate awareness through her work.

I have revisited this subject as a way to overcome shame. By being vulnerable and sharing my experiences I am able to heal. Dr. Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, has spent the past thirteen years studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. In her new book *Rising Strong* she writes, “The opposite of recognizing that we’re feeling something is denying our emotions. The opposite of being curious is disengaging. When we deny our stories and disengage from tough emotions, they don’t go away; instead, they own us, they define us. Our job is not to deny the story, but to defy the ending—to rise strong, recognize our story, and rumble with the truth until we get to a place where we think, Yes. This is what happened. This is my truth. And I will choose how this story ends.”¹

My sister and I were both sexually abused by our stepfather. Even though it happened to us both for many years, at the time I thought it was only happening to me. Keeping this secret held me hostage for the totality of my childhood and into adulthood. In 2009 my sister came out publicly about our abuse and pressed charges. I had been

¹ Brené Brown, *Rising Strong* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 104

seeing a therapist privately for many years to address this issue and my codependent behaviors that developed as a result, but I still wasn't prepared for the emotional tornado that touched down on my family. The news of our abuse wreaked havoc us. No one reacted the way I imagined they would. Instead it was like a bomb went off. My family exploded then regrouped forcing everyone involved to choose sides. It has taken us years to pick up the pieces but things will never be the same.

2 What do you want to say?

I took a painting class during undergraduate school. During that time my abuse was still a secret. One of my assignments was to do a self-portrait and I was struggling with how to make mine reflect my true self. Eventually this led me to paint "Self-Portrait With a Secret," a portrait of myself with duct tape over the mouth (Figure 2.1). My instructor at the time accused me of trying to skip over the difficult details of painting the mouth but for the first time I felt like I had really unlocked something.

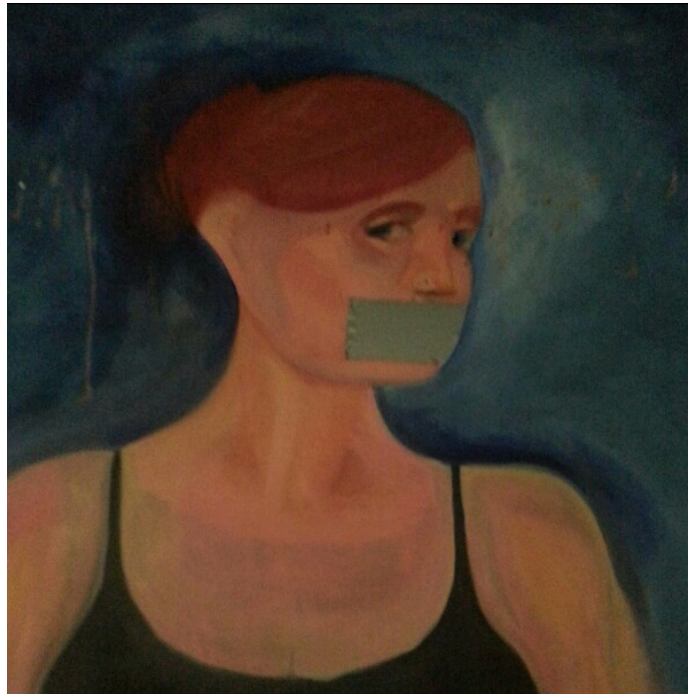


Figure 2.1 *Self-Portrait With a Secret* (2002)
oil on canvas, 3ft. x 3ft.

I successfully made a lot of paintings that cleverly hid my secrets. Mostly I painted text pieces that, to the uninformed viewer, might be perceived as just “weird” but to me they screamed out loud (Figure 2.2). I was painting my secrets and even if I wasn’t telling my story I felt some of those chains loosening.



Figure 2.2 *I'm Not Afraid of Strangers It's the People I Know That Scare Me* (2003)
oil on canvas, 3ft. x 5ft.

My family members spent many weekends alongside these paintings without knowing their true meaning. If they questioned, I lied. This was the closest thing to a confession I could handle.

The majority of my life I have felt broken in some way. Constantly comparing myself to others always results in me never feeling good enough. I devour books about self-esteem, codependence, abuse and healing. Through this dedication to my emotional

well-being I have learned more about others and myself. Now I am creating work that gives me a platform to share what I have learned (Figure 2.3).

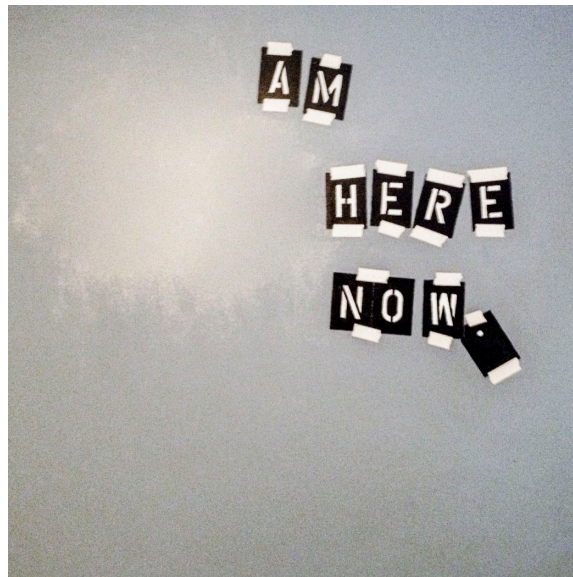


Figure 2.3 *Am Here Now* (2005)
acrylic on canvas, 3ft. x 3ft.

3 The Clothesline

Upon first entry to my thesis show, *Dysfunctional*, the viewer is presented with a large installation composed of five clotheslines ranging from fourteen – twenty-five feet



Figure 3.1 *1 in Every 4 Overall* (2016)
girls pajamas, clothesline, grey paint, clothespins, hooks 25ft. x 15ft.

long. The piece is titled *I In Every 4* (Figure 3.1) and it consists of eighty-two pieces of girls pajamas. Every fourth garment has been washed in grey paint then hung on a clothesline to dry, stiffening and fading it slightly in comparison to the rest with their bright rainbow hues.

I in Every 4 reflects a statistic that one in every four girls will be sexually assaulted before the age of eighteen. I wanted this to be the first thing you were faced with as you entered the gallery in order to set the tone for the rest of the work. This piece creates a sense of discomfort much like Jenny Saville's large blubbery paintings do when you are faced with them at full scale (Figure 3.2). This sets up a very necessary component to viewing the rest of the work because it facilitates learning in a way that words alone cannot.



Figure 3.2 *Branded* (1992)
oil and mixed media on canvas 7ft. x 6ft.

The clothes were collected from thrift stores and they range in size to encompass girls of all ages. As I was selecting the pieces that would be altered I considered the

reality that these could be the pajamas of actual victims. “What if it also happened to her?” I asked myself as I hung the clothes to dry. At first glance the painted clothes don’t appear to be any different than their soft colorful counterparts. You have to look closely to see the differences. My sister and I became really good at hiding our abuse you probably couldn’t have detected it if you tried. In the long run my silence was more destructive to me than the actual molestation itself.



Figure 3.3 1 *in Every 4 Detail* (2016)
girls pajamas, clothesline, grey paint, clothespins, hooks 25ft. x 15ft.

The clothesline is significant to me because my missed opportunity to break my own silence occurred under a clothesline when I was seventeen. It was the year I graduated high school and my mother had just informed me that my oldest stepsister had recently accused my stepfather of molesting her. My mother was angry and accusing and said, “Can you believe she would say that!?!?” to which I lied, “No... how could she say

that?" I was afraid that I would also be scorned so I chose to stay quiet, a silence that would haunt me for another twenty years (Figure 3.3).

I wanted this piece to create the feeling of being a child so I chose to hang it two feet higher than you normally would. Even though I was a teenager when Mom and I had that conversation my inability to speak up for myself made me feel small, weak and helpless.

I created this piece in order to present an opportunity for others to think about this statistic in a more visual way, much like the four thousand pairs of shoes displayed in the permanent exhibition of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum does. Seeing them in mass, smelling them, creates a much clearer understanding of the events that occurred at Majdanek in 1944 than reading about them ever could. I hope this piece gives a voice to the many, many others who have also had to hide from the truth.

4 Pajama Party

I am drawn to domestic materials like fabric and string (Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1 *Pajama Party* Azura, Amber, Jill, Heather, Kaye, Amy, Genie and Melissa (2016)
girls pajamas, clothesline, grey paint, clothespins, hooks 25ft. x 15ft.

They feel very appropriate to my story because my grandmother was always sewing when I was a child. She handmade all of her children's clothing and was the seamstress of the family. I have memories of her always working on someone's costume for a school play or making alterations to a prom dress. For this show I created eight soft sculptures and displayed along one wall of the gallery (Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2 Dysfunctional Right Front (2016)

These constructions are made from ripping girls pajamas at the seams then mixing them with fragments of men's clothes and sewing them back together. The final product resembles a form familiar to a small child who has been restructured with a tumor of some sort. The sculptures are named *Azura*, *Amber*, *Melissa*, *Jill*, *Kaye*, *Heather*, *Genie* and *Amy* after my childhood girlfriends. It is very upsetting to think, now, about how many slumber parties I had as a child where I could have unknowingly exposed my friends to my abuser. This piece represents the permanent change that occurs when a

child is abused. It's like the fabric of their being has been restructured altering them forever (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3 *Dysfunctional Detail of Pajama Party and Hymn* (2016)

5 Hymn

Hymn is a piece I have decided to hang noticeably higher than the rest of the work in the gallery (Figure 5.1). The placement of the work forces you to look up at it much like if you were looking a religious painting in an old European church.

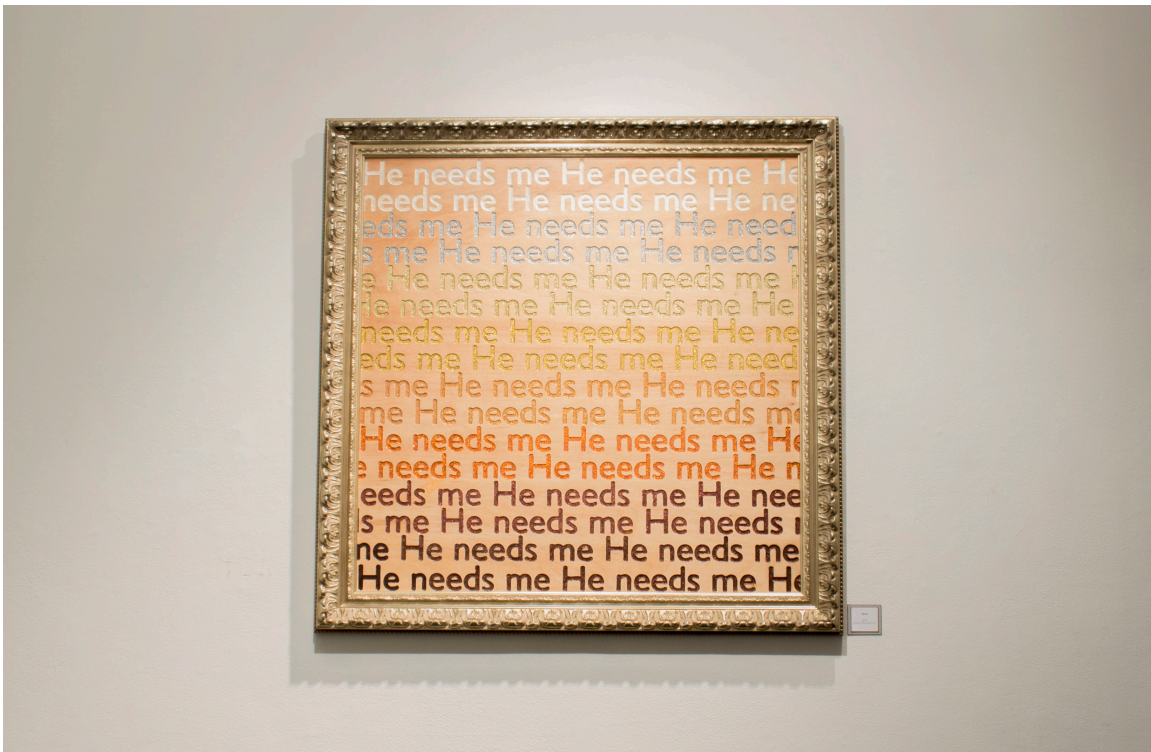


Figure 5.1 *Hymn* (2015)
plywood, glitter, glue, gold frame 4ft. x 4ft.

It is a large square carving in a large gaudy gold frame that was created using a CNC router to repeat the phrase, “He needs me” in one long run on sentence. The words are then filled with a glitter and glue mixture arranged in a gradation of colors from white to a chocolate brown.

This piece was inspired by a song from the Disney movie *Popeye*. In the scene Olive Oil, is singing about her new romantic interest in Popeye. She sings “And all at once I knew, I knew at once, I knew he needed me... Until the day I die I wonder why, I

knew he needed me, It could be fantasy oh oh, or maybe its because...he needs me, he need me, he needs me, he needs me, he needs me!” The chant repeated over and over just like the throws of a codependent relationship.

My abuser told me that if I told anyone it would “kill my mother.” At my young age I took this very literally. My years of secret keeping were an effort to protect my family from harm. I learned to put my own needs aside in order to maintain the “happy family” I wanted so badly. This served me well until I started applying this methodology to my grown up romantic relationships, usually with alcoholics and drug addicts.

I was able to break this unhealthy behavior after many years of attending Co-Dependents Anonymous (CODA) meetings and dedication to one on one therapy. Through this process I learned to rebuild my self-esteem and create proper boundaries.

6 White Houses

White Houses is a series of three sculptures that have been created through a process of destroying and rebuilding, much like the compilation of my family during and since this traumatic news was revealed (Figure 6.1).



Figure 6.1 *Dysfunctional Back Side* (2015)

My process begins with collecting discarded dollhouses. I find them abandoned or neglected on Craigslist or at community yard sales. I select the wooden ones that have been put together by hand then discarded in some way. I question the history of each one as I brush away the cobwebs. I like to think that they were made by a loving father as a gift to his precious daughter. Many of them have been retired to a basement or attic after the child moves on. Most smell of mildew or dust from waiting to be rescued all these years. I could just as easily build my own from a kit, but I think the symbolic importance would be wasted if I did.



Figure 6.2 *Possible Endings* (2015)
dollhouses, miniature chair

The first thing I do when I get them into my studio is apply a coat of white paint. I do this with a small brush so I can reach every corner and ledge. I enjoy watching the history disappear as I go. It feels very cathartic, like I am erasing whatever childhood history came along with it. Once the piece has been painted I begin to dissect it with tools such as power saws and drills. In my work the “house” is symbolic of the family structure. Dollhouses are a symbol of a family based on fantasy. My constructions represent a more realistic version of the family unit one that is more vulnerable, fragile, and guarded than it’s perfect counterparts.

Possible Endings (Figure 6.2) started as a plantation style house with four columns in the front. My first attack on it was with a chainsaw. I cut one of the upstairs rooms completely out then sewed it back into place by drilling holes and using yarn. The ending result was much less exciting than I was expecting so I decided to repair it with a room from a completely different dollhouse. I selected a more gingerbread style house and stole its living room and stole its living room. This process of destructing, switching and reconstructing continued until I landed at the resulting assemblage and also the piece *New Beginnings* (Figure 6.2).



Figure 6.3 *New Beginnings* (2015)
dollhouses. miniature dollhouse

My decision to perfectly paint each one before I alter it creates a visible scar that I have purposefully left unaltered in order to reveal the violence that occurred. *Making Do* was created from the leftover scraps, which is a place where so many families begin their story (Figure 6.4). Through this work and the conversations surrounding it help me to arrive in a place where I no longer feel the weight of being a victim.



Figure 6.4 *Making Do* (2015)
dollhouses, miniature ladder

7 Voyeurism

Behind the center wall of the gallery is a large grey dollhouse standing on its own spindly legs (Figure 7.1). From a distance you see a blue/green light flickering inside the upstairs windows. I wanted to create the something similar to driving at night and seeing the glow of a television inside an otherwise dark house. I'm very curious about other people and how they live their lives. In my own experience, life on the inside was never what it appeared from the outside.



Figure 7.1 *Dysfunctional View of Videos*

Inside the dollhouse there are two videos being projected in two of the rooms upstairs. You can only view these two videos by peeking in through the windows. The room on the left is showing *Deconstructurtsnoced* (Figure 7.2).

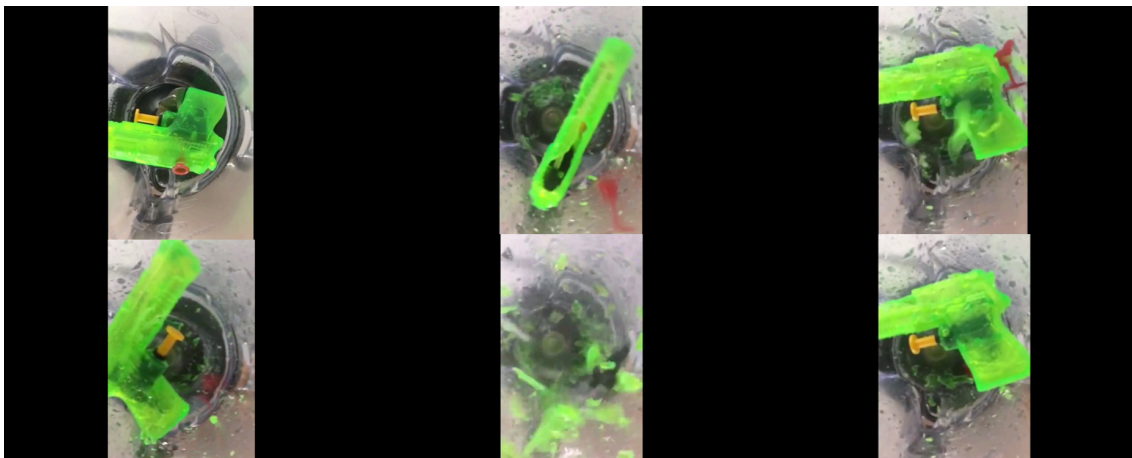


Figure 7.2 *Deconstructurtsnoced* Film Still (2016)

This video was created by dropping a frozen water gun into a blender. From the top of the blender I have replaced the lid with a sheet of thin plexi glass. Almost instantly when the blender is turned on the water gun is reduced to dust, then after a small pause reassembles itself.



Figure 7.3 *39 Film Still* (2015)

The video showing on the right is titled *39* (Figure 7.3). It is an image of myself spinning in a flower print dress. The video slows down several times in the duration and there is audio playing quietly alongside. It is Elvis Presley's version of the song "Blue Moon". This song has been re-made many times over the years by many different artists. I selected this version because it has a sort of suspended in time feeling. The lyrics refer to the expression: "once in a blue moon," meaning "very rarely". It refers to a second full moon within a calendar month, an event that occurs once every two or three years. The narrator of the song is relating a stroke of luck so unlikely that it must have taken place under a blue moon. I chose this song because of my own struggles with relationships that have been a direct result of my abuse. It has taken me many years to build a healthy relationship because of my issues surrounding trust, sex and men. This video was made after a moment of realization that after all the years of unhealthy relationships I am now

part of one that is loving and supportive.

8 Forced Perception

I use photography in my work because it enables me to control what the viewer sees. Through forced perspective and manipulation of scale, I am in control of what is seen. A photograph is very specific. For *Dysfunctional* I created a series of eight photographs. All of them were taken from inside dollhouses. By doing this I can create a false reality symbolic of the one I lived through in my silence. In the process of working on the white house series I was documenting my progress regularly after major changes had been made. I started to look closer and see it from a different perspective.



Figure 8.1 *Inside* (2015)

Inside (Figure 8.1) is a view of the door of the dollhouse taken from the inside. When I discovered the work of contemporary photographer Vincent Laforet, (Figures 8.2 and 8.3) I was drawn to his image manipulation. He takes photographs of what seem to be, at first glance, miniatures, but in reality are aerial photographs of landscapes taken from different heights that distort the image and perspective. This makes the viewer look closely to decide what's real and what isn't and leaves them questioning reality versus fantasy.



Figure 8.2 Vincent Laforet Life Series



Figure 8.3 Vincent Laforet Life Series

Bathtub, Pumpkin, Asleep, Attic, Peek, Better and Greener Grass (Figures 8.4 – 8.10) achieve these same results.



Figure 8.4 *Bathtub* (2015)



Figure 8.5 *Pumpkin* (2016)



Figure 8.6 *Asleep* (2015)



Figure 8.7 *Attic* (2015)



Figure 8.8 *Peek* (2016)



Figure 8.9 *Better* (2015)



Figure 8.10 Greener Grass (2015)

9 Conclusion

During the creation of this body of work Bill Cosby's sexual assault scandal was making headlines daily. The July edition of *New York* magazine hit newsstands with a black and white image of all the women who were now coming forward on the cover with a tagline that read "An Unwelcome Sisterhood" (Figure 9.1). This is a very powerful image that really encompasses the ideas behind *Dysfunctional*. Years of keeping secrets and feeling isolated haunted these women and it only took one to bravely come forward giving others the strength to follow.

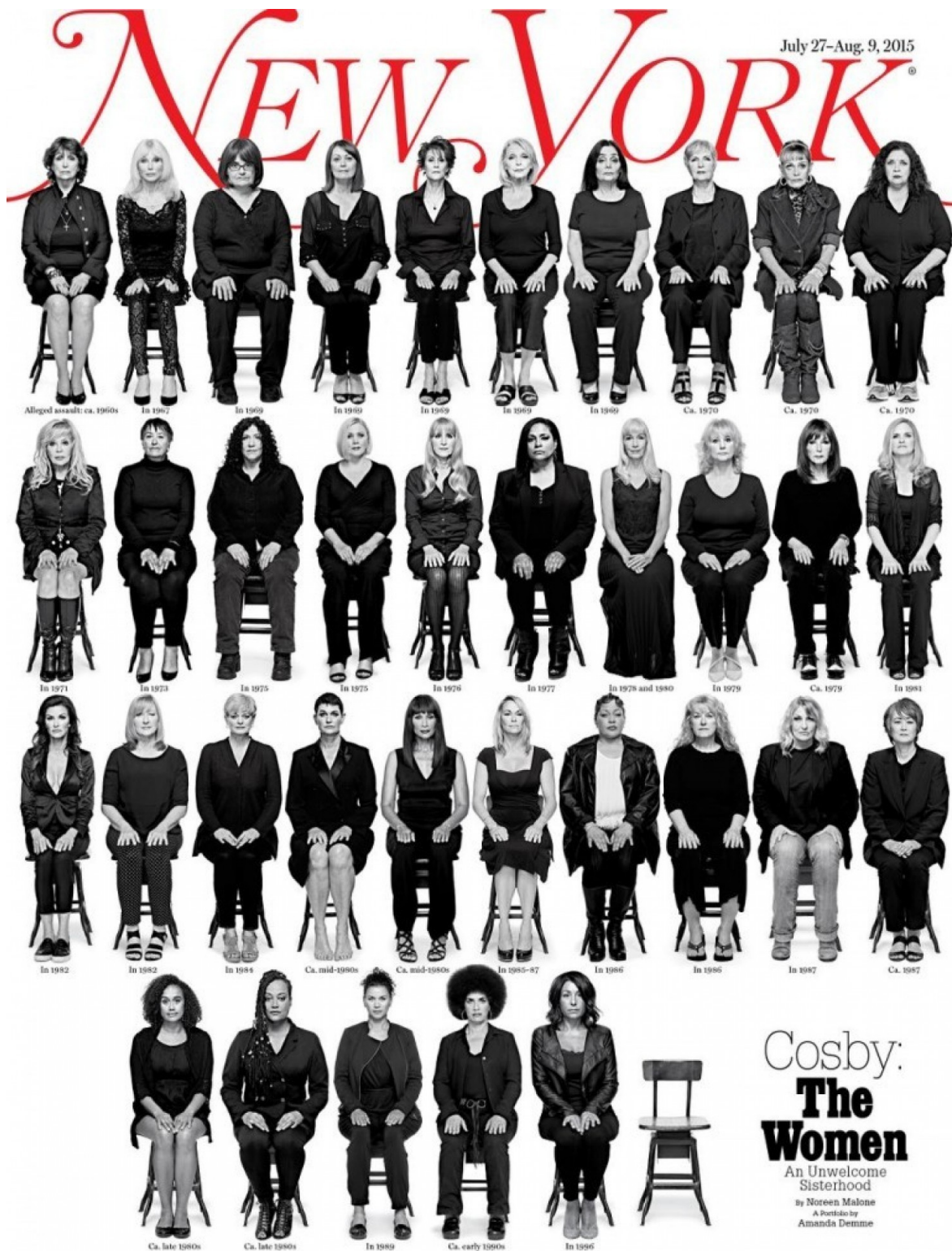


Figure 9.1 New York Magazine Front Cover July 2015

I'm shaken by the amount of students who have approached me after I have presented my work to say, "This also happened to me." In that moment there is a sense of acceptance and unity. Just the need to say... I am like you, I have experienced what you did and I understand. I am wearing the grey painted pajamas.

Dysfunctional is the end of me keeping secrets. It is an explanation of how I have seen the world and how that view is changing. When I was young I was envious of "normal" families. I wanted that emerald green grass. As I have gotten older I realize that no one really knows what goes on behind four walls and a closed door. Maybe someone was envious of my family because we looked "normal" to the outside world.

After being silent about my abuse and feeling powerless for so many years creating this work now feels very powerful to me. I can demand attention and speak up with light; color and materials in a way that I never felt were possible in my youth. Now I have a voice.

10 References

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