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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School of Art

In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Fine Arts Studio

Feminist Complaint Department

by

Sarah Taavola

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ABSTRACT

This body of work and research is focused upon finding connections between the artist's personal trajectory, Surrealist ideology, and Feminist texts. Starting with the Surrealist's ideology of the unconscious, dreams, and use of objects, the artist investigates the eroticism and fetishization of female imagery. Surrealist work is brimming with portrayals of women as man's mediator, muse, *femme-enfant* [child-woman], source and object of man's desire, and the embodiment of *l'amour fou* [crazy love]. These representations of women depicted through fragmented female bodies transform into objects to be easily used and consumed, like furniture or food. The artist investigates how Surrealist women artists have reclaimed female bodies through irony, humor, and confrontation to problematize their position within the movement. By utilizing the subjects of self representation, magic/alchemy, and animal surrogates, these artists become the harbingers of the contemporary women's art movement. Certain trends within this movement are recognized as: the space-making for the unquantifiable in order to actualize the unspoken, unseen, and the inconceivable; the use of wedding dresses and hosiery as surrogates for the female body which brings critical thought to the institution of marriage and the industry of weddings; and the consumable female body through the use of food metaphor. The artist accesses a variety of text to discuss narratives containing symbolism relating to her work such as Clarissa Pinkola-Estés' examination of the Bluebeard fairytale and Andrea Dworkin's interpretations of Kōbō Abe's novel *Woman in the Dunes*. Through the materiality, mortality, and performative Sisyphean labor involved in the artist's body of work, she associates her personal narrative of domestic violence, divorce, and addiction to her on going evaluation.

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In January 2016, my mother celebrated her tenth year of sobriety.

I am very proud of her and I love her very much.

I would not be the same person without her.

I dedicate this work to my partner, Joseph Andrews
for his endless support, patience, and love.

Section I: Context:

The Midwest, Domestic Abuse, Alcoholism, and Divorce

I grew up in Hartland, Wisconsin; in a household with domestic abuse, alcoholism, and divorce. I fear that I will experience the same violence and addiction as my parents. I did not have the opportunity to observe or experience a healthy adult relationship as I was growing up. I have questions about how a healthy relationship works. What does a good marriage look like? What is it made of? My partner also grew up in a household with domestic abuse and alcoholism. I wonder if that was the reason why he stayed in an abusive relationship for eight years; I, on the other hand, did not enter into an intimate relationship, prior to us meeting. Is it possible that neither he nor I know the difference between what a healthy relationship is and what is not? Are we destined to fail? Can we break the cycle that exists in both of our families? Are we stronger than our genetic heredities? The questions I have about healthy relationships and marriage are daunting. There is an urgency that I can not quell. If I try to discover what I am looking for, then I will be actively participating in revealing myself and my family history to those around me. There is a feeling of shame in what I am pursuing. I am ashamed that I am exposing my past. I feel as if I am airing my dirty laundry. This is the ultimate sin in a home with domestic abuse because what happens at home, stays at home. At times, I think I would rather pretend that everything was normal. The problem is that what I was witnessing as a child became normal.

The violence experienced during my childhood has stayed with me. I believe it has caused me to fear and avoid heterosexual men. Once I left for college, I formed a circle of friends almost completely composed of homosexual men. I think this was because I felt safe in their company. It also allowed me to perform my version of femininity and not feel exposed or vulnerable. I could attend social events with my friends and not feel on display for the heterosexual male gaze. My homosexual male friends also participated in the local drag scene and soon my sculptural and photographic works were investigating themes of identity, sexuality, and gender. I believe that my friends' openness to play with gender identities and gender expressions

allowed me to reinvent myself over and over again through my artistic practice. It also has been through my experiences of working in plus size women's clothing retail and meeting other gender nonconforming individuals that has allowed me to see the spectrum of gender expression. Through these personal insights into realizations of gender and sexuality, I have become an invested researcher with the intent to hopefully join the current dialogue involving gender and visual art.

I am now no longer intimidated by heterosexual men but I am vigilant when I am around them. I am cautiousness about what I divulge; I suspect that I am suffering from some sort of post traumatic stress disorder. In January 2015, I met my partner Joseph, and we started to get to know each other very slowly. It was difficult meeting another person whom endured a similar violent childhood. Over the past year, there were several times when we confided in each other about our upbringings, parents, anxieties, and fears. As our relationship matures, we both have been reassessing ourselves in order to look forward to our future. Our rage, embarrassment and humiliation about our childhoods has fueled my artistic practice and has caused me to pursue my questions about healthy relationships and marriage. By producing this thesis work, I am expressing myself as a feminist artist who is joining the ranks and is willing to speak out about what I was taught to leave at home.

Feminist Territories and Artistic Influences

Through my research, my work has begun to follow a feminist genealogy. My art practice follows the feminist tradition of using readily available objects and materials. This custom started among women artists because of their seclusion to the domestic sphere and the difficulty to obtain traditional art supplies. Before going to graduate school, I built environments out of collected cardboard similar to dioramas. These structures were large enough for a person to enter and be photographed inside of. Much of this work was focused in juxtaposing biblical archetypes and LGBT identities. The compositions were my way of telling stories and elevating misrepresented identities into gilded personas commanding recognition. By experimenting with gender expression and performance, I reevaluated social and cultural norms. Using components of drag,

camp, and kink, allowed me to access territories I had not been exposed to previously. The most engaging aspects of the work were the environments themselves and the spaces of inquiry they conspired. This is what I am exploring in Feminist Complaint Department.

My sculptural installations explore connections between contemporary feminist discourse, current events, and my personal trajectory. My work addresses misogyny, violence, and male entitlement in the United States by exploring certain myths and traditions associated with marriage. I am investigating the fragmentation, objectification and consumption of women's bodies through the use of large amounts of sugar, which alludes to the well-known nursery rhyme: "Sugar and spice / And everything nice / That's what little girls are made of". The flow of sand and sugar alludes to women's mortality and the passage of time. Feminist Complaint Department is a space for feminist inquiry, a zone where the dream of domestic bliss is exploded, and a locus where a woman's potential can be redefined.

Surrealism and Identity Through Objects

Surrealist ideology about identity through objects and materials in sculpture, erotic female imagery in Surrealist work, the reclamation of feminine bodies in Surrealist art and contemporary feminist artistic practices are the focal points of my research. Surrealism, the art movement launched in the 1920's, consisted of artists focusing their attempts to "giving free reign to the subconscious as a source of creativity and to liberate pictorial ideas from their traditional associations."¹ First beginning as a literary group that was associated with DADA, the Surrealists spread out into painting, photography, film and sculpture. In December 1929, following the publication of André Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, there was a divisive split among the groups

¹ Ralph Mayer. *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), p. 410

members over Marxist politics.² Along with Breton's manifesto, there was an illustrated text by the Belgian painter René Magritte *Words and Images*, 1929, which "summarizes how depictions of ordinary items can challenge our dominant sense of logic. By captioning an image of a leaf with the word "cannon," Magritte demonstrates his belief that "an object never fulfills the same function as its name or image".³ This is seen in Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, 1929, when the viewer is confronted with an image of a pipe with the caption "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" [This is not a pipe]. This can be read as a literal representation because it is an image of a pipe that the viewer is seeing, not a real one, but also can be taken as a warning to not always believe what one sees.

However, in Breton's second manifesto there was a "redefinition of the movements aspirations and methods... instead of seeking refuge from reality by escaping into dreams and fantasies, Surrealists should henceforth find inspiration in concrete things."⁴ As new ideas emerged, Surrealist sculpture developed in varying forms. "Dissident" Surrealists, who operated outside of Breton's group, "delved into the the darker recesses of the human unconscious... their fantasies of aggression, eroticism, and violence" can be seen in Alberto Giacometti's gendered abstracted forms.⁵ In 1931, Giacometti published drawings of his sculptures as *Moving and Mute Objects* and it was through this that Surrealists discovered that "non-representational" sculpture can "express complex metaphors and states of mind."⁶ The same publication contained Salvador Dalí's *Surrealist Objects*, 1929, an essay describing new forms of sculpture. As an advocate for found object art, he defined "objects functioning symbolically" as constructions that only have meaning once the viewer interacts with the

² André Breton. "Surrealist Situation of the Object" in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Translated from the French by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 112-194

³ Valerie J. Fletcher. *Marvelous Objects: Surrealist Sculpture from Paris to New York*. (New York: Delmonico Books, 2015), p. 35

⁴ Ibid., 34

⁵ Ibid., 35

⁶ Ibid., 44

components of the work.⁷ Dalí believed that objects could be investigated through a multiplicity of practices such as being wrapped, thrown, and handled while blindfolded.

A found object is defined as:

“an object that is found, selected, and exhibited by an artist, usually without being altered in any way...the found object may be natural, for example, a shell, stone, or piece of driftwood, or it may be manufactured, for example, a household item, piece of clothing, or a piece of machinery; a manufactured object is also called a ready-made. It may be given new aesthetic qualities by invented of mounting and display. The artists roll and its presentation is created only in that it points out aesthetic values that the object already possesses but that we're not deliberately considered in its construction... The concept of the found object is in accordance with a surrealist doctrine holding the anything with aesthetic value, even inadvertently so, it's a work of art and worthy of being exhibited as such.”⁸

Marcel Duchamp's *ready-mades*, a term he coined in 1915, had already made appearances in New York. Starting with works such as *Bottle Rack*, 1914, and developing into *assisted ready-mades* such as *With Hidden Noise*, 1916, that would “combine two or more mundane objects in seemingly random, yet also premeditated and complex combinations.”⁹ Duchamp's objects were presented on a multitude of levels, from interactive pranks like *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?*, 1921, to somber puns like *Fresh Widow*, 1920. Very few people outside of Dadaist circles knew about these assemblages. Parisian audiences found objects such as Man Ray's *Gift*, 1921, to be shocking when exhibited with his painting and photographs. Surrealist sculpture was also inspired by the work of Dadaist Jean Arp. In Zürich, Arp made a series of reliefs know as *Earthly Forms*, 1917, that were constructed of layers of painted wood. These pieces have been read as a reaction against the horrific destruction of World War I. He invented “an anti-rational aesthetics based on nature rather than man-made objects,

⁷ Salvador Dalí. “*Surrealist Objects*,” Originally published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, no. 3, (December 1931) 16-17; Translated by Haim Finkelstien, ed. *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, (Cambridge, 1998), p. 231

⁸ Ralph Mayer. p.161

⁹ Valerie J. Fletcher. p. 20

and would sketch simplified forms from memory, known as “*automatist*, allowing his hand to start drawing without a preconceived subject.”¹⁰ This artistic practice would be embraced by the Parisian Surrealists a few years later.

Artists began to influence one another, Arp’s work can be seen in Max Ernst’s *Loplop Introduces a Young Girl*, 1930, and Joan Miró’s *Painting (Circus Horse)*, 1927. Arp had introduced “an abstract language based on nature and humor...whereas geometry speaks to the rational mind, evocative organisms should in theory appeal to our biological selves and communicate with our subconscious minds on a subliminal and intuitive level.”¹¹ Ernst’s knowledge of imagery helped Breton form Surrealist concepts and “encouraged other artists to seek complexity, ambiguity, and symbolism.”¹² Furthermore, it is through social activities among artists that much of the Surrealists’ fascination with objects can be observed. In the 1930s, before the Great Depression affected France, the glamorous world of wealth and fashion would throw “lavish parties and encourage attendees to wear provocative and amusing costumes.”¹³ With telephones worn as hats, and houses decorated with aquariums, it was “society’s conspicuous consumption and flair for the dramatic [that] provided the backdrop for Surrealist object-based art.”¹⁴

Eroticism and the Female Image: Fragmentation of the Female Body

The expanding definition of Surrealist sculpture gave artists the freedom to make work without academic training and from inexpensive supplies. Miró was producing assemblages such as *Object*, 1932, and described his method of choosing his components as, “I feel myself attracted by a magnetic force toward an object, and then I feel myself being drawn toward another object which is added to the first and their combination creates a poetic shock.”¹⁵ As artists continued to produce work, the

¹⁰ Ibid., 22

¹¹ Valerie J. Fletcher. p. 20

¹² Ibid., 30

¹³ Ibid., 45

¹⁴ Ibid., 45

¹⁵ Joan Miró. *Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews*, (Boston, 1986), p. 125

fragmented female body began to appear. In June 1933 at the Galerie Pierre Colle, *Surrealist Exhibition: Sculptures, Objects, Paintings, Drawings*, Dalí's *Retrospective Bust of a Woman*, 1933, Man Ray's *Object to Be Destroyed*, 1932, and Giacometti's *Table* and *Mannequin*, 1933, all displayed fragments of the female body that presented women as objects. Dalí's *Bust* is displayed as an object to be consumed, with a baguette crown, a corn necklace, and a face swarmed in ants; this is a female body presented to be destroyed through consumption. Ray's *Object* is a metronome with a disembodied eye of his lover Lee Miller (who had recently left him) attached; the piece was accompanied with instructions for the viewer to make their own and destroy it. Giacometti's *Table* and *Mannequin* is a plaster figure of a female nude that is decapitated; the head is replaced by a cello neck. This reduces the female into an object that can be "played" like an instrument. The *Table* is where the figure's head sits half covered with a cloth and its severed hand.

At the May 1936 *Surrealist Exhibition of Objects* held at Galerie Charles Ratton, Miró displayed *Poetic Object*, 1936, composed of a stuffed parrot on a wooden perch at the top, a stuffed silk stocking with velvet garter wearing a doll's paper shoe that is suspended beneath the parrot inside a hollow wood frame, a hanging cork ball, a celluloid fish and a map all mounted on a derby hat. Some scholars have read this work as an allusion to the "outbreak of civil war in Spain" and the female leg as a symbol of "civilian victims of conflict."¹⁶ However, this work can be seen as a fragmented female body that is enclosed in a wooden cage. In Dalí's painting *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra*, 1936, the women are decapitated with heads of flowers. This can be seen sculpturally in Dalí's department-store window display *She Was a Surrealist Woman, She Was Like a Figure in a Dream*, 1936, and also inspired the performance of Sheila Legge's *Phantom of Sex Appeal* of 1936, in Trafalgar Square, London. During the performance Legge carried a false leg, that can be read as yet another body fragment and a pun on her name. All of these occurrences presents the image of a woman with a head obliterated by flowers as the

¹⁶ Valerie J. Fletcher. p. 53

ultimate Surrealist woman; woman with an identity that exists as a mere symbol of sex to satisfy male desire.

In the mid-1930s, there was a trend among Surrealist artists of using inexpensive replicas of Greco-Roman statues to express their contempt of classical art. This caused a rise in seeing the fragmentation and fetishization of the female body in Surrealist work. Dalí's *Venus de Milo with Drawers*, 1936, reduced the goddess of love to a "chest of drawers" with white fur knobs that were meant to be handled; the image of woman transformed into a domestic object meant to be pulled open. Man Ray's *Venus Restored*, 1936, is a copy of Venus's torso tied crudely with rope symbolically leaving her helpless and passive, changing her into a submissive participant in bondage. Ray also mounted a copy of *The Three Graces*, the muses of art, literature, and music on shooting target boards and titled it *Universal Target*, 1933; thereby inviting viewers to take shots at them. This is not only an example of fragmentation but of the artist inviting the viewer to commit violence. Roland Penrose's *The Last Voyage of Captain Cook*, 1936, consists of a torso of Venus painted with strips inside a globe shaped cage with a wood saw handle. This piece has been seen as a "metaphor for the forced imposition of Western culture on territories around the world," but it is also an extremely violent portrayal of a female body being cut up with a saw in order to fit in a cage.¹⁷ Penrose's *The Dew Machine*, 1937, displays a mannequin head with long blond hair hung upside down. A wire apparatus holding an array of glass funnels drains clear liquid into the woman's head. The woman is converted into a machine with clear liquid representing a bodily secretion; thereby, transforming her into a sexual device solely for male pleasure.

To begin dissecting the eroticism and fetishization of female imagery in Surrealist sculpture, it is important to first look at how women were perceived within the art movement. Women were seen as "man's mediator with nature and the unconscious, *femme-enfant*, [child-woman] muse, source and object of man's desire, embodiment of

¹⁷ Valerie J. Fletcher. p. 58

l'amour fou, [crazy love] and the emblem of revolution.”¹⁸ The Surrealists were participating in an art movement with an “emphasis on dreams, automatic writing, the unconscious” and it is within those practices that “we can expect to find some of the least inhibited renditions of male fantasies and thus gain a good understanding of male desires and interests.”¹⁹ The dichotomy occurs when the Surrealist men are “faced with the female figure, the male Surrealist fears castration, fears the dissolution of his ego” and “in order to overcome his fears, he fetishizes the female figure, he deforms, disfigures, manipulates her” and destroys her.²⁰ This is seen in Giacometti’s *Woman with Her Throat Cut*, 1932, which consists of a female form splayed open, her neck pulled out, and mouth open screaming. Giacometti eagerly acknowledged that the work was “inspired by a recurrent daydream in which he rapes a mother and daughter before murdering them.”²¹ The violated puppets of Hans Bellmer’s *The Doll: Ball-Joint*, 1934-36, can be read as broken baby dolls wearing schoolgirl shoes and white ankle socks, displayed like trophies, that are in a constant state of falling apart as they are being manipulated by the artist. In 1934, Bellmer published a small book of his photographs that included an introduction that proclaimed, “that *The Doll* was an artificial girl with anatomical possibilities capable of recreating the heights of passion and inventing new desires” and that he “desired to achieve *erotic liberation* through fantasies that transcend the physically possible.”²² What that really means is if his desires were attempted in the real world, the woman would die as a result. Bellmer’s *Dolls* a majority of the time are headless, compressed, pornographic mutilations of helpless female figures being controlled by male desires.

Giacometti and Bellmer’s sculptures set new standards for the portrayal of

¹⁸ Gwen Raaberg. “*The Problematics of Women and Surrealism*” in *Surrealism and Women*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 2

¹⁹ Rudolf E. Kuenzli. “*Surrealism and Misogyny*” in *Surrealism and Women*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 18

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24

²¹ Valerie J. Fletcher. p. 80

²² *Ibid.*, 82

women in Surrealist art, and by the time Bellmer moved to Paris in 1938, the “Surrealists had enthusiastically appropriated his concept of a female figure as something to be manhandled, manipulated, and observed as well.”²³ The January 1938 *International Exhibition of Surrealism* at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris was filled with female mannequins dressed, decorated, and disassembled by male artists. Dalí’s *Rainy Taxi*, 1938, was parked outside the exhibition containing a female mannequin passenger. The interior of the taxi would shower her with water, as live snails [one of Dalí’s favorite aphrodisiacs] would crawl all over her head and naked body. The mannequin was meant to be identified as a “domestic servant signaled by the sewing machine beside her and the omelet in her lap.”²⁴

When visitors entered the exhibition they were greeted by *The Surrealist Street*, 1938, a narrow hallway lined with female mannequins on both sides. Each mannequin was presented with their own street sign, some real while others were fictitious, yet all were to identify the mannequins as prostitutes. Every mannequin was transformed individually: a crown of leaves, hands wound in rope, a giant bat headdress, covered in moss and mushrooms, decorated with tiny spoons, animal skulls, large black beetles, fishing nets etc. The most popular mannequin was André Masson’s *Green Gag in the Mouth of Thought*, 1938, that was completely naked except for a birdcage worn over her head. Through the tiny door in the front the viewer could see her mouth that had been covered with a gag and decorated with a pansy. The hallway then emptied into Duchamp’s *1,200 Coal Sacks*, 1938, an immersive environment containing a low ceiling of coal sacks, a glowing metal brazier, multiple beds and a plethora of furniture made of female body fragments.

Kurt Seligmann’s *Ultra Furniture*, 1938, a hassock supported by female stockinged legs and high heels and was paired with Breton’s *Untitled (Cabinet)*, 1938, that also stood on female legs and was topped with severed hands. Georges Hugnet’s *The Table is Laid*, 1938, a kitchen table with a blonde female half erupted yet still

²³ Ibid., 84

²⁴ Ibid., 91

trapped inside. Freddie Wilhelm's *Zola's Desk*, 1938, a desk made of a dressmaker's dummy with a glass bottle containing a goldfish hanging from the head, a revolver on the chest, and an inkwell on the navel. Oscar Dominguez's *Never (Phonograph)*, 1983, a phonograph with a female arm as the tone-arm and legs sticking out of the loudspeaker. All of these domestic objects composed with female body parts transferred the idea of an inanimate attractive object. In no part of the exhibition was a fragmented male body present, this ideation was made solely to project onto the female body.

During the 1938 exhibition, Hélène Vanel, the Surrealist ballerina, gave a dance performance while clothed in a white cotton night gown. Vanel sprinted around the exhibition, while jumping on the beds she screamed and clawed at her body presenting herself as a patient suffering from hysterics. Similar images of young girls were published in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1928 with the heading '*Les Attitudes passionnelles en 1878*' (*Postures of Passion in 1878*) photographed by Jean Martin Charcot. Surrealists were fascinated by hysterical girls and madwomen and considered them to be an example of *l'amour fou* or crazy love. Most often these girls were female outcasts, such as beggars, prostitutes, orphans, and most often victims of rape. Many unwanted women were sent to hospitals, sanitariums or asylums, and labeled hysterical. These misdiagnosed patients would be sexually assaulted by their caretakers; "according to survivors' accounts, the interns of La Salpêtrière refused to separate their professional duty and their taste for love, and when night fell, the patients would either visit them outside or they would meet in their beds."²⁵ These young women were ostracized and locked away in these institutions where they would live out the rest of their natural lives unless deported to the French colonies. Yet, these conditions were described as "the living poetry invited by the sick women and the doctors when sleeping together culminates in these 'passionate attitudes' photographed by Charcot, in which one sees stunning half undressed women curious poses express a convulsive but

²⁵ Jean-Michele Rabaté. *Loving Freud Madly: Surrealism between Hysterical and Paranoid Modernism*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 2002, vol XXV, no 3/4, p. 64

otherworldly ecstasy.”²⁶ The images of young women in 1928’s *La Révolution surréaliste* were published with a “bald presentation...devoid of any reference to these circumstances,” therefore, allowing the viewer to see them as another example of *l’amour fou* or as Breton describes them “Veritable *tableaux vivants* of women in love.”²⁷ Vanel’s performance was a romanticized display of real female suffering reenacted for men’s entertainment. As these portrayals of women and fragmented female bodies continued to proliferate Surrealist work, the dichotomy for women within the art movement became extreme and contradicting.

It is no surprise that it was only until women artists left Surrealist circles that their work was able to develop and mature. Léonor Fini, Frida Kahlo, and Louise Bourgeois even declared throughout their lifetimes that they were not Surrealists. In the 1930s, women were drawn to Surrealism because of its non-academic views and its recognition of the artist’s personal reality. However, these women struggled with a “movement that defined their role as one confirming and completing a male creative cycle, and the metaphorically obliterated subject/object polarities through violent assaults on the female image.”²⁸ Women artists were able to reclaim the erotic female/feminine bodies in Surrealist art by,

“replacing male Surrealists’ love of hallucination and erotic violence with an art of magical fantasy and narrative flow and moving...toward laying claim to female subject positions...moreover, their images of the female body, conceived not as Other but as Self, anticipate a feminine poetics of the body-imaging and celebrating the female body’s organic, erotic, and maternal reality-that would fully emerge only with the Feminist movement of the 1970s.”²⁹

Reclamation of Erotic Female Bodies by Women Artists

Meret Oppenheim’s *Object*, 1936, transforms a tea cup, saucer, and spoon into a fur-covered fetish. The tea cup becomes a vagina-like receptacle as well as a

²⁶ Ibid., 64

²⁷ David Lomas. “*Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, and Hysteria*” in *Surrealism desire unbound*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.73

²⁸ Whitney Chadwick. “*Modernist Representation: The Female Body*” in *Women, Art, and Society*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002) p. 310

²⁹ Ibid., 311

nourishing breast-like vessel. Oppenheim critiques the female identity by assembling these domestic objects and rendering them useless, yet easily caressed. *My Governess*, 1936, trusses up Oppenheim's nanny's shoes like a chicken and serves them on a silver platter equating a servant to food for her employer. Dorothea Tanning's *The Mirror*, 1952, illustrates an anthropomorphic sunflower looking into a petaled mirror as it contemplates its own blooming. With the use of a mirror there is an emergence of "duality of being the self as observer and the observed" and it is through these observations that an awareness occurs.³⁰ These women produced "self-representations that suggest a complex relationship to social ideologies of the feminine" and because of the limitations in public/patriarchal language and their unwillingness to marginalize themselves with their own private language, women used "irony, humor, and confrontation to problematize their position within Surrealism."³¹

This "feminine self-awareness" is the force that conjures the "fabulist narratives of magical beasts and legendary characters" seen in Leonora Carrington's *Self-Portrait*, 1937-38, containing a multi-breasted hyena and her white horse surrogate.³² Fini's *Le Bout du Monde [The End of the Earth]*, 1948, has a mythic female being submerged in a swamp with animal skulls gazing directly out at the viewer. The woman's face is reflected in the dark water with an animalistic appearance. Kahlo's *The Wounded Deer*, 1946 (fig.45) presents her head on the body of a male stag riddled with arrows and bleeding alone in the woods on a stormy night; the word "carma" is painted in the lower left corner. This painting can have many meanings such as the failed operation on the artist's spine, the tumultuous relationship with Diego Rivera, a blending of the male and female, and her inability to control her own destiny. It is within these images that the viewers see a "self-consciousness about social constructions of femininity as surface and image, a tendency toward the phantasmic and oneiric, a preoccupation with psychic

³⁰ Ibid., 314

³¹ Whitney Chadwick. "Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation" in *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), p. 11

³² Whitney Chadwick. 1998 p. 13

powers assigned to the feminine, and an embrace of doubling, masking, and/or masquerade as defenses against fears of non-identity.”³³ In Remedios Varo’s *Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst*, 1961, a female figure is depicted leaving a doctor’s office holding a severed head by its long gray beard over a well ready to drop it in. The doctor’s office plaque reads “Freud/Adler/Jung,” the fathers of the psychoanalysis that fueled the Surrealist movement. The severed head symbolizes the fragmented female bodies of Surrealism and a patriarchal figure that Varo’s character is purging from her small basket into the well, as her shawl falls away from her face.

Reclamation Continued into Contemporary Practices

These women Surrealists “served as an important harbinger of women’s desire to image themselves by speaking through their own bodies” and have continued to inspire contemporary female artists.³⁴ Shadi Ghadirian’s *Like Everyday*, 2000 (fig.47) demonstrates a transference of objects onto female identities. The artist composed a series of photographs with women wrapped in printed floral fabrics holding everyday household objects in front of them. The objects are transformed into faces and are meant to portray different personalities. Her images have been referred to as “readymade puns.”³⁵ The play with images instead of words and the overall use of humor fuels the formation of characters through the objects; a cleaver or a grater yields an aggressive or strong-willed impression while a bowl or teapot portrays a dutiful and docile demeanor. The title of the work not only describes the objects used but also speaks of the social implications of being a woman; illustrating how women are reduced into objects that are also kept in the domestic sphere.

The work of Sarah Lucas is focused around found objects made into images of the sexualized body. In *Au Natural*, 1994, male genitalia made of vegetables and a female body made of fruit and a bucket are displayed on a mattress leaning against a

³³ Ibid., 6

³⁴ Ibid., 13

³⁵ Saatchi Gallery, *Shadi Ghadirian Exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery*, accessed November 29, 2014, http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/shadi_ghadirian.html

wall. Lucas uses a chauvinistic vernacular in the creation of this work. The use of fruit for the female body recalls Surrealism, however with the presence of the male, the reading of the piece is not the same. The female and male genitals are a staged “mise-en-scène of a naked couple in bed.”³⁶ Sarah Lucas employs Susan Suleiman’s term *double allegiance*. Women are able to craft an image of their own desire that is neither joke nor “phallic imperialism” with this type of analysis and critique. Suleiman says that *double allegiance*:

“Allows for more nuanced readings of both contemporary and earlier work, leading to interpretations in the mode of “both and” rather than in the mode of “either/or.” Instead of reading contemporary women’s work as a simple “yes” or “no,” that is, as an unqualified acceptance or an unqualified rejection of the achievements of male avant-garde predecessors,” I prefer to read them as a “yes, but.” That is, as both affirmative and critical, a response that involves talking back as well as talking with.”³⁷

Looking at Lucas’ *Bitch*, 1995, the work has an overwhelming aggressive tone with the use of a table depicting a woman on all fours. A t-shirt is pulled over the table with two slits cut in the chest to let two melons hang as breasts. A fish is nailed to the back of the table to depict a vagina. *Bitch* recalls Surrealist objectification of women and can easily be compared to Allen Jones’ *Table Sculpture*, 1969, Jones’ table is made up of a sheet of glass held up on the back of a female mannequin on all fours wearing fetish underwear. Both pieces are pornographic and violent; however, in Lucas’ there is still humor present. Invoking the overtly sexed visual language of male Surrealist art and using the everyday objects of table, t-shirt, melons, and fish; an absurd and laughable parody is achieved. Lucas’, “ostensible and visceral appropriation of sexism undermines

³⁶ Philomena Epps. “Got a Salmon on: exploring the relationship between food and questions of sex and gender identity in the work of Sarah Lucas,” Snatch Blog, March 31, 2014, <https://blogsnaatch.wordpress.com/2014/03/31/got-a-salmon-on-exploring-the-relationship-between-food-and-questions-of-sex-and-gender-identity-in-the-work-of-sarah-lucas/>

³⁷ Susan Rubin Suleiman. “Dialogue and Double Allegiance: Some Contemporary Women Artist and the Historical Avant-Garde” in *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998,) p. 132

the original assailant,” and even though the, “chauvinistic speech may be violent and demeaning; Lucas simultaneously exposes it as nonsensical and inane.”³⁸ She is truly talking back as well as talking with. “Despite appropriating the voice of the male aggressor, she does not fully subordinate to their terminology,” and it is through the doubling of aggression and humor that Lucas produces a “hyper-literal pastiche” and alludes to her *double allegiance*.³⁹

The uncanny is a constant element in the work of Deborah Alma Wheeler. She uses familiar objects to create subversive combinations that can also be viewed through the lens of *double allegiance*. She describes her work as an investigation into objects that “in certain contexts, have the ability to either free or oppress.”⁴⁰ Through her process of merging found objects she “questions social, political, and cultural issues about sex, gender identity, and marginalized groups.”⁴¹ Wheeler forms new meanings by manipulating objects such as in *My Ex-girlfriend’s Ex-boyfriend*, 2012. The form is made of a punching bag and a bean bag chair to create a larger than life phallus. These two objects have a completely new understanding and are presented as a hanging apparatus. The punching bag form can still be recognized and still maintains its charged meaning; therefore presenting the work as a phallus for “beating.” This of course is presented as tongue-in-cheek because of the visual pun and sexual innuendo. This piece acts as a “poetic metaphor that is both strangely familiar and jarringly awakening.”⁴²

Wheeler’s *Womankinn Series*, 2009-2011, has a highly recognizable Surrealist influence with the use of sexualized female mannequins that are name branded from head to toe; brands such as John Deere, Craftsman, Stanley, and Atari. Each female form is fully painted with its brand’s colors and logo; but most importantly each one is

³⁸ Philomena Epps. March 31, 2014

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Christopher Harrity. “Artist Spotlight: Deborah Wheeler,” *Advocate*, April 26, 2014, <http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/art/artist-spotlight/2014/04/26/artist-spotlight-deborah-wheeler>

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

outfitted with its own themed strap-on; a toy John Deere tractor, a Craftsman drill, a Stanley measuring tape, and an Atari game controller all acting as phallic signifiers. The choice of these items are interesting not only because of the established recognizable brand for each one, but also because the masculine gendered objects are being gendered twice over by being made into strap-ons and are acting as the phallus. The titles of each piece again evoke the Surrealist use of puns: *Nothing Runs Like a Deere*, *It's in Your Hands*, *Make Something Great*, and *One Player or Two?* Wheeler states that her "intentions are to reveal and illuminate a hidden cultural agenda that subjugates individuals and perpetuates false stereotypical norms that accompany sex and gender identity."⁴³

This small sample of contemporary women artists demonstrates their commitment to investigating what it means to be human in society by dissecting social constructs and reassembling cultural hybrids of thoughts and questions that underlie social norms and more. The subject matter is examined from multiple angles in an effort to offer a new mythology that complicates and disrupts the singularity of big societal ideas. Their work expands the conversation to identity, gender, and cultural visualizing practices creating multiple understandings. As the objects are brought together and visual puns are formed the images start acting as innuendos. It is these visual contradictions that exposes the existing tension and the deliberate contrariness of the artists' work; thereby, gaining an ironic humor with an intentional playfulness. Through the lens of *double allegiance*, these works talk back and have a dialogue with contemporary and earlier work but "neither dismisses (on the grounds of misogyny) nor uncritically celebrates."⁴⁴ It is best said by Sarah Lucas, "I'm not trying to solve the problem. I'm exploring the moral dilemma by incorporating it."⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Susan Rubin Suleiman. p. 132

⁴⁵ Philomena Epps. March 31, 2014

Section II: Evolution:

Process Makes Perfect: Lumpy and Clumpy Beginnings

When I first started creating my thesis work, my artistic process was driven by a chain of experiments. I knew that I wanted to use both sugar to reference the nursery rhyme about little girls, and sand to evoke time passing through an hourglass. I used two tripods I had pulled out of a scrap bin, these extended eight feet high and connected these with an eight-foot bar. There was much debate amongst my colleagues that what I constructed was a giant clothing rack, a sculptural clothesline, or a ballet barre. I first started filling small clothing items, like male and female underwear, with sand and sugar.

I then slung them over the bar and tried puncturing them to let the contents hit the floor. They looked like terrible lumps and emptied very poorly. I tried coloring the sugar with fabric dye and it solidified the sugar into a rock. After breaking it into smaller pieces and sifting it, it would still clump up in the clothing and not drain out. I started looking for different clothing, and ended up finding a pink dress, thigh high leopard boots, woolly long underwear, a plaid collared shirt, bright purple purses, and a wedding dress. These clothing items did not work, except for the wedding dress. By the time my first critique (fall semester 2015) I had not figured out how I would get sugar or sand in a wedding dress, sew it closed, and get it to hang over the bar. I hung the dress over the bar with nothing inside it, and that element ended up being the most discussed component of my experiments.

The Bride Has Arrived

I focused on the wedding dress as the subject of my “tripod piece.” I looked at different ways I could seal the dress and fill it with sand or sugar, but after I bought my first twenty-five-pound bag of sugar I realized there would no way I could fill a wedding dress and not have it weigh up to two hundred or three hundred pounds. At that point the dress would not only tear itself apart but there was no way I would be able to lift it for transportation or installation. So I started thinking about how I had previously made a

papier-mâché unicorn head look like it was vomiting by attaching pantyhose inside its mouth. I wanted to have the unicorn appear sick from a weekend of partying but not pour materials on the floor that I would have to continuously clean up. I decided I could fill pantyhose with sand or sugar and hide these inside the dress. I had purchased a large bag of artificial sweetener because it had the same volume but was much lighter than granulated sugar. This was a grave mistake; artificial sweetener does not stay in pantyhose. The fine powder-like substance fell right through and submerged me in a cloud of sugary defeat. I then tried granulated sugar and it was perfect in the way it showed the individual coloring of the different pantyhose. The sugar filled pantyhose also had an intestinal or visceral appearance to them. As I experimented with different colors, sizes of pantyhose and varying amounts of sugar, I quickly realized that I need to find many more pairs of pantyhose; at the same time, I was on a daily quest to find wedding dresses for more testing.

“Nobody Likes a Bad Omen” and the Weird Rules of Thrift Stores

My artistic practice slowly changed as I visited local thrift stores to look for most of my materials. Each store had to be visited to acquire the materials; I could not call ahead to see if what I was looking for was there. The first time I called, I was informed about the rule that if a customer calls the store to ask what is there the employees can not tell them. The customer must come to the store to look, that way they have a better chance of the customer buying something while they are in the store. I ended up picking specific days and locations to go to multiple stores during the week. I traveled several hours a week to obtain supplies. Each trip became an expedition; each thrift store was its own archeological dig. I was sifting through what was considered to be junk or waste. The societal and cultural debris of American thrift stores is astounding. I went back to the thrift store I purchased my first wedding dress from and was able to find two more. Each of the three wedding dresses have a variety of beading, appliqués, and long lacy sleeves; these sleeves have the appearance of arms reaching out when the dresses are hung. I saw pantyhose being sold at a much lower price at the thrift stores I was

frequenting and I started collecting them as well.

In November of 2015 I was still looking for wedding dresses. During the previous month there had been a large selection to choose from and I asked a sales clerk where they had all gone. I was then informed that wedding dresses were considered Halloween costumes in the thrift store business. After Halloween the leftover wedding dresses are sent back to a warehouse till the next year. I was very surprised and asked if they would get more in over time. The sales clerk told me, "Maybe, every once and awhile, nobody buys them, because nobody likes a bad omen." This explanation really surprised me: Had I been buying bad omens? Was this because only a failed marriage would cause a wedding dress to appear at a thrift store? I was then given the impression that only a bitterly divorced woman was capable of such blasphemous things. I did look online later and it seems like the subject of wearing a used wedding dress and it being bad luck is still heavily discussed to this day; however, the overall responses I read were mostly positive, saying that saving money from buying a used wedding dress brought good luck.

Installation and Experimentation

As I brought my materials into the studio, I started composing my installation techniques. The wedding dresses quickly turned into a curtain of white silk, lace, and beads. I hung the pantyhose forms filled with sugar and brightly colored sand through the dresses. These forms seeped and drained the sand and sugar beautifully. The sand caught and built up in the lace and embroidery, and highlighted the patterns and textures. I decided I wanted to hang a wedding dress completely upside down, by installing large eyelets and using hardware for lifting heavy equipment. I started seeing these dresses as animal skins or even carcasses and bought a gambrel to experiment with. The results were surprising and I knew I needed to cautiously move forward. My intention was to evoke a subtle violence. I believe if a work is merely gory, then it amounts to shock art with no purpose outside of disturbing the audience and can only add to our current levels of desensitization. Through different installation attempts and

critiques, I finalized *Curiosity and Female Accomplishments*, 2016, (fig.1) and *Big Game Hunter/ Say Yes to the Dress*, 2016 (fig.2). I was still working on a large fabricated frame that had the dimensions of a standard telephone booth. It contained shelves of expanded metal with a large fabricated grain chute feeding into the top like half of an hourglass. Over several months I was collecting colanders, strainers, and sieves to install on the shelves. This piece did not meet its full potential in time for my thesis show and was therefore left out of my exhibition.

My third sculpture, *Milk(h)er: Buying the Cow Does Not Make the Milk Free*, 2016, (fig.3) was still being developed with sugar filled pantyhose that were tied with fishing line and had a visceral appearance. I was considering adding a rural or agricultural element that would work with the other components of my installation pieces. My partner grew up on a farm and brought me a milker that his family had used when they had dairy cows. I made a foam armature to put in a wedding dress that would be crawling out of the milker with breast forms coming out of the neck of the dress. The breast forms would circle back towards the inflations of the milker and appear being milked by the machine. Calf nipples were added to the forms in order to look like a hybrid of a breast and an udder. Through critique, the dress was edited out and the nipples were further augmented to appear more like flesh. The end results were uncanny.

Section III: The Body of Work:

Space-making for the Unquantifiable

My finished body of work consisted of three installations: *Curiosity and Female Accomplishments* (fig.1), *Big Game Hunter/ Say Yes to the Dress* (fig.2), and *Milk(h)er: Buying the Cow Does Not Make the Milk Free* (fig.3). These pieces contain critical elements that have forged connections with Surrealism, contemporary Feminist art practices, and my own narrative. As I was developing my thesis work, I learned through discussion and critique, that what I was creating was a space to investigate ideas and emotions; things that are not easily measured. This is similar to the Surrealist's ideology about freeing the subconscious, working within dreams and fantasies, and creating work with "complexity, ambiguity and symbolism."⁴⁶

I found these notions in Ann Hamilton's *Myein*, 1999. The title is an ancient Greek verb meaning "to close the eyes or mouth," and the term "myein has come to stand for that thing which has not been, or cannot be, explained."⁴⁷ At the 48th Venice Biennale, magenta pigmented powder falls down braille studded walls as a recording of Abraham Lincoln's second Inaugural Address is spoken in phonetic code. The work was permeating the space but remained imperceptible at the same time. The oversized Braille text was created with white plaster dots on a white wall. Even if an audience member could read Braille, the size of the dots made it impossible. The Braille text on the pavilion walls was Charles Reznikoff's long poem *Testimony: The United States 1885-1915*. This poem was composed of "the testimonies of witnesses in court cases involving property disputes, accidents and acts of violence" and "these acts of description bear witness to things not easily seen or held within an idealized projection of democratic space."⁴⁸ As the magenta powder fell down the walls during the exhibition the Braille became evermore present. The indecipherable layers of speech and text lend themselves to evoking a space of the unquantifiable.

⁴⁶ Valerie J. Fletcher. p. 30

⁴⁷ Anne Hamilton. "Myein, 1999" *Anne Hamilton Studio*, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/projects/myein.html>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

My thesis work attempts a similar practice of space-making. The subject matter of domestic violence, divorce, and addiction most often go unspoken. Discussing these topics is considered taboo. There are invisible barriers in society; what happens at home, stays at home. The wedding dresses are soft and supple, and then slowly empty brightly colored sands onto the floor. As the sand and sugar spill out, the dresses become saturated with the colors of the sand. What starts as white dresses on a clothesline, become garish carcasses or skins of women. It is my intention to utilize complexity, ambiguity, and symbolism in order to engage the viewer in content that is difficult to express. Ernesto Neto's *Just like drops in time, nothing*, 2002, creates a space that awakens the viewers' senses. The work consists of spices placed inside nylon membranes causing olfactory stimulation in the viewer. This subjective experience will vary among the audience and the work will exist in an immeasurable amount of ways through each person's perception, memory, and emotions. By creating this space, viewers senses are activated as they engage the work. Frances Goodman's *The Dream*, 2010, creates a space of refuge comprised of a tent with canopies of embroideries containing excerpts of interviews conducted with unmarried women. These interviews act as a record of the women's feelings tied to societal pressure and expectations; many of the women describe their anxieties from being told that they need to be married by a certain age. An audio recording of the interviews plays in the background, allowing viewers to hear the women discussing how they yearn for the perfect wedding and their confessions that they do desire marriage but are internally conflicted with doubts and fears. This work creates a space for the invisible social anxieties that women experience when they see depictions of weddings and brides in mass media. Erika Engstrom states that "only by closely examining the underlying messages forwarded in such stylized depictions can we understand how the wedding serves as a metaphor for society as a whole, reflective of commonly accepted cultural practices, meanings and values."⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Erika Engstrom. *The Bride Factory: Mass Media Portrayals of Women and Weddings*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012, p. 4

Wedding Dresses and Hosiery as Female Body

My thesis work combines wedding dresses and hosiery to evoke the presence of the fragmented female bodies seen in Surrealism and reclaimed in contemporary Feminist art. Through my research, I have found that the wedding dress is used as a stand in for the female body in the work of many women artists in the last 20 years. Lesley Dill's *Dada Poem Wedding Dress*, 1994, is a dress created with paper and printed with lines from Emily Dickinson's poem *The Soul has Bandaged Moments*. Lucy Brown's *Wedding Cage*, 1998, is a dress shaped sculpture made from shredded wedding dresses and takes on the form of a venus fly trap waiting to grab its next female prey. Susie MacMurray's *A Mixture of Fralities*, 2004, is a dress made of 1400 household gloves that have been turned inside out that can be seen as commentary about the subservient role of the woman in marriage. Chiharu Shiota's *Dialogue with Absence*, 2010, features a painted white dress hung on a wall that is perforated with tubes pumping red liquid. The tubing and pumps take over the surrounding floor and form a nest. The pumps hum and push the bright red blood through the tube-like veins, creating a dreamy yet anxious atmosphere. Julia Ramsey's *Engaged*, 2011, is an installation featuring two dress forms that "explore a modern woman's ambiguity toward marriage...two wedding gowns, two story lines, two slogans;" one is titled *IN THE AIR*, "a knitted dress of golden thread and tulle suspended above ground;" the other is titled *TIED-UP*, "a crocheted gown bound in a web of ribbon and rope; two outlooks on the trappings of an age-old tradition."⁵⁰

Curiosity and Female Accomplishments (fig.1) and *Big Game Hunter/ Say Yes to the Dress* (fig.2) both activate wedding dresses as a symbol for the female body. They are hung upside down and slung over a bar like animals that are being drained and skinned. This is my commentary on the socially constructed expectations of women, weddings, and marriage. Engstrom describes how the media versions of weddings not

⁵⁰ Julia Ramsey. *Engaged*, 2011, *Collections: Julia Ramsey Knitwear*, Accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.juliaramseyknitwear.com/collections/#engaged-1>

only portray “a stylized picture of the most intimate, yet public, moment of peoples lives,” but also “further enhances common perceptions about the way human beings express and acknowledge feelings of love and commitment.”⁵¹ I am critical of these portrayals because of the domestic violence that took place in my home, my parents’ divorce, and my own Feminist beliefs. Engstrom states that “media versions of weddings reflect current gender norms and roles, those associated with divisions of labor and expectations of behaviors, wants, and expertise; and for women, weddings serve as a site where gender socialization comes to the forefront.”⁵²

Curiosity and Female Accomplishments (fig.1) consists of three white wedding dresses slung over an elevated bar and are slowly draining colorful sand and processed white sugar onto the surrounding floor. This installation is an interpretation of the Bluebeard fairytale and it’s moral lesson about “the perils of curiosity: In spite of its great charms, curiosity/ Often brings with it serious regrets.../ For once satisfied, curiosity offers nothing,/ And ever does it cost more dearly.”⁵³ The story describes the youngest of three sisters who marries a beastly man. She is given keys to every room in his castle, but is told to avoid using one specific key. Once Bluebeard leaves, she uses the forbidden key and opens the room that holds all of bodies of Bluebeard’s previous wives. The key is stained with blood and no matter what she can not wash it clean. Bluebeard returns, discovers that she has been in the room, and sentences her to death. She is able to escape once her brothers arrive and kill Bluebeard. The story is full of symbolism and has been interpreted by scholars in a multitude of ways. Clarissa Pinkola-Estés Ph.D states that,

“early in the formulation of classical psychology women’s curiosity was given quite a negative connotation, whereas men with the same attribute were called investigative. Women were called nosy, whereas men were called inquiring. In reality, the trivialization of women’s curiosity so that it seems like nothing more than irksome

⁵¹ Erika Engstrom. p. 14

⁵² Ibid., 14

⁵³ Charles Perrault. *Perrault’s Complete Fairy Tales*, Originally published as *Stories or Fairy Tales from Past Time with Morals or Mother Goose Tales* in 1697, Paris. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1961) p. 68

snooping denies women's insight, hunches, intuitions. It denies all her senses. It attempts to attack her most fundamental powers: differentiation and determination.⁵⁴

Pinkola-Estés sees the room as a symbol of forbidden knowledge and the key is permission to that knowledge, which the sister is denied to use. She describes how psychological thinkers such as Freud and Bruno Bettelheim interpreted components of the story as “psychological punishments for women's sexual curiosity.”⁵⁵ This would mean the bloody key that cannot be washed clean is a symbol of the youngest sister's virginity. Once Bluebeard sees the bloody key or his bride's loss of virginity, thereby, losing her own worth, he is thrown into a rage and plans to murder her. The three dresses in my installation act as stand-ins for Bluebeard's slaughtered wives who are found behind the door of forbidden knowledge. In all of the versions of the story, the murdered wives' bodies are described as being fragmented, mutilated, and destroyed somewhat similar to Surrealist images of female bodies. The story of Bluebeard contains many Surrealist ideas about women, like the youngest sister as a *femme-enfant*, [child-woman] and women serving as a source and object of Bluebeard's male desire.

Big Game Hunter/ Say Yes to the Dress (fig.2), uses the name of one of the many reality television shows with a narrative that focuses exclusively on the bride's appearance. “The wedding gown commands a magical and almost holy status” in this type of programming.⁵⁶ These women come from all walks of life, yet all of them leave as “generic, identity-less women who wear a specific uniform considered legitimate and acceptable for today's American wedding.”⁵⁷ These women can be interpreted as Bluebeard's wives, who also lost their identity after being murdered by their groom. *Big Game Hunter* alludes to the gambrel used to hang the dress upside down. This device

⁵⁴ Clarissa Pinkola-Estés. *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 47-48

⁵⁵ Bruno Bettelheim. *Uses of Enchantment: Meaning and Importance of Fairytales*, (New York: Knopf, 1976)

⁵⁶ Erika Engstrom. p. 119

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 132

is used to hang animals in order to drain them of blood, remove guts and skin, and butcher the meat. It acts as a Surrealist pun because the act of processing the animal is known as “dressing.” However, the gambrel resembles a clothes hanger and was often interpreted as a regular hanger during critique; at times it was also read as a BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism) device.

The hosiery inside the dresses also represents women’s bodies and a variety of skin colors were used with the intention of illustrating an inclusivity among races. The hosiery filled with colored sand represented blood and viscera; these were also consistently read by viewers as breasts, ova, gonads, menstruation, miscarriages, and abortions. As I made my work in the studio, I continued to research the use of the same materials in contemporary Feminist art.

Senga Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.*, 1977, was an installation of hosiery that was activated by her performance. As Nengudi twisted her body in the installation and stretched the pantyhose into web-like strands, the hosiery attained different meanings of bondage, lynching, sex, birth and death, all in direct relation to women’s bodies. Sarah Lucas stuffed hosiery with pillow filler and used them to compose piles of entrails in her *NUDS*, 2009-10. She depicts female bodies in her work by forming clouds of breasts, long splayed open legs, and protruding buttocks with hosiery. Lucas places these soft and supple female fragments into everyday found objects like chairs, buckets, toilets, tables, and mattresses, creating Surrealist woman objects. Similar to Neto and Nengudi, I am filling the hosiery inside the wedding dresses with sand and sugar, thereby creating pendulous shapes. However, I want the hosiery I use to slowly empty its contents onto the floor, once in place. As the surrounding floor is covered with the sand and sugar the work needs to be recharged with newly filled hosiery.

After completing my installations, I read about similar Sisyphean labor involving sand in Andrea Dworkin’s *Intercourse*, as she discusses the symbolism in Kōbō Abe’s novel *The Woman in the Dunes*, published in 1962. A man finds himself in an unfamiliar town after missing the last bus out while on a trip. He is offered lodging in a women’s house at the bottom of a vast sand pit. When he tries to leave the next day, he becomes

aware that the locals intend to hold him captive and compel him to shovel the ever-advancing sand dunes that threaten the town. Dworkin states,

“The sand in *The Woman in the Dunes* is life itself with its crushing disregard for personality or fairness of reason or the defense built up against its unceasing and formless flow: life here is precisely identical with sexuality, also crushing, formless, shapeless, merciless...carried by life and sex towards death, the human experience is one of being pushed until crushed.”⁵⁸

In my work, the draining of the sand and sugar represents mortality, similar to the symbolism of an hourglass; however, once the contents fully empties, I can not easily flip the dresses to reset them. This is why I feel so drawn to Dworkin’s interpretation of Abe’s Novel and the ceaseless labor of clearing the sand. In the novel, the sand is all encompassing and permeates all aspects of life, creating more of a sense of surviving than living. I observed this in my installation, as the sand and sugar flows out onto the surrounding floor it was indifferent to its surroundings, similar to the brutal environment in the novel. My work also visualized Dworkin’s concepts of sexuality: the dresses had a ruthless presence. The dresses were cruelly displayed like trophies collected by a remorseless hunter. If dating is similar to hunting an animal, then marriage can be read as an equivalent to the kill.

Consumable Bodies

The Feminist art historian, Linda Nochlin has written at length about the image of women in art and women making art. In her book, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, she describes the title of the chapter *Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art*, as “actually [being] redundant” because there was no such thing as erotic art that did not involve the imagery of women.⁵⁹ This imagery of women was “created out of male needs and desires,” and at that time there was no need to

⁵⁸ Andrea Dworkin. *Intercourse*, (New York: The Free Press, 1987), p. 27

⁵⁹ Linda Nochlin. “*Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art*” in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) p. 137

create art “based upon women’s erotic needs, wishes, or fantasies.”⁶⁰ Nochlin concludes that there was no place for women in the art world because of the lack of erotic art *for* women instead of “*about* women.”⁶¹ Since women were not purchasing art, there was no outlet for them; “no[r] imagery available—no accepted public language to hand—with which to express their particular viewpoint.”⁶² It is without this language, that they are left out of the formulation of visual metaphors in erotic imagery.

The fragmentation, mutilation, and destruction of the female body in Surrealist art causes the body parts to be easily consumed metaphorically as objects and food. The female body is consistently objectified by the Surrealist male artists: made into furniture, household items, goods, and consumed by a male audience. *Achetez des Pommes [Buy Some Apples]*, circa 19th C. is the *demi-porn* photographic image of a nude woman holding a tray of apples, with her breasts resting in line with the fruit. This is an example of one of the primary visual metaphors that has been placed on the female body. Paul Gauguin’s *Tahitian Women with Mango Blossoms*, 1899, and Paul Cézanne’s *Amorous Shepherd*, 1883-85 are both examples of the female body being likened to fruit; a consumable object. Nochlin describes that even though these images at times can be “laughable triviality” there are “echoes of a grand, universal, and time-honored metaphor [that] still reverberates in them.”⁶³ A modern counterpart, made by Nochlin herself, is titled *Achetez des Bananes [Buy Some Bananas]*, 1972. This photographic image is of a nude man holding a tray of bananas with his penis in line with the fruit. Nochlin describes the food-penis metaphor as having a reductive effect on the male subject; consciously simplifying him into an object of female desire. This is the opposite of the unconscious male celebration of the female breast as fruit. Most importantly, she says that her photograph presents “the male body as a source of gentle, inviting satisfaction for women’s erotic needs, demands, and daydreams.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ibid., 138

⁶¹ Ibid., 138

⁶² Ibid., 139

⁶³ Ibid., 141

⁶⁴ Ibid., 142

The metaphor of woman as food has been reclaimed by contemporary Feminist artists. This can be seen in Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress*, 1987, when the artist herself wore a dress made of steaks, Janine Antoni's *Lick and Lather*, 1993, as the artist licks self-portrait busts of chocolate and bathes with self-portrait busts of soap, and in Sarah Lucas' *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs*, 1996, showing the artist photographed with two fried eggs on her chest. All three artists are using their own bodies to activate the work. These self representations reference the previous discussion of women Surrealists reclaiming their own "self-consciousness about social constructions of femininity as surface and image."⁶⁵ This includes Dorothy Cross' *Virgin Shroud*, 1993, that uses a cow skin as a veil draped over a human shaped armature. The fur covered human form references the fur lined teacup in Oppenheim's *Object*, 1936. The nipples of the udder outlines a crown on the figure's head and a satin train at the bottom gives the piece a bridal presence. The nipples can be read as a reference to the feeding and nurturing that is attributed to cows and women. The skin veil is composed of one whole piece of skin without a single opening for the wearer; rendering them silent, blind, and at the mercy of her presumed groom. This piece was influential to my sculpture *Milk(h)er: Buying the Cow Does Not Make the Milk Free* (fig.3) which features a stainless steel milker with elongated breast-like udders emerging from the top of the can that then circle back towards the inflations with long jutting nipples. The udders and the viscera they lay on are all made of hosiery filled with processed white sugar that is slowly leaking with the appearance of milk. I am seeking a similar parallel between women and cows as Cross, while referencing the idiom "why buy the cow if you can get the milk for free." This expression is better understood as "why pay for something when you can get it for free" or "why put forth the commitment of marriage when you can get sex without it." My interpretation and personal belief is that even with marriage, sex is never free. The institution of marriage should never render a woman's body and sex as a consumable right of man. The long breast forms resemble a ouroboros, an ancient symbol most often seen as a serpent swallowing its own tail, and

⁶⁵ Whitney Chadwick. 1998 p. 6

is a representation of the cyclicity of creation and description; life and death. I am summoning the notion that this work exists in multitudes and can be interpreted at length. Chadwick states

“Partial exile from the body, recording the body through its absence or trace, or importing it elsewhere may reveal psychological dimensions of the self, political understanding, emotional awareness, or all of these. Such strategies, common both to Surrealism and to later performative acts by women that refuse the body as biologically determined or visually objectified, cannot be reduced to single meanings.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Ibid., 30

CONCLUSION

I found the development of my sculptures to be challenging because of its personal nature, materiality, and how it would be received by my family and the viewer. The content was at times trying. My older sister was planning her wedding as I was producing this work. My mother had requested that I stay away from social media, where I was posting research about marriage and domestic violence, until my sister's wedding was over. My parents attended my exhibition opening and while my father was troubled over the wording in my artist statement, my mother waited until we got to the car and then demanded that I explain my work to her. It was as if neither of my parents remembered what had happened in our house.

As children, my sister and I both witnessed my parents yelling, fighting, and watching the police arrive. I remember watching them shine a light into my mother's face, looking for a bruise. When they took my dad that night, I remember his dirty socks were laying on the bushes next to the front door; I do not know why. I remember being sick as a child, around Christmas time because the tree was in the living room. I remember my father pushing my mother and as she's falling into the tree the ornaments pulse and shine with the impact. I remember the divorce and my father's lawyer demanded that my sister and I get tested for behavioral problems. I think the lawyer was insisting that my sister and I were troubled by the divorce and my father was seeking full custody. I remember the day of tests, when I had to go look at pictures of shapes and move colorful blocks around to mimic the image; in the end, my sister and I were determined to be fine. I remember my mom telling me that my father would smoke marijuana in the garage before heading off to work. I remember that he had been injured many times while working as an ironworker and had developed a severe Vicodin dependence. I remember my mother telling me that she did not want to have any more children with my father after I was born and that is why she had her tubes tied. All of these parts of my memory, I realized I may not share with my sister. I think she saw the normalcy that other children had and yearned for it. I think I was never able to identify what that was. I have wondered if there was gas-lighting, but I never felt like I was being

manipulated by my parents. I remember when I would question them about domestic abuse and there was consistent denial from both parents. I feel like I was always met with answers like, “That’s water under the bridge,” “How can you even remember/think about any of that,” “Why are you even bringing that up?” and, “I don’t remember that.” My older sister never questioned my parents about the past and I came to realize that I had a different experience growing up than her.

Once my sister left for college, I was on my own in our house. The first December I finished making candy at my high school friend’s house, when I called my mother to come pick me up. She was drunk and insisted I get my father to come get me. When I got home, she was smoking in bed (my parents never smoked in the house.) Once she started to tell me that I would be better off without her, I realized what was happening. The previous year, the oldest boy among the neighborhood kids I would play with as a child, had hung himself in his family’s garage across the street. I was sixteen and it felt like everything was falling apart. I remember my mother’s boyfriend she had while she was still drinking. He was a manipulator, liar, and drug addict. He would ridicule my mother for going to AA, but then go missing in Milwaukee for days on a drug binge. There were shouting matches between him and my mother; and over time I would start yelling at my mother as well.

These are just fragments of my childhood and adolescence. As I was making my thesis work, I entered into my first serious relationship. We started making plans to live together and parts of my memories would make me question my ability to start a home with another person. This work has been a cathartic experience for me. My work and research have provided me with a kind of reconciliation of my past and present. My discomfort in what is considered a normal domestic environment combined with my actual experience growing up pushed me to re-evaluate myself as a woman and an artist. This work is contextualized within this space; my unquantifiable space.

The materiality of my thesis work and the labor of caring for the installation speaks to my necessity to represent subject matter that is often ignored. The physical force of the sand and its ability to permeate a space, gave me what I needed to

visualize my past experiences, and at the time, current fears of the stages of womanhood and the institution of marriage. My pieces are always in flux, giving them their own mortality. For much of my existence, life has always felt similar to the sand that was slipping through my hands as I was making my work. These pieces demand a Sisyphean labor in order to live, and as I gave myself to the process of the work, I realized that I was creating more than I was ever losing; a lesson I hope to carry into my future work.

My greatest concern was the reception of the work by my audience. I had anxiety about the work being too crude or violent, and that instead of my intended narratives and experiences the viewers in my audience would be reliving a personal trauma. It was from the countless critiques and conversations that I met a fellow artist and colleague who survived an even more brutal home life than myself. She told me that my work spoke to her experience and that being able to see work that actualizes how we both are coping with our histories was therapeutic. I am honored to be entrusted with her story and it is because of our collective experiences that I was empowered to pursue the depiction of our voices in these portrayals of female bodies.

At the opening reception I overheard a young male viewer say to a young woman, "I think it's about how women let themselves go after marriage." I find this anecdotal to my work because it exemplifies why I need to keep making and researching. My most recent work has been based in using female assigned domestic items such as kitchen hot pads, women's scarves and handkerchiefs as the material to grow large borax crystals. I am using a common household cleaner to freeze the items into crystallized forms. I am interested in taking a familiar domestic object and growing it into an artifact that resembles a geological specimen. My current research is centered around what is considered women's labor and discussions about the allocation of emotional labor in the private and public spheres.



(fig.1) *Curiosity and Female Accomplishments*, Sarah Taavola, 2016, Steel, Wedding Dresses, Pantyhose, Sand, and Sugar



(fig.2) *Big Game Hunter/ Say Yes to the Dress*, Sarah Taavola, 2016, Steel, Wedding Dress, Pantyhose, Sand, and Sugar



(fig.3) *Milk(h)er: Buying the Cow Does Not Make the Milk Free*, Sarah Taavola, 2016, Milker, Pantyhose, Nipples, and Sugar

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