

Spring 2017

Silenced imbalances

Ashley G. Roth
James Madison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019>



Part of the [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Roth, Ashley G., "Silenced imbalances" (2017). *Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current*. 287.
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019/287>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

Silenced Imbalances

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Visual and Performing Arts
James Madison University

by Ashley Grace Roth

April 2017

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Art, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

HONORS COLLEGE APPROVAL:

Project Advisor: Robert Mertens, MFA
Assistant Professor, Art

Bradley R. Newcomer, Ph.D.,
Dean, Honors College

Reader: Laura Purvis, MA, Architectural Historian

Reader: John T. Casteen IV, MFA
Lecturer, University of Virginia Department of
English

PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at Duke Hall Gallery Court on May 4, 2017.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Statement	5
Artwork	7
And We See We Are Not Alone	8
Sexism: your choice to choke on, spit out, or swallow	14
Coping	19
Femininity and Craft	26
“Locker Room” Talk	32
Introspection	38
Passion in Women	40
Nasty Woman	46
Poetry	49
Ringing	50
Again	51
#1	52
#3	53
Messages	54
Fester	55
Beachcomber	56
Coiled	57
Self Punishment	59

Birdseed	60
Toxic Cycle	61
The futon	62
Pickle	63
Unwillingly breath returns	64
Conclusion	65
Bibliography	67

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the financial support of the Martha Curt Scholarship, the Myra Doherty and the Myra Doherty Memorial Scholarships, the Dean's Scholarship Fund in the College of Visual and Performing Arts by James and Gladys Kemp ('49) Lisanby, the Thompson Family Scholarship, the JMU Scholarship Endowment, the College of Visual and Performing Arts Research Grant, and the Professional Development Scholarship from the College of Visual and Performing Arts at James Madison University.

I am incredibly grateful to my Honors Thesis Committee for providing me with extensive personal and professional guidance. Thank you to Robert Mertens for advising and supporting me tirelessly throughout my degree. Your deep understanding of fibers and feminism helped me discover myself as an artist. Thank you to Laura Purvis for encouraging me to follow my passions and never give up. Thank you to John T. Casteen IV for helping me discover my poetic voice and for listening deeply. I would also like to thank Bill Tate for teaching me to take risks and for introducing me to Vienna.

I would like to thank my friends and collaborators whose dialogue was imperative to my work. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional love and support.

Statement

Awkwardness and vulnerability

through continuous public display and criticism

this and these inhibiting, defeating a person's ability

to be able to function to the fullest extent.

Disabling.

Through literal and metaphorical ciphering I blend original poetry with my artwork in order to address misperceptions about gender, sexuality, mental illness, and ableism within American society. Because of my dedication to social activism, particularly from a feminist standpoint, my process demands a research-based practice, fixed deeply in hands-on experience. I engage the Craft movement and its intersections with both historical and contemporary feminism by working heavily with techniques and materials characterized by intensive labor, such as crocheting, felting, and weaving in order to highlight and subversively analyze gendered roles. Fiber art is strongly connected to this complex history, itself a trivialized gendered domestic activity, only recently elevated within contemporary conversations of fine art. Through my craft, I actively move expressions of feminism and intersectionality from private, traditionally feminine spaces, to the public sphere by placing myself within the feminist discourse with work that encourages others to engage in this conversation. It is important that my work is both informative for and serviceable in countering the deeply embedded cultural acceptance of erroneous views on gender inequality, mental illness, and ability in our society.

My undergraduate thesis work is an expression of my personal experience with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), major panic disorder, depression and dermatillomania. Collectively, the pieces are a metaphor for how these disorders alter my ability to function daily and affect how I perceive myself as isolated and dysfunctional. Mental disorders are invisible illnesses. If a person who suffers from mental disorder(s) is high functioning, it might be difficult or impossible for others to see and/or believe that any illness actually exists. As someone who suffers from high-functioning anxiety and depressive disorders, I have often experienced this. Additionally my work explores the, often isolating, personal and mainstream expectations of gender and sexuality. I am particularly interested in the facets of identity that force an individual to be categorized, having titles and associated expectations placed upon them. My use of poetry is one way that I explore how language can conceal and reveal simultaneously.

Artwork



And We See We Are Not Alone
Mixed Media
2015



And We See We Are Not Alone
Mixed Media
2015



And We See We Are Not Alone
Mixed Media
2015



And We See We Are Not Alone
Mixed Media
2015



And We See We Are Not Alone
Mixed Media
2015

And We See We Are Not Alone

This series is an expression of my personal experience with mental disorders, specifically obsessive-compulsive disorder, major panic disorder and depression. These pieces illuminate the individual struggle and differing personal experiences of people with mental illness through the isolation of figures trapped within their own mental landscapes. Although I can only speak through personal experience, this body of work was made from my acknowledging that although I felt isolated by my illness, many people experience mental illness in varying degrees and diagnoses. The work is accompanied by a three-part poem titled "Coiled" (page 56). Each piece is composed of the same materials: rusted metal, felt, waxed-linen thread, vintage wooden boxes and HO-scale figures. The materials used are crucial to the metaphor that I am creating: felt in its capacity to be suffocating, the binding of thread, orange; a color reflecting anxiety, the claustrophobia of the wooden boxes, and rusted metal symbolizing the deterioration of a durable material. The metaphor is subjective to my own struggle; however, all the individual pieces displayed in relation to one another reflect my acknowledgement that although the metaphor may change from person to person, I am not alone in my experiences. Furthermore, this body of work was my first exploration in expressing personal suffering behind invisible illnesses.



Sexism: your choice to choke on, spit out, or swallow
Silver wire
2015

Sexism: your choice to choke on, spit out, or swallow

I am interested in the construction of the mind/body dichotomy perpetuated in Western culture. We see this notion expressed in Baudelaire's 1863 essay "In Praise of Cosmetics", where he argues that morality is artificial, and to social values of mind over body, and the superiority of cultural fabrication over individual bodies. In my work I also think about how this is a gendered activity, reflecting historic notions that the mind and intellect are the realm of the (white) male and that corporeality and emotions are that of the female or other. I see the pain in my work as representative of this striving for artificial at the expense of the body.¹

Lauren Kalman's work, particularly her piece *Hard Wear (Tongue Gilding)*, directly influenced my piece *Sexism: your choice to choke on, spit out, or swallow*.² *Hard Wear* "combine[s] both the extravagant, wealthy nature of gold with the physical deformities often linked with the lower class."³ Kalman places gold leaf in the context of the tongue to reference high class and wealth in association with food intake, infant-hood, and the giving and receiving of sexual pleasure.⁴ I was intrigued by Kalman's use of the female

¹ Alex King, "ARTIST INTERVIEW: LAUREN KALMAN," AESTHETICS FOR BIRDS, December 14, 2016, accessed April 28, 2017, <https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2016/12/01/artist-interview-lauren-kalman/>.

² Kalman, Lauren, *Hard Wear (Tongue Gilding)*, 2006. Film and Print. 35 by 23 in. At http://www.laurenkalman.com/art/Hard_Wear.html#0.

³ C. M. Williamson, "Spotlight on Lauren Kalman: Pleasure and Pain In Gold," *The Artifice*, December 12, 2015, accessed April 24, 2017, <https://the-artifice.com/spotlight-on-lauren-kalman/>.

⁴ *Ibid.*,

mouth as a place of sexual context. I wanted to reference the aesthetic of Kalman's piece, but I was curious to explore this sexual element in the context of fibers and craft.

Responding to the enlightened sexism women experience today, I referenced historical notions of fiber arts as "women's work" and the evolution of the Craft movement as potentially representative of many marginalized communities. I was especially interested in commenting on the expectation that women should keep quiet, not fight back against gender inequality, and stick to "feminine" spheres. Enlightened sexism is the push to denounce the women's movement and feminism, declaring that equality has already been achieved, negating a need for contemporary feminism. In an excerpt from Susan Douglas' *Enlightened Sexism*, 2010, she explains that enlightened sexism is:

A response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism – indeed full equality has allegedly been achieved – so now it's okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women.⁵

As the title of my piece suggests, enlightened sexism is something that everyone has a choice to confront or to perpetuate. Unfortunately, enlightened sexism seems to be working. For a long time, I was afraid to approach feminist topics in my work because many mainstream attitudes believe that gender equality has been achieved. According

⁵ Susan Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism* (2010), in *Women's Voiced Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 6th ed. Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015), 285.

to a study mentioned in the documentary *Equal Means Equal*, 72% of Americans believe that women have equal rights under the constitution.⁶ They don't. The Equal Rights Amendment, first introduced to Congress in 1923, still has yet to be ratified. The amendment states: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."⁷ My piece, placed in the context of the mouth, suggests a need for people to speak out against gender inequality and realize that enlightened sexism is marginalizing a need for action. Feminism is not dead yet.

In order to incorporate gendered material and techniques, I chose to crochet a doily out of wire. I believe wire is a masculine material and crocheting, a distinctly feminine craft. Because of its long history of being associated with women, work in the home, and family, it has been long debated that fiber art belong, not in the fine art realm but stay, traditionally in craft.

Women's work is inevitably in the sphere of culture as opposed to nature and women often perform tasks similar to those of men, but their work is awarded a secondary status because of the different place the tasks are performed. The structures of difference are between private and public activities, domestic and professional work. This provides an important insight into the structure of sexual division in art hierarchies. For in fact what distinguishes art from craft in the hierarchy is not so much different methods, practices and objects but also where

⁶ *Equal Means Equal*. Dir. Kamala Lopez. (Heroica Films, 2016), Film.

⁷ *Ibid.*,

these things are made, often in the home, and for whom they are made, often for the family.⁸

Fiber art is often viewed in the art world as being subordinate to fine art, because fibers and textile crafts were often made by women in the context of the home for the family. This ideology directly reflects the status of women in our society as being subordinate to men, therefore making the status of our work less than that of men's. Additionally, because of its ties to women's work in the home, fiber arts are also associated with feminist artwork, which causes them to become increasingly marginalized through enlightened sexism.

If I chose to work in fibers because I recognize this tie between women and traditionally gendered roles, does that make my work not art but craft? Can my work not be considered art because I am making work about this phenomenon of placing conceptual work in the context of the cottage industry? Is my work automatically disregarded because I am another woman making "crafts" and talking about feminism, which is supposedly already dead?

⁸ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (I.B. Tauris, 2013), 70.



Coping series: two bracelets and two rings
Copper sheet, copper wire, felt
2015



Coping series: ring, detail
Copper sheet, copper wire, felt
2015



Coping series: large wearable piece
Felt, copper wire
2016

Coping

These wearable pieces were made after “And We See We Are Not Alone” as I was trying to find a more intimate and personal way to express my experience with mental disorders. I was interested in the use of the body as a way to analyze my own physical relationship to my work. I began exploring the similarities of mental disorders to fungi, parasites, and invasive plant species such as English Ivy and Kudzu. I was fascinated by the way these invasive species inhibit another plant’s growth, sometimes killing it, and I compared this to how a mental disorder can have an affect on a person’s physical health.

Repulsiveness and impairment became important elements in my work. Through body adornment, I used these elements to express my feelings of shame, disgust, awkwardness, and vulnerability regarding my illnesses. I was captivated by William Ian Miller’s *Anatomy of Disgust* 1998 and began researching the psychology behind disgust. Miller says “it is inferiority itself that tends to disgust no matter whether it be the inferior position in a classification system of plants or animals or in our own social and moral hierarchies.”⁹ Our society views anything that does not adhere to the mythical normative as being inferior: disabilities, disorders, sexualities that stray from the heteronormative, etc. We are conditioned to tend to find these things disgusting in a sense and to label them as “Other.” I set out to explore this element of disgust in relationship to my mental illnesses.

⁹ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Revised Edition, 1998), 43.

Following the completion of “Sexism: your choice to choke on, spit out, or swallow,” I chose to work with metal and fibers because I wanted to link craft directly with its association to the feminine. Leading up to this body of work, I had been curious about gendered material: what are materials that are perceptually considered more feminine or more masculine? For this series, I chose to work with metals and fibers because of their potential associative constructs. The copper armatures for the rings and bracelets have a much more structured quality in contrast to the organic quality of the felt tendrils. I am fascinated with gendered associations: governance, culture, and structure correlating to the masculine while nature, the organic, and earth correlating to the feminine. Men are seen as being of the social sphere, and women of the natural sphere. The tendrils are coiled with copper wire so that although they blossom into very organic forms, they are constrained by structure.

After creating the smaller wearable pieces, I decided I needed to work larger because the bracelets and rings were only minor inhibitors to my movement and I really wanted to ply with restraint. The larger wearable piece has a much more physical quality to it and because it is mostly made of felt, it is heavy to wear and succeeds in further restricting movement. When I experience symptoms of my disorders, I completely lose my ability to function mentally and physically at a ‘normal’ level. The symptoms I experience from these illnesses affect my immune system, my ability to focus, eat or sleep regularly, socialize, and perform simple tasks to the best of my ability. The way these pieces take over the body and inhibit movement is how I was able to translate how my mental disorders can be debilitating like a physical disorder, disease, or handicap. Being someone who is high functioning, people often treat me as

if I do not have a mental disorder. Although I suffer from an “invisible illness,” others perceive me as being fully able and often when I explain that I am struggling it seems to be discredited, because there is little physical evidence of my struggle. Through counseling I have a new understanding of this work: the feelings of shame I had about my illnesses and feeling like I cannot perform to the normative standard manifested in a strong desire to create a physical representation of my feelings and struggles since it is often unnoticed by others.

This body of work was largely influenced by stigmas I felt, being a woman, working with a medium that is historically based in craft. It is grounded in feelings of shame, awkwardness and vulnerability, explicitly the shame, awkwardness, and vulnerability of being anything other than a straight, white male. My hope is to continue this project even further through intersectionality, by collaborating with people of different races and sexualities.

Looking back on “And We See We Are Not Alone” and “Coping,” I realized that I was subconsciously attracted to felt because of its resemblance to human skin. I imagined my diagnoses as a physical and bodily malformation. In addition to depression, anxiety, and OCD, I am diagnosed with dermatillomania (also called excoriation), which is a skin picking disorder. It is “considered a type of repetitive ‘self-grooming’ behavior called ‘Body-Focused Repetative Behavior’(BFRB)” and it can also be classified as a type of obsessive compulsive disorder.¹⁰ I pick at loose or dead skin around my nails and at blemishes that actually exist or that I simply perceive exist all

¹⁰ "Skin Picking Disorder (Excoriation)," WebMD, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/skin-picking-disorder#1>.

over my body. Once I notice a blemish or dead skin, I don't want to stop picking at it until I "remove" it. Often times this results in bleeding, scabbing, sores and scarring. I was so attracted to this element of disgust, specifically, in reference to human skin because of my own obsession with trying to eliminate any perceived imperfections of my skin.



Femininity and Craft
Mixed Media
2016



Femininity and Craft, detail
Mixed Media
2016

Femininity and Craft

This piece was a product of my exploration of coding and poetry. Jen Bervin's *The Dickinson Composites Series* was a direct source of inspiration for my work.¹¹ In this series, Bervin studied Emily Dickinson's handwritten poems and created large-scale embroidery pieces of the variant marks she used in her writing. Since many of the variant marks and words Dickinson used in her poetry were omitted in printed editions of her work, it loses much of the depth the variants add to the reading and interpretation of the poetry. Bervin focused on highlighting the importance of these variants by creating layered composites of only the variant marks and words in six of Dickinson's fascicles and embroidering them large-scale.¹² The variants become a new language and poetry in the way Bervin revealed and concealed different aspects of these poems.

Following this idea of revealing and concealing, I coded a poem I wrote entitled "Femininity and Craft" into weaving techniques and essentially re-wrote the poem in the form of a cloth. I divided the alphabet into four sections:

1. A, E, I, M, Q, U, Y
2. B, F, J, N, R, V, Z
3. C, G, K, O, S, W
4. D, H, L, P, T, X

Then I took each of these sections and assigned a weaving technique to it.

¹¹ Bervin, Jen. *The Dickinson Composites Series*, 2004-2008. Quilts, 6 by 8 ft. At jenbervin.com. <http://jenbervin.com/projects/the-dickinson-composites-series#2>.

¹² *Ibid.*,

1. Float (Red)
2. Pile (Orange)
3. Hole (Blue)
4. Coiling (Green)

For spaces, I used a twill weave. Each number was a designated inch and each line of the poem was approximately ten inches in length. This is the pattern of the lines of text:

1	2	0	1	0	3	1	2	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	0	0
3	2	0	0	4	4	1	1	3	3	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	0	0
3	2	0	4	4	2	2	1	1	2	2	3	3	3	1	2	4	1	2	0
3	2	0	0	1	1	3	3	1	1	4	4	1	1	1	1	4	4	0	0
3	2	0	2	2	1	1	3	3	1	1	4	4	1	1	1	1	4	4	0
3	2	0	1	2	1	4	4	1	2	3	0	3	4	4	1	2	0	0	0
4	4	1	2	0	3	1	1	4	4	1	0	2	1	1	1	4	1	0	0
3	3	1	4	4	0	1	0	3	3	1	1	4	3	3	0	2	1	0	0
0	0	0	0	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	0	0	0	0
3	3	1	1	4	4	1	2	3	0	4	1	2	2	1	2	1	2	4	0
4	4	2	3	1	3	4	0	1	1	0	3	3	2	3	0	1	2	4	0

There is approximately ten inches of twill weave on both ends of the cloth and two inches of twill bordering the text. Between the eleventh and twelfth line, there is also about ten inches of twill.

The cloth was then stained with black tea and rust to make it appear grimy and decayed. Meant to look like an artifact, it is displayed inside a garment bag to nod toward stereotypes of gender based clothing and appearance. The bag also serves as a symbol of preservation, which, in this case, is a metaphor for the preservation of gender stereotypes, norms, and hierarchies.

What drove me to write the poem were questions I had begun to ask myself a lot following my research into the history of fibers and textiles, and the history of the women's movement. How would my work be received and understood differently if I were a man? Do I want people to receive and understand my work outside of the context of me being a white female or is it important to my work?

Femininity and Craft

if I were a man

or lesbian

or transgender

or asexual

or bisexual

or anything other

than simply female

would I somehow be

“saying”

something different

through my work and

do I want to be



"Locker Room" Talk
Mixed Media
2016



"Locker Room" Talk, detail
Mixed Media
2016



"Locker Room" Talk, detail
Mixed Media
2016

“Locker Room” Talk

This piece was made in response to enlightened sexism, sexual harassment, sexual terrorism and rape culture in America. It was also made in response to the surfacing of the 2005 video of President Donald Trump bragging about taking advantage of women physically.¹³ Trump later described the conversation as “locker room” talk suggesting that it was not a big deal and that America had more important things to worry about.¹⁴ This piece was made from a found embroidered table runner, copper wire, and Mylar. The strips of Mylar hanging from the embroidery have words and statements written on them that directly reference common misconceptions and truths about sexual harassment and rape. Much of the text is written in response to, and reflecting on, reading a chapter in Jessica Valenti’s book *Full Frontal Feminism*.¹⁵ In the chapter entitled “The Blame (And Shame) Game,” Valenti discusses misconceptions and realities about rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and intimate partner violence in America.¹⁶ I was interested in what she describes as a “rape schedule”: women taking preparatory steps to try to protect themselves from rape such as carrying their keys when walking to their cars, locking their doors routinely, and avoiding walking alone at night. Valenti points out that although these things make us feel safer, most

¹³ David A. Fahrenthold, “Trump recorded having extremely lewd conversation about women in 2005.” The Washington Post (WP Company LLC) [US], last modified October 8, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html?utm_term=.589ca94e756a.

¹⁴ Ibid.,

¹⁵ Jessica Valenti, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Women’s Guide To Why Feminism Matters* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Ibid., 63-83.

women who are raped are raped by someone they know and not by a random person on the street.¹⁷ Valenti also talks about the difference between rape and sexual assault:

Some women think that if force wasn't used, it wasn't rape. Some women think that they "deserved" it. Or that they "owed" a guy sex. 'Cause he bought her dinner or something. [...] The legal definition differs from state to state, but the generally accepted definition is forced intercourse (vaginal, anal, or oral) – force being physical or psychological coercion. Men can be raped. Rape is not always heterosexual; women can rape women, men can rape men.

Sexual assault is different. It's unwanted sexual contact, like grabbing, fondling, or other nasties.¹⁸

Immediately after reading this, I realized I have been raped and not realized it. I later learned that what I had experienced is called altruistic sex, where there is not complete consent and "motivation for consent involves feeling sorry for the other person, or feeling guilty about resisting sexual advances."¹⁹ I was so upset and sickened by learning this and after watching how Trump handled the video situation by brushing it off like it was no big deal with a "boys will be boys" attitude. I thought about all the times I have been sexually assaulted and harassed, not knowing how to handle the situation, and feeling hopeless and small. I had no idea how big of an issue this was in our

¹⁷ Ibid., 66-67.

¹⁸ Ibid., 68.

¹⁹ Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee, *Women's Voiced Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015), 550.

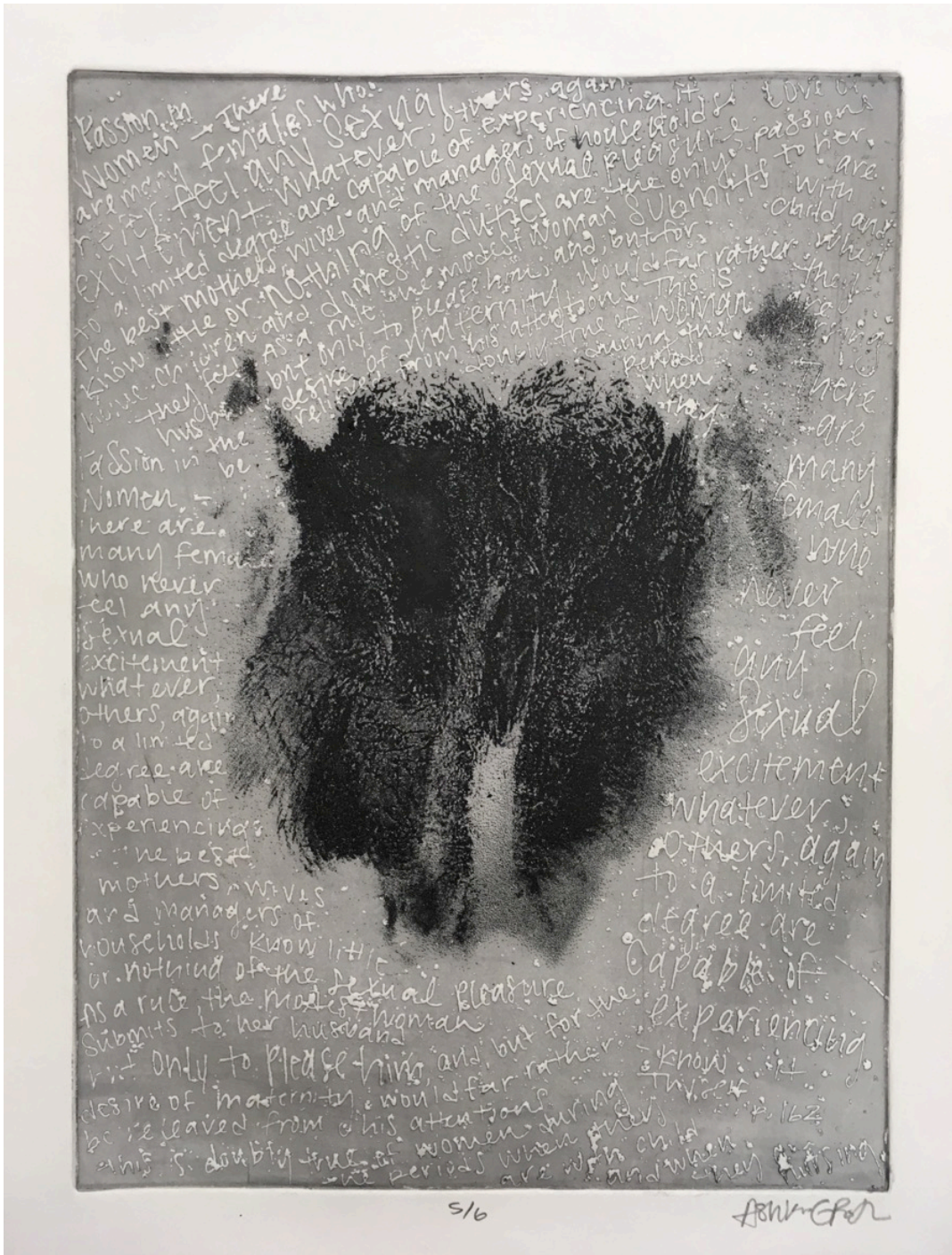
country. I didn't think I would ever hear a presidential candidate brag about assaulting women. I had no idea. I used free writing in list form as a way to digest the news and its connection to Valenti's text. What resulted were the handwritten strips of Mylar hanging from the embroidery: a somber word map.



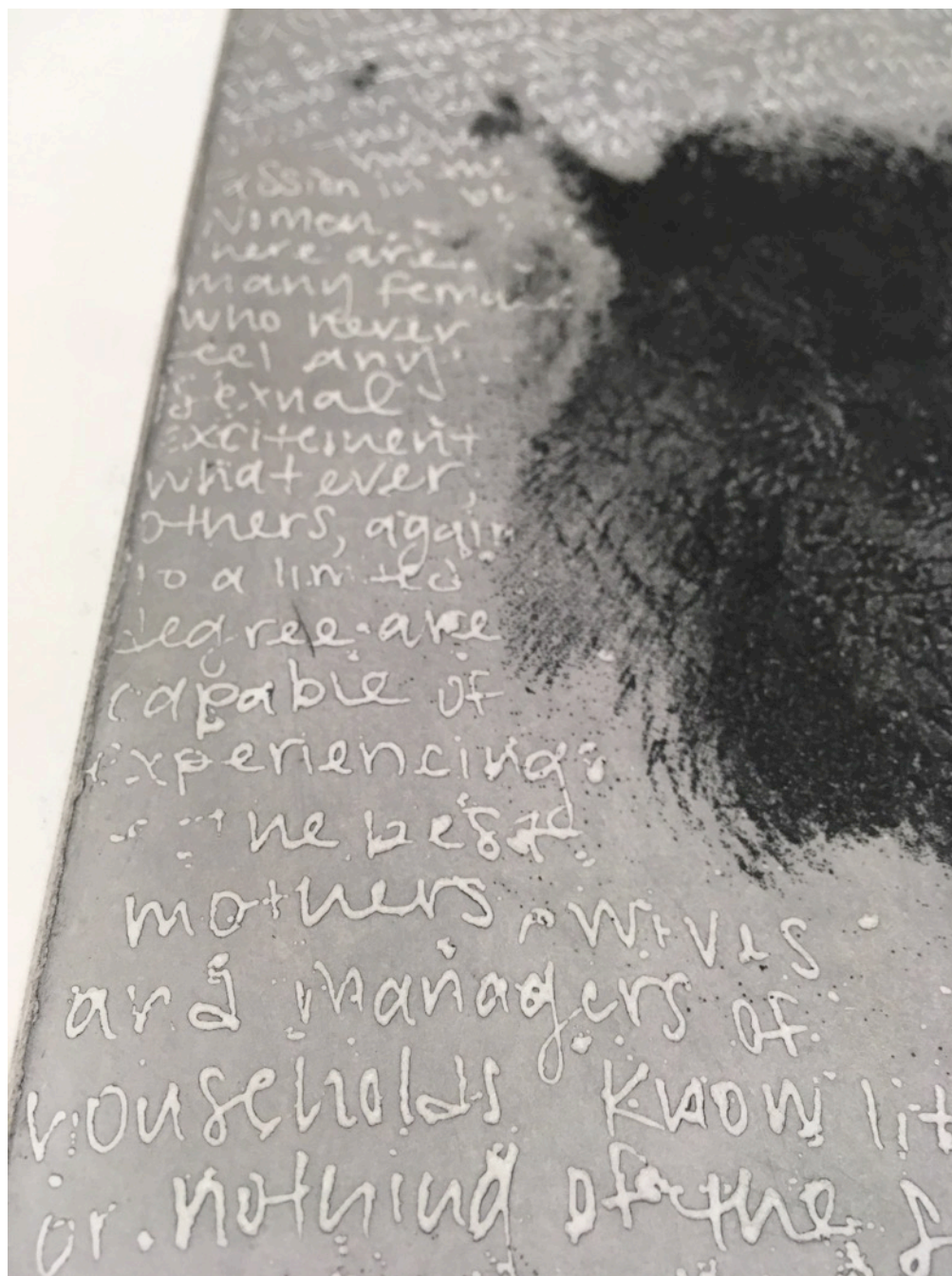
Introspection
Intaglio Print
2016

Introspection

Introspection is a self-portrait that came from personal reflection on my body and being a woman. I was thinking about the objectification, devaluing, and hypersexualizing of female bodies and also how they're mystified. I was considering how most states in the U.S. tax feminine hygiene products as luxury items and how wronged I feel. The presence of the tax reflects how women really are not treated equally under the law considering that menstruation is a female biological trait. Because men don't share this biological trait, only women are being discriminated against through this tax simply because they are women. I thought about beauty ideals and how women's bodies and appearances are policed by our culture. I looked at myself in the mirror and could easily list about two-dozen reasons why I didn't measure up. I thought about my sexual experiences and the expectation that my body was meant for someone else's pleasure and that I deserved less and expected less in return. I realized that I was very familiar with altruistic sex. I considered times where I have been sexually harassed or when people I know had been. I felt disgusted and a need to reclaim my body.



Passion in Women
Intaglio Print
2016



Passion in Women, detail
Intaglio Print
2016

Passion in Women

After finishing "Inspection," I wanted to focus on how women's bodies in the context of our culture, are portrayed, and the expectations and stigmas attached to them. I had been researching performance activist art, particularly those involving women's bodies such as Casey Jenkin's *Casting Off My Womb*²⁰ and Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*.²¹ Beginning in November of 2013, Casey Jenkins sat in Darwin's DVAA gallery for 28 days knitting from skeins of wool, which had been inserted into her vaginal cavity. Jenkins labels herself as a "craftivist" meaning she "[uses] traditional craft techniques for a political or social activism purpose."²² *Casting Off My Womb* showcases the vagina in the face of society's fear, while also making a statement about how women should be in full control of our own bodies and decisions. Adam Weinstein specifically points out the work's relationship to other feminist works such as Yoko Ono's "Cut Piece" and Carolee Schneemann's "Interior Scroll" in his article on Jenkins; "*Vaginal Knitting*" *Is the New Thing in Activist Performance Art*.²³ *Casting Off My Womb* is a piece about women being subject to society's constructs and

²⁰ Jenkins, Casey. *Casting Off My Womb*, 2013. Performance, at SBS2Australia, "Vaginal Knitting | The Feed," YouTube, November 27, 2013, , accessed April 16, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6RZZf6HMzo&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv&has_verified=1.

²¹ Schneemann, Carolee. *Interior Scroll*, 1975. Performance, at caroleeschneemann.com. <http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/works.html>.

²² Casey Jenkins, quoted in Adam Weinstein, "'Vaginal Knitting' Is the New Thing in Activist Performance Art" (*Gawker*, November 27, 2013, <http://gawker.com/vaginal-knitting-is-the-new-thing-in-activist-perform-1472674648>).

²³ Adam Weinstein, "'Vaginal Knitting' Is the New Thing in Activist Performance Art" (*Gawker*, November 27, 2013, <http://gawker.com/vaginal-knitting-is-the-new-thing-in-activist-perform-1472674648>).

how they should be free to make their own decisions, especially when it comes to their own body.

At *Women Here and Now* in East Hampton, NY in 1975, Carolee Schneemann's performed her piece *Interior Scroll*.²⁴ In this performance Schneemann stood naked on a table, applied strokes of paint to her body and while acting a series of live action model poses, read aloud from her book *Cezanne, She Was A Great Painter*, 1976. After this, she began removing a paper scroll from her vagina, reading aloud from it. The text on the scroll was from a Super 8 film she had made called *Kitch's Last Meal*, 1973, which "recounts a conversation with 'a structuralist film-maker' in which the artist sets intuition and bodily processes, traditionally associated with 'woman', against traditionally 'male' notions of order and rationality."²⁵ *Interior Scroll* was a product of the artist exploring the body as explicitly sexual and thinking about the vagina physically and conceptually as a passage and as a place of knowledge, sexual power and transformation.²⁶

My piece, *Passion in Women* is in response to thinking about these artists' performative works and exploring the vagina in the context of our society today. The vulva is not revered in the same way the phallus is. Instead, it is seen as something lesser, weak, disgusting, a thing to be maintained, but also hypersexual, mysterious, and elusive. In my research, I had become increasingly interested in old books about

²⁴ Elizabeth Manchester, "Interior Scroll, Carolee Schneemann 1975," Tate, November 2003, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-p13282>.

²⁵ Ibid.,

²⁶ Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy*, pp.234-5, quoted in Elizabeth Manchester, "Interior Scroll, Carolee Schneemann 1975," Tate, November 2003, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-p13282>.

home life and etiquette through books such as *Know Thyself; Or, Nature's Secrets Revealed* by Bp. Samuel Fallows and William J. Truitt (1911),²⁷ and *Amy Vanderbilt's Complete Book of Etiquette* (1954).²⁸ I was curious as to how conceptions of the female body and etiquette, specifically female sexual understanding, from the early-to-mid twentieth century, reflect our female sexual understanding today. I came across a particular passage in *Know Thyself* that struck me:

Passion in Women. – There are many females who never feel any sexual excitement whatever; others, again, to a limited degree, are capable of experiencing it. The best mothers, wives and managers of households know little or nothing of the sexual pleasure. Love of home, children and domestic duties are the only passions they feel. As a rule, the modest woman submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for the desire for maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions. This is doubly true of woman during the periods when they are with child, and when they are nursing.²⁹

Although this view is not a contemporary view of female sexuality, traces of this tone, still linger today. I began reflecting upon my own sexual experiences and realizing my own tendency to put my partner's wants and needs above my own because that's what I

²⁷ Samuel Fallows and William J. Truitt, *Know thyself; or, Nature's secrets revealed; a word at the right time to the boy, girl, young man, young woman, husband, wife, father and mother, also timely counsel, help and instruction for every member of every home; including important hints on social purity, heredity, physical manhood and womanhood* (Marietta, O.: S.A. Mullikin Co., 1911).

²⁸ Amy Vanderbilt, *Amy Vanderbilt's complete book of etiquette: a guide to gracious living* (New York: Country Life Press, 1954).

²⁹ Fallows and Truitt, *Know Thyself*, 162.

believed was most 'desirable'. I personally considered my vagina to be ugly, disgusting, a burden, and something that required constant maintenance. I was frustrated that the vulva and female sexuality were such taboo subjects while male sexuality and the phallus were normalized and powerful topics. I began making prints of my vulva to become more acquainted with it and to explore what the showing of these prints and having these conversations would bring.

In the beginning, the process was extremely awkward and uncomfortable. I felt dirty and even guilty that I was paying so much attention to this particular body part. I began thinking about our beauty standards for women and how they are in place to make women objects for male lust. But women aren't supposed to be overly sexual, or else they are considered damaged goods, sluts. As I continued making prints, the process became more natural for me, almost like brushing my teeth or taking a shower. I didn't feel repulsed by this action and I actually became really attached to the prints I was creating and found them to be formally, very beautiful. Through the process of making so many prints, I had normalized this action. The piece *Passion in Women* was made in response to this process and the exploration of societal constructs of female sex and sexuality today. I chose to surround the vulva print with the passage "Passion in Women" from *Know Thyself* to question whether our views of women today are really that different, or whether the stigmas we attach to female sex and sexuality work to maintain this view.



Nasty Woman
Intaglio Print
2016

Nasty Woman

This piece was created following *Passion in Women* in continuation of my exploration of contemporary stigmas attached to female sexuality. It was made in response to the blatant sexism and misogyny that presented itself during the 2016 presidential campaign, specifically when President Donald Trump called Hillary Clinton a “nasty woman” in the final presidential debate after earlier claiming that “nobody has more respect for women than I do.”³⁰ Throughout the debate, Trump focused on pointing out emotional and personal aspects of Clinton as important topics. He repeatedly called Clinton a liar, used her marriage as a reflection of her personality and trustworthiness, and referring to her campaign as “sleazy” and “crooked.” When asked about the nine women that came forward and said that Trump had either grabbed or kissed them without their consent, Trump deflected responsibility, claiming that he had never done any of those things and suggested that either the women were lying to get their “ten minutes of fame,” or this scandal was caused by Clinton’s campaign.³¹ I still can’t believe that this level of sexism and misogyny was so publically accepted by America in the campaign for the highest possible position of power in the United States in the year of 2016.

I was also beginning to consider ways in which androcentrism exists in the psychiatric world and was wondering whether female inequality bridged my interests with mental health. While making vulva prints, a colleague pointed out to me that the

³⁰ "The Third Presidential Debate: Hillary Clinton And Donald Trump (Full Debate) | NBC News," YouTube, October 19, 2016, accessed April 16, 2017, <https://youtu.be/smkyorC5qwc>.

³¹ Ibid.,

prints reminded them of a Rorschach inkblot. The Rorschach inkblot test, designed by Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach in 1921, is a projective test used to reveal personality traits. Fascinated by this observation, I began folding my vulva prints to create my own "inkblots" while the paint was still wet. Though this abstracted the vulva print it directly referenced the Rorschach inkblot test that was initially designed to diagnose schizophrenia. I was curious about the history of diagnoses of women with mental disorders with regard to the gender gap. According to Mayo Clinic, women are almost twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression than men.³² Mayo Clinic describes specific biological factors that can contribute to depression in women such as puberty, premenstrual problems, and pregnancy, but go on to explain that biological factors alone do not attribute to the higher rate. Unequal power and status of women, work overload, and sexual or physical abuse also contribute to the gender gap.³³

What are all the contributing factors to my diagnoses? Why is it okay for men in power to be openly misogynistic and still be respected? What would I find if I were to create my own projective test that would test people's sexism and diagnose them as feminist or misogynist...?

³² "Depression in women: Understanding the gender gap," Mayo Clinic, January 16, 2016, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/in-depth/depression/art-20047725?pg=1>.

³³ "Depression in women:," 2.

Poetry

Ringling

each limb aching
muscles and ligaments numb
lips tingling legs asleep
eyes glazed and frozen
dry black ice
I take care to slither
through the day
jumping from dark place
to dark place
keeping to the shadows
so to dissolve into nothingness

the ringling is so loud now
it's a numb, desperate kind
stomach churning eyes tight
kind of ringling

I don't even have the energy
to want it to stop

Again

Again again a gain, a set back
back to the beginning, where I started, where I never want to be

I thought it was over, under control under control, under construction
I guess is a better way of putting it
although it's construction to maintain, maintain control.

Sometimes it feels like I live and breath it
like a compulsive smoker

...I have to live

In the morning groggy eyed and feet heavy the cold darkness covers my body
like a blanket and urges me back to sleep
it sings me a black lullaby and cradles my head in a nightmare
late for work again and it is now the afternoon.

Again...again.

#1

my anxious ghost
mumbles to me in the dark
dipping its finger into the deep pool
watching as the rings rush wildly away

I picture it as being
very much like one of these rings
a small thing growing massive
disrupting the calm abyss
predictable stifling

it bends me slowly down
desiring greater rings
and I fall in.

#3

sometimes you can sense
a presence of feeling
like a low hanging fog
it creeps across your shoulders
and whispers through your thoughts
it wraps around you
an almost embrace
and leaves you standing frigid
or hollow carved and emptied
and you wallow in it

full of what's-the-point's and how-could-this-happen-to-me's
you wallow

but it is only sitting on the surface
and it is you choosing to absorb

Messages

fingers hover slightly above the
backlit water in
fragile pondering
I merely exhale and
a thought escapes tearing over
land and under water
not a word spoken
and yet perhaps the message is
received and perhaps not
I envision him
a beautiful exotic bird

taking up the blankets and
wrapping them between thighs and
under arms
I picture him near me and the
warmth of his skin and the
beating of my heart steadily accelerating
allegro allegro
can you feel that
can you feel me
if I whisper to you
will you listen

the simple tree wonders why she is
mistaken for a nymph
“do we fabricate what we want to
see and project it onto what isn’t?”

Fester

heavy now
you don't see
the resentment and despair you feel
consuming you
the mouth of fear
you don't see yourself
pushing away and
picking apart the very thing
you desperately want to
pull and mend together

you don't see the role you have
in worsening it

Beachcomber

I've spent my life shield and stone
born to protect others shelter and sanctuary

now I am an abandoned fortress
nothing left

but a shell of my former self
punctured by the current
I can no longer shield even myself
from the tide
salt clings to me like plaster crumbling eroding
my framework flaking like sun-dried paint
my body cracked gossamer thin stippled and scarred
suffocated by barnacles

nothing left
but to be polished by the shore remnants of generations past

I am no longer useful to the sea and yet
a beachcomber finds beauty in me

Coiled

Pt. 1

dragging feet across the day in an open container
surrounded by bodies yet I see none
tiny strings pang pulled too taut corroded weight

I associate with a strand of hair on the ground
invisible things prey on the feeling deep within
and ingest whatever I enjoyed

what was it I enjoyed

numb to it only my extremities tingle now
I organize all my nothings in order by
color shape and size

what else would I do

the drumming is so loud about me
I can't hear my breath

am I breathing

Pt. 2

dragging feet across the day in an open container
surrounded by bodies yet they see none
tiny strings pulled too taut

corroded weight

each associate with a similar strand of fallen hair
invisible things prey on the feeling deep within
and ingest whatever they enjoyed

what was it they enjoyed

numb fingers twinge
nothings in order by size, shape and color

what else would they do

the drumming is so loud about them
they can barely hear themselves breathing

Pt. 3

dancing feet across the day
surrounded by others and we see we are not alone
no more strings pulling too taut or corroded weight
we don't even notice the hair on the ground
the invisible things crawl back to their caves
to sleep soundly and indefinitely
we remember all the things we forgot we enjoyed
feeling back in our hands and feet
we can hear the quiet thump of our heartbeats

we are breathing we are alive

Self Punishment

no success worth celebrating
punishment my only reward
guilt moving thick like chalk
down throat choke

fingernails tracing and retracing
nondescript parts of pens click click
clutter creeps into the corners
a storeroom of useless concerns
the top of my priority list

fingers mangled and cracked picking
always picking never thinking about it
picking like my own skin is the cause

Birdseed

I eat birdseed for breakfast

I usually don't care

I eat it again for dinner lunch is always debatable

just enough sustenance

just enough to harden my stomach

just enough to dull my mind

just enough to keep my body awake

I eat birdseed for breakfast again

Toxic Cycle

You are a fly

No, not a fly a gnat

You hover around the sweet smell

Wine left out on the counter, half drained

You want her simply because she is there

Not because you need it

You desire it, but not enough to commit

When you try to fly out

You drown in it

The futon

The imprint of your basement

The sound of the small TV on a low table next to the PlayStation

The smell of cement floor, laundry detergent and cardboard boxes

The chill of the draft coming in from the garage

The futon

The way the metal bars felt underneath the cushions

The sound it made when we shifted even slightly

And the tapestry I would stare at

And the door to upstairs we listened for

In my mind I thought if I could love you down

If I could practice until I was perfect at it

You would love me

I was really good at it

Pickle

felt like raw hide
of threaded tendons and
fibers fixed into place
simultaneously provocative and
virgin pure
like our flesh

I mourn these moments
intimacy cannot be pickled

Unwillingly breath returns

I sit at the bottom
nose to knee and
watch the beads of water
touch me softly for a moment
then rush away

a raw hot numbness comes
and the veins in my arms appear
deep mulberry green

occasionally I wonder if I will run out of time
before my body will allow me to inhale again

Conclusion

“Silenced Imbalances” is the culmination of my undergraduate artwork and writing. My work focuses on my personal experiences surrounding mental illness and gender inequality, and the intersection of the two. From this body of work I produced a series of questions that resulted from engagement in political activism, historical research, and critical thinking surrounding systems of privilege and inequality in American society today. The following final question is critical to understanding my identity as an artist and the intent of my work.

Why does it matter that I am a woman and what does crocheting have to do with it?

In my first few years of college I was afraid to pursue feminism in my work because I thought that I wouldn't be taken seriously as an artist. While researching the history of fibers I started to realize that female artists who work in fibers are widely excluded from the art world and are placed in the category of “craft artists” because of its relationship to the home. As I noticed gender inequality manifest in my own life, I began to understand how enlightened sexism can undermine contemporary feminism. I discovered that I do not have equal rights under the constitution. So yes, it does matter that I am a woman. Equality for women and other marginalized groups still has yet to be achieved. I now choose confidently to work in the fibers medium and craft techniques because they reflect a long history of gendered oppression as well as represent female strength and resistance. I could choose to make my work more appealing to the

masculine fine art world, avoid being marginalized as a craft artist, but it would be a disservice to myself and to all other female artists. I will not affirm male dominance and bend to the gender hierarchy. Feminism is not just about women. It's about basic human rights and celebrating our unique differences

I am currently focusing on the intersectionality of oppression in my work. Intersectionality is defined as “the theory that the overlap of various social identities, as race, sexuality, and class, contributes to the type of systemic oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual.”³⁴ “Silenced Imbalances” examines the intersectionality and oppression of my social identities: neurodivergent and woman. Through “Silenced Imbalances” and future work, I aim to challenge our society’s systems of privilege and inequality and the institutions that maintain those systems.

³⁴ "Intersectionality," Dictionary.com, accessed April 18, 2017, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/intersectionality>.

Bibliography

Allen, Robert M. *Student's Rorschach manual; an introduction to administering, scoring, and interpreting Rorschach's psychodiagnostic inkblot test*. New York: International Universities Press, 1966.

Author, Elissa. *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Bank, Mirra. *Anonymous Was a Woman: A celebration in words and images of traditional American art - and the women who made it*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1979.

Bervin, Jen. 2004-2008. *The Dickinson Composites Series*. Jen Bervin.
<http://jenbervin.com/projects/the-dickinson-composites-series#2>.

Bushman, Richard L. *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

"Depression in women: Understanding the gender gap." Mayo Clinic. January 16, 2016.
Accessed April 16, 2017. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/in-depth/depression/art-20047725?pg=1>.

Douglas, Susan. "Enlightened Sexism." In *Women's Voices Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee, 209-210. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015.

Equal Means Equal. directed by Kamala Lopez. Heroica Films, 2016. Film.

Fahrenthold, David A. "Trump recorded having extremely lewd conversation about women in 2005." The Washington Post. October 08, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html?utm_term=.589ca94e756a.

Fallows, Samuel, and William J. Truitt. *Know thyself; or, Nature's secrets revealed; a word at the right time to the boy, girl, young man, young woman, husband, wife, father and mother, also timely counsel, help and instruction for every member of every home; including important hints on social purity, heredity, physical manhood and womanhood*. Marietta, O.: S.A. Mullikin Co., 1911.

"Intersectionality." Dictionary.com. Accessed April 18, 2017.

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/intersectionality>.

Jenkins, Casey. "I'm the 'vaginal knitting' performance artist – and I want to defend my work | Casey Jenkins." The Guardian. December 16, 2013. Accessed June 8,

2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/17/vaginal-knitting-artist-defence>.

Kalman, Lauren. 2006. *Hard Wear (Tongue Gilding)*.

http://www.laurenkalman.com/art/Hard_Wear.html#0.

King, Alex. "ARTIST INTERVIEW: LAUREN KALMAN." AESTHETICS FOR BIRDS.

December 14, 2016. Accessed April 28, 2017.

<https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2016/12/01/artist-interview-lauren-kalman/>.

Klabusich, Katie. "Beyond Awareness: Mental Illness and the Ableism of Capitalism."

Truthout. May 31, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2017. [http://www.truth-](http://www.truthout.org/news/item/36225-beyond-awareness-mental-illness-and-the-ableism-of-capitalism)

[out.org/news/item/36225-beyond-awareness-mental-illness-and-the-ableism-of-capitalism](http://www.truthout.org/news/item/36225-beyond-awareness-mental-illness-and-the-ableism-of-capitalism).

Livingstone, Joan (ed.), Joan Livingstone, and John Ploof. *The Object of Labor: Art,*

Cloth, and Cultural Production. Chicago, IL: School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Press, 2007.

Manchester, Elizabeth. "Interior Scroll, Carolee Schneemann 1975." Tate. November

2003. Accessed April 16, 2017. [http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-p13282)

[interior-scroll-p13282](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-p13282).

Moreland, Quinn. "Forty Years of Carolee Schneemann's." Hyperallergic. September 01, 2015. Accessed April 16, 2017. <https://hyperallergic.com/232342/forty-years-of-carolee-schneemanns-interior-scroll/>.

Morse, Felicity. "The reaction to my vaginal knitting shows society is still telling a woman what to do with her body" The Independent. December 17, 2013. Accessed June 8, 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/the-reaction-to-my-vaginal-knitting-shows-society-is-still-telling-a-woman-what-to-do-with-her-body-9009891.html>.

Myers, David G., and C. Nathan Dewall. *Exploring Psychology*. 10th ed. New York, NY: Worth Publishers, 2016.

Parker, Rozsika, and Griselda Pollock. *Old mistresses women, art and ideology*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

Rennie, Kevin. "Australia: Vagina Knitting Not Everyone's Taste in Art." Innovation. December 11, 2013. Accessed June 8, 2015. <http://innovation.soup.io/tag/Australia?newer=1&since=367800682>.

SBS2Australia. "Vaginal Knitting I The Feed." YouTube. November 27, 2013. Accessed June 8, 2015.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6RZZf6HMzo&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv&has_verified=1.

Schneemann, Carolee. "Interior Scroll 1975." Caroleeschneemann.com. Accessed April 16, 2017. <http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/interiorscroll.html>.

Seay, Allison. *To See the Queen*. New York: Persea Books, Inc., 2013.

Senior, Anne-Marie. "Vagina knitter Casey Jenkins 'will not apologise' for her 28 day art performance." *Mirror*. December 17, 2013. Accessed June 8, 2015. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-news/vagina-knitting-art-casey-jenkins-2937041>.

Sexton, Anne. *The complete poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999.

"Skin Picking Disorder (Excoriation)." WebMD. Accessed April 16, 2017. <http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/skin-picking-disorder#1>.

Steinem, Gloria. "If Men Could Menstruate." In *Women's Voices Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee, 209-210. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015.

"The Third Presidential Debate: Hillary Clinton And Donald Trump (Full Debate) | NBC News." YouTube. October 19, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smkyorC5qwc&feature=youtu.be>.

Vabethany. "Yoko Ono - Cut Piece (1965)." YouTube. February 28, 2013. Accessed April 16, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYJ3dPwa2tl>.

Vanderbilt, Amy. Amy Vanderbilt's complete book of etiquette: a guide to gracious living. New York: Country Life Press, 1954.

Weinstein, Adam. "'Vaginal Knitting' Is the New Thing in Activist Performance Art."

Gawker. November 27, 2013. Accessed June 8, 2015. <http://gawker.com/vaginal-knitting-is-the-new-thing-in-activist-perform-1472674648>.

Williamson, C. M. . "Spotlight on Lauren Kalman: Pleasure and Pain In Gold." The Artifice. December 12, 2015. Accessed April 24, 2017. <https://the-artifice.com/spotlight-on-lauren-kalman/>.

Winter, Katy. "She didn't learn THAT at WI: 'Vaginal knitter' spends 28 days making scarf from wool stored inside her." Daily Mail Online. December 05, 2013.

Accessed June 8, 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2518107/Vaginal-knitter-artist-Casey-Jenkins-makes-scarf-wool-stored-inside-vagina.html>.