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May 2020

Exploration of the Female Character

By

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Abstract

This paper will explore female character construction as it relates to gender and identity of women in art. I will explore the influence of Ana Mendieta, Francesca Woodman and Cindy Sherman in the evolution of my own photography, which focuses on construction, and identity of the female character.

Keywords: female, character, gender roles, ideal, identity

Female Character Construction and Identity as Viewed Through the Feminist Lens

Women have fueled the inspiration of artists for as long as art has existed. From the *Venus of Willendorf* to the countless versions of *Judith Beheading Holofernes* to the photographic self-portraits of Cindy Sherman and Ana Mendieta, the lives of women have captivated artists. I will explore the use character development and female identity in the works of Ana Mendieta, Francesca Woodman, and Cindy Sherman as they relate to my own work.

The female subject in both art and literature has projected idealistic views of beauty and gender roles upon cultures for thousands of years. In her essay, *Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema*, feminist art writer Laura Mulvey analyzes the function of the female in art as something to be looked at by man.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness, (Mulvey 62).

Mulvey argues that the socially-constructed male gaze encourages viewing from a male perspective, thus reducing women to objects for male pleasure. Historically, society has appropriated behaviors, duties, and appearances to which women are expected to conform. These expectations are based on social constructs that are typically patriarchal in nature. This places women within a cast of roles, or characters that revolve around being the submissive caretaker and objectified sex object, both of which could be deemed to benefit man's pleasure.

Gender roles are established at birth; newborn girls are swaddled in pink blankets adorned with flowers, hearts and butterflies. Girls are groomed to be the more fragile and gentler

gender. As children, girls are given dolls, dress-up clothes and toy kitchens, while many of their male counterparts are given guns and swords. At adolescence, girls engage in elaborate makeup and hair rituals, hours of analyzing their appearance in the mirror, and often succumb to the fashion, body and boy-obsessed stereotypes that are expected of them. Even in the twenty-first century, girls are still being molded to become wives, mothers, caregivers and sex objects. Ultimately, humans end up playing roles they have been trained to play which translates to a lifelong game of dress-up. This “dressing-up” to adhere to stereotyped gender expectations often translates to characters in artwork.

Mother Nature as Character

One common theme found in my photography is the communication of women’s different roles and identities portrayed using characterization. The list of characters could continue on for as long there are descriptors: object, wife, mother, muse, teacher, counselor, etc. I have been strongly influenced by the late Cuban-American photographer and performance artist, Ana Mendieta, whose work communicated her feminist views and her spiritual connection with nature. Like Mendieta, I have a strong connection to the cycle of life which transcends nature and woman. Nature’s unpredictable seasonal cycles and capacity to generate life are reflected in a female personification. This assignment of gender to nature spans throughout the history of humans. In ancient classical mythology, goddesses were presented as having a strong connection to earth. Persephone was the goddess of spring growth, while her mother, Demeter, was revered as the goddess of harvest and fertility.

Mendieta’s ethereal land art photographs provide the viewer with an irrefutable connection to body and earth. She would often allow the ambiguity of the form left over from human touching earth to obscure the lines of gender connection. Other works seem to define a

mother-earth relationship between woman and nature, such as in the 1973 performance work titled *Imagen de Yagul* and in the 1976 *Arbol de la Vida*, also known as *Tree of Life*.

Mendieta's performance-based work has heavily influenced my own. Both my color photograph titled *Giver* (Fig.1) and Mendieta's *Arbol de la Vida* (Fig. 2) offer a version of a female character reminiscent of Mother Nature. In *Giver*, I wanted to speak to woman's connection to, and comfort with, the cycle of life. The subject is connected physically to earth through the mud and moss covering her body. The body language of the model in this photograph demonstrates her comfort with her role in the cycle as she is reclined with her arms restfully draped across her body and her eyes closed. This is in contrast to the female figure in Mendieta's *Tree of Life* who is also covered in mud, but whose posture and demeanor seem to communicate another story. Mendieta's subject is erect and her arms are stiffly raised to the sky, suggesting both surrender and protection. Mendieta's alert facial demeanor is another contrast to my subject's more peaceful expression. The viewer is pulled into the scene through a close range of *Giver* offers a more intimate experience, where the distance in Mendieta results in more of a spectator's view.

In both images, the subjects' identities are camouflaged by the mud, making it perceivable that they could represent any woman, and thereby implying that all women have this connection to the cycle of life. Both subjects are nude, however neither image is provocative in a way that might entice the gaze of the male viewer. Both characters in these images tell a story of continuation. Mendieta reveled in her connection to the earth and in her reality of being a woman within her artwork, saying,

Through my earth/body sculptures, I become one with the earth. I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my

ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs ... [in] an omnipresent female force, the after image of being encompassing within the womb, is a manifestation of my thirst for being (Jones, 26).

While both images illustrate a connection between woman and earth, the tension in Mendieta's *Tree of Life*, and her statement above, reflects a more aggressive version of Mother Nature.

Mendieta's Mother Earth character, with consideration of her writing above, seems to suggest that there is a ubiquitous female habitation in the womb to death circuit of life that is directly tied to the forces of nature.



Figure 1. Candi Helsel-Wilk, *Giver*, Peotone, Illinois, 2005.



Figure 2. Ana Mendieta, *Arbol de la Vida*, London, United Kingdom, 1976.

Also influential in my work is Mendieta's *Imagen De Yagul* (Fig. 3). An analysis of this work from online modern arts journal The Art Story.org demonstrates the idea of the cycle of life and death, as well as the female connection to earth.

The artist uncommonly remains in the resulting photograph lying in a Zapotec tomb, her nude body covered with white flowers. The foliage that obscures Mendieta's face and seems to grow from her body turns her unclothed form into both a lifeless corpse and a place of great fecundity. Mendieta's use of the abstracted feminine form that has become fused with the landscape may also denote her finally finding home in the more universal Mother Earth and an acceptance of the cycles of life and death. It also eloquently speaks to her concerns surrounding belonging and rootedness, and an underlying reliance on her female mysticism, (TheArtStory.org).

Mendieta's performance piece is perhaps a commentary on the concept of rebirth. She, again, has abstracted the female subject, presenting her as yet another version of Mother Nature. The life that springs forth is not necessarily voluntary on the part of the female, as much as it is

self-sacrificing. The subject is enclosed within the confines of a hole in the earth, potentially indicating the planting of seeds, which will result in new growth.



Figure 3. Ana Mendieta, *Imagen De Yagul*, Mexico, 1973.

In my black and white photograph titled *Cocoon* (Fig. 4), my subject, once more, is connected to nature. Both the subject in *Cocoon* and the subject in Mendieta's work seem to represent a connection to death or a return to earth. Mendieta's subject is presented in what visually looks to be a tomb, while my subject is encased in a cocoon of silky web. Both tomb and cocoon could be viewed as holding vessels as a body morphs into another form. Both subjects seem relaxed and accepting of their current states of being. Mendieta's subject appears to be sprouting new life in the form of the small white flowers, while the female in *Cocoon* patiently waits out the cold death of winter.



Figure 4. Candi Helsel-Wilk, *Cocoon*, Chicago, Illinois, 2007.

Isolation of Victorian Domestication

Throughout the evolution of my work, I began looking more toward character construction. My subject matter, while still focused on the female, transitioned to embrace my love for fashion and costuming. The ebb and flow of fashion eras has inspired my artistic work, especially the Victorian period. The Victorian era was such a defined time period in terms of gender roles. Victorian society embraced women who accepted said roles, while it ostracized those who did not. In the male-dominated world of the era, women were expected to be submissive, quiet, and well-behaved at all times. Women were just as trapped in their clothing as they were in their reality. The corset, for example, illustrates this constricted existence. One could even metaphorically perceive the strings of a corset as confinement to the home, to a marriage, or to institutions that women of this era were bound to.

Among my influences is Francesca Woodman. During her short life, Woodman identified with the isolation of the Victorian female. Woodman, who committed suicide at the age of 23, spent much of her short career analyzing the madness that often accompanies isolation. Victorian

women who rebelled against gender norms and refused to conform to the era's ideals of female sexuality were often diagnosed with hysteria and institutionalized. The resulting isolation further removed any voice they may have had. This idea of solitude is something that Woodman investigated thoroughly in her haunting black and white images.

Many of Woodman's images experimented with how her subject related to their space. In her self-portraits, Woodman often presents herself as a woman who is forced into solitude and eventually succumbs to madness. This brings to mind the heroine in the Victorian short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The deeply developed characters in literature, such as *The Yellow Wallpaper*, can also inform and inspire the artist. This period novella centers on the unnamed protagonist and is a literary illustration of what domestic life was like for the hysteria-diagnosed women of the late 1800's. American art critique Abigail Solomon-Godeau speculated that Woodman's *Space 2* series (1976) was influenced by the plight of the story's protagonist.

This manipulation is evidenced in Solomon-Godeau's reading of those photographs taken in the decaying interior of an abandoned house Woodman found in the streets around her college. These photographs, often mistaken for a cohesive set united by the title of the 'House' series, represent the most celebrated and reproduced of Woodman's works, and her blurred self-representation merging with the space's decrepit surfaces here was first related by Solomon-Godeau to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's description of a woman's unravelling mental state in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (Riches 516).

In the small format black and white self-portrait (fig. 5), Woodman's nude body emerges from the torn wallpaper of a abandoned room, giving the viewer the sense that the woman is losing her identity to the house, and alludes to the possibility that the house might eventually

consume her. This idea plays into the storyline of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, because it establishes the subject as an inanimate part of the house. The subject seems to be aiding her own consumption because her hand holds up the peeling paper and indicates no sign of a struggle, implying the woman's acceptance of her fate in a man's world. Her nudity suggests vulnerability, and the strategically placed paper over face, breasts and genitals strips her of identity and further reduces her to a part of the house.



Figure 5. Francesca Woodman, from *Space 2*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976.

Gilman's short story also influenced the creation of *Climbing the Walls* (fig. 6). Like Woodman's, this photograph addresses how the female might relate to a space in which they are confined, be it a physical, mental or emotional. The image challenges the viewer to consider the subject is multiple appearances within the single frame. The three versions of the female subject display both isolation and a desperation to escape, as she fades in and out of the walls. The extended exposure creates a spectral transparency. The long, narrow hall and the chaos of the patterned walls are reminiscent of the wallpaper described by Gillman in the short story.



Figure 6. Candi Helsel-Wilk, *Climbing the Walls*, Seattle, Washington, 2018.

The images differ in their tolerance of their respective situations. The struggle of my subject suggests she is not willing to settle into her role as an extension of the house. Her body language suggests she is not content within the walls, which is in stark contrast to Woodman's subject, who has surrendered to her environment.

Angel as Character

Woodman's work habitually engages topics of the human condition. Subjects in her images often appear in a state of partial blur due to long shutter speeds, resulting in ghostly or spirit-like beings. Given her first unsuccessful suicide attempt and eventual death by suicide, it is evident that the notion of her own mortality was present in her thought process and most likely guided her creativity. Woodman created a series of images titled *On Being an Angel* in a defunct factory in Rome, Italy from 1974-1975. In the series of self-portraits, Woodman returns to the dilapidated rooms she was so fond of, where she was often nude and always recorded in a partially transparent state due to long exposures. In some of her angel series images, she takes on a more literal form of an angel with wings constructed from white bed sheets, while in others she approaches the topic conceptually through transparency and use of mirrors. Curator Kim

Knoppers of the Foam Fotografiemuseum in Amsterdam discussed the exhibited work of Woodman. She said, “The theme of the angel is as a figure that is there and also not there, because it is not human. She is, somehow, always in-between – and this in-between is very important. Woodman’s photographs are about appearance and disappearance,” (British Journal of Photography).

The concept of angel ties back in with Woodman’s interest in the Victorian era where dutiful and husband-abiding wives were referred to as “angels of the house”. English period poet Coventry Patmore coined this term of endearment penned a poem titled *Angel in the House* dedicated to his submissive and self-sacrificing wife. Patmore’s writing became a portrait of the ideal wife and mother, (Kuhl).

Angels provide an interesting platform for exploration of both woman and character. Commonly presented as female, angels exist in the undefinable place between the living and the dead. Much of Woodman’s work seems to focus on what could be determined as moments that capture a state of being in-between. Woodman wrote in her final journal dated January 19, 1981, “I was inventing a language for people to see the everyday things that I also see... and show them something different... Simply the other side,” (British Journal of Photography).

In Woodman’s untitled image from her series of work *On Being an Angel* (fig. 7), she uses herself as the subject in a derelict interior. The scene is backlit by prominent windows that illuminate the white sheets hung to mimic wings, which are central to the composition. This illumination, in combination with the subject’s blur, alludes to spiritual transience and transcendence of body.



Figure 7. Francesca Woodman, *Untitled From On Being an Angel Series*, Rome, Italy, 1977-78.

My black and white photomontage titled *Choate* (fig. 8) shares many similarities with Woodman's angel image. From the derelict spaces and diaphanous female figures to the blinding light pouring in from windows at the back of each frame, the images both communicate a sense of freedom not present within the previously compared set. The light flooding into both images serves as a tool of illumination, perhaps freeing these women from their domestic prisons. Woodman's subject, as well as mine, are unattached to their environments. Instead, they are in mid-air, suggesting they might be leaving their respective spaces of isolation.



Figure 7. Candi Helsel-Wilk, *Choate, Anna, Illinois*, 2018.

Female Character and the Transience of Mortality

Woodman's *Self-Deceit # 1* (fig.9) is a black and white self-portrait featuring a female subject crawling around a corner. Her nude body is in blur and is very animalistic in nature as it explores her reflection in a carefully placed mirror. Mirrors are an apparatus of self-representation, a place where we look to ourselves for knowledge and understanding. In this image, the room and mirror stand as the only stable parts of the image due to Woodman's movement and shutter speed. This suggests she might be questioning the stability of her own existence, once again connecting to her interest in mortality. Interestingly, the title of the image, *Self-Deceit #1*, plays a role in the interpretation of this work. The distortion of her from movement speaks to a possible struggle with identity or a distrust in herself.



Figure 9. Francesca Woodman, *Self-Deceit #1*, Rome, Italy, 1977-1978.

In contrast to Woodman's *Self-Deceit # 1*, the subject in my digital image titled *Time Passed* (fig. 10) sits with her back propped up against the mirror, avoiding her reflection. Her body is in a fixed position, but her head, which is in contact with the reflective surface, becomes blurred from side-to-side movement. The room around her is in focus, but the birds contained within the mirror are blurred. Because birds have the unique ability to occupy land and sky, they are a symbol of freedom and are considered by some cultures to be a symbol of eternal life. The subject is intentionally avoiding a confrontation with the mirror, possibly implying that she is unsure of or uncomfortable with what is to come. Woodman's subject is directly addressing the other version of herself, while the woman in fig. 10 is avoiding her reflection, which could imply that she is avoiding looking to the future out of fear or denial of her impending age or the conclusion of her own life.



Figure 10. Candi Helsel-Wilk, *Time Passed*, Portland, Oregon, 2018.

Life's transience can fuel creativity like nothing else. I created *Bound* (fig. 11) not long after my first husband was killed in an accident. At the time, my children were young, and I was alone. In contrast to the women who have inspired my work, I do not take self-portraits, but this photograph gets as close to a self-portrait as any image I have ever taken. The character in this image is a mourning woman, and my direction of the model's gesture and facial expression was a direct extension of how I was feeling at the moment. I was in a dark space of loneliness, despair, fear and panic. In this image, my subject floats helplessly in the darkness that I felt at the time, entangled in a heavy rope. At this moment, I was not quite ready to deal with how my life was changing, so the subject's face is turned away. I also was not ready to address my emotions. As a result, her mouth is bound as well. She is suspended in a moment in which she could probably break free from these ropes, but is too wrapped up in her current state of despair to try.



Figure 11. Candi Helsel-Wilk, *Bound*, Chicago Heights, Illinois, 2005.

Exploration of the Doll

Exploration of character within our own identities is one way humans narrate their existence to the world. Of all the artists who inspire me, Cindy Sherman is among the most pivotal. I relate to her on several levels, but predominantly because she is both a portrait artist and a master of character construction. Sherman's work generates much discourse regarding presumed norms. In a 2010 article published in photography journal *History of Photo*, Jui-Ch'i Liu wrote, "From cinema and television to advertising, the Internet, and even old master paintings—she [Sherman] creates work that disrupts assumptions about beauty, status, vanity, and art itself," (Liu 78-79). While she professes to have no feminist thought processes in the making of her images, it is undeniable that her work has a feminist voice.

Sherman has indicated in interviews that she is not interested in capturing the standard beauty, but approaches the idea of beauty unconventionally. This notion of looking past idealized beauty is a key concept in my doll series. A doll is essentially humanized, molded plastic, usually demonstrating idealized features. The history of dolls is rich and diverse, and has revealed a vast array of purposes that align with the individual needs of cultures through time. Throughout

history, dolls have functioned as funerary objects, magic vessels, protection for families, and teaching tools. However, in recent history, dolls have come to represent idealized qualities of humans, and they are usually identified with the female gender. This gender association goes so far that women are referred with the sexist pet-name 'doll'. This name has connotations that women are playthings. Society has constructed the doll as a plaything for girls to encourage the nurturing role they are expected to assume as adults.

Both Sherman and I have generated bodies of work centralized around the doll theme. In Sherman's 1975 black and white silent short film titled *Doll Clothes* made up of a collection of photomontages, she presents herself as a flat paper doll and stands in her underwear sifting through laminated sleeves of doll clothing. Once she finds a dress and wraps the tabs around her flat body, large hands come in to the screen, stripping the dress off and returning Sherman to her own laminated sleeve labeled "doll". Sherman's explanation of this is that the hands are those of a parent disciplining an ill-behaved child. She wrote, 'The human hands that appear in the film, the artist suggests, are 'like the parent telling the child that she is misbehaving and has to stay in the book,''' (Schor 2012). Sherman filmed *Doll Clothes* during her time at Buffalo State College in 1975; however, the public did not view it until 2004 when it was included in an exhibition at the Montclair Art Museum, *The Unseen Cindy Sherman: Early Transformations*. In modern light, this film suggests the idea of putting a woman back in her place, the clear-labeled plastic sleeve, as an object. Sherman's *Doll Clothes* was the first of many projects where the doll was a vehicle for character formation. Sherman would go on to create several series of work involving everything from sex dolls in suggestive positions to masked dolls to the eventual use of prosthetics mentioned above.



Figure 12. Candi Helsel-Wilk, *Dollface*, Anna, Illinois, 2008.

In the photograph, *Dollface* (fig. 12), I wanted to explore the objectification of the female by taking the more literal approach of using a woman as a doll. This idea of comparing women to the child's plaything is an interesting concept. As girls grow tired of their dolls, the dolls generally end up in a pile of varying states of dress and condition, depending upon how much they were played with. The woman, cast aside, is not much different from the doll. In this specific image, the subject's heavily made-up face resembles the plastic of the discarded dolls with which she shares the bed. Her drawn-on eyes are wide open and "look" listlessly to something out of the frame. She seems just as used as the inanimate figures scattered around her, and seems to accept that this is her place.

Character of Mother

Sherman's photos have provided much commentary on the idea of the woman's place. Between 1988-1990, Sherman created a series of thirty five works based on paintings of old masters called *History Portraits*, ironically all painted by men. While each of the paintings from her *History Portraits* series seem to pay a twisted tribute to a famed work of art, Sherman has commented in multiple interviews that she never actually saw any of these paintings in person.

She worked from photos of the paintings in books, removing any sense of scale and possibly eliminating details. This is interesting because Sherman's focus in her own photographs relies so heavily on hidden details. Throughout this body of work, Sherman used herself as the model, along with prosthetic breasts, religious undertones, heavy makeup to foster the feeling of a painting and an overall dark palette so familiar to paintings of the old masters.

A play on the Madonna and Child, Sherman's *Untitled 223* (fig. 13) initially evokes a virtuous sense of intimacy between mother and child. The mother glances downward at the child who is being nursed at the breast. The rich colors, dark background and composition allude to the notion that Sherman's inspiration is based on historical religious paintings depicting the famous mother and child. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that much more is going on. One starts to notice that the breast from which the child is feeding is prosthetic and that the child is actually a doll. These revelations are an unorthodox shrug in the direction of traditional views on motherhood. The prosthetic breast introduces a synthetic element to what is commonly considered a natural exchange between mother and child. Upon further investigation of the mother's expression, the expected look of intense love that appears to transform into one of disdain, which conflicts with traditional idealized views of a mother's awe towards her child.

The subject in the image *Baby Maker* (fig. 14) confronts the overwhelming responsibilities of being a woman, specifically in regards to childbearing and rearing. Her dressing gown, along with the kitschy color scheme of her surroundings conjure up reminders of the dutiful 1950's homemaker. The subject is perched on a bed, propped on her arms with an expression of shock. Her heavily made-up features, drawn on eyelashes and bed-head offer the frenzied disposition as the subject considers the chaos that her life of producing offspring must induce. Through all of this, she is partially reclined on the bed in a fashion that suggests she is

ready, although not necessarily willing, to engage in acts necessary to perform her presumed duty of creating even more children.



Figure 13. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled 223*, Rome, Italy, 1989.



Figure 14. Candi Helsel-Wilk, *Baby Machine*, Anna, Illinois, 2008.

While the ideal female form varies slightly depending on culture and time, there are defined characteristics that define a feminine woman. These characteristics usually include a long, flowing mane of hair, voluptuous, soft features, and inviting demeanor. Gender and sexuality as they relate to femininity is common among Sherman's work. In many of her images, she presents a female character who diverges from typical feminine and beauty standards to blur the line between the male and female identity. Exploration of androgyny through the presentation of the female disputes traditional assumptions about a woman's physicality and her place.

The Androgynous Female

Sherman challenges the concept of "ideal" in each of her works. In a world that looks for perfection, she is not afraid to draw in the viewer with the promise of something traditionally beautiful, but then offer them an ugly reality in the details. In Art Journal 44 article, Beth Hinderliter elaborates on the impact of Sherman's perspective of the ideal.

Sherman's photographic performativity turns the divine art of painting inside out. In these seams, painting and the sublime art of the actor meet, not simply to exchange hierarchical roles, but to offer an entirely different set of possibilities. While Victorian photographers such as Oscar Rejlander (1813–1875) sought in narrative photographic tableaux to elevate photography to the art of painting, Sherman altogether rejects the idea of representation as the striving after an ideal form, (Hinderliter).

It is not the ideal Sherman is interested in capturing. Instead, acting as both character and photographer within her work, she approaches the ideal with the intention of exposing all of the undesirable qualities of prescribed systems such as beauty, gender roles and identity. Her work is about enticing the viewer to look closer, and causing them to evaluate their own systems of judgement as they try to make sense of her images.

Sherman's *Untitled 276* (fig.15) illustrates this perfectly. The self-portrait features a subject wearing a gauzy and very feminine, flowy, see-through gown, as she is perched upon an unseen stool in a very masculine stance. Her synthetic mane of frizzy blonde hair adorned with a delicate crown of white flowers frames a cocky expression that is more reminiscent of a burned-out 80's heavy metal star than a seductive woman in her boudoir. The romantic palette and flowing fabrics reference paintings of the Renaissance as the subject is slighting, which is reminiscent of Botticelli's *Venus*. Another clue that this subject might be a parodied nod in the direction of *Venus* is the presence of the calla lilies being clutched in her right hand. Greek mythology suggests that *Venus*, the goddess of love, was jealous of their beauty and placed the yellow pistil in the center of the flower to blemish them. The flowers are also a symbol of purity, which is reinforced through the color scheme. Upon closer investigation, one starts to notice those intentionally unsavory details Sherman is known for. The subject's breasts are sagging and there are rolls of skin pushing out of the dress which would stand in opposition to ideal beauty standards. Adding a sense of vulgarity, her nipples, as well as a large patch of pubic hair, are visible through the transparency of the dress. Sherman has presented a burlesque, androgynous character that parodies traditional standards of beauty and gender. She has intentionally blurred the line, offering elements of both beauty and repulsion within the image. Once the viewer takes in all of the details, they begin to question the environment. Was this gauzy, romantic environment meant to house this caricature?

Is as much as stereotypes are applied to people, they are also given to places. In *Man Cave* (fig. 16) two female subjects appear to be comfortably absorbed in a space meant for men. Surrounded by pinball machines, exposed ductwork and a grungy bar just in the distance, the women are engaging with the playthings of men. They are certainly not in the domestic spaces of

which we expected to see them in. The female subjects offer a slightly skewed view on sexuality. Although they are wearing dresses, their hair is concealed by swim caps, offering a bald head frequently associated with aging men. Both subjects are demonstrating a “take it or leave it” sort of gaze, indicative of a disinterested man. The front subject is grasping the machine in the sexually suggestive manner in which males typically use to play the game. Also stereotypical of men, the two are not interacting with each other. These elements create a subtle androgyny within the image that allows the viewer to ponder their role in this narrative.

The differences between this pairing of images are extensive in terms of color, environment and subject, but the message is the same. Both images are intended to question to coding used to determine feminine and masculine qualities in gender. Sherman has used softness in juxtaposition with a masculine stance and vulgar details to approach the topic in parody, while I have used feminine details in a masculine environment. Either way, the androgynous characters within the photographs beg the viewer to consider existing ideals, as well as how they uniquely place those ideals onto people according to physical gender.



Figure 15. Cindy Sherman Untitled 276, New York, 1993.



Figure 16. Candi Helsel-Wilk. *Man Cave*. Blue Island, Illinois. 2018.

With intention or not, each of the seventeen works referenced in this paper demonstrates a constructed female character who confronts traditional stereotypes, identities and norms associated with the female gender. Ana Mendieta used her “earth-body” performances as a metaphorical vehicle to discuss the connection of the female to nature and life cycles, as well as to obscure the boundaries between male and female gender identification. Her work was heavily influential to mine as I started on my path as an artist. Her organic approach to the human-earth communication of the female form was an undeniable contributor that jump-started my interests in photography. Francesca Woodman used physical spaces to document her states of mind, as well as her views on domestic ideals. Her struggles with her own mortality and her place in the world are revealed in her haunting self-portraits. Cindy Sherman used her body as a canvas, literally painting herself into a mod podge of characters who challenged norms through gender identities and tradition through satire and unapologetic visuals.

Viewed through the lens of patriarchal ideals, the female has long be objectified in both life and art. Each of the women who have influenced my own body of work has taken a different

approach to illuminate the female in a way that is not about male consumption. Using characters, they have challenged gender norms using a diverse set of narratives and techniques, breaking down traditional systems of understanding what a woman's place is in the world and in art.

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