

home/body

By Molly Valentine Dierks

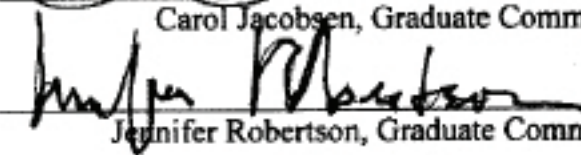
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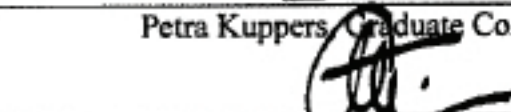

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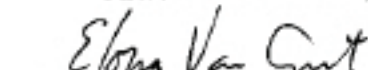
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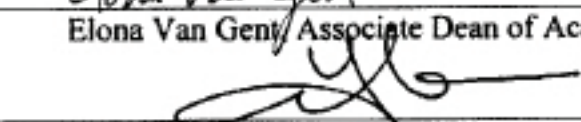
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Abstract

This written thesis investigates the personal and theoretical themes behind *home/body*, Molly Valentine Dierks' thesis exhibition, which deals with gender as a construct. Themes addressed and discussed are the role of the continuum (versus dualistic thinking) in feminist theory, the mother-figure, women's bodies (as I have experienced my own and as they have been discussed in feminist theory), the double bind, and the abject.

Keywords:

abject, ambiguity, art, body, continuum, domestic, double bind, dualism, dualistic, feminism, feminist theory, gender, home, installation, mother, role-play, sculpture

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Introduction

One way women have had of coping is to withdraw - to go into your own space, to be depressed. Instead of attacking and venting anger, you turn it inward, against yourself, so that you get to feeling really depressed: You're not good enough; you fucked up . . . You say all these bad things to yourself. It's like beating, self-abuse. You're beating on yourself with these words and these messages that there's something wrong with you, because you didn't complete this or that task; and look at you, you don't have a relationship; or, look at you, you messed up on your relationship. Whatever it is that brings the depression, you use those things to hit yourself over the head and your body, so that if you're depressed two weeks or three weeks or six months or six years, it's a constant abuse of self, a violence against the self. Some days, it's easier to take than somebody else abusing you, so what you do is you jump in and abuse yourself, before somebody else can do it.

~Gloria Anzaldua, In an Interview on *On Changing Identity*

In 1970, in her seminal book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone wrote “sex class is so deep as to be invisible” (Firestone, 12). Since 1970, the women’s movement has made sexism less invisible and less acceptable, but sexism remains deeply embedded in women’s lived experiences. This year, I watched “The Family Man”, the number three box office when it was released in December of 2000. The movie depicts a man choosing a future in which he gives up his life as a high-powered executive on Wall Street in order to marry his girlfriend and have children. While the main character gets to retain his job to perform as the ‘family man’, the ‘family woman’ must give up her successful career in order to be a mother. Recently released movies like “The Family Man” demonstrate that stereotypes based on traditional and restrictive female gender roles are still woven into the fabric of contemporary American culture.

While women may be more liberated in many ways, we still endure sexual assault and harassment at a greater rate than men, are paid less than our male counterparts, and form a minority in present-day legislative and political arenas (Bird, Reingold, “Sexual Harassment Charges”, “The Earnings of Men and Women”). It is not surprising that the incidence of depression in women is double that of men, a fact that the American Psychological Association publicly announced is “related to being female in a contemporary world” in 2012 (Goleman).

The pieces in my MFA exhibition deal with the nature of being a woman today, visualizing its complexity with sculptures that are conflicted and unresolved. The installation and sculptural pieces reference traditional gender roles and current cultural pressures, interweaving them with personal stories and memories, to reveal my understanding of my ‘femininity’ as something complex, that employs ambiguous commitments. As an installation, *home/body* speaks to the fact that while women are more liberated than in previous eras, we often continue to perform, and/or be affected by feminine identity as part of a constructed fiction.

Exploring feminist theory enabled me to process my experiences, allowing me to make work that reflects my interior experience of being a woman by comparing it with an exterior perspective of femininity as a gender role constructed of expectations and commitments.

There are many themes in this body of work, and the pieces overlap in content. For this thesis, I have chosen the themes that most intrigued me as I made the work, and I relate them to feminist writing. These themes shaped the heart of the forms, materials, and underlying stories of *home/body* as an installation and collection of sculptures.

The home in *home/body*

The woman who inhabits the room I built for my MFA thesis exhibition is one (fictional) character who takes on many roles. Her room, her ‘home’, is an extension of herself and her foremothers. She shares a history with women who have been defined by domestic roles. She is a daughter as well as a mother, containing references to my mother, my grandmother, and myself. She represents a possibility that speaks to how gender is constructed.

For the exhibition room, I used wall trim, cream wall paint, wood flooring, and antique furniture in order to mimic the living room in my childhood home, a 120 year-old townhouse in Virginia (Figures 1-4). The sculptures are displayed on the wall (in a cabinet and in a hung frame), and on furniture (a vanity table, and pedestal tables of varying shapes and sizes). The incorporation of the sculptures into a domestic setting enhances a sense of familiarity with the objects, that, upon closer inspection, is contrasted with their foreignness, in order to reflect on the ways in which I experience my own femininity as a naturalized construction.



1. *home/body* (Installation Detail)



2. *home/body* (Installation Detail)

The Continuum versus Dualisms

As I created the sculptures in *home/body*, it became more and more evident that they spoke to my experiences as continuous and fluid, and the ways in which the roles that shape my identity overlap. Feminist theory addresses how the world is more accurately and meaningfully organized through series of continuums versus in dualistically opposed categories.

Structuring the world into a series of hierarchical binaries has been condemned as contributing to the oppression of women (and other groups). In her well-known work, “A Cyborg Manifesto”, Donna Haraway cites dualisms as “persistent in Western thinking and Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals — in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task

is to mirror the self.” Binaries include “self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/ made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man” as well as “ideal/material [and] social/natural” (Haraway, Hartsock, 287).

By combining categories of self and not-self, inner and outer, body and object, in my sculptures, I am underscoring my belief in the way my own femininity shifts and is ambiguous.



3. *home/body* (Installation Detail)



4. home/body

Inner/Outer and the Body as Self/Not-Self

Women experience others and themselves along a continuum whose dimensions are evidenced in Adrienne Rich's argument [. . .] that inner and outer are not polar opposites but a continuum.

~Nancy Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint*

In the room stands a wire frame on which there hangs a dress that is lit from within with a warm incandescent light. The dress is in the process of being made, and the objects of its fashioning are not needles or thread, but rather the accoutrements of hairdressing: combs with glinting teeth, a silver brush with a pointed handle, silver hair clips, and old-fashioned hairpins. The dress (*Hair Shirt*), is covered in human hair, brown and curling, and the light glows through tissue paper that looks like flesh. On a table is a pair of handcuffs (*Umbilical*) resembling silver bracelets, but a braided section of my own hair replaces the chain linking the bracelets. Red pumps have been carelessly tossed on the floor: The heel of the shoe has grown in on itself, coming back through its insole, as if to wound the wearer (*Ingrown*). These are all pieces I made to blur the line between what is experience as 'inner' and 'outer', in order to address the experiences I have had of my body as simultaneously self and not-self, as both subject and object.

In "The Feminist Standpoint", Nancy Hartsock points out that women experience the connection between inner and outer differently than men, citing "a series of boundary challenges inherent in the female physiology –challenges which make it impossible to maintain rigid separation from the object world. Menstruation, coitus, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation – all represent challenges to bodily boundaries" (294). Rosemarie Tong elaborates: "Through their uniquely female bodily experiences—their monthly menses, the demanding symbiosis of pregnancy, the pain of childbirth, and the pleasure of breast-feeding their infants—women

supposedly come to know, in a way men cannot, that human beings are one with nature” (252).

At the same time we experience a deeper connection between our bodies and the world around us, women have been taught to view their bodies as a kind of alien commodity, an asset or object to be displayed, traded, upgraded, and manipulated, subdued into behaving, often for a male audience. Iris Marion Young, in her book, *Throwing Like a Girl*, suggests that inhibited intentionality characteristic of female embodiment derives from the fact that women often experience their bodies as “things/objects, to be looked at and acted upon” (39).

In addition to being judged by their appearance moreso than men, women have also been reduced to being seen only in terms of their bodies more often than men. Elizabeth Grosz, of *Toward a Corporeal Feminism* writes that, historically, “women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men” (14). In a society that values the power of the mind over the body, Grosz is insinuating that women are subject to being treated as lesser beings. Kathleen Lennon, author of “Feminist Perspectives on the Body”, states that a woman, unlike a man, “is regarded as enmeshed in her bodily existence in a way that makes attainment of rationality questionable”.

What is interesting is that in defining women *in terms of* their bodies, society has alienated women themselves from their own bodies, making it nearly impossible for us to feel connected to them in a way that is not fraught with anxiety.

Hair Shirt, *Umbilical*, and *Ingrown* address these contradictory themes of over-connectedness (reduction to being merely a body) and alienation, which are both the result of the objectification of women in society.

Hair Shirt is about the twin sides of experiencing the body as self and not-self through practices related to gendered role-play, including cosmetic routines, body modification, and dress (Figure 5). As Susan Bordo observes in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the*

Body, “our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the prevailing historical forms of [. . .] masculinity and femininity” (91). The classic A-line dress, constructed of hair and sewing patterns, is about the harming and healing aspects of bodily manipulation: the character is cutting, piercing, and sewing together not just her body, but her idea of herself.



5. *Hair Shirt*

Ingrown also addresses bodily manipulation and gender performativity, specifically speaking to the discomfort and the pleasure experienced as a result of engaging in rules surrounding gendered performance (Figures 6-7). I created these high heels, turned in on themselves, to be both grotesque and beautiful. While they speak of injury and horror, the red patent leather is shiny and luscious, and the curve of the ingrown heel is sinuous and fluid; they attract as well as repulse. The heels address elements of a specifically feminine “biopower”, Michel Foucault’s term for the domination and control of physical bodies within society. As Kathleen Lennon, in “Feminist Perspectives on the Body”, explains, biopower is not one-sided, involving elements of both societal constraint and participatory willingness to engage in the constraints:

[Foucault’s] accounts stress the way in which women actively discipline their own bodies not only to avoid social punishments, but also to derive certain kinds of pleasure. Power works, here, not through physical coercion, but through individuals policing their own bodies into compliance with social norms....such modifications are a consequence of such bodies carrying social meanings, signaling within specific contexts, sexual desirability, or availability, or respectability, or participation in social groupings.



6. *Ingrown*



7. *Ingrown*

Umbilical plays with the idea of biopower as it relates to women, revealing the hidden mechanisms of gender construction that are enacted through rituals related to hair (Figure 8). When I initially began to read the writings of feminist thinkers, I became interested in the practices we incorporate into our daily routines, almost without thinking about them, that allow us to perform our gender. Linda Alcoff, in her essay, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism” writes “Gender consciousness produces habitual bodily mannerisms that feel natural and become unconscious after long use” (Hartsock, 108). Long shiny locks act as a symbol of women’s status as decoration as one indication of the amount of time we spend on our appearance, as well as an adornment that gets in the way of physical activity: In an effort to experience what it was like to deconstruct this gendered bodily mannerism, I decided to shave my head. I created *Umbilical* to speak to my mixed feelings about being a woman without hair this past summer.

In many ways, I felt confident, stylish, and liberated when I had no hair. I also felt exposed. My long hair was a signature of my femininity, one way of conforming to what society expects of a heterosexual female interested in attracting men. People became suddenly awkward. Several times, I caught middle-aged women looking at me with open disgust; younger women either stared surreptitiously, or praised me for my bravery. Once, a passenger in a car threw a drink at me, while screaming “fucking dyke!” This comment was more than a shocking reminder of gay hatred: The passenger seemed to be showing me that I had ‘othered’ myself in the eyes of society by appearing too male, and therefore deserved punishment. His apparent hatred for homosexuals seemed to grow from a fear of any kind of transgression of his understanding of gender codes. By calling me a “dyke” he meant to chastise me for not being feminine enough.

The enhanced scrutiny resulting from not performing my gender properly (or performing it in unexpected ways) led to an unforeseen side effect: I found myself playing up my femininity with makeup, which I rarely wore before, and carefully selected jewelry of gold and silver to prove that I still wanted to be seen as attractive and girlish.

Umbilical symbolizes my tie to my hair, which felt like something soothing, something I was missing, an absent part of who I considered myself to be. The steel hand cuffs are contrasted with a hair chain that is soft but surprisingly strong. *Umbilical* represents my mixed feelings about my hair as something that bound me to my body and to my own sense of femininity, as well as to ‘gender rules’ which have both imprisoned me and brought me the pleasure of adhering to expectation.



8. *Umbilical*

The Mother and Pain/Love

3.

*What is this mask of skin we wear,
what is this dress of flesh,
this coat of few colors and little hair?*

*This coat has been handed down, an heirloom
this coat of black hair and ample flesh,
this coat of pale slightly ruddy skin.*

[. . .]

*I became willful, private as a cat.
You never knew what alleys I had wandered.
You called me bad and I posed like a gutter
queen in a dress sewn of knives.*

*All I feared was being stuck in a box
with a lid.*

~ Marge Piercy, *"My Mother's Body"*

*In a child's eyes, a mother is a goddess. She can be glorious or terrible, benevolent or filled with
wrath, but she commands love either way. I am convinced that this is the greatest power in the
universe.*

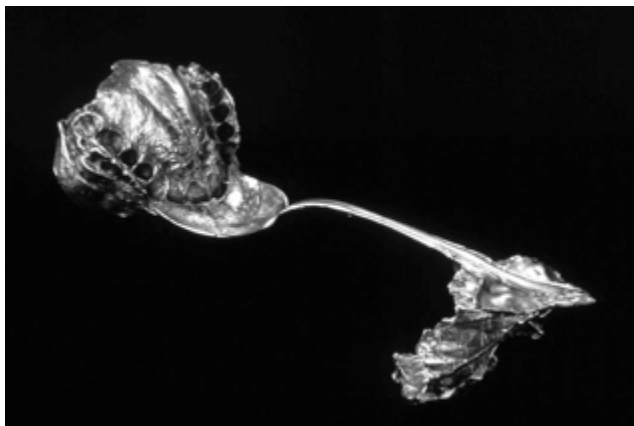
~N.K. Jemisin, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*

The influence of a mother in the lives of her children is beyond calculation.

~ James Faust

Many artists have dealt with the theme of the mother in their work. My favorite pieces are those by Janine Antoni and Louise Bourgeois.

Antoni's piece, *Umbilical*, is a silver baby spoon that incorporates a casting of the inside of her mouth (where the spoon should be) and a casting of her mother's hand where the handle ends (Figure 9). In *One/Another*, Antoni's daughter holds a spoon to her mother's navel in a spontaneous gesture, as if to feed her in the same way she was fed in the womb (Figure 10). Antoni's use of bodily references in her sculpture makes it unclear where the self (mother or child) begins and the not-self (child or mother) ends. By capturing the physical gesture of feeding, *Umbilical* and *One/Another* embody the emotional and psychological intimacy between mother and child.



9. *Umbilical* (Janine Antoni, 2000)



10. *One/Another* (Janine Antoni, 2008)

Louise Bourgeois, who has inspired much of Antoni's work, said of her sculptures, "My works are portraits of a relationship, and the most important one was my mother" (Cooke, Dreishspoon). In the second half of the 1990's, Bourgeois created *Maman* (mother), a series of black steel spiders, towering several stories tall in cities around the world (Figure 11).

Bourgeois created *Maman* to bear witness to her mother's strengths, writing, "why the spider? Because my best friend was my mother and she was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat, and useful as a spider" ("Louise Bourgeois").

Despite her description of *Maman* as a tribute, the sculptures are decidedly dark, the colossal twisting steel legs evocative of Gothic architecture. When I look at her work, I think of the relationship Bourgeois had with her mother, who was trapped in a domestic space where her father was engaged in an ongoing affair with Bourgeois' nanny, a fact which Bourgeois detested. Perhaps the mother figure for Louise is one who has been metaphorically murdered, echoing the notion posited by French feminist philosopher Lucy Irigaray that the formation of Western culture and social formations did not lay in parricide (as Freud put forth), but in matricide. Suppressed by patriarchy, Irigaray wrote that the mother figure 'remains in the shadows of our culture' (155).

By taking the spider from the web, Bourgeois is removing the mother from the shadows: *Maman* implies that the influence of the mother extends beyond the home. By situating *Maman* in city centers, the city becomes the mother's web, which she has helped to shape. For me, the installation functions as both a warning about the effects of oppressing women, and a reminder that mothers are powerful figures to be reckoned with.



11. *Maman* (Louise Bourgeois, 1999)

I see the mother figure as embodying elements that are both light, based on nourishment and comfort, and dark, based on threatening a sense of self. The mother, who births a child and who may also feed it with her own body during breastfeeding, is the ultimate symbol of the continuum between me/not-me, body and world, interior and exterior. More importantly to me, though, the mother-daughter bond is a private and unique relationship, fraught with pain and love. I created *Cradle*, *Heirloom*, *She/I/You/Me* and *Communion* to explore the theme of motherhood, both as an abstract and personal relation.

My own relationship with my mother is one of the closest bonds I will ever know, and one of the most comforting, as well as one of the most painful. I believe my mother might say the same of her relationship with me. I cannot help but associate my depression with my memories of my mother, whether accurate or not, as the changes in my body and appearance coincided with a period rife with turmoil in our relationship. Our words during arguments were like weapons, carrying a violence that wounded me into my adult years. Her judgments felt permanent and intractable, though I do not think she meant them to be. In many ways, mending my relationship with my mother has been like stitching back together my own body.

Mothers and daughters are regarded as being more ‘enmeshed’ than their male-female pairing counterparts, because they share genetics, gender roles, and sex characteristics. Daughters look to mothers as examples of how to be adult women and mothers see themselves in their daughters, a mirroring tendency that makes processes of separation fraught with conditions of ambivalence, co-dependence, and dramatic disagreement (Acker, Apter). Both *Heirloom* and *Cradle* attest to the mother as a protective force and a presence that threatens to overwhelm.

Cradle is an antique wicker bassinet, set up waist high on rocking chair legs, with an interior cloth of pastel peach-pink. The mattress and bumpers are pierced with rows of

more than 12,000 acupuncture needles (Figures 12-13). I created the piece to express how I feel about my mother, and about my depression. I chose the two-inch needles for their fineness, which allowed them to resemble hair or fur. The needle-bed and flesh-tone fabric work together to create an impression of the body, a kind of womb, that is both soft and threatening. Only later, as I worked with them, piercing the fabric in methodical rows, did their references to both pain and healing emerge. I found this a fitting metaphor for the piece as a whole, since my relationship to my mother has been both soothing and painful.

Lisa See, author of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, writes “In our country we call this type of mother love *teng-ai*. My son has told me that in men's writing it is composed of two characters. The first means pain; the second means love. That is a mother's love” (39). Debra Ginsburg echoes this sentiment, writing that “the emotions, whether they were joy, sorrow, love or pride, were so deep and sharp that in the end they left you raw, exposed and yes, in pain” (Quotes About Motherhood). One of the symptoms of my darkness, which involves abuse to the self, is inertia, or stasis, a kind of harming behavior that involves swaddling oneself in bed. This behavior feels very soothing, almost womb-like, but covers up an insidious lack of action that saps one of vitality. It is pain, masquerading as comfort.



12. Cradle



13. *Cradle* (Detail)

Like *Cradle*, *Heirloom* addresses themes of co-dependence and individuation that define the relationship between my mother and I (Figure 14). The teacups are modeled after my grandmother's china, which she gave to my mother as a part of her dowry. For formal gatherings, my mother set out the delicate gold-rimmed china in complex configurations that I found beautiful as a child. The precious collection represents to me a set of abilities and duties my mother inherited from my grandmother, who was also an accomplished cook and entertainer.

Heirloom serves as a metaphor for the bond between mother and daughter that is laden with expectation. The intertwined cups and fused plate symbolize the relationship I share with my

mother, which is precious, comforting, fragile, and binding. The cups cannot be freed from each other without being shattered in the process: like my mother and I, the wholeness of the cups depends on their connection.



14. *Heirloom*

She/I/You/Me is also about overlapping identities of women in my family (Figures 15-16). Set in an antique ornate gold gesso frame, *She/I/You/Me* first appears to be a family photograph but spending time with the sculpture reveals it as a moving image. For the piece, I used three photographs; of my grandmother when she was in her thirties, and of my mother and I fashioned after my grandmother's image. A software program transforms the features of one portrait into another. Over time, slowly, and nearly indecipherably, my mother becomes me and I become my grandmother, who then becomes my mother, and so on, in different orders.

This piece is about an inherited sense of self, a part of my identity that was constructed during my childhood as one of the 'Valentine' women. My grandmother and I were very close when I was a child. I remember how strong I thought she was: She raised my mother and aunt single handedly after my grandfather died unexpectedly of cancer, taking on two jobs to pay for their schooling, investing wisely in property, and never remarrying. As a child, I loved hearing

stories about my mother from my grandmother and vice versa. I felt honored to be a Valentine, since my mother and grandmother were such strong, opinionated and capable women.

When I was in the fifth grade, my grandmother developed Alzheimer's and another side to the relationship between her and my mother developed. As she lost her memory, she existed in an in-between space, neither there nor not-there, so my mother and I could not either let her go or hold onto her. She was both present and not present. This video is a testament to how much of myself has been informed by the presence and absence of my mother and my grandmother in my life. Our shared stories, relationships and histories often make me feel as if we are three incarnations of one continuing story about Valentine women.



15. *She/I/You/Me*



16. *She/I/You/Me* (Video Stills)

Communion addresses motherhood as a more abstract concept, paying homage to the intimate physical bond between a mother and her child, enacted through pregnancy and breastfeeding (Figure 17).

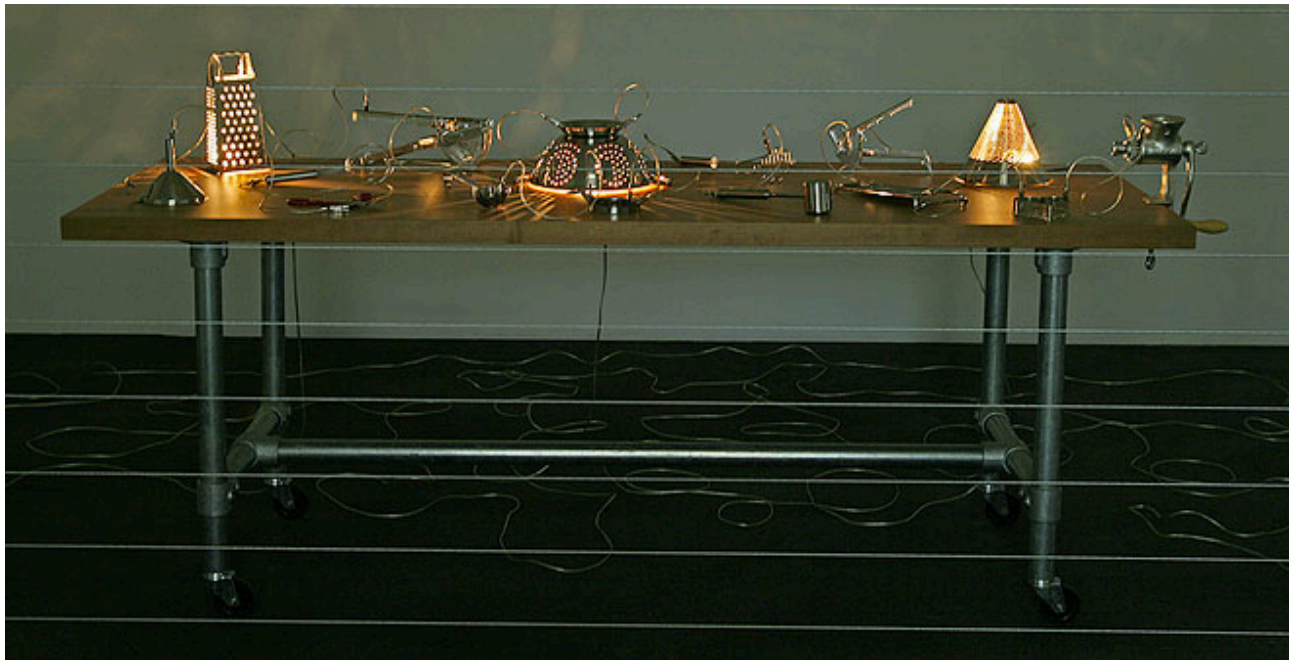
Mary Daly, in *Prelude to the First Passage*, noted “Western society is still possessed overtly and subliminally by Christian symbolism, and this State of Possession has extended its influence over most of the planet. Its ultimate symbol of processions is the all male trinity itself. Of obvious significance here is the fact that this is an image of the procession of a divine son from a divine father (no mother or daughter involved)” (82). In response to Daly's writing, and my memories of the awe inspired by church communions, I created *Communion* to question the religious metaphor for feeding the body with the body that is associated with a male divinity in Christianity. By embodying the physical connection between mother and child present during breastfeeding, *Communion* reclaims the miracle of ‘feeding the body with the body’ for women and mothers, to whom it naturally belongs. I chose to represent the cup as an item in the home to portray breastfeeding as an intimate act between mother and child that often occurs in private.



17. *Communion*

The Double Bind and Tools of Masculinity/Femininity

Many women have worked with items of domestic industry in addressing femininity. In *Home*, Mona Hatoum electrifies metal kitchen instruments so that they become a body, crackling with a pulse (Figure 18). The undercurrents of powerful emotion within the home become palpable. Hatoum has said that this piece was inspired by the violence she associates with her displacement from home (exiled from Palestine as a child, and again from Lebanon as an adult) and that the connections to the kitchen also relate to women's domestic roles (Ohlin). The electric kitchen utensils also "expresses a sense of claustrophobia, even deep rage, experienced by women alone" (Ohlin). Meret Oppenheim's *My Nursemaid* is a mixture of humor, sensuality and provocation, wherein a woman's shoes are dressed with paper frills or toques as a chicken would be for roasting and presentation at the dinner table (Figure 19). Thus, the roles of women as sex object and domestic caretaker are confounded. I continue to be inspired by the ways that both artists use domestic objects to create powerful but subtle commentaries on the relationship with women to domesticity.



18. *Home* (Mona Hatoum, 1999)

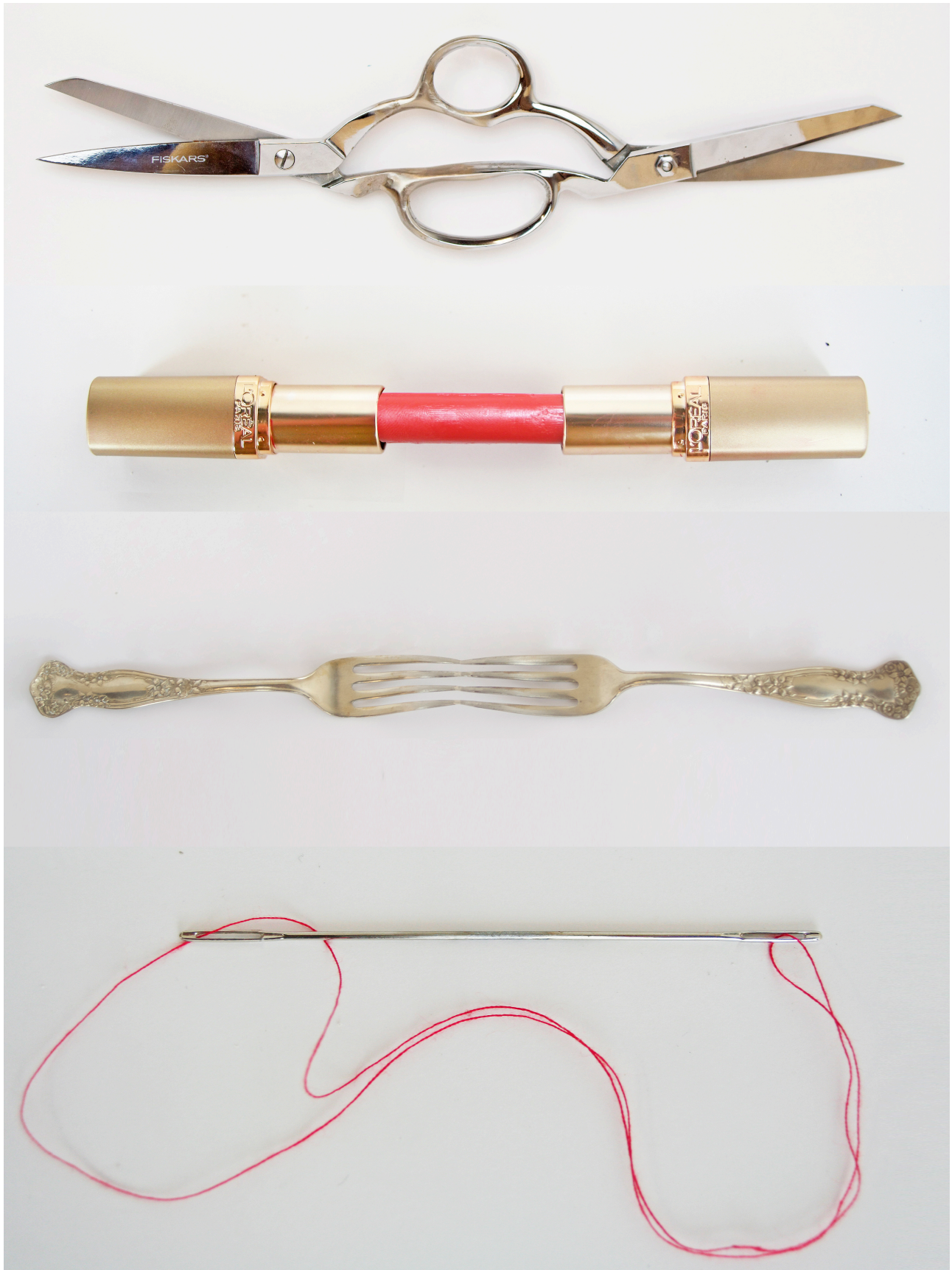


19. *My Nursemaid* (Meret Oppenheim, 1936)

Double Bind, *Tools*, *Mop*, and *Weave* are pieces where I modified objects that symbolize gendered role play through their domestic and cosmetic utility, in order to reveal how the association of women with the home continues to affect contemporary perceptions of the feminine gender construct.

Double Bind is a series of objects, combined in pairs, that speak to the double bind theory in feminism, which articulates how women, in their attempts to define themselves, still struggle to escape essentialist, societally constructed notions of what a woman is or should be (Figure 20). Linda Alcoff, in *Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism*, states that part of the difficulty of defining feminism is its emphasis on the ‘feminine’, “a concept that we must deconstruct and de-essentialize of all its aspects” (406). The objects in *Double Bind* (which reference cosmetic

routines, domestic activity, and traditional women's crafts) become either dangerous or useless when combined in doubles. The fused objects mirror a sense of futility in attempting to escape feminine tropes when using a vocabulary (of words, actions and ideas) that has been defined within a patriarchal society.



20. Double Bind

When she Audre Lorde wrote “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”, she was specifically speaking to the fact that a feminist movement will not overcome the structures of exclusion and oppression of patriarchy, if that movement reenacts oppression and exclusion by ignoring its third world, lesbian, and women of color constituency (110).

When I designed *Tools*, I was thinking about how the inability of deconstructing the master’s house with the master’s tools also could apply to the efforts to feminize a patriarchal vocabulary of success and power (Figures 21-22).

Using exaggerated and essentialist historical tropes of male and female (action or violence versus passivity and decoration), the ‘feminized’ tools of a ‘masculine’ society don’t work: they are awkward as objects of display and would shatter if used as tools. *Tools* reveals gender binaries to be awkward and potentially useless in attempting to enact a real discussion about liberation from oppression for people of any gender identity.



21. *Tools*



22. *Tools* (Detail)

Mop and *Weave*, pieces that use my hair and symbols of domestic industry, challenge bodily boundaries, blurring the line between the psychological space of gendered role-play and the physical space of the body (Figures 23-24). *Mop* and *Weave* address my belief that anyone becomes or begins to identify intimately with the tasks that take up their day, and that these identities are passed on from one generation to the next. Generations of engaging in domestic activity (which was largely all that was presented as being available to women in some periods)

continue to influence the fabric of how women relate to their sense of self through their sense of a shared women's history.

The relationship of the body to domesticity is a layered and historical connection. Hartsock, in discussing how Marxist theory can be related to women's labor, notes that in a period when "unlike men, [. . .] women's lives [were] institutionally defined by their production of use-values in the home", "women and workers inhabit[ed] a world in which . . . the unification of mind and body [was] inherent in the activities performed" (290). She therefore notes that women's labor in the home was seen as physical labor, which was denigrated in capitalist societies, enabling this kind of work to define women as second-class citizens in a way that is related to their bodies. Hartsock noted that women were faced with "dualisms that give higher value or status to that which has historically been identified as 'mind', 'reason', and 'male' than to that which has historically been identified as 'body', 'emotion', and 'female'" (298). Embodiment, enacted through domestic work, became intimately associated with the female gender construct.

The connection of women with their historical roles as caretakers continues to play out today. Author Gina Ford describes how mothers and their colleagues judge each other on how they handle responsibilities within the home, a judgment she notes men are not subjected to as often or as harshly. In the double bind she describes in her book *Good Mother-Bad Mother*, published in 2006, mothers who work outside the home are seen as irresponsible, and women who define themselves through their work as stay-at-home mothers are seen as lacking ambition (43-79).

Mop uses human hair to insinuate the binding of women to their historical roles within the home. *Weave* uses the metaphor of the web, which has been associated with female industry from Arachne to Philomela, as a representation of a space that is simultaneously home and trap, relating it to the body (Bloomberg, 5).

I think the bodily home, as well as the domestic space, has the power to be contradictory for women. Our bodies have betrayed us as sites by which our intrinsic value has been (and continues to be) judged. And historically, while the home has been one of the few arenas in which women can exercise power, domestic association or responsibility have acted as barricades to acceptance into political, economic and professional realms outside the home. Tying the body to the home enacts both as spaces fraught with tension that emerges from a burdened sense of expectation.



23. *Mop*



24. Weave

The Object

The themes in *home/body* deal aesthetically and theoretically with the object, as it was conceived of by Julia Kristeva, French feminist and psychoanalyst. According to Kristeva, the object refers to an object that was once a subject but has been cast out of the cultural world, and turned into an object, one that elicits feelings of repulsion or disgust. The object can refer to things like a corpse, which was once a human being, or a person who is rejected by society because they are seen as disturbing cultural norms (Felluga, Kristeva, 1, 3, 7).

The object is represented through its links with identity in *Umbilical*, which speaks to my experiences of feeling outcast or freakish when I relinquished my hair, a gender coded sign of femininity. In her book, *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, C.J. Pascoe dissects the ways that gender performance is related to the object in Judith Butler's seminal work *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. "Object identities" are "unrecognizably and unacceptably gendered selves", and people react to them with revulsion (Pascoe, 14). Pascoe notes that the "constitutive outside" is populated by people who have been "cast out of a socially recognizable gender category" because they are not performing gender according to accepted cultural codes (14). Abjection explains the origins of the verbal assault (fear of social transgression) I endured when my head was shaved, as well as how generally exposed to scrutiny I felt without hair since it was one adornment that bound me to an acceptable performance of gendered identity.

Cradle, Heirloom, Communion and *She/I/You/Me* all touch upon abjection thematically, through a different identity, that of the mother. Kathleen Lennon, in *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, writes that for Kristeva, that object represents "the irruption of the bodily into our lives; an irruption which has its origin in our relations with the maternal body. . . . With our reactions to the object we are reminded of the constructed nature of the self as positioned in the symbolic, and of a corporeal existence, which echoes the original interdependence of our body with the maternal body. The original relation to the maternal body is one in which there is no sense of a separate self". The

mother's body is abject for the child, as it represents something both belonging to and not belonging to the child. *She/I/You/Me* addresses how the identities of my mother, grandmother and I are intertwined, our influences on one another embodied as a physical merging. *Heirloom* and *Communion* also use physical fusion of what are normally distinct objects or body parts to imply the psychological intimacy between my mother and I that began in infancy.

Cradle and *Heirloom* symbolize the abject in my relationship with my mother as Kristeva describes it in "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection": "The abject confronts us . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity . . . It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (13). The intertwined handles and joined plates of *Heirloom* addresses individuation as a complicated process that continues into adulthood, and the needle bed of *Cradle* speaks of injury and protection.

Aesthetically, my work also references the abject and abjection. Items that incorporate hair (*Mop*, *Weave*, *Umbilical*, *Hair Shirt*), that turn back on the body (*Ingrown*, *Cradle*, and the scissors in *Double Bind*), or that reference the interconnectedness of separate beings (*She/I/You/Me*, and *Communion*) employ the abject through a visual embodiment of "a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object or between self and other" (Felluga).

home/body addresses the ways in which women's history of definition and role-play is bound up in women's lived identities today. The women who came before me, which *home/body* alludes to formally using Victorian furniture and wallpaper, and thematically, through objects that symbolize domestic activity and women's craft, are part of a shared history of how femininity is constructed and experienced. *home/body* references the influence of a gendered history on a contemporary feminine construct and, therefore, draws on the abject, in that it exists "in between myself and other" (myself and women in history), is "both me and not me" (Lennon).

Ultimately, the abject, “by presenting us with what is neither clearly self nor other” serves “to remind us of the fragility of those boundaries” (Lennon). References to the abject in the work in *home/body* reveal feminine identity as a changing, ambiguous and delicate construct, one that cannot escape historical roles, the maternal relation, and the colonization of the female body, which women continue to play out as they perform their gender through beauty routines, body modification, and other roles and practices.

Conclusion

Although I do not participate in all of the roles and practices referenced by the objects in the room, I see them as contributing to an overall notion of femininity that I have experienced personally and identified as being deconstructed and examined in feminist theory and art history. The dual aspects of repulsion and attraction, pleasure and pain, familiar and foreign, subject and object, inner and outer, and self and other referenced in *home/body* reveal the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the nature of feminine constructs. Ultimately, *home/body* represents my efforts to come to terms with and study my own relationship with my femininity, as it is enacted in my relationships with my mother and my grandmother, as it is informed by historical and contemporary societal pressures and codes, and as it experienced in ways that are both emotionally positive and fraught with tension.

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