

The Thing[s] She Carries
Shulman Kaitlin

Introduction

Creative work that explores the human body, which has been founded in both theoretical and empirical artistic practices, spans both time and mediums. In the past, my artistic work referenced the significance of the human body through personal exploration. I have used my body as influence and inspiration to create a number of figurative pieces that explore personal identity through self-portraiture and movement studies [Figure 1,2]. While the female body has been featured in most of my artistic works, its historical and cultural significance remained unexplored until now. In particular, my study focuses on the reproductive capabilities of the female body and the corresponding cultural expectations and significance of a woman based on what she does or does not carry with in her uterus.

My Integrative Project is a re-imagining of the 21st century's modern woman's "empty" uterus. In this project, modern women are defined as students in a higher educational setting, in their early twenties who are or have been sexually active. Through a multi-media project, which re-structures and re-images the female "vessel" or uterus within women's bodies. I use imagery, research and collective stories to analyze the female form.

While the contemporary image of the uterus that I am working to create references a universal woman, the process of imagining new images is founded in a very personal exploration that engages processes that have been important to my artistic practice. I am creating new anatomical imagery through relief carving; a process that I both enjoy and consider to be an emotional and personal mark-making tool [Figure 3,4].

Relief carving allows me to create new anatomical images that challenge the historically institutionalized medical diagrams

I have researched in order to determine the significance of women. Instead of only referencing and researching my specific point of view through the exploration of my body's very specific physical capabilities, I researched both historical and contemporary anatomical imagery of female anatomy. My first anatomical sketches of the female body, including gender neutral muscle and bone structure, kidneys, veins and intestine were drawn by hand and crafted using a line quality that I have used in the past as an effective and accurate drafting technique [Figure 5, 6]. I am exploring a universal female condition and reality by introducing the connection between the internal bodily systems that have historically defined cultural readings of the female body. Whereas in past works, I have conceptually looked inside myself for inspiration to create personal works, I now look inward to consider the one thing that connects all women: her anatomy.

I am creating a new image of the female body through redrafting and redesigning her reproductive organs. My artistic working process and conceptual process are similar. In order to create my own anatomical imagery, I studied current medical images of the female body. Subsequently, I am developing my own anatomical aesthetic through a series of drawings and relief prints [Figure 7,8].

Along with new anatomical imagery, I want my work to exist in a new presentation format. The choice to locate anatomical imagery on paper would reference the rigid and highly influential historical implementation of medical and scientific information. Historically, these institutional images of female anatomy have been

influential in determining the societal roles and opinions of women¹. To subvert this historical precedence, I utilize both video and photography to capture the performance of wearing the, newly rendered and contemporary version of female anatomy. Within my project, the female body itself serves as a new context and medium to present new information and new imagery. I turn my relief prints into digital files and subsequently, using an LCD projector, project onto various female bodies, in order to accomplish a new way to view anatomical imagery [Figure 9,10,11].

Research

As a research-oriented thinker and creator, reading and looking at artist's works has been an integral part of creating my thesis project. This year, I took a class called *Global Perspectives to Gender, Health and Reproduction*, and I have been learning about the image-ability of internal body systems and how these medical and scientific models have changed significantly over time. Whereas in Ancient Greece, the female body was considered closely linked and almost identical to the male body, as time went on, the female body was defined and described as a deviation from the male “*norm*”². The anatomy of the female body with its reproductive capacities has informed how women and their bodies are defined in society.

The historical solution to interpreting bodily processes was turning them in to metaphors based on current cultural realities and practices³. One article in particular, written by Emily Martin called *Medical Metaphors: Menstruation & Menopause* discusses the shift in the medical and scientific understanding of menstruation and

¹ Jordanova L.J. “Natural facts: a historical perspective on science and sexuality”. Nature, Culture and Gender. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA. 1980. 54.

² Martin, Emily. “Medical Metaphors of Women’s Bodies: Menstruation and Menopause.” The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction. Beacon Press Books, Boston, MA. 2001. 27.

³ Martin, Emily. 30.

menopause and the subsequent societal perception of women. For example, at the time of the industrial revolution, the body became a model of the “progressive” society. The imagery used to describe the biochemistry of female anatomy was that of a factory⁴. Menopause and Menstruation, for example, were considered degenerative processes. The permanent cessation of a woman’s monthly period was conceptually equivalent to a factory breaking down⁵.

While studying historical medicine and science has informed conceptual considerations that have aided in the creation new female anatomy, various artists’ works have influenced the way I create images and consider the rendering the female body [Figure 12]. The work of German expressionists, including Kathe Kollwitz and Karl Schmidt- Rottluff have been influential in terms of developing a harsh, brooding carving style that I use in my own relief work⁶. Schmidt- Rottluff incorporated this heavy-handed style to illustrate nude women in a way that completely desexualized their bodies and instead turned the focus onto his particular technique [Figure 13, 14]⁷.

Yves Klein’s 1960 performance piece called *Anthropometries* has also been a direct visual influence for my project. The performance consisted of two women covered in paint who “danced” to a live orchestra in front of an audience. The finished piece includes photo documentation of the performance and canvases filled with the imprints of their moving bodies. I take inspiration from pieces of work that can be presented and

⁴ Martin, Emily. 36.

⁵ Martin, Emily. 44.

⁶ "The Widow II." *Käthe Kollwitz: Galerie St. Etienne*. Web. 30 Nov 2009.
<<http://www.gseart.com/artists.asp?ArtistID=67>>

⁷ "Kniende." *germanexpressionism.com: Karl Schmidt- Rottluff*. Web. 30 Nov 2009.
<<http://www.GermanExpressionism.com/>>.

viewed in different forms similarly to Klein's multidimensional exploration [Figure 15, 16]⁸.

I came across 16th and 17th century carved ivory anatomical figures. They were carved with a removable layer that exposed interior anatomy⁹. The female porcelain models were almost always shown to be pregnant and her female anatomy was depicted as an oval shaped hole that either held a porcelain model baby or was completely empty [Figure 17, 18]. In this era, a woman was considered a purely reproductive being and without carrying a child, her body was left void of any fill or function¹⁰.

Although models and anatomical drawings are no longer constructed without sex organs such as the uterus, fallopian tubes and vagina, like the porcelain Italian anatomical models, the ideological presence of a woman's ability and even expectation to reproduce is incredibly relevant. In some cases in today's culture, specifically among groups of women including students, young adults and young professionals, the utilization of sexual organs in order to reproduce is avoided. The "void" in female sexual anatomy, while at one point in history promoted an absence of productivity or life, holds a completely different significance to this subset of women in contemporary culture.

I consider myself a part of this subculture of women who resist and avoid the use of sexual organs; therefore, the "void" and absence of anatomy illustrated in the porcelain Victorian female models, promote possibility, freedom and control instead of a lack of reproduction. While the Victorian notion of the "void" represents a symbol of the cultural perspectives that promoted the purpose of the female body, was centered on her ability to

⁸ "Anthropométries." Yves Klein Archives. Web. 30 Nov 2009.
<http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/works/works1_fr.html.

⁹ Hansen, Julie V and Suzanne Porter, The Physician's Art: Representations of Art and Medicine. Duke University Press, Raleigh-Durham, NC. 2000.

¹⁰ Jordanova L.J. 54.

reproduce, in a contemporary context, the void represents something completely different. Today, for this certain group of women, choosing to not have a baby grants them different opportunities. The significance of not filling the "void" with a baby is for different women.

I have explored the meaning of the "void" on both a personal and interpersonal level. First, I created images based on my own ideas of what I would imagine to fill this unused space in my own body [Figure 19, 20, 21], subsequently, I interviewed women who are part of this specific subculture of young women in order to find out what they imagine fills their "void". My subjects included housemates, classmates and even old friends, all of who are students at a various universities [Figure 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27].

The ideas each woman had about her own body were collected in multiple forms. Each woman drew an image of what they imagined would occupy the space in their "void", some women accompanied their drawing with a piece of writing explaining the ideas behind their images and other women chose to verbally express their ideas directly to me [Figure 28, 29, 30].

The working process that I have established transforms each woman's image to a projected animation, which promotes the continual presence of the different conceptions of the their own body. After collecting each woman's drawing, I transfer the image onto soft linoleum and create a relief carving, essentially reaffirming and solidifying each woman's personal image and concept of her own body that she has shared with me. I then ink and print the carving, photograph the transferred image, animate the image in Adobe Photoshop, an image editing software program and finally project the animation on each female subject's body [Figure 31, 32, 33].

Conclusion

I draw inspiration from female artists who create works that challenge assumptions and associations about the female body, including issues around female sexuality and female gender performance. For example, Tracey Emin, a British multimedia artist has created a number of works in various art forms that express a sexually charged and confrontational point of view regarding her ideas about her body. One of the many neon sculptures that Emin created is called “People like You Need to Fuck People Like Me”, which the sculpture reads in a neon blue script¹¹. Emin directly confronts and explores her own sexuality through her work [Figure 34]. Similarly, I have created an Independent Project that could encourage new considerations of the female through personal exploration.

Another significant aspect of my project is the interpersonal exploration I conducted in order to re-imagine female anatomy. I decided to ultimately present my Independent Project in various spaces in order to cultivate various channels to share my findings. My project will be presented in the Video Performance Studio in the Duderstadt center and also an offsite space in Kerrytown. I hope to facilitate the formation of new community for the subculture of women I have recognized in my project within the preexisting structure of the Art and Design school and the City of Ann Arbor [Figure 35, 36].

I have re-imagined the historical anatomical models and medical images of a woman’s empty uterus. Through a multi-media project, I use imagery, research and

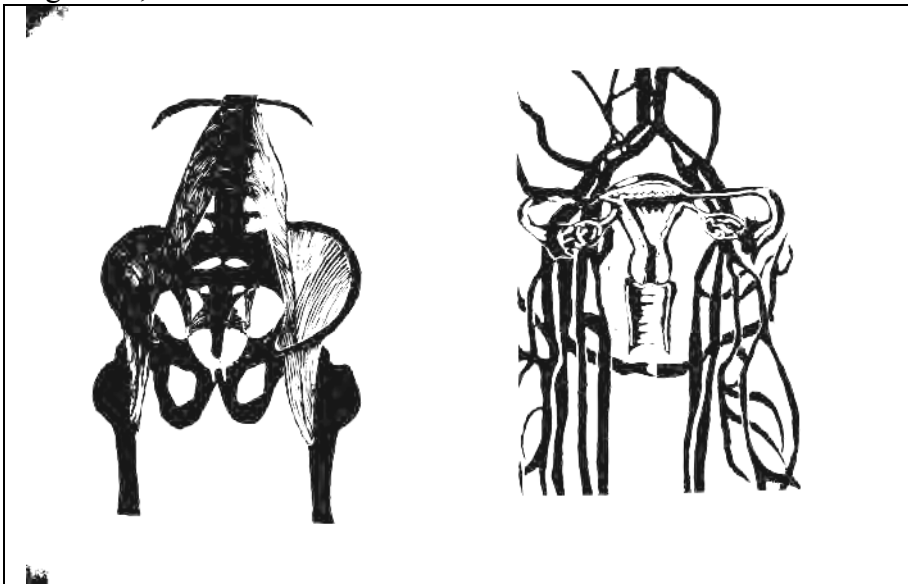
¹¹ "People Like You Need To Fuck People Like Me." *Tracey Emin Selected Works*. Web. 1 Mar 2010. <<http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/#/artists/tracey-emin/>>.

collective stories to analyze the female form and create new images of the female body which re-structures and re-images the female “vessel” or uterus within women’s bodies to reflect the different women’s perceptions of what they carry inside of them. I am part of the sector of modern women that I have identified through my Independent Project who have chosen to not reproduce at this time. My connection to the working process that I have developed over the past year and subject matter of my Independent Project indicates the possibility that I can continue this work and expand the community of women who I have recognized.

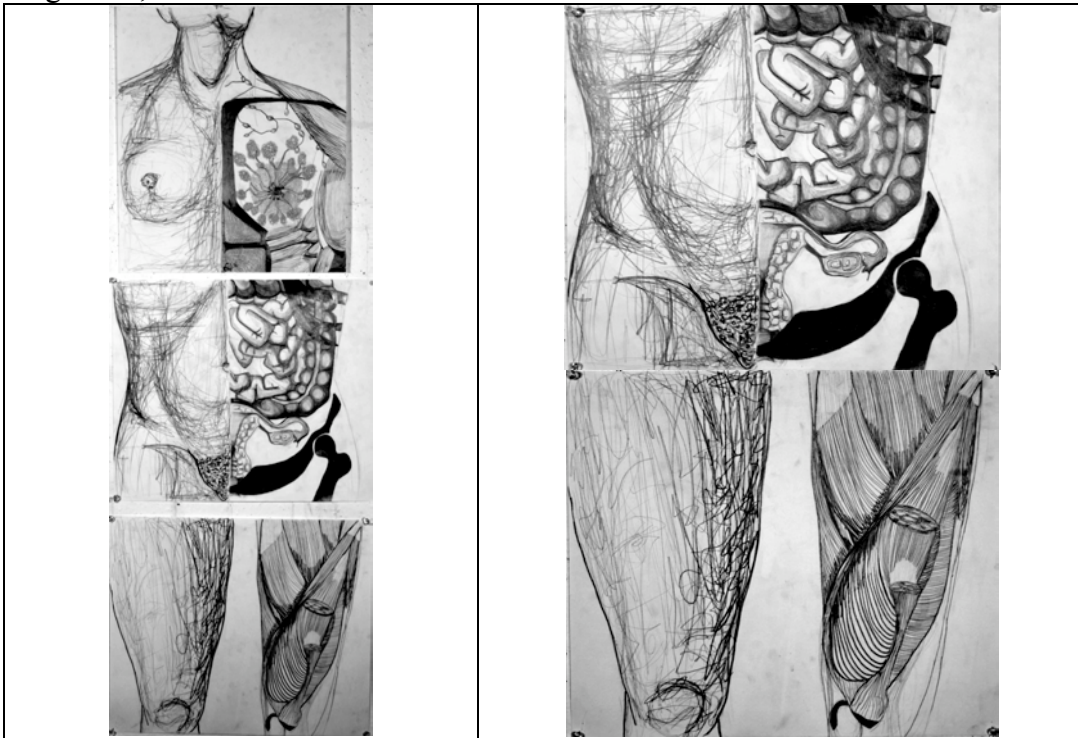
Figure 1,2



Figures 3,4



Figures 5,6



Figures 7,8

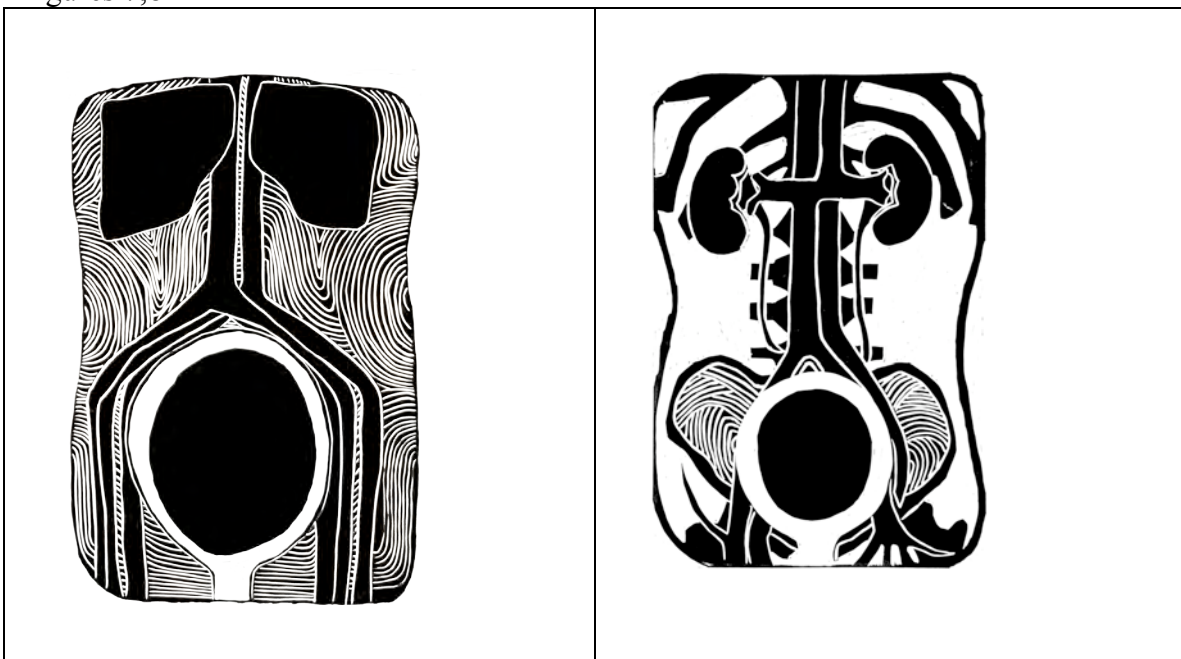


Figure 9,10,11

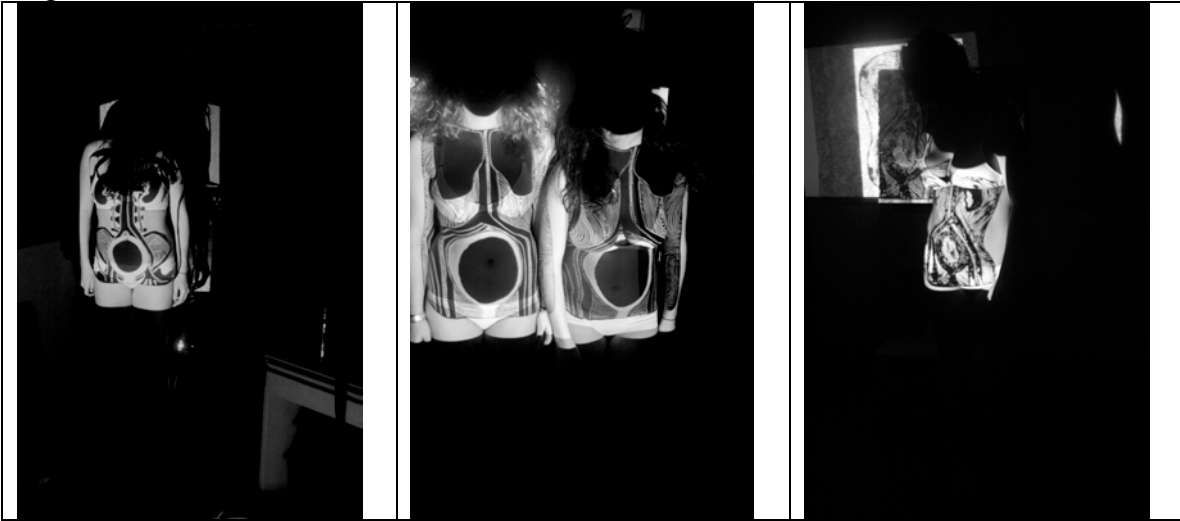


Figure 12

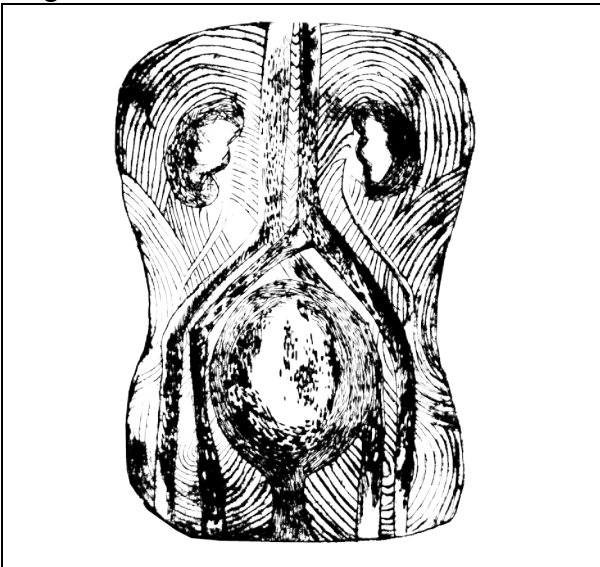


Figure 13,14



Figure 15,16

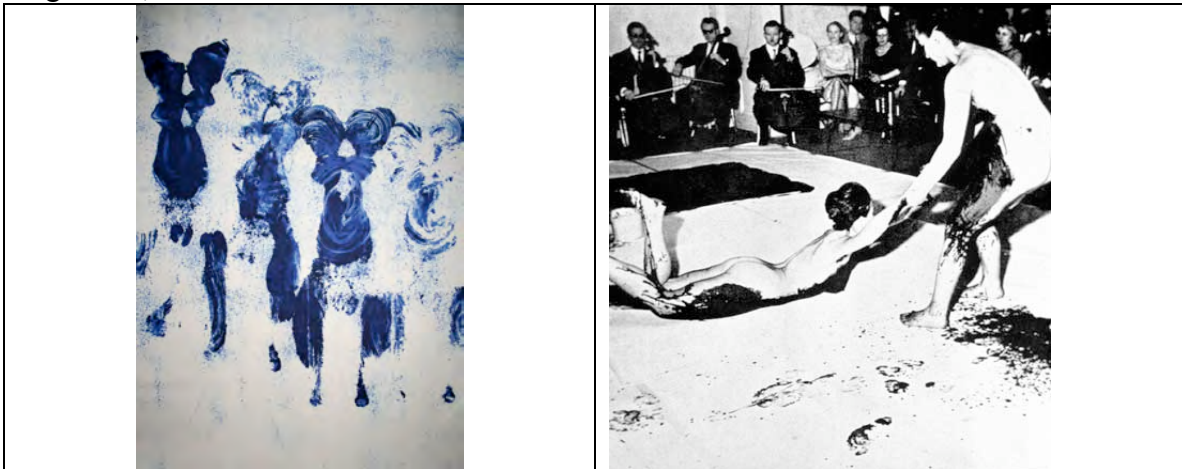


Figure 17,18



Figure 19, 20, 21

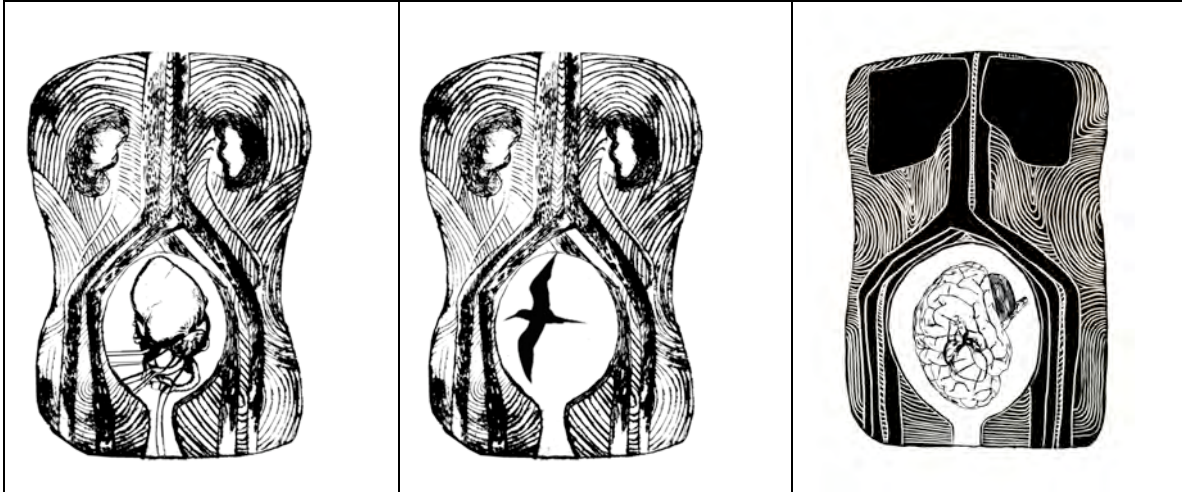


Figure 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27

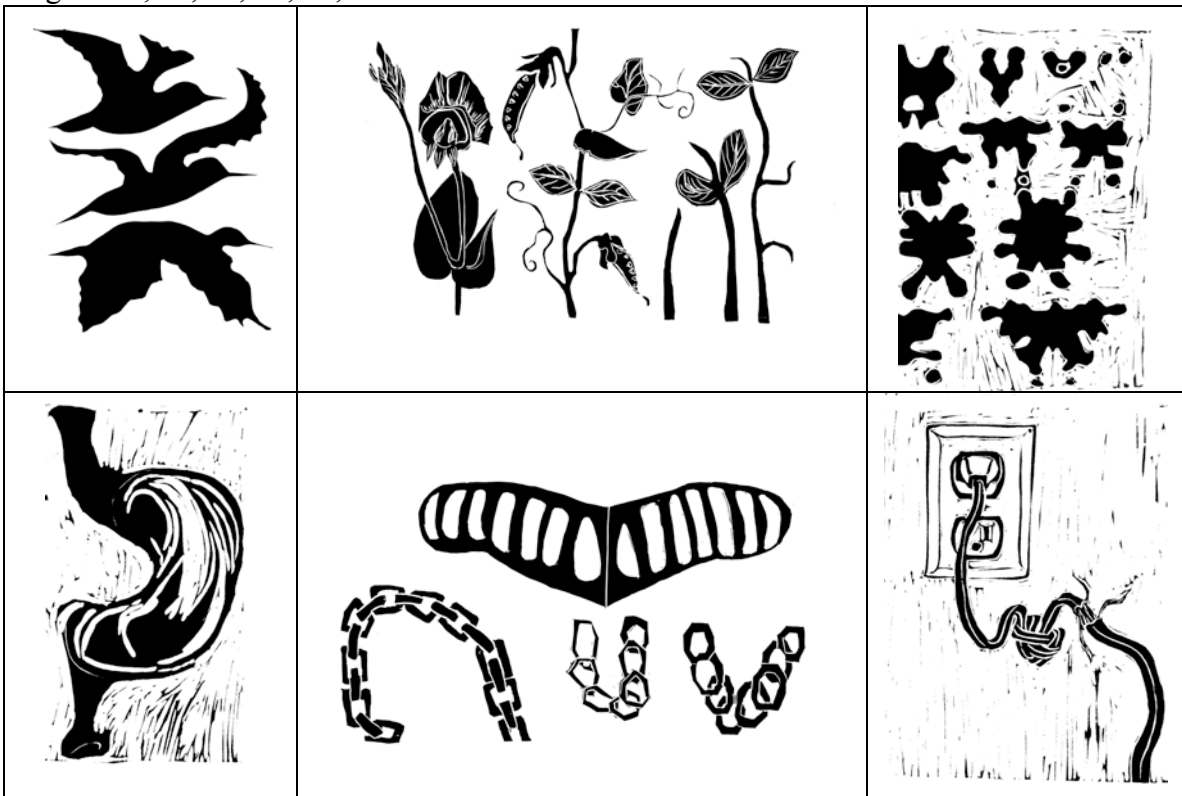


Figure 28, 29, 30

“I don’t know how long it is, or where it’s going, but I’m on it...the road represents not only my movement through life, but also the direction and indirection that I face as a woman everyday in this world...”

-Katy Halasz

“Just as I am in awe of the way in which female reproduction organs function. I am in awe of the differences in individuals. What defines me is the love that I have for other people... What defines the world are the tremendous differences in the thoughts and feelings of each individual.”

-Chelsie Melkvik

“My mother explained herself as follows: A doctor working with peoples’ private parts is like a mechanic working under the hood of a car.”

-Caitlin Dronen

Figure 31, 32, 33

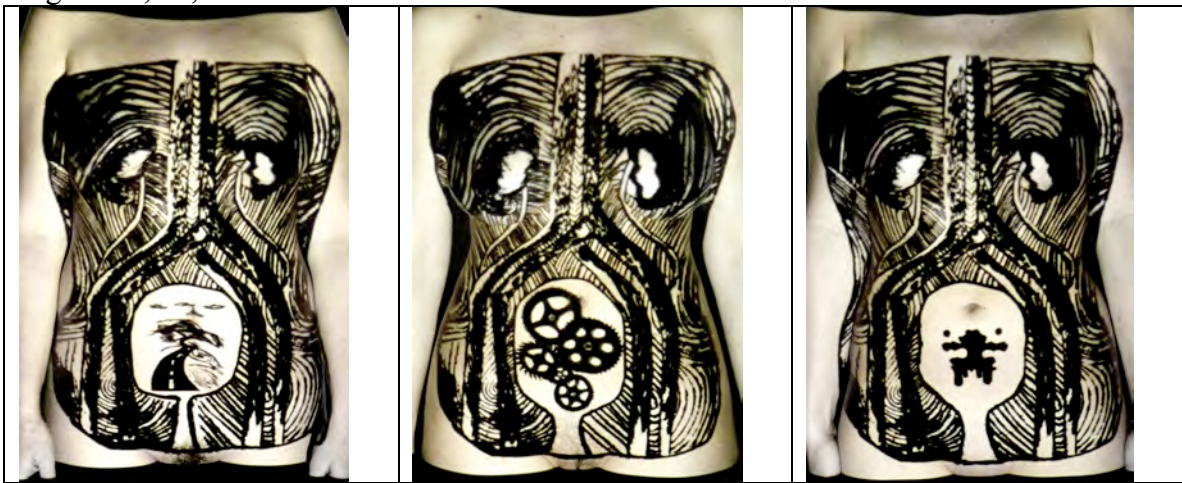


Figure 34



Figure 35, 36



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