

**The Transmutation of Visceral Desecration:  
marginalized women, murder and the urban environment contextualized in film**

By

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## **abstract**

This thesis is made up of a 35mm film, *reinsertion*, and a praxis paper that investigated my film processes and research, concerning the missing and murdered women of Vancouver. The catalyst was my experience living in a city in shock during the Pickton Trial. In 2007 Robert Pickton was charged with 26 counts of First Degree Murder. He was tried and found guilty for six out of a possible 26 murders that took place on his pig farm in Coquitlam. My goal was to create a film that positions the responsibility of the murders on the City of Vancouver, its police, City Hall and residents. My research focused on my personal experiences in the community and feminist discourse. Through the creation of an experimental film about the murders, I explored ideas such as authorship, experiential art and absence as representation. Simultaneously, the film subliminally communicates the trauma of the aforementioned women.

This thesis pursues several key questions:

- Can a city be a sexual predator?
- Who has the right to tell a story?
- Can film emote without narrative?

It concludes that a society, by inaction, can condone atrocities, that the stories we tell are inherently our own and that trauma can be communicated through subtle movements, gestures or objects.

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Vancouver, Canada. December 2011

## **dedication**

This thesis and my film *reinsertion* are dedicated to the missing and murdered women from the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver.

## **inspiration**

An 'aesthetics of sensation' describes the connections, the energies, the molecular connections of consciousness and nervousness within the mind/body/brains of those who experience the film as a material encounter. In this perspective, texts or films it might be argued are also bodies.

Barbara Kennedy (53)

Philosophy is motivated by dark sentiments: a “discontent,” a certain anguish, an uneasiness about living, an obscure sense of guilt. By contrast, the first figure of the transmutation elevates multiplicity and becoming to their highest power and makes of them objects of an affirmation. In the affirmation of the multiple lies the practical joy of the diverse.

Gilles Deleuze (82)

## introduction

Yes, I intend to transmute a visceral desecration. This thought, the title of my praxis paper, is the intent of my research and film, *reinsertion*. By visceral desecration, I refer to an act of sexual violence that leads to the mental or physical destruction of the victim. Specifically, I refer to the shocking deaths on the Pickton farm<sup>1</sup>. I intend to transmute my thoughts and emotional responses concerning these deaths into an experimental film and a social statement. Deleuze describes transmutation as “a *triumph of affirmation in the will to power*” (82 emphasis his). I reference Deleuze here because I believe that through the creation of art we can affirm the lives of the missing and murdered by acknowledging and mourning their deaths. The Cultural Memory Group, in their studies of memorials across Canada, state that survivors of sexual or gender based violence and their allies, through the creation of memorials can bring about healing in themselves and their communities. I align myself with others witnessing and creating works about sexual violence.

The raw materials for this praxis are my personal memories and the experience that I have living in a community where seventy-one women are missing or murdered (MISSINGPEOPLE.NET). The stories I disclose to you here are an autobiographical dialogue, and the points of departure that acted as a springboard to the creation of my thesis film. I did not conduct empirical research into the murders, the trial, or the

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<sup>1</sup> The Pickton farm is a large farm in Coquitlam at 953 Dominion Avenue. Pickton's brother Dave had a party house nearby called “Piggy's Palace” (Mudede).

dangers that women face working on the streets, before or after the Pickton trial. My purpose was not to create a documentary. My purpose was to create a film that memorializes and communicates the trauma of the victimized women and explores the culpability of the City of Vancouver. I simultaneously did readings that questioned my authority as a witness and artist.

My purpose was to capture photographic images representative of my trains of thought concerning the missing women, and to create a narrative from my research and memories. I considered both the origins of gathered facts and my emotions. After shooting and processing of the film negatives I entered into a meditative state as I retreated into a room for editing for two weeks to compile disparate images into a film. Finally, I held my breath in the screening room as my vision unfurled. This praxis paper is a description of the research and methodology necessary to the production of *reinsertion*.

Some of my research is unconventional within an academic context; I present autobiographical accounts and my response to living in a world where women disappear. Within this paper short conversations from my past are presented in script form. These scenes will not appear in the film. From my own internal perspective, I contemplate the disappearances of approximately seventy-one women from the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver (MISSINGPEOPLE.NET). For the past decade I have been aware of disappearances of women, and I felt that there were murders connected to them.

## telling a story

Central to my praxis and film is the question of who has the power or the right to tell a story. I have only a tenuous grasp upon my chosen subjects: the missing and murdered women from the Downtown Eastside, the victims of Robert Pickton. I could embark upon a series of interviews with friends and family of the victims and other missing women or I could make up fiction. I resolved to examine my past for connections. This focus on my personal experiences as a woman in the Downtown Eastside positions *reinsertion* an auto-ethnographic film. I am telling a story about myself in order to tell a story about my community. I am not speaking from inside the community of these women. I am not a friend, colleague or family. I am speaking as a neighbour and fellow woman. I currently reside on the perimeter of the Downtown Eastside and lived (for two years previously) within five blocks of Hastings and Main<sup>2</sup>. Despite this, I am very much an outsider.

In making *reinsertion* I am very much aware that I am neither friend nor family of any of the victims. I speak from my personal experiences living in the Downtown Eastside and my personal experiences as a survivor of sexual violence. My personal experiences are essential to the creative process and ethical bias of this project. I know how it feels to be propositioned by a john, to be followed home by a john in a car, and to fear for my safety. I am an outsider who has experiences that

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<sup>2</sup> Hastings and Main is the epicentre of the Downtown Eastside, psychologically if not geographically.

connect and with a story to tell. Women's stories have traditionally been ignored; bell hook's phrase, "the right speech of womanhood" implies speech that is able to be ignored, suitable for the societal position of women (*Talking Back* 6). If that is so, then my desire in this work is to speak wrongly. Rather than appropriate another's utterance, I desire to speak for myself, to stand among the numbers of women who have experienced sexual violence to say: "Silenced No More!"

Traditionally, women artists have created work from biblical stories, history, and commissioned works of portraiture. Within the confines of these subjects Artemisia Gentileschi, in 1620, made striking work to depict powerful heroines from the Old Testament (Heller 30). Although Gentileschi did not make autobiographical work about her experiences of rape, by her art instructor in 1612, this series of paintings depict women with an unusual ferocity, "vulnerability and strength" (Heller 30). Some artists such as Nancy Spero used the Holocaust to tell stories specific to women (Bohm-Duchen in Feinstein 65). I feel I can only explore women's issues from my own experience.

In the film, *reinsertion*, I combine the potential of auto-ethnographic research methodologies with artistic practice, to address the marginalization of women living within Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The imbrication of myself, as artist, and the missing women, as subject, is essential to my material practice (Ronai 4). I am not telling anyone's specific story in this film; I indicate this through the absence of characters, or subjects, in my film. The viewer will not develop any relationship to

people who occupy the screen for between two and eight frames as characters in the film. The only shot in which a viewer might identify a character is in a six frame zoom, a self portrait, through which I address my own presence and the autobiographical nature of film. The camera does not act as an authority—revealing characters or stories to the viewer. Rather, the camera captures moments that we might experience in common with the unseen, implied subjects of the film. I film specific sites that figure into the story: specific corners where women were last seen working, locations where women's remains were disposed of, a store where Pickton sold his pork. I do not photograph the farm in Coquitlam where women died, because I am staying within the boundaries of Vancouver and my personal related experience.

Rather than approach my subjects didactically, or from an aesthetic perspective, I attempt to create an empathic, immersive relationship with them. This autobiographical experiential approach aligns my work with “third wave” feminists (Heywood 2). I position myself within “third wave” feminists who reject the attack of Naomi Wolf in her early work and Katie Roiphe when they coined, “victim feminism” and “rape crisis feminism” respectively (Heywood 59). Wolf and Roiphe were speaking from within the ranks of well-educated privileged women. There is a need, within feminism, for the voice of women who are not privileged and who have felt the effects of sexual or domestic violence. The Cultural Memory Group suggest that



public feminist gatherings such as “Take Back the Night”<sup>3</sup> and memorial installations for the École Polytechnique Massacre<sup>4</sup> and other public monuments memorializing “women murdered by men” are a way to promote change.

While my film is dedicated to the missing and murdered women of Vancouver it is not meant to act as a memorial. My intent is to show that by living in proximity to these women, I developed feelings of kinship towards them. The change that I might wish to promote is to inspire women to feel more solidarity towards marginalized and dispossessed women. I am making this film about a serial killing of women from my neighborhood, however; essentially, it is my own story being told. It is this intimacy with the inner workings of my own mind, that of the filmmaker, which became the crux of my thesis. James Peterson describes the ‘poetic avant-garde’ in film to be intimate in two ways: first, it is personally controlled, and second, it is about the private concerns of the filmmaker (Peterson 29). I worked with the structure of the film to communicate danger, fear, and terror. During the making of the film, I visited and photographed specific locations where Picton’s victims were last seen. Two locations happen to be within blocks of my home in 1996. My experiences and my response to living in the Downtown Eastside, an environment where such disappearances became commonplace, is what the film will reveal.

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<sup>3</sup> “Take back the Night” is a peaceful protest against Sexual Violence, a march of women and their allies often with speakers or a candlelight vigil. It has taken place in cities internationally since the late 1970’s.

<sup>4</sup> On December 6, 1989 Marc Lepine opened fire at the École Polytechnique in Montréal. Fourteen women died as a result. He began the shooting spree by “separating the men in one classroom from the women. He told the women, ‘I am fighting feminism.’”(Sourour 7).

## **origins of *reinsertion***

Abstraction has been my preferred methodology for the past ten years. Remaining central to my work is my attention to the visceral response to various types of sexual violence. In the past, I used my own and my friends stories as a survivors of sexual violence as source material. I used the story line and emotive content of these stories in combination with materials derived from myths that have a similar storyline. My past work Includes: the video, *Mythogeny* (1997), and three 35mm films: *insurrection* (1999), *interception* (2002) and *degradation* (2003). These films are primarily abstract. I utilized materials symbolically and created films that pulse with bold colour and high contrast. In *interception* I hand painted four hundred feet of film stock in order to create an colourful montage that interpreted my experiences of being raped. I used a very precise story line that moves from a happy day through to a painful rape, a blackout, and a fearful running escape to shelter. In *interception*, I was asked by a friend to create a film that spoke about her experiences of incest. I connected her story to the fall of Eve, rewriting the story in the garden as the first incestuous act. With Satan as the first incestuous uncle and Adam and Eve, through their enforced innocence, confusing his erect penis for a snake. This story does not appear in the film. I made the film out of thousands of slices of fruit, metaphoric for the garden. When you see the film it is as if you are seeing the fruit used as a negative. I used various methods to vary the impact of the images on the viewer and tell the story subliminally. In *degradation* I connect a myth to an experience that I had when there was a moth infestation in the fruit on the

negatives from *interception*. My description of *degredation* reads,

The film maker finds herself transformed into Pandora as she opens a reel of film and a cloud of insects surround her. A single moth, delicately, invisibly, embedded in the substance of the film symbolizes original sin. The shame and repercussions of incest are represented by, the excrement, cocoons, and dead bodies, of moths and their larva. We see how the insidious spread of disease and evil erupt through the mythological and historical defloration of women. Thousands of moths were killed during the making of this film. Their bodies filled the frames and sprocket holes. Thousands of girls are raped daily, their lives and bodies treated as refuse. (Del Pieve Gobbi)

The frame-rate and juxtaposition of image will communicate to the audience via their autonomic nervous systems (Gehman 170). Through visual and auditory channels, I seek to involve, and even provoke, the viewer's emotional and physical experiences by using rapid, even extreme frame rates as I am photographing the city. I seek to trigger certain physical responses in the viewer: their respiration may increase, they may feel warmer or become restless, they may even leave the theater. Avant-garde filmmakers attribute such responses to the 'flicker effect' (Small 74). My use of the 'flicker effect' and re-photographed frames, I attribute to the influence of structural film, such as that of Conrad and Warhol (Sitney 348). Specific instances, when I re-photograph two Vancouver police stations and city hall in my work manipulating duration are inspired by Rimmer, Snow, and Warhol.

LeGrice has explored the effect of structural film on the viewer and states,

Editing of live-action sequences in the avant-garde film has increasingly tended towards extremely rapid rates of change. One possible reason for this is an implicit search for a film that can function essentially on the psychophysical rather than the psycho-interpretive level. Action on the autonomic system seeks to create a nervous response that is largely pre-conscious. The psychological reactions sought being a direct consequence of physiological function. (LeGrice 106)

These structural elements began with flicker films but have since been used in other types of experimental film and even in mainstream cinema. Stan Brakhage pioneered autobiographical content and further attempted to document thoughts and emotions. Brakhage and other “avant-garde filmmakers developed abstract (non-representational) forms to represent the everyday. They pursued abstract cinematic forms that metaphorically represent states of mind and emotional states” (Lane 13). In 1998 I encountered a Stan Brakhage film, *Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse*, which inspired me to explore the possibilities of abstraction as a possible narrative device. The title of the film prompted me to wonder; I attempted to distil a dramatic narrative from the visual experience. The questions evoked by this film are ongoing in my practice. I was inspired by Brakhage to apply my own experiences as a victim of sexual violence to communicate, using colour and the flicker effect, the catharsis of horror to the viewer.

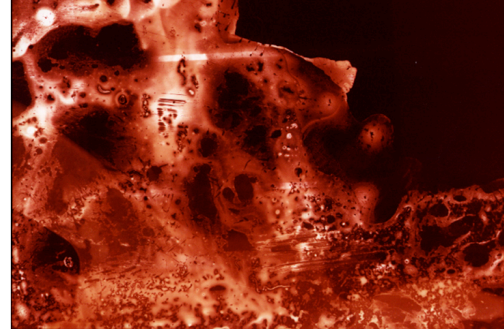
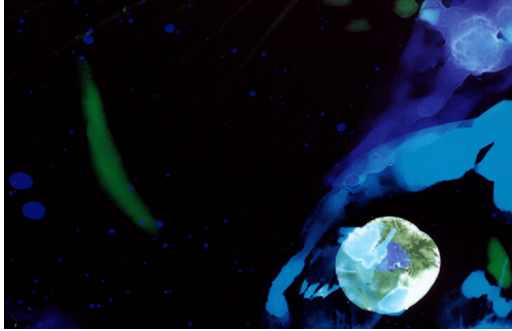


Fig. 1 Del Pieve Gobbi, Rena. *insurrection*. 1999. Vancouver. Film Still.

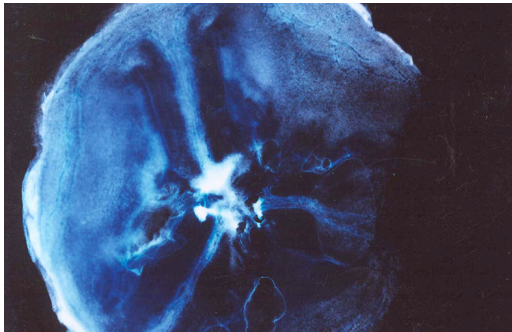


Fig. 2 Del Pieve Gobbi, Rena. *interception*. 2001. Vancouver. Film Still.



Fig. 3 Del Pieve Gobbi, Rena. *degradation*. 2003. Vancouver. Film Still.

I am combining the provocation of physiological responses from the toolkit of the experimental filmmaker with the use of literal images of the Vancouver landscape. This synthesis is how I diverge from my past body of work. My past work was so veiled behind theories of abstract and experimental film that unless I am present to comment, the story remains purely liminal. My past films have concerned themselves with the psyche and experiences of one woman, whereas *reinsertion*

concerns itself with a group of women and their community. Rather than using abstraction exclusively, my new work is a combination of representational and abstract images. This approach is stylistically aligning my work with that of women animators. Women who have depicted sexual violence in animation have also chosen to digress into abstraction during sensitive scenes in their films. Michèle Cournoyer's, *The Hat / Le Chapeau*, is described by the NFB thus:

A young woman works as an exotic dancer in a bar. The customers' hats remind her of a man she knew as a child, who also wore a hat. The man entered her bedroom, turned back the sheets and laid his hand on her body. She cannot forget how he defiled her (NFB).

*The Hat / Le Chapeau* is further described as a “visceral experience” in which. “The filmmaker, with naked honesty, invites the audience to share in the pain of a woman (NFB).” Cournoyer depicts this story through a pen and ink rendition in which images morph in quick succession: his fedora becomes the dress of a small girl, the buttocks of an adult woman, and the balls of the man become a small girl, the girl's torso becomes an immense penis.

The morphing of objects to tell a story of a sexual assault on a young girl is also used across the world in Korea. In *Daddy and I*, a mother leaves a small girl at home alone; her father comes home and after watching a beauty pageant and some soft porn he turns upon his daughter. She tries to escape running and leaps into the fish tank becoming a guppy or gold fish. The father follows, morphing into a shark

and then a penis. Five Korean college students co-directed *Daddy and I* using extremely evocative images. The official synopsis reads, “A sexually abused child transports herself into a fantastic place within her mind to escape her terrible ordeal (Daddy and I Web).” This sensitive portrayal of sexual violence cuts through our learned experience of film as spectacle. With the use of suggestive images, the authors of these two films portray the rape of children without graphic or voyeuristic sexual images of children and engage the viewer through emotions.

Viewers who engage on an emotional level increase their empathy for victims of sexual violence. An increase in empathy reduces the likelihood of engaging in sexual assault (Foubert 2006). According to Rachel Hall, “the performative recurrence of horror in public representations of sexual violence naturalizes rape in a manner that denies men’s ability to stop raping women” (2004). The exploration of rape narratives in animation heightens the emotive aspects, rather than the voyeuristic, thereby increasing empathy in the relationship of the viewer to the victim, rather than to the representation of the violent act.

*reinsertion* is about prostitution and murder in Vancouver, but you will not see any prostitutes. Likewise, you probably won’t see any plot development. It is very likely that the images in the film will be disturbing to you, not in their content but in their speed, their intensity, and their incongruous colours and juxtaposition. The visceral effect of the film on the autonomic nervous system of the viewer will communicate directly as a synesthetic experience, whereby, “sensation and kinetics affect the

body, of the viewer, and the observer, as much as the mind and the emotions”  
(Kennedy 59).

I use frame rate and duration to evoke abstraction and employ metaphor by implying the characters in the film through their absence in the landscape. The making of the film began as I rode buses through the City of Vancouver in 2007 on my way to school.

The high-profile Pickton Trial was wrapping up as I was beginning the Master of Applied Arts program at Emily Carr University. Each day on my ride through the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver the daily papers, which I found abandoned on my bus, displayed images from the trial: the victims and their families, but mostly Robert Pickton himself, the perpetrator of these shocking crimes. Confronted with these images each day, my psyche recoiled. I began capturing the city on film, from Commercial Drive through the downtown core to the Granville Bridge, as a meditation on the missing women.

I used my 35mm cameras from within the buses where I found the daily papers displaying the trial images. This photographic journey was then transformed into cinematography as I envisioned the creation of a 35mm thematic short, all shot on old half-frame 35mm still cameras, and mostly hand-processed. I shot specific locations and built a sequence with my editing while trying to deny the viewer the familiar film trope of location. The edits in the film have a rhythmic rather than



narrative structure. My notions of editing in *reinsertion* are similar to those that Raul Ruiz describes as *poetic*.

...nor, is poetry found in so-called beautiful things: rivers, landscapes, mountains and sunsets. Rather, we find it in the haphazard intersecting of sequences, in the instances of narrative incoherence and in crossing sight lines. (Ruiz 22).

In my editing process, I cut from shot to shot Cambie Street—the ocean—a busy sidewalk—city hall—Save On Meats— city hall—a busy sidewalk —the ocean— Cambie Street—the ocean. I based my decisions on colour, texture and patterns of repetition. Repeated segments in film reference the past with each repetition serving to add mystery while also increasing our desire to possess the image (Mulvey *Death* 160,161). The fragmented quality of the editing heightens what Mulvey refers to as “the uncanny of the inorganic” (*Death* 172). By freezing the frame the illusion of life created by the twenty-four frames per second required for persistence of vision is broken down. This is used often in live action film as the character in the film dies we see the moment of death as stillness, often as a held frame. Mulvey states that the freeze frame thereby infers that the “still frame’s association with death fuses into the death of the story” (*Death* 70). The repeated still frames in *reinsertion* infer a relationship between City Hall, the police stations and the death of the women.

The creation of an avant-garde film, a *memento mori*, as my personal elegiac

response to the disappearances of women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, presents a difficult challenge. These women are not survivors of sexual violence from whom I can gain permission or information. These issues of appropriation and authorship are shared by many artists creating art about marginalized, homeless and disenfranchised people (Felshin 255). I created film in remembrance of women I did not know. Susan Sontag writes that remembering is ethical (115). Furthermore, Sontag asserts that we do not have the right to claim amnesia concerning the pain of others (114).

## **synesthesia**

Synesthesia is the effective translation of one sensory input into a sensory experience of a different category. Wassily Kandinsky describes it in the following way: “Keen lemon-yellow hurts the eye in time as a prolonged and shrill trumpet-note the ear, and the gazer turns away to seek relief in blue or green” (25). Some people look at a colour and hear a sound. Or inversely, some people see colours when they hear sounds. Others experience a synesthetic effect when looking at numbers or text; they see colours simultaneously. I contextualize the effects of synesthesia as the ability of films to arouse emotions in the viewer.

Experimental films depicting narratives of sexual violence are designed to engage the viewer on a visceral level. Frame rate and colour shifts in the footage translate into affect, creating an experiential moment. The film invites the viewer to enter into and share experience.

I am making a film about a series of violent sexual attacks that ended in death and dismemberment. I am trying to do this without creating a film that is a voyeuristic spectacle. This film has transference of emotions as its main component. I attempt this transference by using ideas based in synesthesia to create an unusual experience for the viewer.

My intention in this film is that the viewer might experience synesthesia while

looking at images of the City of Vancouver, and become aware of their own body, perhaps experience physical sensations, taste or sounds, from something outside their present experience. Ideally, this synesthesia will penetrate into the psyche, transporting the viewer into a different mind-state. In his discussion of a new aesthetic theory, Deleuze describes how contemporary films penetrate into the body of the viewer to communicate through intensity, texture, light, speed, and sound (Kennedy 5). This is explicitly how I intend to communicate to my viewer.

## **Downtown Eastside**

The Downtown Eastside of Vancouver begins at the perimeter of Gastown and extends eastward to within a block from my door and within an inch of my heart.

Each day as I leave my building I walk past women 'working' the four corners of my street. As I walk by I greet them with a simple 'hello' or 'have a nice day.' Some days, I compliment them on an outfit or haircut. I view these women as people in my neighborhood who work in a very difficult profession. Some of the women are transient; I see them once or twice and then they are gone. Other women I see on a regular basis for a while, and then not at all. Sometimes I worry about them, and sometimes I simply hope they have moved on to a better life.

The women I encounter at the perimeter of the Downtown Eastside, are comparatively healthy and do not overtly seem to have lost the battle with drugs or childhood demons. In one of several brief conversations I had with one woman, we talked about the new cut and colour of her hair, and then she shared with me part of her strategy for moving off the street: she was attending life-skills classes at Gastown Vocational<sup>5</sup> and she said they had paid for her haircut. She disappeared shortly thereafter and I didn't see her for almost a year.

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<sup>5</sup> "Gastown Vocational Services (GVS) provides a range of vocational and educational services to both youth and adults who have a mental health disability." February 21 2009. <<http://www.gvsonline.ca>.>

I ran into her again recently on a different corner than usual, just a block farther west. The women had relocated due to the construction of a new storage facility in the neighborhood. I'll take you there...

**1. EXT. STREET. NIGHT**

**1**

RENA

Oh! Hi, I haven't seen you for a while.

WOMAN

Yeah, I was trying to stay away. I was doing good.

RENA

And how are you now? Are you okay?

WOMAN

(shaking her head)

Can I have a hug?

Rena steps off her bicycle and complies with the woman's request. Rena's eyes close tightly and she takes a deep breath.

WOMAN (CONT'D)

Thanks

RENA

Take care. I've been thinking about you.

Rena gets back on her bicycle and rides away. She cycles for a few blocks and then turns and backtracks. The woman is no longer alone and gives Rena a closed, dismissive look. So Rena turns again and rides away.

My relationship with the woman whose conversation I scripted above was fleeting:

no more than a year and a half of periodic encounters. It took six months of nodding hello before we even spoke to each other. This was our last encounter. It was about a year ago. I choose to see her absence as a positive sign.

Prostitution, mental health issues, poverty, broken homes, addictions and in many cases an aboriginal heritage, compounds the situation that kept the missing women on the margins of society. My sensitivity to these issues stems from growing up in Prince George, the southernmost point on the “Highway of Tears”, a stretch of Highway 16 North, through Smithers where many young women disappeared and some have been found dead. In an article published on Friday, October 12, 2007 CTV reported that:

The RCMP on Thursday doubled the list of women who have gone missing on a notorious British Columbia road known as the ‘Highway of Tears.’ Until now police believed nine young women died or went missing along Highway 16, a road that stretches from Prince Rupert to Prince George. But police now believe the number is actually 18. (CTV News Staff)

At the time of this report the murders had already been happening for a long time. In fact the first victim, Gloria Moody, was killed in Williams Lake in 1969 (CTV News Staff).

A male friend of mine went on a grand adventure, camping and hitchhiking across Canada from Toronto to Vancouver that summer. I had always dreamed of such an

adventure but was painfully aware of the danger due to my gender. My friends and I growing up in Prince George were aware of the dangers of the road. My awareness of the disappearances of women from both Highway 16 and from the Downtown Eastside was the starting point of an awareness of my own feminist inclinations. bell hooks describes issues that I have encountered within feminism.

Much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live on the margin. As a consequence, feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences (hooks, *Feminist Theory* xvii).

hooks describes black women as a group having “a social status lower than any other group” (*Feminist Theory*). In Canada, aboriginal women have our lowest social status. In British Columbia this lack of social status contributed to the invisibility of women missing from the “Highway of Tears” and the Downtown Eastside.

After Robert Pickton was charged with the murder of Sherry Irving, Stewart Phillip, president of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, said that the disproportionate number of aboriginal women among the victims reflects a dismissive and discriminatory attitude on the part of police agencies who didn’t look as hard for these marginalized women as they would have if 63 women had disappeared from the British Properties over time. (Anderson 181)



Women missing from the Downtown Eastside were marginalized because of their position as sex trade workers, substance addiction, and mental health issues; racial discrimination compounds the issue. Referring back to the missing women on the “Highway of Tears”, for instance, it was not until the disappearance of Nicole Hoar, a white tree planter, that the public and media took any notice of the disappearances in general.

The term “Highway of Tears” was born out of fear, frustration and sorrow over the mostly Aboriginal women who have gone missing or have been found murdered along the stretch of highway between Prince George and Prince Rupert. With Nicole Hoar’s disappearance on June 21, 2002, the term “Highway of Tears” became more widely known, and the general public became aware that Hoar’s disappearance was not an isolated incident. (Stutz)

Issues of race and social status are in the forefront of society’s disregard for many of the missing women in British Columbia.

The initial desire to write and illustrate the plight of these women came to me in 1997. I was living in Vancouver’s Strathcona neighborhood, one block from the corner of Hastings and Heatley. This was my first experience of living in the Downtown Eastside. I really enjoyed my street and the neighborhood south into Strathcona; we had frequent potlucks and afternoon teas. The area teemed with artists and bohemians; the yuppie encroachment into the neighborhood and its gentrification had barely begun.

One day, everything changed: I injured my hands at school and could no longer ride my bicycle. This meant that to get to college, instead of cycling south through my happy neighborhood, I had to walk a block north and catch the bus on Hastings Street. I tried to time my arrival at the bus stop at a nearby corner so that I would arrive just before the bus. I wanted to avoid, as much as possible, facing the johns trolling the neighborhood. The johns were impossible to avoid on my way home. The bus stop was over a half a block away from my street. On two days out of three, as I walked away from the bus stop a car would follow me. Some weeks I was followed every day. Sometimes the driver would pull over only to pull away again when he realized that I was not a sex trade worker. However, sometimes the vehicle would follow me around the corner and the driver would lean over and speak to me through the passenger window. If I turned my head, spoke or gestured they would simply pull closer.

This is my in-point. This is the breach through which I try to expand my consciousness and understand the plight of the abducted and murdered women. It is because of such experiences that I feel kindred to women who choose to exploit their own bodies and undertake such a precarious, dangerous and uncertain existence. I have felt first-hand the unrelenting pressure that johns place upon women. They want us to succumb to their desires, and they push for it. From my experiences of feeling hunted, and my elusive relationships and conversations with marginalized women,

**2. EXT. STREET. MORNING**

**2**

Rena is walking quickly South on Heatley Street. A vehicle pulls towards her as the driver rolls down his window.

**RENA**

(Waving her arms)  
Go away!

The vehicle pulls closer and the driver leans out the window

**JOHN**

(Slowly and clearly)  
Do you speak English?

**RENA**

(Slowly and crisply)  
Yes I speak English. Do you understand English? I said go away. I am not a prostitute; I am walking in my neighborhood. I am not standing on a corner on Hastings Street. I can see your license plate number. Now, go away! Fuck off!

Through my past experiences and clear memories of such interactions I conceive of the characterization of emotions and fears in the streets of Vancouver. I exude this malaise through the construction of film.

The idea of conveying the emotions of women dealing with the aftermath of sexual violence through film is not a new one. In England, at the Leeds Animation Co-op, a feminist co-operative founded in 1976 by Gillian Lacie produced *Give Us a Smile*, a collage-based animated film which expresses the reactions of women to the

violence, both physical and ideological, with which they are confronted every day (Pilling 35). Another film that dealt with issues of sexual violence from a first-person perspective is Karen Watson's *Daddy's Little Bit of Dresden China* illustrating the subject of incestuous child abuse (Pilling 96). The father figure in Watson's film has only one facial feature that he uses to see and eat. Seeming to allude to the devouring nature of the male gaze. These films utilize the personal experiences of the filmmakers, much as I am doing with this auto-ethnographic piece. By making film derived from our own experiences, women filmmakers have direct ownership of our stories, thereby avoiding issues of appropriation.

Here is another example of an incident from my life that directed the muse of my filmmaking.

**3. INT: A HOUSE ON 600 BLOCK PENDER STREET**

**3**

There is a knock on the door. Rena gets up and answers the door.

MAN

You've got to help me!

RENA

What's up?

MAN

(breathing heavily with wild eyes)

My girlfriend is freaking out. I  
just broke up with her and I  
don't know what to do.

MAN enters the room and paces in near the door.

She's a prostitute, I kept asking her to quit working and I couldn't take it anymore. I so I broke up with her today.

She says she wants to go home but I know she will work on the way. She's fucked up! I can't let her go out there!

**4. INT: EVENING:**

**4**

Two women and the same man enter the room. The girlfriend is lying across the bed. Her makeup is smeared and she is crying.

MAN  
I brought a couple of friends over. Can we talk?

RENA  
Hey, are you okay? N is worried about you.

GIRL  
(Sniffling)  
Why do you want to break up with me? Why can't things work out? ... Leave me alone.

RENA  
N is worried about you going home tonight when you are so upset. Do you want to come over and have a glass of wine? We can talk about it.

This ended up being very successful and the woman spent the night at our house and was in a calmer state when she headed for home the next day.

This experience led to my first time-based piece about the issues of childhood trauma and repeating cycles of behavior that re-enact that trauma. In that video, *Mythogeny*, I play four characters, one dressed in white symbolizing the innocent child who is the original personality and the primal victim, and three other identical characters in purple who play the child's older selves who are trying to destroy the innocent part of themselves in order to be able to deal with their reality without the pain of the loss of innocence or without the painful reminder of a lost life free from pain. It is the contrast between the past life and the present, the knowledge that there could be a different life without the initial violation, makes their lives unbearable. In the video the three older selves hunt down and kill the person of their innocent child self.

The need to *numb out* the memories of past sexual trauma through re-enactment can cause victims of childhood sexual violence to seek out similar circumstances (Phillips 251). My conjecture was that the woman who sheltered at my house wanted to go out during a moment of emotional duress and 'work the streets' in order to re-engage with her earlier experiences of trauma in a bid to numb herself out from her current emotional pain. This experience more than any other, caused a breakthrough in my attitude towards prostitution; a paradigm shift in my thoughts and generated empathy towards prostitutes as fellow sexual assault survivors.

## horror film genre

Generally, in films depicting sexual violence and murder, the viewer is transported into an uncomfortable scary place. *reinsertion* tries to do the same. Unlike typical films in horror or suspense genres, this film will not provide characters, plot, or an abundance of gore to produce the effect of danger, fear, death and the uncanny to an audience.

If this was mainstream cinema, there would be characters in the film; a concerned population, a police chief, the mayor, countless extras as the streetwalkers of Vancouver, bit parts for actors playing Sereena Abotsway, Mona Wilson, Andrea Joesbury, Brenda Ann Wolfe, Georgina Faith Papin, and Marnie Frey,<sup>6</sup> a lively collection of police officers, and forensic specialists, police station support staff, the family and friends of the victims, and the “star” of the film, Robert Pickton. Special consideration would be taken in hiring actors to play the judge, court lawyers, and key jurors. Importantly, we would have scenes depicting the Pickton family home in his childhood.

If this were a traditional horror film no expense would be spared.

This is not the type of film that I am making.

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<sup>6</sup> These are six of the women Pickton killed; the six for whose murders he was found guilty.

## atypical film genre

I am one woman with a motley collection of camera equipment and a deep-seated distaste for voyeuristic spectacle. Through my eye and the cameras' I subvert the "determining male gaze" of the voyeur by referencing to the women of Vancouver through their surroundings and filming the city rather than the women (Mulvey *Visual* 19). I extricate the eroticism of the 'streetwalker' by removing them as object(s) of the male gaze. The absence of the women turns the focus back to the viewer. I refuse to re-enforce the sexual stereotype of the protagonist, in this case marginalized sex trade workers (Rainier 42). I engage the City of Vancouver through my very active cinematic eye reversing the role of the gaze through my active/female lens<sup>7</sup>. I assign the city the role of the passive male through the static shots of city hall, the police stations and the docks, which remain primarily masculine domains. Rather than filming sex trade workers I positioned myself on corners where specific murdered women were last seen and filmed the traces of cars going by and recorded the sounds of the traffic. By shooting from my imagined point of view of the women I hope to assist the viewer to experience rather than objectify.

Despite the lack of a multi-million dollar budget, I make this film at great expense. I make this film despite my stress and abhorrence to the Pickton Trial and the

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<sup>7</sup> Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* assigns the cinematic gaze as active/female and passive/female. (19)



anxieties encountered: despair, depression and revulsion. My method requires distilling the pathos and fear that I feel into my shots and editing. I provoke a response, not through depiction of women in pathetic and degrading situations, but directly through the rapid flickering of images that evoke tension, chaos and visceral discomfort in the viewer. Rather than allowing the audience a comfortable distance from which to objectify the experience, my film immerses them directly in a disruptive, chaotic, and frightening environment of filmic sense and sound. My hope is that the response of the viewer mirrors the emotions of the unseen subjects of the film.

## location as subject

Depicting a city as a sexual predator and having images of a city stand in for characters is a challenge. Especially since I am photographing a city familiar to many. I use images of the City of Vancouver metaphorically to represent the fear and energy of a woman threatened by a violent sexual act, or by her own death, and also metaphorically to represent the inaction of the city in preventing the death of the women. I use images of city hall in various ways as a character.



Fig. 4 Vancouver City Hall. Del Pieve Gobbi, *Rena. reinsertion*. 2010. Digital Photograph. Vancouver.

Near the end of the film, I inter-cut two different shots of the city. One shot is of the Vancouver city hall and was shot and processed in such a way to add a contrasted inverse image the way animators simulate the appearance of lightning. This shot was is inter-cut with a total of nine seconds of images taken every few steps while

walking along the sidewalk on Hastings Street from Heatly Street to Abbott Street. This strip is a hang out for the marginalized and was/is a common area for prostitution and drug trade. The editing of the fast and jarring movement through the night-time Vancouver landscape juxtaposed with the ominous shot of city hall is intended to infer pursuit.

I use a more traditional associative approach in some footage. For instance, I re-photographed a slide of city hall 1020 times to create a static moment (Fig.4). Within film language, the static frame most often represents mortality, the passing of time and death (Mulvey, *Death* 67). I use this metaphor to also reference the lack of civic action concerning the missing women. It was not until charges had been pressed against Pickton that the city began to respond to the very real needs of sex trade workers. My assertion, that city officials turned a blind eye to the needs of sex trade workers, is backed up by Robert Matas, a reporter for the *Globe and Mail*, he states:

For years, Vancouver turned a blind eye to the mysterious disappearance of dozens of prostitutes from the city's Downtown Eastside. But just before the start of a sensational trial alleging that Robert Pickton murdered the women, the city has apparently found its heart.

City hall has given preliminary approval to a location for Canada's first 24-hour drop-in centre for sex-trade workers. Police have renewed their commitment to a \$100,000 reward related to the missing-women

case. And a rundown hotel has been converted into housing for women who are victims of violence.

For years, family and friends of missing women have been petitioning, marching and shouting for more thorough police investigations and more support for the vulnerable women who sell sex from street corners. But little was done to help families search for the missing or to aid those working in the industry.

Robert Pickton's first-degree murder trial in the deaths of six women from the Downtown Eastside, now scheduled to begin on Jan. 22, is expected to draw attention to Vancouver's hesitant response to the plight of street prostitutes. (Matas)

The plight of women in the Downtown Eastside is visible to me on a daily basis. I see women in desperate postures as I walk, ride or take transit each day. I also see men in dire straits, however the plight of the women affects me more. The dangers they face and the knowledge that so many have died drove me to make this film. Mine is not a fun, 'feel good' movie. It is a film about my emotions and reactions to a series of murders too close to home. It is a movie about how I felt being confronted on a daily basis with the face of the serial killer in the news every time I rode the bus from December 12, 2006 to December 11, 2007, the day the jury came to a verdict (CBC).

When you see *reinsertion* in a theater it will bear no resemblance to the stories that I have written here. I wrote these stories to illustrate my methods and lay bare my

internal thought processes of constructing *reinsertion*. I filmed various aspects of the city based solely on my gut responses and instincts. I travelled through Vancouver photographing sometimes two frames per block and sometimes eight or even twenty frames per block; this methodology slows down and speeds up the city. I operated cameras on foot, on public transit, and on a bicycle. I changed film stock in a random fashion that seemed very significant at the time of shooting.

*reinsertion* explores the problem of the content through the material of the film and yet abandons the content for the material. The form is the content. This is what I mean when I call *reinsertion* an abstract film. I create images and distil emotions from them through montage rather than from story, actors and dialogue. This is a challenging undertaking because I possessed a story, characters, even a location. This type of film is referred to as avant-garde, structural or experimental. I had to decide what it was that I would abandon in the process. It turned out that the one thing that I was unable to abandon was the material of my film. I was working without any 35mm equipment other than five half-frame 35mm still cameras, two eight foot long light tables and a tape splicer. Later, I rented a hot splicer for the neg-cut.<sup>8</sup>

I was asked by one professor to abandon film for digital production due to the lack of production facilities and the cost of film. I explained that I could not! My desire to

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<sup>8</sup> After editing decisions are locked in film negatives go to a specialized lab where they are cut and hot spliced. I did this myself, with a rented hot splicer.

work in film embodies my belated desire to protect the missing women. The poignant subject of the film is referenced by a reverent visitation to specific locations, frame by frame shooting, labour-intensive hand processing and is reinforced by my relationship with the celluloid. My relationship to the celluloid of the film is fundamental and protective. The physical processes of film references directly my rage and pain at the plight of the missing women.

The physical relationship of female avant-garde filmmakers with the celluloid of their process has precedent, especially in the work of Carolee Schneemann, who would leave her film out in the studio for extensive periods up to three years (Butler 70). Her films combined photographic images with hand dyed and distressed sections and clearly showed the hand of the maker (Butler 70; Peterson 69). Butler describes a film in which Schneemann filmed herself and her partner during intimate sexual acts but from extreme close up and unusual angles.

The result is doubly autobiographical: intensely intimate, in its closeup portrayal of bodies and sexual acts, and densely textured, marked by its artisan, domestic production, with a non-linear organization that mimics a participant perception or memory of events rather than objectifying those events. (Butler 70)

In the past I have worked alone. I did not disclose the story behind my films to people around me until I was finished, and sometimes not even then, or perhaps only to a small percentage of my audience. When screening in a women's festival

event, such as Vancouver's "Sistahood Celebration", I would give a very clear artist's talk about the motivation and construction of my film, while screening in an international animation or film festival there would not be the same opportunity or even the appropriate moment for such a talk.

My life is my research, the raw material of my creative process.

I am shooting literal images and I am using those images as the raw material to create a mood, a journey and a synesthetic experience.

The journey that I undertake in my praxis is to extrapolate the emotions of the missing and murdered women. Now, I am going to be very clear here: I am not trying to incite in the viewer any feeling of being abducted or murdered. I am trying, however, to communicate the stress that one might feel being in a precarious or even dangerous position. I am trying to depict the City of Vancouver itself as a hostile, dangerous predator of marginalized women. By the City of Vancouver I mean its government, police force, social service organizations and general public. I propose that the City of Vancouver is implicated by its failure to respond to the ongoing crisis of the disappearances of women.

*reinsertion* is not the only film to use images of a city as self-reflective commentary. Anne Marie Fleming in *You Take Care Now* combines images of prizefighters with images of a city to accompany "her account of being raped by a taxi driver in

Southern Italy and hit by a car in downtown Vancouver” (Wees 18). This is another example of a filmmaker using images of a city to stand in for the emotional experience of sexual violence. The City of Vancouver figures in both Fleming’s work and mine. I’ll explore part of that city now.

There is currently in Vancouver a large population of marginalized people requiring assistance for basic needs. A disproportionate number of these people reside in the Downtown Eastside. The area is full of SRO Hotels and Social Service Agencies that provide basic food, medical care, education and legal services to residents.



Fig. 5 Main and Hastings, Del Pieve Gobbi, *Rena. reinsertion*. 2010. Film Still. Vancouver.

So how did one neighborhood become a receptacle for the nation's ills? British Columbia Social Service organizations outside Vancouver, lacking resources, tell clients to move to Vancouver where, “services that can help you are available.”



One such service organization, the Motivation Power and Achievement Society<sup>9</sup>, is a member based Vancouver organization for Persons with Mental Health Disabilities, needs to move its Community Resource Center at Fourth Avenue and Fir Street to a new proposed location a few blocks away. They have been at the present location for twenty years. The MPA is dedicated to having places of refuge outside of the Downtown Eastside so their clients can progress. The Kitsilano community has been lobbying to prevent them from establishing new quarters. This lobbying translates as animosity and rejection felt by the members of the organization on a personal level.<sup>10</sup>

For these people with mental illnesses and similar marginalized populations cast as perpetual victims, ostracized and terminally unhealthy, the city plays the role of a predator. Organizations often require people to be in unsafe neighbourhoods in order to receive services. For persons living in fear and deprivation so overwhelming that they struggle for a safe place to sleep and even to excrete, the spatial reality of the city takes on the role of an adversary. For marginalized and homeless people, their bodies, lives, and possessions are in constant danger. For women, this is greatly magnified.

If those who live within the city, those who are responsible for the organization and safety of the city, are aware that predation is occurring on the level of a serial killer

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<sup>9</sup> Originally known as The Mental Patients Association

<sup>10</sup> I have been a member of MPA since 1998 and I served on MPA's Board of Directors from 2002 until 2007. Their crisis in acquiring permission and funding for their new location is still ongoing.

and they do not act, does the city not then become an accomplice to the serial killer? John Glionna in an article about Lincoln Clarkes states.

John Lowman a criminologist at Vancouver's Simon Fraser University, says that the city simply looked the other way. 'The long-term policies flushed all the crime and addiction into the Downtown Eastside,' he says. 'The idea was to contain and corral social problems in one area and bury our heads'.

I communicate fear, displacement, unease, angst, bewilderment and trauma through my images. I set up camera shots to transport the viewer through a toxic landscape. I use various, often expired, film stock as filters to shift the colour, temperature of the light and the mood of the footage. The film is an exploration of how I feel and I position those feelings in the material of the film. The rapid and changing frame rate and disturbing, unreal colours of the film combine with the specific images to communicate my emotional reality.

The experiences of my life as a young woman living in the Downtown Eastside, an unarguably hazardous neighborhood, are the primary sources of the structure of this film. I have felt terrified and exposed when predatory johns followed me home. I have been sexually assaulted. I have succumbed to the pressure to have sex with someone due to my past experience as a victim and my fear of physical injury. I fill my mind with the real, remembered terror of these events and translate them to film. I don't have to go far from home for inspiration.

My apartment building, the ARC, is at the intersection of Powell Street and Commercial Drive, situated inside the industrial area on the fringe of the Downtown Eastside.<sup>11</sup> I shot a time-lapse sequence through a back window of my building; orange loading cranes overlook the harbour; the steam from the factory,



Fig. 6 West Coast Reduction. Del Pieve Gobbi, Rena. *reinsertion*. 2010. Film Still. Vancouver.

West Coast Reduction throws the seagulls into a spiralling relief (Fig. 6), Living as I do across the railroad tracks from the factory, I am subliminally aware via olfactory input that something is not right within. Charles Mudede, a west coast writer, filmmaker and cultural critic had this to say about the situation:

The unusable remains of the pigs Robert slaughtered and served to his friends and neighbours--pig entrails, brains, bones, nerve tissue, and gore--were taken by truck to a rendering plant near the DES

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<sup>11</sup> The ARC is an artist live work studio building at Commercial Drive and Powell Street.

called West Coast Reduction Ltd. Many are certain that the partial remains of the murdered sex workers were also trucked to West Coast Reduction Ltd.

Located on 105 North Commercial Drive, West Coast Reduction's facility is impressive. It's a complex of huge cylindrical cookers, storage tanks, office buildings, industrial stacks, and railroad tracks. Underground pipelines connect it with one of the biggest ports on the Pacific Rim; huge orange cranes loom just behind it, and the surrounding air is relatively clean, although once in a while the smell of something awful wafts from an unidentifiable source. The plant turns animal bones, guts, fish, blood, pig entrails, used restaurant grease, and, now many believe, the remains of sex workers into a number of consumer products, like lipstick base, soaps, shampoos, and perfumes. These commodities that improve human appearance are shipped all over the world.

Six blocks up from the rendering plant, the most fashionable part of Vancouver begins. Commercial Drive is lined with restaurants that serve Cuban finger foods, theaters that screen Bollywood films and stores that sell Italian shoes. Here hipsters visit a wild variety of trendy cafes, tapas bars, spas, health-food groceries, and cosmetic shops. All of these urban pleasures are walking distance from the rendering plant, the place where Robert Pickton brought the intestines of his slaughtered hogs for more than 20 years, according to West Coast Reduction's records. After emptying his truck, he is believed to have picked up sex workers, sometimes within a block of the plant.

(Mudedede)

The strip within a block of West Coast Reductions, where Pickton is believed to

have picked up sex trade workers is the same area in the preceding anecdotes about my neighborhood. My building sits between the corner where the women work and the West Coast Reduction across the train tracks. This is where I have interactions and brief conversations with the women a block from my door. When people ask me about my Downtown Eastside neighborhood I joke that, “the frequent job offers on the way home make one feel positive about the economy”. I joke as a hint that I feel the pressure of the sex trade daily, in the threat and danger that emanates from the vehicles that follow me home. People laugh; I successfully made light of the matter. In this manner, one keeps a bold face on life.

One day, while walking home, I ran into a female police officer three blocks from my building. I stopped to comment that had I known that they give the women police officers Harleys I would have thought about applying to the force. I turned the conversation to that of the prostitution in the neighborhood. The police officer replied, “The scary thing is how normal the johns are, your average guy.”

Is it “your average guy” that we are afraid of? The Pickton Trial took place with no real surprises. Robert Pickton has been found guilty on all counts. The remaining charges against him are not going to trial. Family and friends of other victims will not have the justice that a trial provides. Stated as reasons why the remaining counts will not go to trial are the cost, and the fact that Pickton will not live to meet parole as it now stands. Would all charges be going to trial if the victims were well-heeled Vancouverites? Has the marginalized life situation of these women followed

them to interfere with justice? Was Robert Pickton working alone or was he, among the guilty, simply the one who most accurately matched our idea of a serial killer? I do not address these questions in *reinsertion* and they remain unanswered.

## metaphor and absence

In my films, I typically use subtle metaphors and abstraction to explore intense and horrific incidences. I believe that this maintains a position of safety for a viewer who has had similar experiences. *reinsertion* has been a considerable leap from my previous films, structurally, with this addition of literal photographic representations of persons and places.



Fig. 7 Boot and Hubcap. Del Pieve Gobbi, Rena. *reinsertion*. 2010. Film Still. Vancouver.

The women, who are the subject of the film, are conspicuously missing. This was obviously a conscious gesture. Their absence is an implicit metaphor referencing three concepts. The first is that they are absent. These women are either missing or dead, ergo; they are not here. The second is that when these women were present on the streets of Vancouver. They were all but invisible. Considering everyone on

the streets, these marginalized women receive the least assistance. The third is that due to their position on the margins, nothing was initially done when they were reported missing. The missing and murdered women are alluded to in the film's first images (Fig. 7). An empty boot and an overturned hubcap, signifying a woman risking her life in the sex trade and her customer; it hardly feels like a metaphor.



Fig. 8 Boot and hubcap. Del Pieve Gobbi, *Rena. reinsertion*. 2010. Film Still. Vancouver.

The shot of the boot and hubcap appears again near the end of the film. However, the shot is jittery and the shoe has tipped over (Fig. 8). The palpable absence of the owner of the boot changes in the closing; shot the tipped over boot over has an aura of pathos and finality. My use of an empty boot to signify the absence of persons who have come to a tragic end, mirrors the use of shoes and other wearable artifacts in the work of artists concerning the Holocaust (Feinstein 123,125). Another artist who used shoes to represent absence of presence is Doris



Salcedos who uses the once worn shoes of “dead and disappeared” persons from among the politically oppressed in Columbia (Gibbons 58). Salcedos and I both made art about a population for whom death and disappearance are considered normative by “First World Society”, due to the aboriginal status of the missing (64).

The use of shoes to represent the missing and murdered has been co-opted by groups world wide and here in British Columbia as a potent symbol. “Shoe Memorials”<sup>12</sup> occur at the Comox Valley Art Gallery and on the steps the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Through their marked absence in *reinsertion*, I am commenting that these women were invisible and that this invisibility contributed to their deaths. The absence of the women from the film, serves to highlight their marginalized position in our society. Mollineaux references another marginalized population, the Black diasporic subject in Cadboro Bay through their absence by in her photographs (Fatona 230). Mollineaux uses absence to prevent the objectification of the gaze. “Mollineaux's insistence on visually leaving the Black body out of the frame closes the shutter on any attempt to objectify the Black body through a domineering and objectifying gaze” (Fatona 230). Similarly by denying the viewer the presence of women as subject of my film I reject the objectifying gaze.

Similarly, Yvonne Rainier in *The Man Who Envied Women* restricts her audience

from having any visual relationship with the female protagonist of the film by

removing her presence from the visual (Rainer 42). The missing presence of Downtown Eastside women in my film references feminist film theories about the subversion of the male gaze (Mulvey Visual 19). Both Mulvey's writing and film practice have worked to find new means of representing women's feelings and experience (Mulvey Visual ix).

My insistence on pursuing the portrayal of sexual violence through suggestive rather than graphic representation remains consistent with my past work. In *insurrection* I used hand painted negatives on film depicting violent sexual assault through the closed eyes of the victim (fig. 1). My next film, *interception*, is an abstract narrative film made of dried fruit (fig. 2). Inspired by Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, *interception* explores the loss of innocence. It is a graphic representation of the place within my mind that I escaped to while being raped. For my film *degradation* I wrote the following synopsis. It translates the metaphors I was assigning in an extremely abstract film.

The filmmaker finds herself transformed into Pandora as she opens a reel of film and a cloud of insects surround her. A single moth delicately, invisibly, embedded in the substance of the film symbolizes original sin. The excrement, cocoons and dead bodies of moths and their larva represent the disbursement and repercussions of incest.

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<sup>12</sup> Women's organizations gather and display shoes with information about individual women. Shoe memorials

We see how the insidious spread of disease and evil erupt through the mythological and historical defloration of women. Thousands of moths were killed during the making of this film. Their bodies filled the frames

and sprocket holes. Thousands of girls are raped daily, their lives and bodies treated as refuse.

The use of representation of 'place' into my work, along with the public nature of the crime I am exploring, cause *reinsertion* to read as political rather than personal. This does not mean that the film is without metaphor or not abstract or not personal. My use of literal images of a recognizable place add another dimension, the political, to what is visually and structurally an abstract experimental film.

## film as object: editing

The physical challenge of shooting and processing 450 feet of film in 54 and 32 inch (two and three second) pieces is rigorous. The challenge of editing a film from these black and white and colour negative strips without being able to see it move until I am finished was a great risk, compounded by the permanence of the splice. I hung all my negatives in a window with the northern sky as a light source. I rented a hot splicer at the last possible moment, when my editing decisions were coming together.



Fig. 9 Editing Room With Negatives. Del Pieve Gobbi, Rena. *Studio*. 2010. Digital Photograph. Vancouver.

I began editing in the center of the film with the pan across 'Save on Meats' and created a roughly symmetrical pattern. The movement in the film (after the first six seconds) is in reverse and in the still frames the images are flipped left to right. In

filmic language this emphasizes the effect of film as referencing the past and memory. In terms of the past these reversals represent the delay in beginning an investigation into the missing women. Family of victims had pointed a finger at the Pickton farm back in 1997 when attempted murder charges against him were dropped (Kamb). The lack of action on behalf of the missing women is shown through still shots of Vancouver city hall and police stations. Metaphorically showing them as stagnant and belonging to another century. My thoughts during the editing process were very much on the women; these women are viewed as disposable people. I used a personal metaphor of images of the ocean to represent different woman. During one editorial decision making session, I sat looking at photos of the women on the computer screen and cried. The effect of having twenty months of filming, research and writing converge in two weeks of editing was intense. According to Joan Gibbons, the time-exhaustive process of making “renders the process as symbolic as the objects” in the work of Doris Salcedos (Gibbons 63). I felt this ritual of process also when filming on corners where women had disappeared. When editing I was surrounded with the visual content of my negatives and engaging physically with the mechanism of my process; neg cutting and hot splicing; the ritual of construction.

During the process of setting up the editing room, I built a small table that was centered in the large picture windows. I covered the windows with plastic film and wax paper to render them translucent. I laid two eight feet long light boxes on the table. I brought in fruit, candles, and flowers, potted tulips and hyacinth, and placed

them on the table with the light boxes. Five days later, while documenting the room and my process, it suddenly became clear to me that I had built an altar while setting up the room. This formalizes the editing process into a semblance of a sacred space with the small table with hot splicer playing the role of sacristy and the act of splicing a strange sacrament. My relationship to the object of the film, the absence of the women and my unspoken grief and rage when I consider these

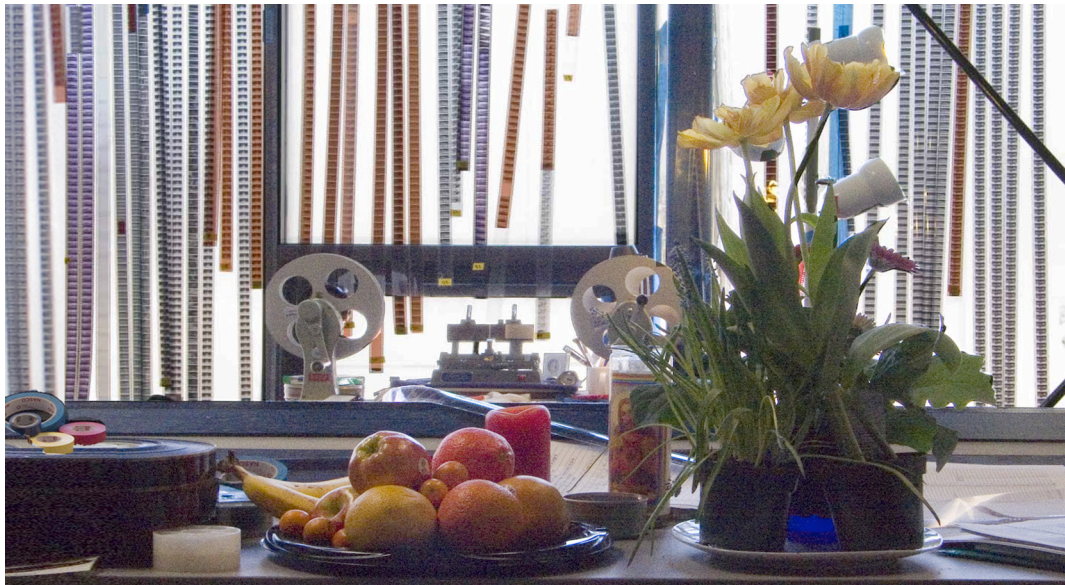


Fig. 10 Film Reels and Hot-splicer at far Window. Del Pieve Gobbi, *Rena. Studio*. 2010. Digital Photograph. Vancouver.

deaths, played out as a solitary ritual. As I arranged and cut the negatives, I performed a ritualistic act, a personal ritual of mourning.

## conclusion

A new consideration of the concept of the *aesthetic aims* to bring materialism back into the equation and to offer experimental thinking about the nature of 'body' and 'subjectivity' (Kennedy 20).

Upon beginning this journey, I wanted to tell a story that explored the idea of the city of Vancouver as sexual predator, culpable for the deaths and disappearances of women from the Downtown Eastside. I questioned whether it was appropriate for me to tell this story. I also wondered if it was possible to communicate my political message and the emotive dissonance of the subject with an experimental film. I feel that I have tested and answered these goals and have had affirmative audience responses.

My progress in the pursuit of this thesis and the accompanying film project has broadened my reach. I recognize my desire to have my work disseminated, and implemented changes in my filmmaking practice to increase its ability to communicate. I also recognized my desire to focus within specific feminist agendas such as appropriation, representation, and authorship. The changes that I made in my artistic practice caused me to rethink the manner in which abstraction functioned in my past work. It was necessary in *reinsertion*, to utilize more direct visual communication and real world photographic images. This type of filmmaking is more concrete, yet it retains the mutable poetic quality of my previous films.

My praxis and body of work exist as alternative narrative structures that will ultimately be empowering for women. During the making of *reinsertion* I explored ideas concerning authorship, marginalized populations, and voyeurism, issues that are vital for women filmmakers to consider (Felshin 11, 255). I clearly see my filmmaking practice consisting of an academic, feminist, and filmic ideology. The main occurrence that has transpired through the creation of *reinsertion* is my increased awareness of my desire to communicate feminist issues surrounding sexual violence and the difficulty in doing so. The relationship between my material practice and my subject has always been a close one. By shooting on 35mm still cameras and hand processing the film two and three seconds at a time my relationship to each shot, even each frame is accentuated. The time span of shooting and processing the film is extended so that the most I shot and processed in one day was eleven rolls of film, thirty-three seconds of footage. Each location, each shot was carefully intentional. I remained faithful to my medium, and my message by continuing to work in film, in the midst of another digital revolution with HD equipment being readily accessible. I remain primarily a filmmaker, transmuting my world into light.



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