THE STRANGE HAIR AND THE PRETTY NIPPLE
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE FEMALE BODY AS HOST, IDOL, AND INSTIGATOR

A Thesis

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I dedicate this Thesis to my amazing Family; my Father Mark, my Mother Erin, my sisters, Nicole & Olivia and my brothers, Luke & David

For your love, support, and unyielding belief in me as a human, I cannot thank you enough. Without your faith in me, I would never have had the courage to become that which I am; an Artist.

Especially my Mother, who in my darkest hours is my light so that I might see,

In deaf moments is song so that I might hear,

When I cannot speak, she is my voice,

When I doubt, she is my hope.

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INTRODUCTION

The arousal and experience of pleasure is enjoyable, desired and actively pursued. But what about pleasure sought or realized through an encounter with the unexpected, the disgusting, or the grotesque? My work is fueled by this question and the many others which arise from it. The lists of what generates pleasure and why are as numerous and vast (albeit unique) as those who seek it. One traditional elicitor of pleasure is beauty, but this notion is problematic because there are innumerable definitions as to what exactly it means; simply put, what is considered beautiful varies greatly between historical periods and different cultures.

Through my research I have found that beauty is often identified as a causation of sensuality, appeal, even comfort; but as beauty is indeed always firmly rooted in the eye of the beholder, I rely on those symptoms of beauty which pan across cultural and historical eras. To examine the appeal of beauty alone through my work would be to alienate and demean it-to isolate it from the very notions which define it, and so I examine its opposite, disgust, in tandem as to provide an all encompassing investigation of the dichotomous, symbiotic relationship they maintain.
The female body is the ultimate host of taboos, sensuality, revulsion; it has the astounding ability to conjure repulsion and desire simultaneously. Disgust and desire maintain a provocative relationship with regards to the female body; the numerous dichotomies which fester within this relationship drive my artistic output. Most relevant to my work is the examination of the male and female reproductive system and psychoanalytical work pertaining to the mental health and state of the female as they pertain to feminist theory and art. I rely on feminist theory and discourse, the work of other female artists wrestling with the complexities of feminism, as well as research on
historical and current modes of biology and psychology. Much of the visual language I develop in my work derives from a synthesis of this research.

I don’t intend for the undulating vessels I create to elicit pure repulsion, but rather to provide the housing. They represent an origin for all that oozes, gushes and seeps. The breaking down of boundaries is explicit in the rendering of these objects. The vessels have been ruptured, torn open in places to reveal their interiority. Each opening is itself an orifice, the interface between inside and outside, and resemble mutated vaginal forms. The exposure of what appears to be mucous membrane, tissue walls and globules tethered to sinew-like sacks deconstruct the ‘skin’, or screen, which is charged with keeping them in place, at bay from the outside world, our world.

This type of visual language begs the questions of what is subject and what is object, what defines ‘us’ from ‘other’ and where precisely the walls of segregation are erected, eroded or in some cases, absent. The summation of my quest is eloquently stated by Carolyn Korsmeyer: “The complexity of aversive emotions bound up with artistic beauty creates a zone where horrid, beautiful, sublime and sublate can be difficult to distinguish. But that is why some beauty is truly terrible.” (Korsmeyer p. 177)
CHAPTER I

SOUP, ANYONE?

To begin an investigation of disgust as it pertains to my work, I must first identify disgust through a multi-cultural lens; both its reception and tolerance (in public and private arenas) are of importance to my work as they directly correlate to the boundaries I occupy and breach in conception and materiality.

William Ian Miller’s term “life soup,” which articulates and merits the label of “disgusting” is a formula for objects which undergo birth, growth, death and then decay into a postmortem “life soup” of other forms of life (especially those life forms which are low and mindless). He ties this cycle to the revolt which tethers itself to mortality:

“What disgusts, startlingly, is the capacity for life, and not just because life implies its correlative death and decay: for it is decay that seems to engender life...Death thus horrifies and disgusts not just because it smells revoltingly bad, but because it is not an end to the process of living but part of a cycle of eternal recurrence. The having lived and the living unite to make up the organic world of generative rot-rank, smelling, and upsetting to the touch. The gooey mud, the scummy pond are life soup, fecundity itself: slimy, slippery, wiggling, teeming animal life generating spontaneously from putrefying vegetation.” (Miller p. 40-41)

The last two stanzas of a poem by Emily Dickinson provide a robust example of the line which is drawn by death, which is in fact also the line of life, albeit of another, lower form:

I willed my keepsakes, signed away
What portion of me I
Could make assignable, and then
There interposed a fly.
With blue uncertain, stumbling buzz
Between the light and me;
And then the windows failed, and then,
I could not see to see.

Written in the spirit of a woman who, in her last moments of life encounters a fly about to descend upon her; we find this poem emblematic of the disheartening realization that with our own expiration the sustenance of other forms of life is provided. (Korsmeyer p. 174)

Food itself is a strong, if not the strongest, elicitor of disgust. The consumption of food which has expired is a difficult, if not nauseating, idea which extinguishes the appetite, for most that is. From the Icelandic delicacy Hákarl to the drink of Chicha in Ecuador to a revered cheese, *cusa marzu* on the Italian island of Sardinia, we find that fermentation (to the point of decomposition) of these foods and many others is seen to play a role in social tradition. For some, the partaking of such foods would induce nausea or vomiting, the latter is in fact an immune response; the serotonin which induces vomiting also mobilizes the immune system to fight pathogens that may have been ingested.

There is a level of unavoidable repulsion at the thought of eating something which has crossed the barrier between slight putrefaction to that of apparent decay. Carolyn Korsmeyer points to still life painting, specifically the gamepiece genre, as an example of the use of rot and decay to symbolize loss, transience and our ultimate mortality as well as its ability to prompt human reactions of fear and disgust, harmoniously within art. (Figure 1.1)
In a contemporary sense, we find artists such as Janine Antoni whose use of food as material in her work becomes the very indicator of the impact of the human body. In her piece *Gnaw*, 1992, (Figure 1.2) Antoni, as the title suggests, gnawed at two 600lb. blocks, one made of chocolate, and the other of lard. The material removed by the mouth of the artist was then transferred to 45 heart-shaped packages for chocolates and 400 lipsticks; in addition to the chewed lard, pigment and beeswax were also used. These items, both the blocks and their subsequent offspring, show the intervention of the artist on the material part of which was partially masticated before being spat out, then shaped into the forms with which they are traditionally associated.
The gnawed blocks, standing as scarred testaments to Antoni’s physical dominance over them have, in themselves, become issues of concern as their slow yet inevitable decomposition (especially that of the lard block) has drawn insects and other undesired life forms from the pits and exterior of the building into the gallery itself.

It is not only the growing mold or even the presence of maggots that make us green in the face, but odor as well. Scent has a profound effect on what we deem edible or not, and our sense of smell is one of the strongest sensory receptors we rely on. However, this has not kept humans from ingesting questionable food stuffs. Game meat has traditionally been hung until it begins to ‘turn,’ when its flavor reaches a full, robust ripening. T. Sarah Peterson, a food historian, notes that in the sixteenth century in order to align their culture with that of classical antiquity, Europeans altered their food habits to reflect those of the ancient Greeks and Romans which consisted of consuming flesh and animal parts usually not eaten (mostly organ meat) and preparing gamy meat very rare. “Fashion setters crunched on ears; blood from meat nearly oozed from the mouth; livers silken with fat melted on the tongue; and the taste of pronouncedly high meat, decomposed to the fine point just this side of maggoty…”(Korsmeyer p. 67)
When food breaches moral codes it breeds an entirely new set of problems and becomes taboo. While the ultimate food taboo is cannibalism, there seems to be one exception; the human placenta. Most female mammals consume the placenta after giving birth, ingesting that which they have just expelled. The placenta contains levels of prostaglandin which stimulates involution of the uterus (a cleansing process), as well as small amounts of oxytocin which eases birth stress and allows the mammary cells to contract and eject milk. A popular and perhaps obvious theory is that the placenta is consumed in the wild to prevent predatory curiosity of newborns. Eating human placenta, traditionally, has been advocated by the Chinese and Vietnamese; boiling the placenta and drinking the broth was believed to improve milk quality, and its consumption (in pill form) is even alleged to alleviate postpartum depression by some Western health-care practitioners.

What prevents most humans from consuming their own afterbirth, aside from the unappetizing thought of eating something which has just traveled through the birth canal, is that not to eat it separates us from animals. Such a separation is a resounding theme in disgust’s role in society. While those who study neurobiology or the evolution of emotions often conclude that disgust is an evolutionary, protective aversion, moral philosophers tend to treat disgust as an educable emotion. No matter its origins, it is widely agreed upon that disgust functions as a defensive device which keeps humans from descending back to a bestial condition. As Rachel Herz describes:

“Our desire to think of ourselves as unique among the rest of the world’s creatures that have a beating heart fuels our repugnance for behaviors that are animal-like—behaviors that break the codes of manners and norms of “civilized” public behavior. To maintain our separation from lowly beasts, we should not be seen, especially in public, behaving like beasts: gobbling down sticks of butter, having sex, grunting, farting, belching, being naked, scratching ourselves…squatting to urinate or defecate wherever the urge compels us. We are disgusted by people who behave like this, because they do not uphold the conventions of civility that we expect and respect, and because by breaking these rules they bring our inherent animal nature to the fore.” (Herz, p. 42)
Art displayed in a public domain is a good avenue through which to expose and pursue such taboo subjects. I seek out examples for the powerful responses they elicit, only to transform the visual language which they possess into powerful displays of isolated occurrences in the female body. (Figure 1.3) I alter richly colored and patterned fabric to resemble a monstrous yet glorious display of magnified clotting; the (female) body’s shedding of endometrial lining, complete with tattered edges reminiscent of dendritic extensions. Undulating pools of gold refer to self-contained collections of cellular activity—which refer to the regenerative process of birth and death. The selection and treatment of materials adds to the opulence of the work which counteracts the rawness of interior fluids; prompting disgust and appeal alike.

If disgust prevents us from diverging into animal behavior, it can also be used as an instrument of criticism, as in the work of Paul McCarthy. His penchant for sex, dildos, excrement,
and the overall ‘inappropriate’, is evident in his large-scale, public displays which subvert everything from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs to Political figures in obscene poses—often ‘caught with their pants down’. Disgusting display can poke at morality, exposes bodily function (both internal and external), and has the unmatched potential to generate intense reactions.

Artists use disgust just as they use humor, satire, history, beauty, desire, repulsion, etc. The work of artists who use the body and its functions often incorporate the categories of disgust elicitors examined by Korsmeyer. They are as follows: (1) contaminated foods; (2) bodily products such as vomit, pus, mucous, sexual fluids, and excrement; (3) related violations of hygiene codes; (4) lower-order animals such as vermin; (5) violations of the bodily envelope such as wounds or evisceration; (6) perverse sexual activities; (7) signs of death and decay; (8) violations of the social-moral code. (Korsmeyer p. 32)

These categories are well developed in artistic practice, as not only seen in the work of artists like McCarthy, but also in Hans Bellmer’s La Poupee series, Judy Fox’s pieces titled Lust, and EV Day’s Tongues and Clams series. I will later examine the work of these artists and how they were influential to my own practice. Each served as an example of how to engage with beauty, desire, repulsion and disgust. My work deals heavily with the concept of disgust as defined by society and as it concerns the female body in producing desire and/or highly intense reactions; among them blooms the grotesque.

In *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, edited by Frances S. Connelly, Kristen A. Hoving in her essay (Chapter Ten) “Convulsive Bodies “examines the grotesque as symptomatic of surrealist photography, but, the grotesque, ever evasive and dynamic not only lies at the core of surrealist thought, but spans the thresholds of many sects of artistic practice. Hoving expands upon its resistance of the ‘discrete’.
“The grotesque exists in opposition to things that have clear identities, set places in the world, comprehensible boundaries. It undoes from, picking away at beauty, rationality, harmony, and shape like fingernails worrying a scab. By means of parasitic prefixes it sucks life from what it is not, becoming misshapen, deformed, unfocused, indistinct, disintegrated, and antithetical.” (Connelly p. 220)

Hoving’s summary presents the grotesque in its unique niche of perverting and subverting the contents, the subject matter with which it engages. The grotesque transgresses limits of the social body, disarticulating it to the point of primitiveness. It is both excessive and transgressive;

“…the body that fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks, defecates, is sick and dying…The grotesque body is a disarticulated body, whose internal chaos threatens to externalize itself violently in the form of contagious symbolic order.” (Pacteau p. 128)

Francette Pacteau continues, noting that the grotesque body partakes of the abject in that it threatens our subjectivities by means of pollution and infection. I embrace the grotesque as essential to my work because it nibbles at the edges of our constructions, eager to reduce them to slimy rubble, much to our horror, its agenda is precisely to deconstruct and disunify, to tear, eat away at and dissolve that which we tend to think of as stationary, rooted in certainty, that which has not been challenged.
My work focuses on the dichotomy of the female body; it is a generator of disgust while also holding the esteemed position as being a thing, if not the thing, of beauty. My work navigates between strange hairs, menstrual blood, bodily fluids and the skin. The idea of skin, this epidermal coating which keeps innards in and supports all that is celebrated about the female body out and up, is the heart of my work or, rather, the heart of why exposure and investigation of it is.

Michel Chaouli describes the mental situation the skin maintains: “In our imagination, a skin seamlessly coats our entire head, our face, eyes, mouth, nose, ears. This image does not allow for openings, for were it to do so it would have to account for where they led. And that is literally unthinkable.” (Connelly p. 59) Chaouli’s account of skin, I would like to argue, can be stretched to the lower regions of the body as well. It is not merely burps and earwax which we fear, but the fluids which can contaminate and pollute, which elicit the greatest unease. The skin or screen, which implies boundaries, is a protective barrier (whether it is mentally or physically manifested) which separates us from it; it being anything which has the potential to infect, harm, or desecrate our bodies in any way.

Skin is dangerous because it is inundated with cultural, ethical, moral and social meaning. It can prompt desire, both in its exposure and lack thereof. It has been used to determine race, even class, but for my investigation I utilize skin for what it is biologically: a barrier. But, as skin cannot escape from what it is culturally, I use the words of Miller to describe both the beauty and repulsion of it before moving forward:

“Skin, especially in young women, was held to be the chief contributor to beauty, and its exposure always evoked the erotic and the sensual…its fragile and transient attractiveness made it a locus of the worst forms of the disgusting. There is nothing quite like skin gone
bad; it is in fact the marrings of skin which make up much of the substance of the ugly and monstrous.” (Miller p. 52)

FIGURE 2.1 Janine Antoni, **Saddle**, 2000. Full Rawhide (Cow)

*Saddle* (Figure 2.1) by Janine Antoni presents the viewer with the absence of two bodies; the artist’s and the cow’s. We are left with the hollow shell of what was once the cow’s hide and can safely assume the artist kept hers. In *Saddle*, the protective nature of skin is questioned as the actual hide of the animal comes to stand alone as a metaphorical shell of emptiness, a host of nothingness. This work deals with death, using the skin of another mammal to signify the inevitable death of the body, as Antoni notes: “It’s a kind of push-pull that you feel, of such a presence of the figure. For me, the shocking thing was to realize that I’ve made a piece about the death of the cow, my own death”


With the breaking of the skin, boundaries are broken down and new ones quickly formulated, especially those of proximity. Each vessel I make echoes this phenomenon. With each slit there is the threat of a new, unorthodox substance which emerges and spills out into the space but also the threat of the void, the unknown interior space. While some pieces are more polite than
others, as a group they carry the imminent threat of exposure. The dry exteriors of the ceramic vessels (I utilize the term ‘vessel’ not as a tribute to the history of the material itself, but rather as its definition of a hollow receptacle for liquids) work as skinned bodies, bodies which are familiar yet indiscernible. Their invented and abstracted forms do not resemble the human body necessarily, but are stand-ins for it. Their matte treatment and fleshy, at times rosy, color signify their connection to the exterior of a body. (Figures 2.2 & 2.3)
In each case, the exposure of the interior substances of the vessels I create works much the same way as popping a zit does: the infectious intrusion on the skin and its removal, or rupture, directly assaults the interior/exterior construct, as Chaouli describes:

“If we understand the subject to be an agency that continuously differentiates itself from objects, an agency that poses itself as autonomous, then the opening of the skin of the

FIGURE 2.3 Katelyn Seprish, *Ingesting the Internal, number 3*, 2013. Ceramic, wax, hair, pigment
object…will inevitably encroach upon the subject as well; the protective covering of the subject…tears and for a moment exposes the subject to the outside. Involuntarily, automatically the body’s openings open, eyes, mouth, even the pores widen for half a heartbeat, until the head turns and the porous subject closes itself off again.” (Connelly p.61)

Chaouli describes the very rupture my work emphasizes but also, and interestingly, the reaction of the viewer to such a presentation. Korsmeyer terms this type of encounter as ‘Aesthetic Encounter’, that in which the disgust response is somatic. (Korsmeyer p. 33)

According to Winfried Menninghaus, the fundamental schema of disgust is based upon proximity that is not wanted; she describes this experience as intrusive and resulting in a forced distance. The common thread through the distancing of oneself is the fear or threat of contamination. This idea is also explored by Kristin A. Hoving as she likens Bunuel’s *Chien Andalou* to the work of Dali and Horst. In *Chien Andalou* just as thin, dark clouds sweep over a full moon, almost dissecting it, a woman’s eye appears to be sliced open and an immense, unnaturally thick glob spills out of the slit; the passive body is violated by a sharp object which penetrates it ruthlessly.

“Something is disgusting when it pops our phantasm of an orderly object world and with it our narcissism: the smooth skin of the world bursts and the inside, whose existence we suspected all along but repressed all the more vehemently, gushes forth.” (Connelly p. 58) When the lines are blurred between subject and object, when subjectivity is skewed, indiscernible, we find this space occupied by the abject.

Julia Kristeva’s work on Abjection is unique from Freud and Lacan in that her analysis of the conscious self is derived from the maternal role, breaking away from phallocentric models. In Kristeva’s chora stage (0-6 months of age) there is no distinction between self and mother; everything is experienced as pleasurable, as there are no boundaries. “It is not then an absence of
health or cleanliness which makes something abject, but that which perturbs an identity, a system, an order; that which does not respect limits, places or rules. It is the in-between, the ambiguous, the mixed.” (Pacteau p. 130)

However, with the acknowledgment of boundaries and the development of a sense of identity, the abjection of the maternal body takes place. Kristeva roots the Abject in the place where the subject and object have disintegrated and with the eruption of the real in our lives which directly relates back to us separating from the maternal body, and more importantly that abjection is necessary for development: “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be.” (Kristeva, 10)

Boundaries and the layers from which they are made up are always being challenged, but in regard to the female body as a host of boundaries and with regard to Kristeva’s definition of the abject, we find that Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro’s Womanhouse (Figure 2.4) is a powerful combination of tearing down screens and redefining boundaries by the addition of layers. In this installation and performance (which was done only by female artists) the very womb of female domesticity (the home) was rethought, exposed in the entirely refreshing light of feminist interpretation; the ultimate goal was to reverse the mythical views of what defined woman’s role in domestic settings.

The kitchen, the room most commonly prescribed to females, is found to be orderly, each saucer, whisk and condiment in its place. There is nothing odd about the room, save for the multitude of disembodied breasts which spackle the walls and ceiling. The dislodging of the female role in the home is achieved with a decorative, humorous and overwhelming display of breasts, they are suctioned to the very constructs which define them, overpopulating the walls breeding
themselves into a frenzy which borderlines hysterical order and overt displeasure, mimicking the tropes which they were challenging.

The abject often provides feelings of unease or uncertainty as the lines between subject and object are unclear. This is indeed one of the goals of my own work: that the viewer be caught in a web so to speak and is unsure if their role is of predator or prey. The invasion of “lower” forms of life, the parasitic for example, are menacing because they have the potential to get on or in us. Never more threatening than when encountered in swarms, which are unpredictable and breed pandemonium, we find “lower” forms of life or anything which we deem as dangerous or hosting hazard to cause disgust; one fly versus one thousand flies, one maggot verses ten thousand maggots, etc. “The swarm is vibrant with life, but it is also overwhelming, disorderly, chaotic and uncontrolled.” (Herz p.103)

Korsmeyer sites a poem by John Donne as exemplary of the deconstruction of the skin as boundary but also as the perverse elevation of “lowly” forms of life. Donne proposes an argument for seduction as two lovers are united by the biting of a flea: (Korsmeyer p. 174)
Mark but this flea, and mark in this,

How little that which thou deny’st me is;

Me is suck’d first, and now sucks thee,

And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.

It is the flea, the worm, the louse, the maggot which becomes the fly that perfectly invites our squeamish attitude towards “lower” forms of life, which have the tendency to become ‘swarms’ whether upon infestation of a host or as the result of consuming something which is decomposing. Both scenarios signify more than death, they signify our vulnerability as living beings in a world which thrives on death. Therefore, the notion of disgust plays an integral role in my work as a foundational study between beauty; that which is feminized, scrutinized and desired, and that which is grotesque, ugly and foul. Building from this foundation, I explore and exploit the homogeny generated by such terms and its role in contemporary aesthetics.
CHAPTER 3

THE APPEAL OF DISGUST; SEDUCTION AND REPULSION IN THE BODY

There is a magnetism to disgust, a perverse and obscure desire which draws the mind and body whilst repulsing it. Kolnai recognizes what he calls an “eroticism of disgust.” For Kolnai, this attraction begs a desire for and union with the object which generates the aversion. While this view is in tandem with psychoanalytic approaches, it differs in that Kolnai does not find the origin in the unconscious but in the configuration of the conscious emotion itself.

“The object of disgust is prone to be connected with something which is concealed, secretive, multilayered, uncanny, sinister, as well as with something which is shameless, obtrusive and alluring…Everything that is disgusting has in it something which is at one and the same time both striking and veiled, as is, say, a poisonous red berry or a garishly made-up face.”

(Korsmeyer p. 122)

Korsmeyer continues the thoughts of Kolnai, pushing the symptoms of the ‘conscious’ emotion, disgust, further into the notion that it possesses a significance; that it maintains an aesthetic power, manifested through allure and repulsion only to provide the realization that the suggestion of something more is obtainable.
Orifices of the female human body are of paramount importance to my work as I have located them as the breaking points of skin barriers, the very receptacles that fill and fuel our most extreme senses of desire and disgust. They act as focal points in my work; the areas in which one form gives way to another. In EV Day’s work *Tongues and Clams* (Figures 3.1-3.4) we find overt sexual content as the shells of clams have been forced open to give way to tongues immersed in saliva—the visceral gunk and muscular hydrostats extends beyond the shell’s limits; seeking to lick at and prod the outside world. Usually hosting a pearl, a symbol for the apex of the female sex, they become tiny vessels of naughty instigation—the prodding, seeking tongue always explicitly linked to sexual activity.

I am particularly interested in the visceral nature of what the orifices produce, from menstrual blood to snot, these are the very elements which seep from and sometimes literally spew forth from our bodies—directly banishing any barriers which existed pre-exposure and pre-rupture. The cystic vessels I create do not in themselves elicit pure disgust, but rather, they provide the housing, the genesis from which the oozing visceral substances emerge, pushing outward beyond form. (Figures 3.5 & 3.6)
FIGURE 3.5 Katelyn Seprish, *Ingesting the Internal, number 7*, 2013. Ceramic, wax, hair, pigment
FIGURE 3.6 Katelyn Seprish, *Ruptured Order*, 2014. Ceramic, wax, hair, pigment

I find the work of Judy Fox (Figures 3.7-3.12) to be a supreme example of provocation expressed via art. Through composition, color, form, and her usage of reproductive organs and highly sexualized body parts, she creates works which showcase the explicitly sexual. In their states of metamorphosis, we find them to allude to psycho-sexual dimensions, to the lack of separateness in sexuality (specifically reproductive and highly sexualized body parts) overall. This is achieved
through the coupling of penile forms with small, plump breasts, vaginal forms and orifices cloaked in fatty layers of labia, pronounced veins and small scrotum-like appendages, all wrapped in fleshy layers, peeking suggestive heads into the world from under their hoods. Her work is unique in that its derivation from the Seven Deadly Sins (apparent in the titles she gives them) differs from historical renderings and creates them as extraordinarily bisexual.

Miller divides orifices into two groups according to their function in the role of disgust: he locates the first as the Freudian trio of erogenous zones (genitals, anus, and mouth), the second includes key organs of the senses (eyes, ears, and nostrils). This division into groups, Miller states, is dependent upon whether the orifices are understood to involve the admission of raw material (liquids and solids) or if they are more susceptible to sounds, smells, visions or spiritual invasion.
(The last, I will argue, could apply to all orifices depending upon one’s religious or cultural affiliations).

Concentrating on the Freudian trio, specifically the genitals and mouth, Miller warns that “both male and female genitals produce highly polluting substances…the organs themselves are also highly contaminatable, although culture puts the female organs more at risk than the male.” (Miller p. 102) Menstrual blood and semen are considered ‘highly polluting’ (urine, according to...
Miller, is not, due to his assessment of its liquidity and clarity) and therefore threatening. According to Miller, semen is a volatile pollutant and its toxicity is dangerous; self-defiling as well as defiling:

“Semen pollutes in a number of ways…It makes the vagina the site of rank fecundity and generation that assimilates it to the constellation of images that makes teeming, moist, swampy ooze a source of disgust. Second, semen has the extraordinary power conferred on it by patriarchy to feminize whatever it comes into contact with. In a sense, semen is more feminine than the vagina itself. Whatever receives it is made woman.” (Miller p. 103)

In The Symptom of Beauty, Pacteau explores the three main categories of the abject (according to Kristeva): Food, Bodily Wastes and Signs of sexual difference. Kristeva identifies menstrual blood as a corporeal sign of sexual difference, as the differentiation between men and mothers:

“Like all other bodily wastes, menstrual blood partakes of a cyclical crossing of the border between inside and outside. In this case, however, the waste is the expelled link between fetus and the mother. Disgust towards menstrual blood is the refusal of that original corporeal link.”
(Pacteau p. 131)

The female body, as has already been established, is a site of fecundancy; a vile vat of visceral, teeming fluids which swirl and threaten to seep out into the world. I agree with Miller, that menstrual blood, like semen, is indeed a most threatening and polluting substance, but I would argue that it is the most feminized bodily fluid; that semen is not more feminizing than menstrual blood merely because it also signifies death; menstrual blood is in itself a proclamation, nature’s declaration of death in that it signifies, solely, lack of life. It is therefore the epicenter of disgust, rejection, failure, and death. Miller’s statement only gains merit due to the nature of the sexual organs from which the substances emerge—the penis being a an object which penetrates, the vagina, a sorrowfully submissive participant in this act; a receptacle.
Considering these substances not for their reproductive capacities, but as substances isolated from regenerative possibilities and embraced as fluids which elicit disgust, I argue that if the female vagina were able to ‘penetrate’ another organism and spread its ‘seed’ it would, I believe, trump semen in its element of recoil, contamination and yes, disgust. In keeping with the discussion of bodily fluids, I turn to *Precious Liquids* by Louise Bourgeois. (Figure 3.13)

![Precious Liquids by Louise Bourgeois](image)

This piece examines liquids, displayed in clear glass bodies (reminiscent of womb-like vessels), suspended in a modular fashion among stern, almost industrial metal structures. Phallic, upright cylindrical beams support the thin arms which reach out and seem to both strangle and support the fragile glass bodies, holding them out and above the barren bed which they straddle in a precarious manner. This work rests within a wooden, circular configuration which is entered into by the viewer in order to experience the work. This invasion of bodies (unclean bodies at that) into
a private chamber, a cavernous interior which directly speaks to and mimics that most interior, most precious space: the womb directly correlates to viewer as penetrator, aggressive invader and trespasser of the space.

This piece represents bodily processes, but more importantly, the artist brings this grouping of objects into a metaphorical sphere in which the physical functions of the body are not necessarily coupled with, but expressive of, the psychological connotations of these processes. Bourgeois states:

“Since the old fears were linked to bodily functions, they resurface via [the body.] For me, sculpture is the body. My body is the sculpture. Glass becomes a metaphor for muscles. It represents the subtlety of emotions, the organic yet unstable nature of the mechanism. When the body’s muscles relax and untense, a liquid is produced. Intense emotions become a material liquid, a precious liquid.” (Pollock p. 75, Old Bones)

My own work maintains connectivity with the Freudian trio as well as Kristeva’s categories of the abject in my own investigation of the female body, its functions and social constructions. I embrace the fluid nature of excretions to further emphasize the correlation between interior and exterior using hair, wax and plaster to create a situation which unabashedly provokes societal norms and advances itself towards the abject, the taboo.

For some, there is nothing more disgusting than hair. Not just human hair, but any hair when found in undesirable amounts or locations (i.e. a clump resting on the bathtub drain, in the mouth or in food). Even as early as four months of age, a child will display expressions of disgust by hair in their mouths. But for others, there is nothing more appealing than hair as Miller describes: “Hair can hardly be divorced from gender and the sexual, and it always has been, in the West at least, charged with erotic significance. Beards meant something about male virility and female head hair was fetishized, more consistently than legs, skin, feet, into one of the chief
markers of the erotic. On top of the head or on the face (for men) it is critical to the judgment of a person’s beauty, especially for women.” (Miller p. 54)

Hair, as a constituent of beauty is vulnerable to desecration but not by any exterior force, for hair grows in the most loathsome areas of the body; coating areas where sweat is most odiferous (the armpits and groin). It does not obey rules of modesty or propriety – public hair being the most offensive of corporeal hairs. When hair garnishes a mole or grows out of ears and noses, or when it creates uni-brows, it can be ugly, but humorous. There is nothing funny about the offensiveness of pubic hair, or hair that sprouts on the nipples (of women). Hairs, especially when found separated from the body or growing in places of the body where it should not, as seen in the case of dermoid cysts, (Figure 3.15) tempts the thresholds of tolerance.
Dermoid cysts are cystic teratomas found in the body that may contain mature skin, hair follicles, and clumps of hair, bone, nails, eyes, cartilage and teeth. The fact that dermoid cysts are almost always benign does little to settle the discomfort and alarm at something growing within the body which contains the constituent parts of a body but is not. They, like the intrusive hairs on the nipples of females (not to mention hairs which sprout in undesirable places and numbers on and in the body) are akin to bodily liquids as representational of functions of the body which we, as a culture, find repulsive yet unavoidable. It is the very disobedient and reckless character of corporeal liquids and hairs which foster our lack of tolerance for them. Not only unrefined and unruly, they are unsettling. They inspire disgust with that which we so highly regard: our own bodies.

FIGURE 3.15 Dermoid Cyst

The breasts of women fall into the category of the most desired of body parts; the breasts are oversexed icons of media; one cannot check out at the grocery store without coming into contact with at least one pair of breasts, spilling out and over their two-dimensional platforms of magazine covers into the isles with candy bars, gum and soda as another commodity. The nipples,
then, not only indicate the naked, fully exposed breast, they are its centerpiece, where color deepens in the areola, leading up to the protruding gathered flesh of the nipple. Nipples not only host milk ducts which support life, they are highly eroticized sex objects. What is to be said of a sex object, in its entire lure and promise of pleasure, when amid the pimply mounds leading up to the object so desired, odd hairs are found? Thick and gnarly, their presence surely a cruel joke of nature—an intrusion, an insult, which must be eradicated as to remove all evidence of its sinful existence.
CHAPTER 4

THE GAPING MAW & THE SEEPING WOUND

“When our inside is understood as soul, the orifices of the body become highly vulnerable areas that risk admitting the defiling from the outside. But when our inside is understood as vile jelly, viscous ooze, or a storage area for excrement the orifices become dangerous as points of emission of polluting matter, dangerous both to us and to others.” (Miller p. 89)

I turn to the main orifice, the gate of womanhood over which much debate, criticism and praise has been given: the vagina. To locate the origin of the most feared of feminine fluids, I explore this organ as examined in psychoanalytic and critical work pertaining to artistic practice. The vagina itself has had many names, some more crass than others, from the gore of hatchet wound to the innocence of rosebud to vajayjay (a currently trendy, humorous nickname). The term ‘Gaping Maw’ for example, leads us to the work of Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party, (Figure 4.1)
where among a triangular table containing 39 place settings which honor important women from history (another 999 women’s names are inscribed in gold on the floor below the table), China-painted porcelain plates with raised central motifs are the focal point of each setting, they open and bloom upward, much like a gaping maw, a mouth frozen in yawn, their delicate folds splayed outward rendering them totally vulnerable and in a sense, ready for consumption of some sort.

The vagina, according to Miller, is as feared as it is desired. *Vagina Dentata* (or toothed vagina) is a term which originated as a precaution against promiscuity and is also used to describe the fantasy by which a man fears his penis will be irretrievably damaged by his lover’s sexual organ. This term may have been the inspiration for Dr. Sonnet Ehlers’ anti-rape condom, “Rape-aXe”, which is in fact, a toothed insert (a female condom), created specifically for women in Africa to dissuade rape.

While my work does not embrace the notion of the vaginal cavity as an overt threat, expressing it as hosting barbs or teeth, it does explore the threatening facets of it as a gateway through which the vilest of substances (menstrual blood, afterbirth, and discharge) are released. My body of work titled *Curious Rupture* (Figure 4.2) embraces the notion of the womb (or innards of mystical, feminine material) as exposed directly through the ruptured, vaginal openings of the vessels. The layers of fleshy, intestine-like material ripple forth, ovum caught among them shimmer in gold coating as the seepage, the very indicator of interference with the body, spews forward, leaking out and announcing itself in the gallery space. At points the seepage forms clumps, at other times it is only suggested, but remains the very facet of the work which prevents it from being polite.
The ‘Wound’ receives similar treatment as a threshold from which the inside is released to the outside as a site of curiosity, intrigue, repulsion and captivation. *Doubting Thomas* (Figure 4.3) by Caravaggio demonstrates the capacity for inspection a wound can instigate. In the painting we find the apostles with torn garments, unkempt hair and lacking all signs of cleanliness and therefore holiness. Jesus gently guides Thomas’ hand to his side; the outstretched, and presumably unclean, index finger prodding into the wound, causing a bit of flesh to lift as he inspects—disbelief evident in the many wrinkles of his brow. Korsmeyer sites *Doubting Thomas* as symptomatic of disgust in accordance with psychoanalytic analyses; that as wounds,
dismemberment, and blood all signal the immanence of decay, the penetration of the protective skin is a standard example of the disgusting: “There is no gore in the painting, but the sight of dirty fingers intruding into the violated flesh quite likely induces a visceral frission and a spasm of disgust in the viewer.” (Korsmeyer p. 176)

Charles Darwin’s research in 1872 is noted as the first significant work of empirical analysis of disgust; his study, concentrated on the expression of feelings in zones, concluded that the wide-open mouth, along with other facial expressions, is a universal indicator of disgust. In contemplating Laocoön and His Sons (Figure 4.4) we find that not only is the sculpture’s mouth open in agony, but his teeth are exposed. Laocoön’s mouth comes to stand against the law of beauty; it comes to signify the oral danger of disgust as is expounded upon by Menninghaus: “Not the mouth, but the uninterrupted surface of the skin, is the dominant speech-organ of the
sculptural body. As soon as the mouth speaks in excess it disturbs—or indeed even destroys—the authentic discourse of plastic form, because it distorts this form’s beautiful curvature and generates an ugly crater.” (Miller p. 62)

The open mouth, including the baring of teeth, spans beyond a symbol of pure revulsion or disgust; it emblematizes *Jouissance*, that is, a sense of enjoyment; *en jouit*. This reaction as described by Menninghaus, in accord with Kristeva and Freud’s development of the term, firmly roots it in the pleasure of one’s own non-being:

“(as ego, as a speaking subject which can relate to and name objects only in the wake of an originary loss of the object)...this *jouissance* blends Freud’s theory of the death drive and of the archaic triumph of the libido over all barriers of disgust and prohibitions of
perversion with Bataille’s *érotisme de excess*, of pleasurable self-abandonment, of death, of decomposition, and –not least- of perversions conceived as the royal road to a transgressive economy of expenditure.” (Miller p. 376)

The gaping mouth can be examined in Miller’s investigation of this facial expression as it pertains to semen, as its appearance is accompanied by death; an organism which loses control and as a result of that bit of death comes the facial expression we have been exploring:

“…facial expressions as undignified as those that revolted Swift when he imagined a woman defecating. Or as Rousseau noted regarding the facial expressions of a man who had been aroused to ejaculation by desire for him: “And I really know of…nothing more revolting than a terrifying face on fire with the most brutal lust…”” (Miller p. 103)

Miller goes on to state that semen, which indicates orgasm, is the most repulsive of all sexually linked substances because it destroys dignity, “…a prelude to the mini-shames attendant on post-ejaculatory tristesse. The appearance of semen signals the evanescence and the end of pleasure.”(Miller p.104) it could therefore be discerned that semen becomes a non-thing as described by Chaouli; irrevocably falling out of the world of objects and in doing so indicates death. Conclusively, the facial expression which indicates disgust is the very same as that which indicates a particular type of pleasure in accordance with jouissance.

The Sublime is one category that Korsmeyer discusses in correlation to the pleasure which can be found in the attraction to an object which also inspires fear or revulsion. She uses Edmund Burke’s Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) to further examine the feeling of ‘delight’ which is one of the three basic feeling states of emotion that Burke defines. With respect to the sublime, Burke offers that it is founded upon intense emotional pain but occupies such a space that it can become pleasurable: “…objects that inspire terror may trigger the elastic delight of the sublime because a state of emotional contentment is simply too close to that intermediate state of indifference that lies between pleasure and pain.” (Korsmeyer p.73)
My work embraces the idea of the wound and orifice as related to vaginal forms to further demonstrate the psychological baggage which accompanies pursuits into the sexually charged and explicit in artistic practice. (Figure 4.5) I rely heavily on theoretical and psychological work pertaining to all bodily surfaces which have been broken (the wound) or are natural gateways (orifices) from exterior to interior as they provide the specific structure I seek to express in my work. It is important that my work acknowledge and encompass the historical issues which generate feelings of disgust and desire alike in accordance with the female body to exemplify their correlation in contemporary terms; current views, taboos and criticisms are entirely relevant and maintain a consistency in today’s society which I find as troubling as I find intriguing.

FIGURE 4.5 Katelyn Seprish, Ingesting the Internal, number 6, 2013. Ceramic, wax, pastel, hair
CHAPTER 5

THE CAPTIVATING, SOMETIMES ELUSIVE AND EVER CUNNING CULPRIT

“Ideed woman is just a sign, a fiction, a confection of meanings and fantasies. Femininity is not the natural condition of female persons. It is a historically variable ideological construction of meaning for a sign W*O*M*A*N, which is produced by and for another social group which derives its identity and imagined superiority by manufacturing the spector of this fantastic Other.” (Pollock p.255, Modernity)

I begin with this passage in particular from Pollock due to its all encompassing and succinct narration of what defines “femininity”. Pollock analyzes Bourgeois society relying on Baudelaire’s Essay Women and Prostitutes, to untangle the sticky web of ideas which comprise the societal view of women (especially where their femininity is concerned).

‘Woman’ is still a highly demanded commodity, or rather, her body is. A house of flesh, scandal and sin, the female body, even if it is not displayed on a dimly lit stage with poles and layers of shimmery sheer cloth falling away from it, has the potential to become that which is desired and wicked; the embodiment of that which challenges and/or breaks social and moral codes of gender. As such, she is subject to scrutiny, always, but never more so than when she challenges or assumes a male position. For instance, a woman who patronizes a dingy strip club (an establishment predominantly for male entertainment) and then talks about it at the office around the coffee bar is much more likely to be judged and scrutinized for her actions than a male coworker would be. Not only does this type of behavior endanger her ‘femininity’, it threatens masculinity. Women are ultimately considered bearers of a hemophiliac-like disorder; the carriers of a recessive gene which threatens to surface and wreak havoc on the male populous.

G-Force by EV Day (Figure 5.1) fully envelopes the female/male dichotomy in the terms which I have stated above; by dipping red thongs into resin so that their form is maintained, Day
stretched them to the limit of their fibers; and then arranged them, suspended from the ceiling in a fighter jet formation. They do appear as though they are flying through space at extreme speeds; a formation of thongs in flight, red hot (save for 3 black) thongs at that. In this piece she directly challenges a predominantly male occupation and she does it forcefully with one of the very tools of female seduction: lingerie.

The virgin/whore dichotomy in Pollock’s writing is still very much alive and thriving, unfortunately, it did not diminish in the 19th century. Through this reality, femininity is truly an ideologically driven regulation of female sexuality and certainly not a condition based upon sex. However, it is the female sex (or rather a political definition of the female sex) which ultimately instigates cultural, historical, and still current viewpoints of women, as Miller elaborates:

“With the vagina goes the cultural baggage of virginity, of who controls sexual access to the female, of the entire misogynistic tradition which blames male desire for females on females, even male desire for males on females. The vagina is a gateway inside, the gate to the woman’s soul by which act of entry property in her body is claimed, whence the notion
of possessing and knowing a woman meaning having intercourse with her.” (Miller p. 102)

In the *Symptom of Beauty*, Pacteau describes her interest in beauty as prescribed to the female body in the act of attribution of beauty—the physical apparatus to which the beholder’s eye is attached—that is, she seeks not the contingent object of desire, but the fantasy which frames it: “I take it as self-evident that the worth of a woman is contemptible...that such a criterion nevertheless continues to be paramount in postmodern, post-colonial and so-called post-feminist society.” (Pacteau p. 15) Beauty cannot be confined to a universal definition of the attributes of an object, nor can it move beyond. Pacteau lends this account from *L’Eve Future’s* novel in which he compares a young woman to the *Venus Victorious*:

“The only fault which has befallen Miss Alicia is thought...If she were deprived of all thought, I could understand her. The marble Venus, in fact, has nothing to do with thinking. The goddess is veiled in stone and silence. From her appearance come this word: I am Beauty, complete and alone. I speak only through the spirit of him who looks at me. In my absolute simplicity all thought defeats itself since it loses its limits. All thoughts sink together in me, confused, indistinct, identical, like the ripples on rivers as they enter over the sea. For him who reflects me, I am the deeper character he assigns me.”

As beauty can be found in many objects, philosophers often conclude that the only trait which beautiful objects share is that they arouse a distinct type of pleasure. With the comingling of beauty and pleasure, we often find that pain is inherent; embracing themes such as loss, grief and death in all forms of artistic practice (including literature and cinematic expressions). Consider Donatello’s *Mary Magdalene*, for example:

“Some theorists have tried to reconcile the apparent contradiction...by surmising that beauty redeems painful content, sugarcoating a bitter pill...beauty presents a zone of puzzlement for our understanding of any art that pains while appealing, no matter when or under what aesthetic fashion it was produced.” (Korsmeyer p. 162,163)
In *Three Lectures on Aesthetics* (1915), Bernard Bosanquet segments beauty into two categories; *easy* beauty and *difficult* beauty. His analysis of *difficult* beauty is of particular relevance to my work as he connects this type of experience with the sublime – to the point of repellence; specifically those subjects (often unpleasant subjects) pursued by artists, which are often considered below aesthetic consideration.

The balance of composition and harmony of parts are taken into consideration when we appraise an object for its form. Balance between complexity and simple line, mathematical formulas and even, yes, the female body itself have come to define what is considered ‘beautiful’ form. There is no universal formula for beauty. However, symmetry is a powerful indicator of what we deem beautiful or not, according to facial and bodily proportions. Asymmetrical faces showcase disruptions in developmental symmetry, implying genetic weaknesses which result from environmental perturbations during development and thus harbor undesired genes (as an example, severe cases can be attributed to in-breeding). Asymmetry or homozygostiy is therefore undesired.

On the contrary, we find bilateral symmetry (or heterozygosity) to promote strong, resilient genes which are the result of genetic variety, which are able to change and adapt to

![FIGURES 5. 2 & 5.3, Susanne Aker, *Rorschach series*, 2004-2005. Rapid prototype plaster resin](image-url)
environmental conditions (ability to resist parasites, infection and debilitating pathogens). Bilateral Symmetry or heterozygosity is an indicator of optimum health and success in intersexual and intrasexual competition. If one were so inclined, one could upload a picture of a face to the website 
http://www.anaface.com/ and determine its symmetry, or lack thereof. The fact that such a website exists is a clear indicator of our societal obsession with exterior looks.

Homozygosis vs. Heterozygosis can be compared to the historical dichotomy of Chaos vs. Order; the omnipresence of this conversation can be viewed in ancient civilizations, from the Aztec Empire to ancient Egypt, to present day manifestations. In artistic practice, when disarticulated parts fail to form a whole, we find their discontinuity unsettling. The photographs and sculptural work of Hans Bellmer’s La Poupee series (begun in 1934) align with the surrealist fascination with the automata; straddling the poles of seduction and temptation, his work epitomizes the grotesque. Bellmer’s work is reflective of more than his private, psychological aspirations (his preoccupation with the forms of pre-pubescent females) and his self-proclaimed political agenda – the work explicitly entertains ground in sadomasochism and skewed misogyny. (Figures 5.4 & 5.5)
For my investigation, however, I concentrate only on the formal aspects of his work as they relate to the representation of the female body with regards to chaos vs. order. In figure 5.4 the chaotic display of two sets of legs which are attached to their own pelvis’ are conjoined by a central abdomen. The frenzied display of flailing limbs alludes to the hysterical body; reminiscent of Jean Martin Charcot’s photographic records of his patients, these poses dehumanize the body in a sense – creating a body which only functions out of craze and lack of control; directly displaying the psychological state of ‘hysterics’.

On the contrary, symmetry is also employed by Bellmer (see Figure 5.5) suggesting an alternative rendition of the classical torso. His work speaks to the grotesque as described by Pacteau: “The grotesque body, then, is the sensuous, material body signified as excessive and transgressive…the grotesque body is a disarticulated body, whose internal chaos threatens to externalize itself violently in the form of contagious symbolic order.” (Pacteau p. 128)
The work of Suzanne Anker relies heavily on both biology and psychology to demonstrate language systems as visual form. (See Figures 5.2 & 5.3) Anker’s digital printing of her *Rorschach* series develops narrative form from the psychological inkblot test, also known as the Rorschach test, to examine the expression of biological sets of information. I use a combination of asymmetry and symmetry in my own work to further examine the relationship between order and chaos; using the strengths of each polarity to bring the biological and psychological directly into my work, further tying the tribulations and challenges of the female sex into an ongoing discussion of gender and ethics in artistic expression.
FIGURE 5.6 Katelyn Seprish, *Ingesting the Internal, number 10*, 2013. Ceramic, wax, pastel, hair
CONCLUSION

My work is a manifestation of both the idea of the vessel and the visceral; the combination of clay, wax, hair and color unify my work into an experience of the sensual; the seduction of the grotesque. I am interested in how pleasure is identified, realized and revered – specifically in regard to the female body, and also how that same body is scripted with the notions of revolt, disgust and scrutiny. My work occupies the space of tension which exists between the realization of these concepts and their exploitation; threatening well-established boundaries and reworking the construction in order to create a visual experience which irritates and pleases which informs and is informed.

The psychoanalytic discourse I study, from Freud to Kristeva (namely Kristeva’s work on the maternal body and abjection) has influenced the way I consider the treatment of the female body from a historical viewpoint and has assisted in my development as an artist, prompting the refinement of my visual dialogue. The critical writings of Carolyn Korsmeyer, William Ian Miller, Michel Chaouli, Kristin A. Hoving, and Griselda Pollock, among others, have advanced my perception of artistic practice as it relates to the fields of history, psychology, biology, and art. Their ideas, evidence for their theories, and historical awareness has influenced the way I think and write – further refining the work I produce.
The origins of disgust and what prompts it, from food to semen are as complex and intricate as the origin of beauty, passion and lust and it is the relationship between these two affective roles that fosters a majority of the material and instillation decisions I make. While my forms are largely invented and abstracted, the female body is their site of origin and embraces the
many taboos, praises and paradoxes that the body prompts, in a cross-disciplinary way. My work agonizes itself with discourses around the body, feminism and the relationships between them; I seek vengeance from injustices of cultural institutions through the exposure of the body – its proclamation as totems of pride, beauty and raw fecundity.
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