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# Undesirable Forms

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“Undesirable Forms”

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art and Design

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree:

Master of Fine Arts, concentration in Studio Art

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by

Maria Risner

May 2018

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Mira Gerard

Keywords: painting, sculpture, encaustic, female, bodies, discomfort

## ABSTRACT

### Undesirable Forms

by

Maria Risner

The Master of Fine Arts exhibition, *Undesirable Forms*, presents a collection of paintings and sculptures that focus on the repulsion and discomfort a woman can experience within her mind and body. These works were exhibited at the Tipton gallery, in downtown Johnson City. The pieces included in this exhibition consist of encaustic paintings on panel, and sculptures created from plaster life-casts.

The ideas discussed in this paper are influenced by Julia Kristeva and Sigmund Freud's work relating to the abject/grotesque female body. This paper also discusses inspiration from other artists, such as Natalie Frank and Helen Chadwick, who work with psychological subject matter and the female body.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee Travis Graves, Mindy Herrin, Christian Rieben, and Mira Gerard for your time, wisdom, and encouragement.

Most importantly I would like to give a special thanks to God, my wonderful family for your support, and Bryce for always making me smile.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“Every picture is a picture of the body. Every work of visual art is a representation of the body.”*

James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*

I consider myself to be an observer. I have always found human behavior to be fascinating, due to the complex nature of a person. I believe it's possible to know a companion for a lifetime, without ever truly understanding them, because people consist of many layers. In the past I viewed documentaries that followed people dealing with substantial emotional trauma or mental illness. As a result I became interested in discovering how a person could potentially become a danger to themselves or others. This curiosity persisted over many years, and became the catalyst that started my research into psychological disorders. Eventually I developed a special interest with psychology, and began incorporating expressive visual depictions of psychological disorders within my studio research in painting.

Throughout my first year of graduate school I struggled to find engaging content, and continued to produce oil paintings on canvas depicting the figure in a physical and psychological state of suffering. Unlike my previous research, however, I began depicting average female models within these pieces. It was during this time that I also began to break away from the comfort zone of realism, and attempt to create emotion within the artwork using bold color choices and visceral painterly brushstrokes. Although I was

aware the subject matter of women was significant to the work, because I could relate to these females placed in emotional torment, I still struggled to make decisions about content and found that my paintings were persistently too literal (Fig.1).



Maria Risner, "*Breathe*," (Fig.1)

I knew that creating artwork about the body was the right direction for my paintings. During my second year as a graduate student I reluctantly enrolled in an encaustic painting course. Encaustic wax is a combination of bleached and purified beeswax and gum damar used as a painting medium. Once heated, the wax is applied to a surface with paint brushes in an approach similar to oil paint on canvas, but with very different visual and tactile results. To my surprise I found that the material allowed me to achieve an accurate illusion of skin, and was everything I had envisioned, but was not able to attain with just oil paint on canvas.

Although the research for my recent paintings had focused primarily on psychology, the content now centers on a collaboration with the physical, repulsion and discomfort a female experiences within her mind and body, along with the females imagined experience of the revulsion and discomfort of others. These artworks represent the fragility and sorrow surrounding aspects of mortality, and display exaggerations of female bodily features, considered undesirable within society and culture. These features include body weight ratios (both large and small), skin discoloration, texture, and body hair. This research is intended to depict the internal dialogue of women, as well as how they imagine others viewing them, through an abject point of view. These pieces are intended to illustrate the complexities of the mind, and attract and repulse the viewer using both beautiful and undesirable formal elements.

## CHAPTER 2

### INFLUENCES

Over the course of my three years as a graduate student there have been many creative, artistic, and technical influences that have impacted my past and current research. My early approach to painting consisted of a very controlled painting technique, which was primarily technical and literal. I realized through experimentation that working more expressively, and allowing my subconscious decisions to take over, created more convincing psychological elements throughout my works. I began painting females that looked as though the figures were suffering; the subjects included women in physical pain at the hand of someone else. My perception on torment was initially direct, and I realized the paintings needed a more subtle approach.

During this time I researched figurative painters who portrayed psychological elements within their work. These inquiries became a vital part of my process, and as a result my paintings began to become precise illustrations of this research. I began to abandon my former technical approach to painting. My artistic influences reflected this change, and I began studying figurative painters who used relaxed and loose brush handling techniques. I found this approach allowed the content, subject matter, and painting style to become the main driving force behind the work.



Maria Risner, “*Inhale*,” (Fig. 2)

“Inhale” (Fig. 2), is an early example of experimentations with technique and subject.

Natalie Frank, a figure painter, was very influential to my work, as I immediately appreciated her grotesque and distorted figures. This lends itself to themes surrounding women’s issues, such as violence towards women and the physical abuse women can inflict on their selves. I’m interested in how Frank’s bright color choices contradict her dark narratives, and the unexpected elements throughout her paintings. Most of the settings within her paintings include various details, however, her compositions always remain balanced.

For example, certain parts of the figure and background in the painting “Exorcism” (Fig. 3) are highly detailed, while other areas are washed out. Drawing the viewer’s attention to precise sections of the piece.



Natalie Frank, “*Exorcism*,” (Fig.3)

In response to Frank’s figurative work, I recreated a tragic scene in “Inhale” (Fig. 2), contradicting sorrow with a pleasant bright color palette. The result of this painting was overtly literal, depicting a female with large hands wrapped around her neck.

Another series “Ward 81,” by Mary Ellen Mark inspired me to consider revisiting the theme of psychological disorders, a subject matter I heavily researched as an undergraduate.

In 1978 “Ward 81” documented the female patients of the Oregon State Hospital. Although it was clear these women were being kept in an institution, an uncomfortable and sterile environment, I found most of the imagery to be very unexpected. In some photos women were smiling, joking, and showing affection with one another, others seemed camera shy, and even angry. Overall, I felt a deep empathy for these figures, and couldn’t help but notice the beauty within this series. Mark’s pieces became so influential to me, that I began actively researching this subject in order to integrate it into my work.



After viewing Mark's photographs I began creating paintings that represented both instability and isolation, that one would associate with institutionalization. I attempted to incorporate this theme by creating figures in crouched and uncomfortable body positions, along with the use of unconventional color choices.

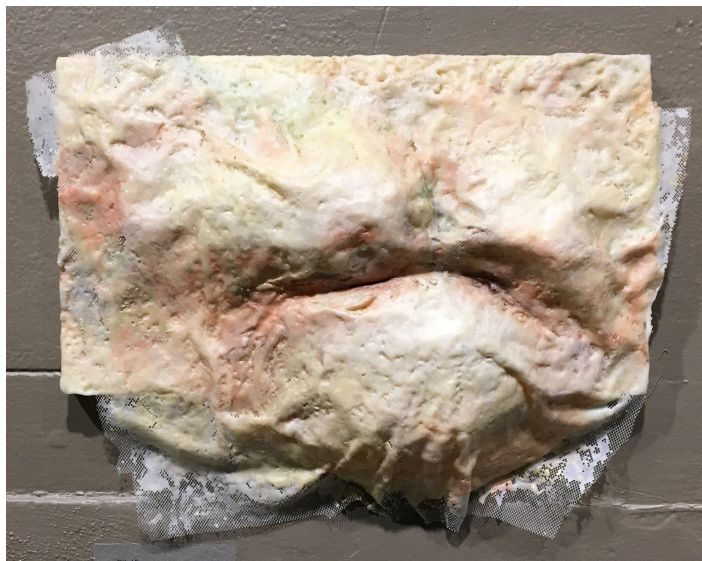
I chose to continue with the theme of psychological disorders overall, however, I began creating artwork about the disconnection a person can feel with their mind and body. I began to focus primarily on the depiction of the flesh. As a result of these changes, ambiguity started to find its way into my research, as shown in "*Detachment*" (Fig.4). This painting displays part of a figure, or perhaps multiple figures, crowded together to occupy the same space. The areas toward the end of the limbs and neck suggest ambiguity, with no certainties to whether this is one person, or multiple figures lying next to one another. The uncertainty is meant to represent the disconnection people can experience within their own body.



Maria Risner, “*Detachment*,” (Fig. 4)

In response to my experimentation with encaustic, I began looking to artists who produced both abstracted and sculptural artwork such as Eva Hesse. The minimalism of her sculptures, and the beauty in the translucency were elements I found to be transcendent and inspiring. For example, I could see the connections between the translucency of material in “Sans II,” and the effect of creating skin with encaustic wax. I knew that this subtlety of material was an element that my own research lacked, and so I began to examine Hesse’s sculptures and their content, relating to the human body and the artist’s own personal life struggles.

In the beginning of research in encaustic medium, my goal was to master the appearance of skin. As I continued to experiment with the material, I became more confident with manipulating the encaustic wax and oils, and the work became larger, such as in “*Wilted Form*” (Fig. 5). This research on panel depicts an abstracted female body, showing breasts and the top of a stomach. The texture of the skin is intended to appear grotesque, and symbolize the emotion of discomfort with the body.



Maria Risner, “*Wilted Form*,” (Fig. 5)

## CHAPTER 3

### PROCESS

My process has changed significantly within the last year from producing oil paintings on traditional stretched canvas. Initially I would stretch a canvas, then apply three layers of gesso onto the surface, and photograph models to use as references for my paintings.

Within this new direction of my research I began to explore two sets of processes, using two different substrates. One path of this investigation into surfaces was focused toward works on panel, which is a flat rigid surface similar to the format of stretched canvas. The other direction was in creating three-dimensional representations of the female figure with plaster life-casts.

I began the works on panel by researching photographs of the female body that coincide with my overall themes, and would then reproduce them in an abstracted manner. I typically built up the form (to a level of relief sculpture) using either molding techniques with fabric and wax, or by simply creating three-dimensional casts with plaster and attaching them to the panels.

Although oil paint is still used within this research, the primary medium I use to create these paintings is encaustic wax. The wax functions very much like flesh, due to the translucent and luminous effect produced when applied in layers. The texture can also be manipulated to appear either sleek or ridged, in order to mirror the surface of skin.

Oil paint is applied afterwards to define the form, along with another layer of wax.

I began the artwork made from plaster life-casts by initially selecting a specific pose and concept before beginning. Before casting, a release agent is applied to cover the female model's skin, this helps the plaster cast release easily from the model when removed. To create the actual cast, small strips of plaster bandages are cut, dipped in water (in order to activate the plaster), and applied to the model. This process is continued, until the model is covered in a thick layer of plaster. Once the plaster becomes hard, it is removed from the model. The plaster casts I create are taken from different sections of the body (such as arms, legs, and torsos). I choose to connect or arrange these body parts together in varied ways to depict different concepts. For example, the piece "*Descending Figures*" (Fig. 6) was intended to represent bodies that are decayed and dying, and in order to depict this concept I chose not to connect separate casts of legs, hands, or heads to the figures.



Maria Risner, "*Descending Figures*," (Fig.6)

A crucial part of my process for developing this new series, which includes many materials that are very new to me, is trial and error. It has been vital for me to learn from past mistakes and achievements within my work, in order to make mental notes for future projects. For example, when beginning encaustic painting I worked only on small wooden panels. After using the medium for a short period, I altered my surface and began working exclusively on fabric. Following multiple experimentations, I felt dissatisfied with the overall results, and returned to painting on wooden panels. The sizes grew however, from miniature to larger works. Therefore, from these tests I have been able to grow by developing both technical skill and aesthetic improvement.

Another aspect of the research I complete is investigating artists who produce artwork with content and a technique that is similar to mine. Visually I look at the color palettes, compositions, and narratives that take place within each artwork. I make mental notes of these elements, and experiment with them in my own work. One artist I heavily researched in graduate school is Jenny Saville, whose work also relates to the distortion of the female body. It is was not only Saville's content that first drew my attention to her paintings, but also her outstanding brush handling techniques. It has also been important for my research to read articles about others artists where they discuss their themes, process, and the artists who inspire them.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE ABJECT/GROTESQUE

*“Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you...”*

-Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

It was during the fall semester of my third year that I began to read *Powers of Horror*, by Julia Kristeva, along with other books that focused on the abject and grotesque. While reading I found connections between these topics and my most recent sculptures and encaustic paintings. Within this book, the word abjection is intended to cover the bodily functions, or aspects of the body that are deemed impure or inappropriate for public display or discussion.

It was also during this time that I began identifying the overall themes of my research as depictions of the sadness and fragility of the human body. Throughout this process I utilized an exaggeration of repulsive female bodily features that most of society would view as unwanted. These features, (such as weight, skin tone and skin texture) are meant to signify the emotions of how a woman might view herself through an abject point of view. The purpose of this series is to reveal the complexity of personal contentment with one's own self, through both attractive and undesirable formal elements.

I particularly wanted to place emphasis on the female body within my work; because of the connection a woman's body has to the abject. "In Kristeva's view the image of woman's body, because of its maternal functions, acknowledges its 'debt to nature' and consequently is more likely to signify the abject" (Creed, 11). I first began to explore the theme of abjection in the encaustic painting "*Extraction of the Body*" (Fig. 8), by manipulating fabric and wax to resemble a stomach. Tubes filled with petroleum jelly were inserted into the fabric, in order to imitate fat being drawn from the stomach. The intention for this encaustic painting was to produce an undesirable and unwanted form. According to Mary Russo, "The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world," (Russo, 62-63). Is it possible for the open grotesque body and the idealized classical body to overlap? Both represent the extremes of the manipulated form, and as a result, do reveal distortion of the human body. I consider this concept to be valid, and observe both beauty and the abject/grotesque within this artwork.

While "*Extraction of the Body*" (Fig. 7) is linked more closely to the grotesque, because of its disregard for conventional aesthetic elegance, the sensual quality of the encaustic wax combined with oils is the bridge that joins this artwork to beauty.





Maria Risner, "*Extraction of the Body*,"  
(Fig. 7)

While it felt as though "*Extraction of the Body*" (Fig. 7) was a good starting point, overall the portion of the stomach was too ambiguous, and couldn't be clearly defined as either male or female. Later I began casting the bodies of female models, and used encaustic wax to continue exploring grotesque elements through color and texture. This experimentation can be seen in "*Detached Form*" (Fig. 8).



Maria Risner, “*Detached Form*,” (Fig. 8)

I began creating “*Detached Form*,” (Fig. 8) by first preparing casts that were taken from a model’s stomach and thighs, and then carving a wooden structure to attach the plaster casts to for stability. I left a small section open between the two casts, in order to place a thin sheet of plexiglass in the center. My intention for this separation was to symbolize the detachment a person could have with their mind, and with their own body. I applied sheer fabric over the surface of the cast and then coated the fabric in a layer of wax. Using oil paint, I developed the cast figures appearance to discolor the skin tones and look dull. The effect of the sheer fabric also provided a wrinkled texture to the skin, pushing the piece farther into the abject/grotesque realm.

Overall, I felt the result of this piece was more effective, and was closer to depicting the figure in an unappealing, repulsive way. Within *The Monstrous Feminine*, “Margaret Miles argues in her study of the grotesque that ‘the most concentrated sense of the grotesque’ comes from the image of woman because of her associations with natural events such as sex and birth which were seen as ‘quintessentially grotesque’. She points out that in Christian art, hell was often represented as a womb, ‘a lurid and rotting uterus’ where Christian sinners were perpetually tortured for their crimes,” (Creed, 43). Therefore, I consider “*Detached Form*” (Fig. 8) to be a much clearer representation of the grotesque female, compared to “*Extraction of the Body*” (Fig. 7).

Helen Chadwick is an artist I admire for the seductive and repulsive qualities her artwork possesses. Her artwork entitled “*Loop My Loop*” is a cibachrome photograph, which depicts an image of blond hair intertwined with a pig’s intestines. Chadwick intended the blonde hair to represent female love and purity, while the pigs viscera symbolizes the raw internal animalistic side to human nature. Chadwick produced many other beautiful and grotesque photographs, in her “*Meat Abstracts*” series. In this series she combines the internal parts of animals, with props and excellent lighting. Through this artwork Chadwick became known for challenging stereotypical perceptions of the body in elegant yet unconventional forms. To me Chadwick’s abject photographs are incredibly fascinating, because of there ambiguity and ability to both repel and attract the viewer. When speaking about her own artwork Chadwick said “I felt compelled to use materials that were still bodily, that were still a kind of self-portrait, but did not rely on representation of my own body,” (Lipp, 1).

Like Chadwick, I also wanted to create research that included bodily materials and would allow the viewer to relate the work to the human body, without including representations of my own body. This is the most evident in the piece “*Abject Form*” (Fig. 9). This artwork represents an image of decayed dead skin, rippled and sagging, revealing a female pelvic bone and a cast of an arm covered in human hair. The hair is meant to direct the viewers attention toward the body, while the rest of the compositional representation remains much more ambiguous.



Maria Risner, “*Abject Form*,” (Fig.9)

## CHAPTER 5

### THE UNCANNY

In Freud's essay on "*The Uncanny*," he begins by describing the uncanny as that which belongs to the realm of the frightening, and of what evokes fear and dread (Freud, 123). In the essay he continues on to explain the meaning of the term uncanny, and starts by sharing the German words *heimlich* (meaning familiar or comfortable), and *unheimlich* (meaning everything that is intended to remain secretive or hidden away, and has come out into the open). Therefore, the uncanny is a combination of the familiar, with the unfamiliar.

"Could this 'class of the frightening' be discovered inside the human body?" (Sawday, 159). In *The Body Emblazoned* author Johnathan Sawday comments on Freud's location of body fear, and that's its location is very different than that of a diseased body. One of Freud's theories is the basis for an account known as the "Medusa's head". This fear, as Sawday puts it, lies within the body interior, of 'inter-uterine' existence. According to Freud, it is the secret nature of the female genitals that alerts us to the 'unheimlich' nature of the place that was once the entrance to home for all of us, the female body. Within this 'unknown' place, the womb/vagina is equivalent to the empty space in which our ideas are projected onto.

“For men and women, the sexually undifferentiated body-interior is a region of eerie unfamiliarity made doubly eerie (and thus uncanny) by the knowledge that this unfamiliar geography is also part of ourselves,” (Sawday, 160).

This account from Freud is another reason I have chose to represent only female bodies within the exhibition *Undesirable Forms*.

It is also throughout his essay that Freud discusses his collection of cases of the uncanny, and investigates these instances. The cases covered include the hesitation in recognizing an object as animate or inanimate, the uncanny double (or doppelganger), and death (dead bodies, revenants, and spirits).

When reading the first case made by Freud I began to make connections between this theory and the artwork of Robert Gober. Freud explains this case as the doubt to whether an animate object is alive, and also the uncertainty to whether a lifeless object might be animate. It’s in this connection that he refers to the ‘impressions made on viewers by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls, and automata’ (Freud, 135).

Gober is an American sculptor who creates the familiar through human bodies, common household items, and objects of devotion. However, he alters these objects in order to provide a narrative to his visual investigations. The uncanny is clearly seen in his sculptures of fragmented bodies produced from beeswax, pigment, and human hair. The piece titled “Untitled” (Fig. 10) (featured in the exhibition, *The Heart is not a Metaphor*), displays a bathtub with only the knees of a figure surfacing above the water. The rest of the figure can be seen, but only vaguely from under the material that resembles liquid.

The authenticity and realism of this sculpture causes the viewer to feel as though the rest of the figure could rise above the surface at any moment. It is exactly this effect of Gober's artwork that leaves the viewer with an unsettling, uncanny experience.



Robert Gober, Detail from “*Untitled*” (Fig. 10), 2003-2005, fiberglass, beeswax, human hair, nickle-plated bronze, wood, semi-gloss enamel paint, photolithography on acid-free paper with graphite, water, recycling pumps, Approximately 96 x 140 ½ x 62 ½  
© Robert Gober, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

I began producing my plaster figures, in order to try and create a similar uncanny feeling within the viewer as well. In the piece “*Suspended Form*” (Fig. 11), the cast has been painted with wax and oil paint, to resemble flesh tones. This gives the illusion of an inanimate object as being animate.



This sculpture depicts a female figure lying in a crumpled, fetal position. “*Suspended Form*” (Fig. 11) is a representation of the repulsion a woman can experience toward her own body. The discoloration of the skin tones is meant to reflect this mood to the viewer and echo the emotion of sorrow. While the figure’s disjointed body, discoloration, and lack of a head suggests that this piece has a closer connection to an abject form, the ideal of classicism is displayed in the dramatic pose of the figure.



Maria Risner, “*Suspended Form*,” (Fig.11)

In his essay, Freud discusses the uncanny double. He also speaks to the unconscious mind’s ‘compulsion to repeat.’ He goes on to say that anything that can remind us of this inner compulsion to repeat is perceived as uncanny. I can see this unintentional repetition of the figure within my own research. Not just in my most recent



work of 3-dimensional sculptures and works on panel, but throughout my entire three years as a graduate student.

Although the visual compositions featured in my thesis exhibition vary, each piece is intended to represent the female body and the overall theme of decay and the mental disintegration that accompanies it. This repetition of the same form can be seen in the sculpture “*Reflected Forms*,” (Fig.12) which includes nine female torsos. Eight of the forms are leaning on one another, providing physical and perhaps emotional support. The last figure featured in the sequence of torsos appears to be striving for this comfort and support as well, but is unable to attain it. Again, a component of the ideal classicism is displayed through the expressive poses of the collection of figures.

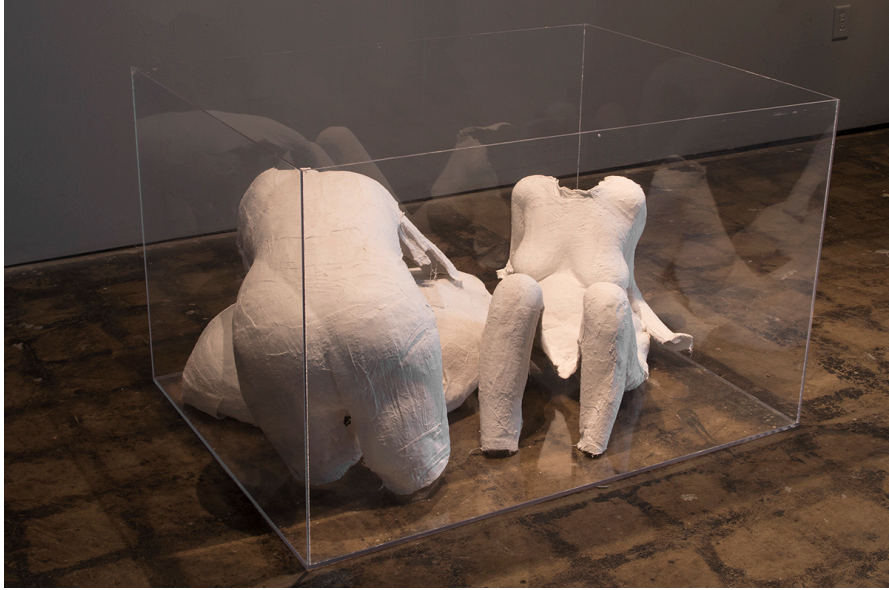
This compulsion to repeat also has a connection to another Freudian theory known as the ‘death drive.’ This theory is ultimately the body’s primitive impulse toward death and self-destruction. The death-drive speaks to the body’s instinct to return to the state of inactivity that preceded its birth. This theory is an explanation for our human need to repeat painful events, which contradicts the instinct to seek pleasure. This repetition binds the trauma, allowing the subject to return to a state of dormancy. “The compulsion to repeat is one – perhaps the arch – element making the psychic mechanism mechanical, hence the structural role it plays, and consequently its tolerance of being notated and theorized. Theoretically it calls for a concept of the death-drive whose presence it betrays: we repeat patterns of mental and social behavior so as to keep psychic expenditure to a minimum, not risking any authentically new investments, preferring old wine in new bottles no matter how sour in reality it always was.” (Smith, 48).

Lastly, Freud chooses to discuss death, dead bodies, and revenants, in relation to the uncanny at the very end of his investigation. Although he chooses to examine this case last, he refers to it as ‘the acme of the uncanny,’ and explains that he could have in fact begun his discussion with this example. Within my work the concept of death is most prominent in the figurative sculptures that are not painted and layered with wax, compared to those that are. For example, in the work “*Reflected Forms*” (Fig. 12) the sculptures have been intentionally left bare, showing only silhouettes of multiple figures and the rough lines left from the plaster bandages.

This raw plaster can also be seen in the sculpture “*Trapped*,” (Fig. 13). Like “*Detached Form*” (Fig. 8) plexi-glass was used in this piece, however, instead of dissecting figures a plexiglass box was used to enclose three plaster forms. This makes it seem as though the bodies are isolated and a struggle is taking place.



Maria Risner, “*Reflected Forms*,” (Fig. 12)



Maria Risner, "*Trapped*," (Fig. 13)

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

*“But I never looked like that!-How do you know? What is the ‘you’ you might or not look like? Where do you find it-by which morphological or expressive calibration? Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; ...even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images,” (Sawday, 15).*

I chose to title my thesis exhibit *Undesirable Forms*, because I have empathy for each of the figures within this exhibition, and feel as though the figures appear unwanted and repulsive when facing the viewer. Throughout the exhibition I wanted to produce only bodies that appeared fragmented, grotesque, foreign, and disconnected. The artwork of my thesis displays an emotional experience of how a woman may feel unwanted or loathsome within her mind and body, and therefore view her own form as grotesque and decaying. Although the primary intention of this research is to present unattractive bodies to the viewer, it was also my objective that beauty could be found within the forms as well. According to Barbara Creed, “Abjection by its very nature is ambiguous; it both repels and attracts,” (Creed, 14). I feel that I achieved this goal, and can see beauty in the translucency of the encaustic wax mixed with oils, and also in the delicacy of the plaster casts.

EXHIBITION CATALOG







Maria Risner, "*Detached Form*," Oils, Encaustic Wax, Fabric, on Plaster Life-Casts



Maria Risner, "*Melancholy Form*," Oils, Encaustic Wax, Fabric, Plaster Life-Casts on Panel



Maria Risner, "*Suspended Form*," Oils, Encaustic Wax on Plaster Life-Casts



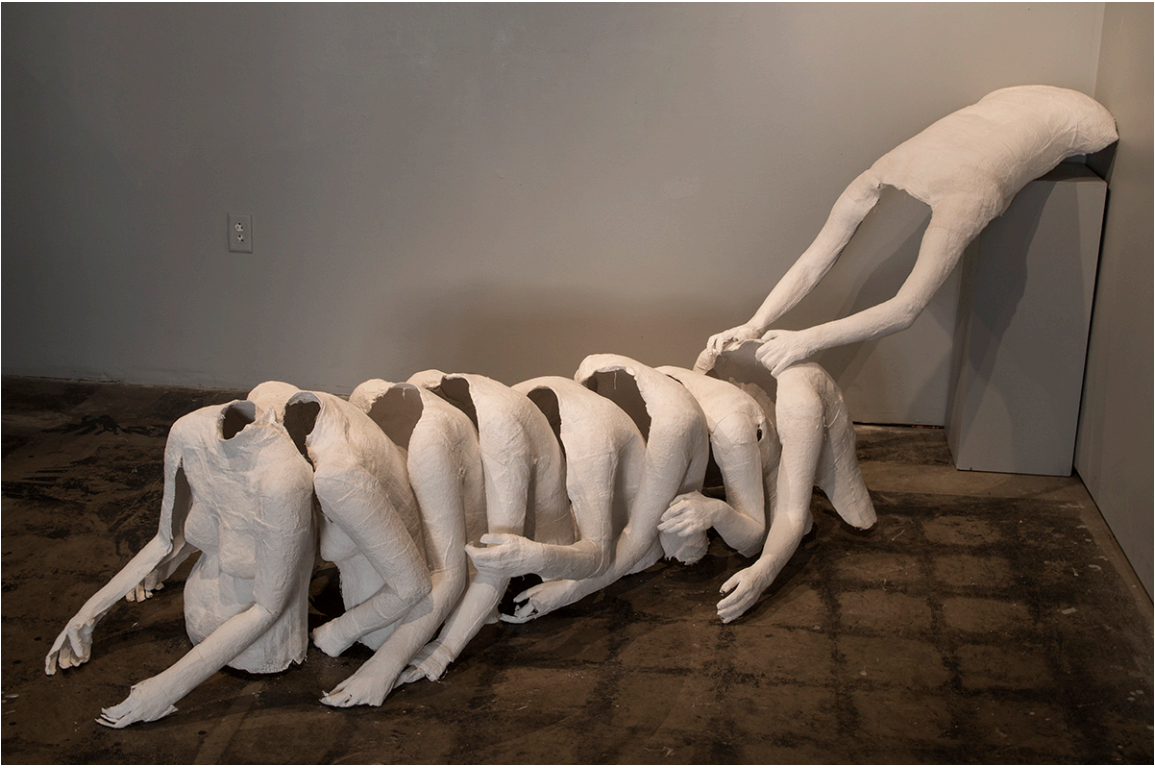


Maria Risner, "*Cavity*," Oils, Encaustic Wax, Fabric, and plaster casts on Panel

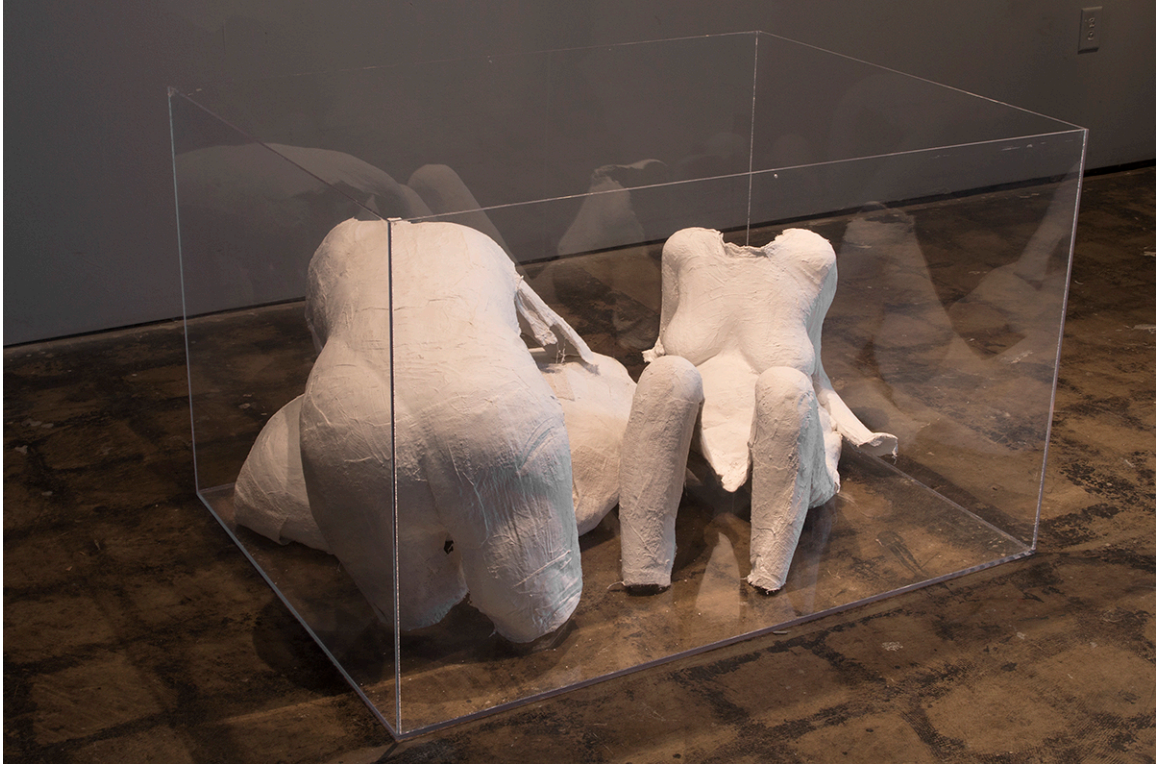


Maria Risner, "*Descending Forms*," Plaster Life-Casts





Maria Risner, "*Reflected Forms*," Plaster Life-Casts



Maria Risner, "*Trapped*," Plaster Life-Casts

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- The Map is Not the Territory*, Reece Museum 2017
- Synonyms of Experience*, Reece Museum 2016
- Women's Works: Celebrating Women's Creativity*  
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Publications: *Studio Visit Magazine*, Juror Lisa Crossman, Curator of the  
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