

Gisela McDaniel

## **Notions of the Female Body: Institutions, Images, and Self Perception**

### **Intro**

My project is a multimedia installation exploring the female body and sexual assault. Using assemblage, painting, sculpture, and audio, the project challenges the community by bringing real women's relationship with their own bodies into view as they share their experiences with and healing from sexualized violence. The project consists in part of two large assemblages comprised of found objects which I defined as being associated with the "female object". The assemblages are interactive and feature taped interviews of women recounting stories of sexual harassment, assault, and/or rape. The stories were collected from a diverse group of women who shared their individual experiences with me in taped interviews. In addition to recording the women's stories, I have been drawing and painting participants with the goal of representing their experiences including the process by which they reclaimed their bodies. Exploring and representing the various parts of the process is central to my project, since most women not only feel a sense of shame following sexual assault, but also a feeling that their bodies had been tainted. Participating in the project became a way for women to reclaim a sense of control and autonomy over their own bodies.

Narratives featured in the interactive assemblage reveal the mental and physical strain sexual assault can leave upon a victim. The assemblages capture the painful internal realities and document how individual female bodies experience profound pain over the course of months, weeks, and even a lifetime following the original assault. The overall project, which includes the assemblages as well as drawing and paintings inspired by interviews serves as a critique on violence against women. It is intended to provoke conversation about violence against women and to shift the focus from the acts

of violence to the trauma highlighting the experiences of the victim. The goal of the project is to humanize the victim as a person with complex agency reclaiming their personal integrity and reclaim the wholeness of the female form. Sculptural oil paintings complement free-standing interactive assemblages and further emphasize the themes and emotive aspects of the constructed, interpretive assemblages.

As a victim of multiple rapes by men I know and men I did not know, my internal struggle to heal after trauma was invisible to the public. I wonder how many other women are struggling to reclaim themselves after sexual traumas and how they go about surviving in a world that created these problems.

### **Women in Institutions: Religion, Education, Work, and Social**

How has the female body been affected by the historical connotations of it? Portrayals of women throughout history have been primarily through images and literature. During Hellenistic times it is clear that Religions with male deities have been the most popular religions since Hellenistic time. *Hellenism: Plutarch, Philo and the cult of Isis* compares the differences between religions with female deities versus those with only male deities. “At a certain point the human race turned towards maleness and patriarchal religion, and this occurred at the outbreak of the Western era” (Mortley 1). Comparing religions with female deities versus those with male deities shows a great difference not only in the roles of women but in the associations people had with them at the time. Mortley describes religions with female deities to distill “engendered humane and civilising values” into society, while male headed religions are geared towards “moralistic systems of destructions of both love and life” (Mortley 2). Female religions, such as the cult of Isis, held higher

roles for women in the church. “The prehistoric freedom of the libido is said to be the direct result of the dominance of female deities” (Mortley 2). Religions with female deities have been said to “engender humane and civilising values” (Mortley 2). Religions with male deities on the other hand have been considered “moralistic systems destructive of both love and life” (Mortley 2). The Bible itself only has two books written by women, and much of the Old Testament describes women as weak, susceptible to emotions and pleasure (evil), and incomplete. The creation story sets up women to be obedient and controlled by men. “*Timothy 2, 9-12* advises women to dress and behave modestly, to keep silent, not to attempt to teach, and not to attempt to dominate men, because ‘Adam was first formed, then Eve’, and because Eve was deceived” (Mortley 47). Paul connects the female body to the church, “Christ is male, and the church is female” (Mortley 48). The downfall of the female is through her “desire and flesh” (Mortley 55).

Greek and Roman philosophers describe the dangers of women when they are not controlled by man. Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher states that sex roles are based on the biological functions of the body, that men and women are opposite and therefore should behave so. Men are physically more complete and thus their nature is to freedom and activity. Women are incomplete making them passive, always awaiting stimuli from man, they are “akin to casue: she awaits stimuli and direction” (Mortley 7). It seems that we have based what a women can be on religious assumptions from the beginning of time.

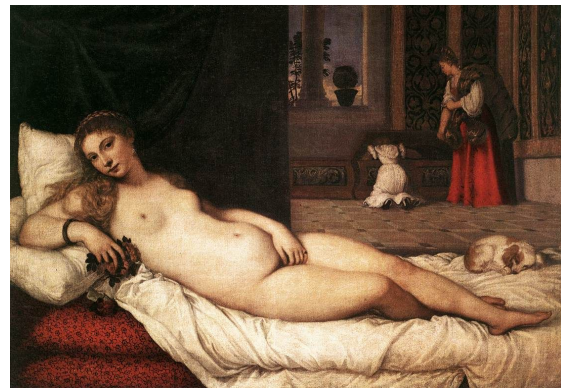
Educational systems in America have proved to promote gender stereotyping. “Schools have been accused of encouraging ridged sex-stereotyped roles which do not allow children to develop to their fullest potential” (Migacz 4). Examples of these instances include different clothings restrictions for genders, and access to different activities, such as sports and games. Creating

curriculums that promote gender equal responsibilities and opportunities at a young age could benefit all children, allowing them to explore and reach for all opportunities regardless of gender.

When entering the workplace or a university at an older age it is common for women to experience these gender stereotypes that begun in the school systems as sexism. Gender inequality discourages women to reach their full potential. It is common in these scenarios for women to experience sexual harassment and abuse, furthering the difficulties of being successful in a career field. In *Woman: A Feminist Perspective* they take note on the effects of this harassment on women. “Sexual harassment in the university and the workplace must be recognized and treated as an oppressive form of sex discrimination that undercuts women’s potential for independence and equality. It disrupts women’s drive for autonomy outside of the home and family by sexualizing women’s work role and by making sexuality a condition of economic survival” (Freeman 42).

## Women in Images

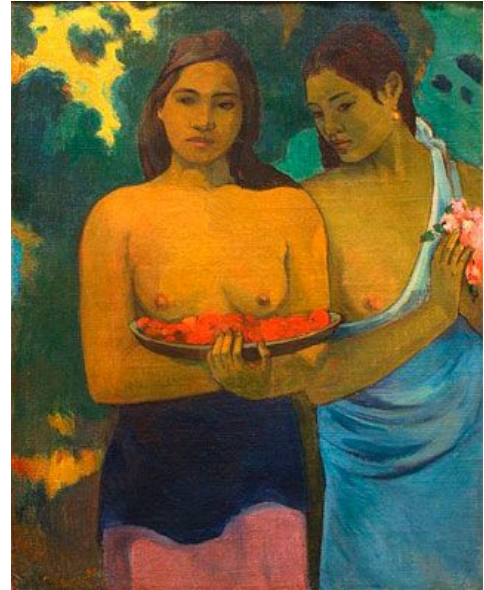
Women in fine art such as the *Venus of Urbino* by Titian, *Olympia* by Manet, Tahitian women painted by Paul Gauguin, and contemporary painters such as John Currin have portrayed women as submissive objects. As technology rose, the image of women were then



uses as a marketing tactic for consumers to want to buy. Playboy magazine and Maxim created a male curation of female sexuality. The male gaze is filled with desire, a desire to own, to obtain, to exploit. Often the female image is used as a marketing ploy to draw in a consumer to a product. The

common phrase “sex sells” comes to mind, but it seems that is almost exclusively female sexuality being sold. These mass images of women are practically inescapable, they are on billboards, on television, in magazines, the list goes on. The female body in this way is looked at as a product to be consumed, and is used to draw consumers in to make unrelated products more desirable. The ubiquity of these images have created an ideal look for how a women should be. Leading to unrealistic expectations of the body and beauty of the female.

Portrays of women through online pornography are accessed by millions every day. In fact, a shocking 30 percent of the data on the internet is pornography (Kleinman). With these statistics porn is clearly in high demand. This is arguable the most direct male curation of female sexuality. For my own research I decided to enter this online world.



Clicking through pages of thumbnails I was horrified to see the different genres. From my searches I found everything from screaming tied up women (BDSM), and aggressive men slapping young women around as they cried. Almost all the women had no public hair and were submissive. The fake moaning was creepy and the longer I stayed on the site, the less real it all felt. There were even strange animated advertisements of overly sexualized women with giant genitals in all sorts of positions of the sides. I could not imagine the artist who made these has a very realistic image of women. Granted, many different genres of pornography exist today, but the majority are made by and for men. Female sexuality is very generalized through these mediums.

## **The Feminist Image**

A french feminist manifesto *The Laugh of Medusa* by Helene Cixous claims that “the effects of the past are still with us” (Cixous 875). This statement stands true for any victims of sexual violence, as they will carry those events with them for the rest of their lives. She discusses that female sexuality is individual, “you can’t talk about female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes--any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another” (Cixous 876). We must acknowledge that femininity is defined from person to person, but at the same time support and accept all women in their femininity. Negative connotations of the female body and sexuality have made it nearly impossible to truly feel 100% well about womanhood. We are taught to hide our bodies, that the functions of our bodies are gross, and that our bodies lead to trouble and that female pleasure is greedy and unnecessary. Female artists of the past have attempted to reclaim their bodies and sexuality through their work. Niki de Saint Phalle, a French artist, worked sculpturally with the female body. She was raped by her father as a child and many of her early assemblage works deal with the fluctuating view on women's sexuality, the need for it to be pure and its susceptible for it to be evil. Contemporary artist Amber Hawk Swanson works sculpturally and performatively with “real dolls”, the realistic sex dolls created today. She even had a “real doll” commissioned in her likeness, and in a performance cut it up and reassembled it as a whale.

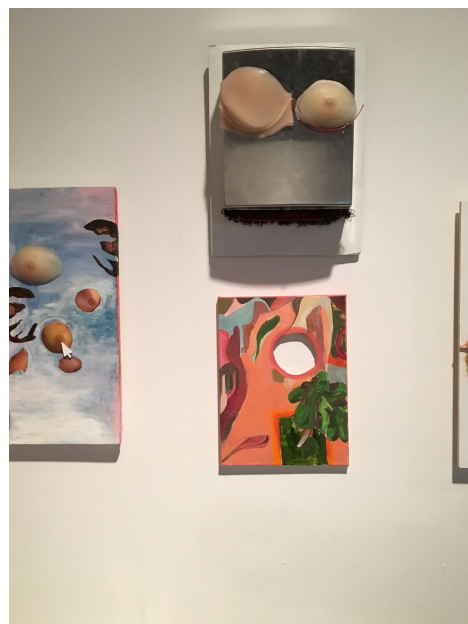
## **Interviews**

The final aspect of my research is original interviews from modern day women. The questions I ask set up a conversation I later go through to find significant commonalities between

interviews. The questions touch on femininity on a individual level, relationship to your own body, and how society and experiences of sexism, and sexual harassment, assault, and abuse. Through these interviews I have found that experiences of assault and harassment have made women more aware of the constant gaze their body is under, or the significance of the female body. Understanding what makes women feel feminine on an individual level helps to find an understanding of the complexity and the spectrum of female sexuality and femininity today in a primarily male dominated world. One woman in particular said something that stuck with me. “I think femininity is being proud to be a woman”, she told me. In the end regardless of how a woman demonstrates and lives her femininity her pride in her womanhood, in an oppressive patriarchal world, is what true femininity is. Creating a platform for women to share their experiences of assault anonymously to be heard by public is intended to spread awareness of the dire need for change in our society.

### **Methodologies**

I began my making process after the initial research by working with images of women, collaging, sketching, and gathering “female objects”. I had much difficulty in the beginning of this process working with images of the female body because not only are they everywhere in media, but how can I help this over exploited body by producing images of it at all? The images I was collaging from ranged from vintage to contemporary Playboy magazines, Penthouse magazine, Buttman magazine, Cosmopolitan magazine, and online pornography captured in screen grabs. I xeroxed everything. Cut

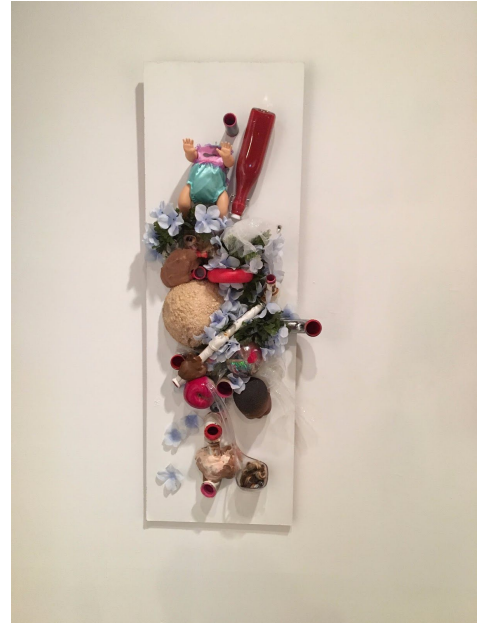






landscapes to comment on colonialism and tied it into how women's bodies have been historically treated as property.

Creating the assemblages took a few steps: collecting the objects, preparing the objects, playing with composition, and adhering the objects onto the plywood. Once acquiring a female object I would immediately paint the inside pink or red to resemble insides. After that I would attach objects by burying them in plaster of paris and a lot of epoxy.





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