

**MIS(S)REPRESENTATIONS:  
Reimagining Women with Collage and Paint**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Collage at times refuses to be contained; it spills over the paper substrate and ruptures the idea of kept order. This thesis examines collage as a material strategy to address gendered mis(s)representations of women that I am confronted with in my everyday. Acknowledging collages political agency alongside methodological research on feminism, intertextual strategies and modes of transgression provides new understandings as well as alternative forms to visually express being in one's body and in the world. Writers Georges Bataille and Kathy Acker demonstrate how transgressive tendencies evoke an outsider's political agency using abject signification to question systems of order and hegemonic power. My process-based art practice looks at works of art and ideas that promote or demonstrate an affective undoing. Employing humour invites the absurd, the dark and the grotesque to disrupt idealized notions of the feminine. The heart of my investigation looks to push the boundaries of otherness and bad taste in hopes of answering my central research question: Can one affect the conventional order of things through transgressive renderings of the female form?

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## **Full Moon in Broad Daylight**

*A woman wakes up and rubs the sediment of old sentiment from her eyes. Calcium destiny fragments fall onto her cheeks and spill out onto the bed sheet, another thing to clean up she thinks and sighs.*

*The woman checks her to do list: go shopping for dry cleaning, open the onions, cut the refrigerator door, change the kids, pay the laundry. Nowhere on her list does it say how to find meaning.*

*Later, at the grocery store, the woman walks up the aisle and down the aisle, aisle after aisle —up and down. The boxes quickly pile up in the cart she pushes in front of her. She reads the label on her children's favourite cereal box. The words are ridiculous tongue twisters, indecipherable ingredients guaranteed to keep food 'fresh.'*

*The woman suddenly stops to tune into a soft breeze tickling her saggy midriff. A wave of paralyzing, heart-stopping anxiety washes over her —she's not wearing any clothes! She puts the cereal box back on the shelf, turns around on her toes and walks out. Full moon in broad daylight.*

*-Karin McGinn*

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## INTRODUCTION:

### A Place Where Women Get Made

The source material that ends up in my artwork comes from fashion and lifestyle magazines of this era. These magazines are gifted to me via an old friend who owns several successful hair and beauty salons in Calgary. Over the years he has turned being a hairdresser into a thriving enterprise. The magazines are not only part of the décor they function as an interpretive device with which together, client and stylist scrutinize the potential in the images. The salons are where mostly women go to transform (or at least try) into the glossy ads of models that have obviously never experienced a bad hair day.

Before I leave the house for my hair appointment I glance one last look in the mirror, mousy brown and disheveled— exactly how I feel. I arrive for my appointment and get checked in by the front desk girl. I grab a smock from her and quickly transition in a closet-sized change room. It's a shedding of the old me (at least I hope) as I hang up my coat replacing it with the salons uniform, a non-descript black smock. I fasten it around my neck to catch the parts of me I no longer want.

Once inside I sit and wait, I feast my eyes on the beehive of activity and take it all in. A woman seated at a hair station closest to me is deeply engrossed in a ritual to stretch artifice into beauty. Her face is hidden under a mop of long dark hair, the stylist's busy hands alternate between detaching the old hair extensions with a replenishment of brand new ones—straight from a plastic casing. The evidence reveals a messy pile on the floor that transforms into black hair snakes at the ready.

It's all so absurd I suddenly feel the need to stifle a laugh. But then wonder, why am I here? A smile stops mid-formation as the sides of my mouth feel gravity's pull. I bring this question back to the studio, adding it to the other questions and anxieties that

I am trying to sift through in the artwork. My concerns are built on how social theory upholds fixed ideas on gender in relation to and in contrast with my own personal experience of life lived in a female container<sup>1</sup>. Instilled with ontological knowledge— I’m a woman<sup>2</sup>, artist, mother, lover, caregiver, urban dweller and consumer; I find these roles to denote certain gender stereotypes. What do these narratives about women tell us about the constructs of contemporary Western society? Especially when the existing systems of order tell a different story about the female gender from my own ontological knowing?

American philosopher Judith Butler theorizes gender politics and social transformations in the face of opposing hegemonic norms. In *Undoing Gender* she states: “The “I” that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependant on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them” (3). I feel akin to Butler’s analytic on social politics as I similarly encounter disparate moments of both belonging and separateness in relation to my own engagement within systems of order.

Butler defines predetermined constructs of gender and other minorities in Westernized/Eurocentric thinking as a problematic hierarchal practice:

“The human is understood differentially depending on its race, the legibility of that race, its morphology, the recognizability of that morphology, its sex, the perceptual verifiability of that sex, its ethnicity, the categorical understanding of that ethnicity” (2).

Considering Butler’s analysis of perceptual marginality, the body maps out and makes visible recognizable differences while at the same time maintains its ability to conceal other parts of ourselves from the outside world. For this reasons the body is the central site of my investigation to encounter and interrogate notions of gender and power.

*Mis(s)representations*<sup>3</sup> imagines the female body as an interpretive anchor to

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Stewart in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* writes: “The body presents the paradox of being contained and container at once” (104).

<sup>2</sup> Of European descent.

<sup>3</sup> *Mis(s)representations* an ongoing series of collage and gouache paintings on paper.



both examine daily experiences through bodily knowledge and envision new female figurations. Contemporary philosopher Rosi Braidotti describes figurations as an alternative feminist subjectivity. In *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* Braidotti maintains: “Figurations express materially embedded cartographies of different nomadic subjects and as such are self-reflective and not parasitic upon a metaphorization of “others<sup>4</sup>”” (11). Braidotti’s definition of figuration recognizes a diverse human populace in relation to place and personal identity. I feel it relevant to point to my own subjectivity as a Canadian citizen of European dissent and acknowledge my version of ‘woman’ is likely different from other nomadic subjects. In this series I reflect on my own embodied knowledge as it contains sensorial insight and idiosyncratic experiences in the everyday world.

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<sup>4</sup> French philosopher Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, defines the colonial term of otherness to be deemed as strange, wearisome and in opposition to the familial or categorical found within systems of ordering.

## PART 1) METHOD: Collage as a Material Strategy



Fig. 1: Karin McGinn. *Seaman's Prize Catch*, 2016. Collage and gouache on paper, 46 x 61 cm. Photo: Ross Kelly.

In *Seaman's Prize Catch* I paint a topless fishwoman bathing in an outdoor pool. Applying cisgender subjectivity, I imagine her as the lustful centerfold and render her body an idealized hourglass form with perfect perky tits and a tiny waist— she is the catch, a prize and an object. Her male companion holds a fishing pole in his tiny T. rex-like hands and with them he casts his line to catch his meal (fig. 1). As I paint the fishwoman I recall old conversations I endured as a young adult, myths about the laws of attraction, how a woman's body is preferred over her face. A fish head with a

knockout figure is the prize catch indeed. I engage gender stereotypes that I am confronted with in my own sociopolitical culture. Braidotti encourages feminist discourse to employ the ‘sexual difference theory’ by using gender stereotypes as a “critique of the humanistic assumptions of subjectivity in terms of rationality, self-representation, homogeneity, and stability” (104). Can one trouble the male gaze by using it?

Commercial advertisers project an idealized body image as standard inevitably pushing the real body, which can never be perfect away from the individual self. In the last decade, technological advancements have enabled advertising agencies to digitally render a flawless image — the photograph of the model is ‘fixed’ to achieve an impossible perfection or rather the image is made artificial. The female body is the primary selling feature as an objectified body-object in commercial narratives based on the construct of an idealized body<sup>5</sup>. Capitalist systems that engender illusions about feminine bodies have led me to visually explore imperfect *other* bodies, as a way to counter Western culture’s obsession with a feminine ideal – the desire to change body shape, the pressure to create perfection that compromises and denies agency in a personal identity.

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Stewart writes, “The idealized body implicitly denies the possibility of death—it attempts to present a realm of transcendence and immortality, a realm of the classic. This is the body-made object, and thus the body as potential commodity” (133).

## 1.1 History of Collage

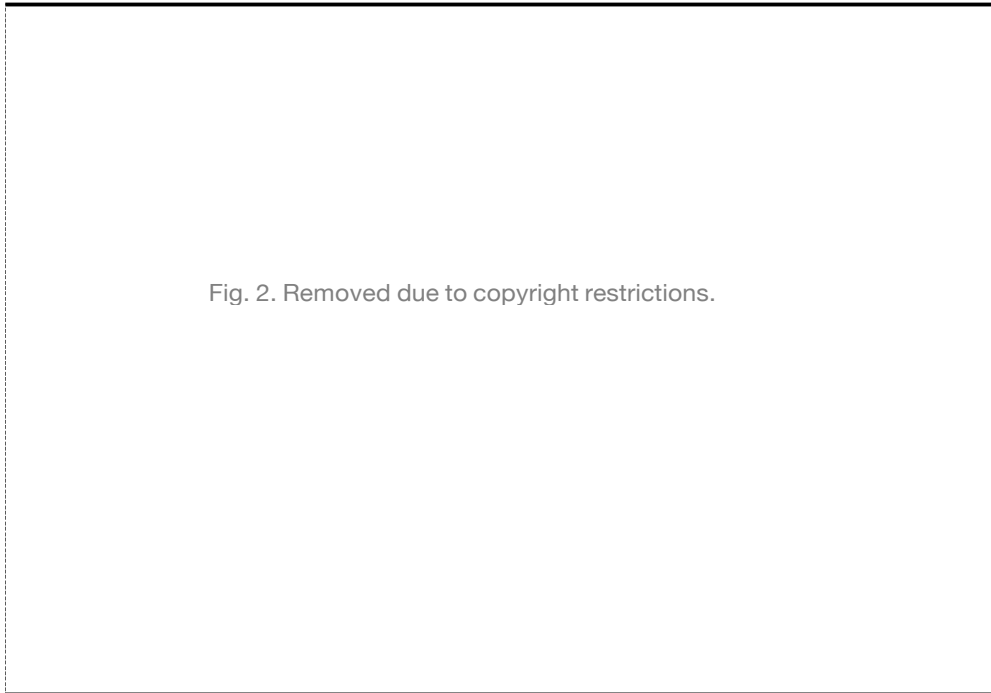


Fig. 2: Hannah Höch. *Das schöne Mädchen/The Beautiful Girl*, 1920. Photomontage, 35 x 29 cm.

The history of collage was born out of an unstable political climate prior to and after WWI. Previous upheld bourgeois ideals and government trust suddenly fell into question by the proletariat, artists, anarchists and others who sought change. A rejection of traditional hierarchies transformed the role of the artist to define their own modern revolution. Dadaists and later Surrealists sought out individual responses by inventing new experimental methods of materiality through the creative unconscious and avant-garde aesthetics. Dadaists created the technique ‘photomontage’ by re-contextualizing commercial advertisements as a means to politically oppose the hegemonic constraints of their own culture. In *The Age of Collage: Contemporary Collage in Modern Art* author Silke Krohn explains the Dadaist’s thinking: “They sought to create not art but anti-art; they wanted to destroy the image that newspapers and magazines tried to get them to believe in; their weapons were scissors and glue” (6). Artist Hannah Höch a member of the Berlin Dada art movement captured this nihilistic

energy while campaigning for anti-war principles and gender equality in her photomontages.

In Hannah Höch's *The Beautiful Girl* the artist uses collage imagery to point to and examine gender stereotypes of her time (fig. 2). Source material cut from magazines, posters and leaflets of the 1920's; she positions the female body in the center forefront of the picture plane. A pair of woman's legs aligns in similar formation to its neighbour, a car door handle. This parallel positioning suggests that material possession and female objectivity are viewed with equal significance. *The Beautiful Girl* not only points to the hierarchal male gaze of this era, the work successfully forefronts her voice questioning the station of women. In much of Höch's artwork the female form dominates the image offering a sense of the artists state of oppression as a working class woman. Although the body is frequently depicted, it should be noted that the female container isn't the focus rather it is her politics that drive the work resulting in a relative indirectness to the body itself. In comparison my art as research seeks a more direct translation of the stories told by the body across its membrane skin, its orifices the boundary crossing between two worlds.

Similar to Höch's *The Beautiful Girl*, *Seaman's Prize Catch* aims to interrogate structures of gender presented within my own spatiotemporal experience. As mentioned earlier, I imagine the male figure is trying to catch the fishwoman with his rod. On the other hand, I find that image signifiers are slippery as I watch the pictures meaning slide in and out of focus. I look again at *Seaman's Prize Catch* and acknowledge that the fishwoman's hands on hips suggest a confident awareness in her own seductive powers. This female figure, a hybrid figuration demonstrates reciprocity to engage in this tired dialect suggesting that instinctual animal behavior endures. Can fictional representations of gender stereotypes deconstruct our relationships to subjectivity and otherness?

Although Höch wasn't the first artist to use collage as a tool of agency it is the artist's feminist voice heard through her use of the source material that makes her work

groundbreaking in its historical contribution. Höch's manipulation of photomontage clearly defines her personal subjectivity in a male dominated arena including her own Dadaist contemporaries. An excerpt taken from her *Zer Collage* exhibition catalogue in Höch's writing describes the technique photomontage as a strategy for artists:

“ Claiming poetic license, we add or remove letters. We give words the wrong meaning by using them nonsensically — ‘to bare one’s heart to somebody’. Casting our scruples aside, we ignore syntax, if that gives greater weight or colour to what we have penned...in the visual arts it predominantly refers to a newly created entity, made from alienating components” (16).

I enter an artwork using the materiality of collage as a tool for agency, intertextuality and improvisation. To this I add painterly elements to heighten the viewer's and my own disorientation. When I first began experimenting with collage I realized right away that this material offered new possibilities and accompanying frustrations. A completely different approach to art making, I find myself responding to the source materials ‘alienating components’ propagating unattainable notions to which I am mesmerized and transfixed by the slick mirages. To mitigate its power I endeavor to de-contextualize its original intent. By tricking the eye I look past the ads images focusing instead on the textures and colours. In *Seaman's Prize Catch* I collect floorboard textures from various sources such as furniture/dishwasher ads to construct a cubist inspired pool deck. I have come to view the brushstrokes made with gouache paint as a representation of my own singular voice while the collage material signifies and performs as the stand in for a franchised world.

## 1.2 Death and Creation

In Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) her character Dr. Frankenstein exhumes old human remains, collaging skin and arteries together the protagonist brings life into his monstrous container:

“How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries underneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips” (35).

Similar to Dr. Frankenstein I am surprised by the results that have arrived from my own making as the conjoined paint and collage materials emit a life of its own. It is this often absurd, dark and humorous piecing together that allows me to construct new possibilities for feeling and experiencing spaces that the body occupies.

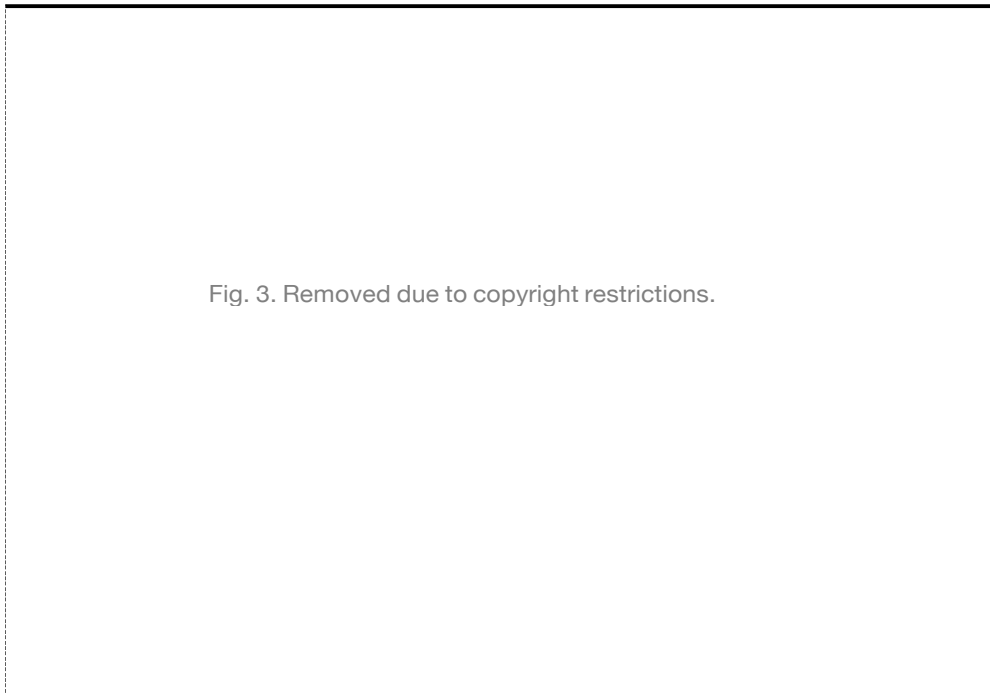


Fig. 3: Wangechi Mutu. *Me.I*, 2012. Mixed media and collage on paper, size unknown.

In the afterword to the book *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise* Malik Gaines and Alexandro Segade describe the artists mixed-media collages by way of comparison to Shelley's protagonist Frankenstein:

"Wangechi Mutu's great creations—created in a vein similar to that with which Mary Shelley's Frankenstein constructed his monster, from a variety of abject sources—are her hybrids. At once both alien and earthy, these dancing goddesses are trans-species pin-ups of a different sort" (145).

I discovered this excerpt after I made my own connection to Frankenstein's abominable creature, a coincidence that speaks to collage's material alchemical ability to fuse strange incongruent marriages by way of destruction. In the novel Dr. Frankenstein pieces together decaying body parts from the dead to make his monster; by comparison in Mutu's and my own artistic process we slice and dismember the stereotypes of women presented in the source material to create new female figurations. In Sarah Thornton's book *33 Artists in 3 Acts* the author interviews Kenyan born Mutu in her Brooklyn home and studio. The artist shows Thornton her self-described "'operating table," where she pieces together her complex collages" (56). Mutu proclaims, "'I am mostly, if not always obsessed with images of women...as an African not living in my motherland, I'm very sensitive to depictions of African people'" (56). Although Mutu's ethnic origin vastly differs from mine we share a similar intention to change the current narrative of gender mis(s)representations within our respective cultures. Thornton writes, "Mutu's women are mysterious, *jolie-laide* creatures that address the politics of beauty" (57). "Collages depicting fantastical women that look like crossbred aliens or futuristic witch doctors covered in paint" (56). In Mutu's mixed media collage *Me. I* (fig. 3) her portrayal of the feminine transcends our earthly standards of beauty creating the evocation of a universal other enabling the viewer to experience a different kind of beauty, one that lives outside of a familiar subjectivity.



## 1.2 Constellations of Intertextuality



Fig. 4: Karin McGinn. *Dirty Laundry*, 2015. Mixed media installation, 62 x 80 cm. Photo: Karin McGinn.

Philosopher Julia Kristeva is attributed with bringing forth the term 'intertextuality' to conceive a pre-supposition of subjective connections in words. Previous poststructuralist<sup>6</sup> concepts believed literary terms to be isolated typologies devoid of historical reference. Defined by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary *intertextuality* is the complex interrelationship between a text and other texts taken as basic to the creation or interpretation of the text. Collages tacit experimental nature evokes new connections and improvisations that encourage the development of intertextual meaning through its infinite and accidental combinations. By adapting this language connection to imagery, I imagine and image a constellation of ideas into non-linear configurations.

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<sup>6</sup> Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in *Structural Linguistics* described literary terms as static systems without referential subjectivity.



Fig. 5: Karin McGinn. In motion *Dirty Laundry*, 2015. Mixed media installation, 62 x 80 cm. Photo: Karin McGinn.

Prior to entering Emily Carr University's MFA program I constructed a mixed media site-specific installation *Dirty Laundry* (fig. 4,5). Looking back I see how this particular work foregrounds my interest in generating intertextual imagery. On the laundry line hangs a taxonomic reference to strangely familiar objects, some on paper, others spectres of old clothing remnants. My laundry list reads:

- 1- half-peeled banana painted on paper
- 1- painted paper toilet roll
- 2- a pair of cloth constructed breasts w/ faux fur merkin sewn on bodysuit
- 2- an old pair of men's business socks w/ *DADDY ISSUES* appliquéd on them w/ men's dress-shirt material

I watch the items sway back and forth on the line. The wind animates the *Skinsuit* and pushes her full bush forward— a perverse pussy invitation. The wind gusts back to its previous direction and takes *Skinsuit* away retracting her request.

In my family of five, I am the only female in our household. A line of demarcation exists simply by the nature of my gender; I am marked as both a spectacle and an oddity. On the day I install *Dirty Laundry* the boys race through the house after school straight into the backyard. All three of them give each other a bemused look when they finally land their gaze on my clothesline of curiosities (Mom's at it again, they must think.) My youngest child immediately seizes the opportunity to grope the *Skinsuit*'s breast. He does it tentatively as if he is actually touching a real breast and wears a sheepish grin while simultaneously reaching up to this no-man's land of private body parts. His face turns back towards me to register the implication of his seven-year-old curiosity and boldness.

Prior to our postmodern era clotheslines functioned in partnership with archaic washing devices to complete the chore of household laundry. Falling on the hands of wives and daughters, this arduous task could easily dominate an entire day's work. In Roberta Cantow's documentary *Clotheslines*<sup>7</sup> (1981) the filmmaker recollects the history of clotheslines with stories told by women relating they're past connections to this domestic object. The film establishes the importance of the clothesline as a cultural artifact and through its usage functioned as an essential line of communication. The act of hanging clothes outside initiated a social connectivity within suburban/urban communities. There was also the unintended gossip translated through the reading of the line. In the film one lady interprets a reading of her neighbours line by pointing to a certain signifier for infidelity, surmising a black pair of panties on a clothesline could only mean a cheating wife. The clothesline's capacity to communicate an undisclosed message about its owner has inspired me to investigate the subversive power in objects/spaces with the intention to reveal the private persona.

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<sup>7</sup> \_You can watch Roberta Cantow's film here: [Clotheslines](#)

In *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* author Julia Kristeva defines intertextuality as going beyond semantics and intersubjectivity. She writes: “The concept of text as ideologeme determines the very procedure of a semiotics that, by studying the text as intertextuality, considers it as such within (the text of) society and history” (37). According to Kristeva text is always contextualized within a societal narrativization providing additional insight and meaning to intertextual referencing. In the visual world, the image is never just an image as it similarly represents an unconscious societal signifier; for example the clothesline as a cultural artifact holds an implicit understanding of its voyeuristic suggestion and audience participation. The clothesline is understood to communicate a private message about its owner and through its performance the clothesline conjures a temporal window into viewing a previously public space turned private. With the conception and development of *Dirty Laundry* I wondered if I could devise an intertextual constellation to connect affect, voyeurism and the female body? In my busy household the bathroom is the only private space to house my own body unmasked and imperfect. Using the audience's operational knowledge of the washroom I set out to portray the embodied private persona and implicate the viewer by placing them in the uncomfortable position of voyeur. With this candid scene I sought to make the invisible become visible by portraying a personal response to the figure's own body. A response intrinsically tied to a complex range of emotions such as shame placed upon women's bodies in our inability to meet Western culture standards of beauty.



## PART 2) METHODOLOGY: Transgressive Tendencies



Fig. 6: Karin McGinn, *In a Minute*, 2017. Collage and Gouache on paper, 31 x 23 cm. Photo: Ross Kelly.

Behind the bathrooms closed door lays a space that manifests and keeps hidden what is secret and private. *In a Minute* shows the viewer what's behind the door— deep flesh tones mixed into dark cavernous openings (fig. 6). I paint a naked woman self-absorbed in her own routine to remove the unsightly body hair from her legs, an act performed largely by women (and some men). Her nakedness exposes a

gaping red hued hairy cunt<sup>8</sup> and accompanying whiskery legs. While painting the woman in *In a Minute* I considered how Western society designates undesirable body traits such as excessive body hair. Intuitively<sup>9</sup> driven, I followed the pull of the paintbrush and found it very strange when a second face began to form itself next to the original head. Deciding not to disregard or try to 'fix' I filled in the facial details of a small child, her milky complexion taking on a ghostly presence, the girls cadaverous apparition complete with opaquely vacant eyes. Once *In a Minute* was finished I studied this two-headed hydra understanding its meaning to embody the figure's own psychological realm as she appears self-involved and preoccupied in her own thoughts. It has been suggested to me by several viewers that the girl represents a younger version of the woman herself. I believe that this open process of working has encouraged my own creative unconscious to render spontaneously imperfect bodies that resist commercial constructs of the female body as an objectified body-object. An example of spontaneous execution appears in the woman's painted right arm as an extra appendage imbued with six fingers. Reflections of what occurs behind closed doors has set in motion my personal voice to act out and find expression in a public form such as an artwork. The transgressive tendencies of my own private realm has through this artistic expression partially made itself manifest, a performative act that is further emboldened by my research into subversive literature, which I will address shortly.

My methodology is informed by various historical and contemporary artists, transgressive fiction and philosophy. I am inspired by writings, works of art and ideas that promote or demonstrate an affective undoing. I want to know that systems or complex ideas can be questioned through intertextual strategies, inversion and mixed media to propose new understandings or alternative ways of being in one's body and in the world.

Cultural constructs dictate who we should be according to socioeconomic

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<sup>8</sup> The Merriam-Webster's online dictionary definition of **CUNT**: 1 *obscene*: the female genital organs; *also*: sexual intercourse with a woman. 2 *usually disparaging and obscene*: WOMAN

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Fisher in *Technologies of Intuition* describes intuitive forces as "an extra-rational means of understanding...simultaneously to both embodied perception and to awareness that extends further than the five senses" (11).

myths— not who we are. Georges Bataille<sup>10</sup> an influential French literary figure in his book *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* in *Chapter V: Transgression* wrote: “The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it” (63). In other words, the transgression reveals a disorderly truth of not only the tabooed perspective but offers a real admission, one which doesn’t always delineate a clear right or wrong explanation. Bataille observed that the difficulty in defining transgression is the result of a “certain illogicality that makes it difficult to discuss taboos” (63). I understand this ‘illogicality’ to be a self-reluctance to go against the grain of what is deemed socially acceptable resulting in a compliancy to adhere to the status quo. Bataille’s explanation of transgression coupled with my own personal experience in negotiating what at times has felt like conflicting roles between personal desires and responsibilities has implored me to consider the insider/outsider point of view, the two-headed hydra of my lived experience. When transgression is involved what does the private persona reveal and how does this point of view differ from a public persona? Using the bathroom as a symbolic private space I try to respond to this idea of the real; the body exhibited in all of its messiness exposes our animal nature and lack of control.

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<sup>10</sup> Bataille was connected to the Surrealist enterprise until he was ‘excommunicated’ by its self-appointed leader André Breton.

## 2.1 The Grotesque Female Body

In Mary Russo's essay "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory" the author conveys a historically infamous stereotype, 'the grotesque female body' built on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival<sup>11</sup>; Russo describes a feminist social critique of the proletariat's *carnival* marketplace. According to the author, this social bias that has claimed certain kinds of female bodies as transgressive finds its origins in early modern Europe's proletariat marketplace. Russo describes the carnivalesque women in direct opposition to the Bourgeois.

"The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest to the world" (325).

The bourgeoisies' classical form shadows an underlying prejudice toward the other imperfect bodies. Russo highlights the various iterations of the transgressive female form as the pregnant, the aging, and the irregular body. In this series I've directed my attention to the subversive power of the grotesque female body as a means to challenge static notions of the bourgeois ideal and imagine new figurations of femininity and Womaness. In *In a Minute* the woman's aging body is implied with painted undulating stomach rolls, a full-grown vagina and overly tanned skin ghosting a bikini outline. My hope is that these imperfect body signifiers intertextually depict a woman in the midst of her own individual story.

Russo explains the carnivalesque women as a vulnerable and marginalized group through violation of cultural norms. According to the author, cultural theorists analysis of this spatiotemporal era have disregarded the enduring societal impact on an inherently undervalued group of women. On the flipside, Russo optimistically states

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics & Poetics of Transgression* examine philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival as a cultural analytic to understanding European cultures hierarchal division. The carnival theory defines the proletariat marketplace as an intersection between inside and outside boundaries and high and low social order; according to the authors, the marketplace was both scorned and fantasized by the bourgeois.



that the carnival women's inability to conform could be viewed as a potential for political agency; as outsiders free of societal constraints this group can use their own voice to speak against hegemonic powers without risk of losing status or reputation. An understanding of my own political agency has emerged as I recognize many artists amongst a populace of outsiders. In this way I see modes of transgression as a way to address the problematic assumptions relating to female bodies, sexuality, and the roles of women. Subversive narratives convey more diverse female archetypes while at the same time call into question homogenized sameness and the machine of economics.

## 2.2 Transgression in Fiction

Bataille applied his transgressive theory into his novel *Story Of The Eye* (1928). Blush-evoking in every way the story fantasizes a teenage boy's sexual trysts with his two young female lovers. Sparing no squeamish reader, the author details a queasy cross-contamination of bodily fluids: "The resulting stench of blood, sperm, urine and vomit made me almost recoil in horror, but the inhuman shriek from Marcelle's throat was far more terrifying" (17). Bataille's excessive use of bodily fluids throughout the story elucidates its functioning role of the abject to signify a crossing over of physical inside-outside boundaries as well as exhibits one of cultural, moral and artistic boundary crossing. The success of Bataille's transgressive fiction is seen in the way it challenges the audience to examine one's own discomfort regarding sexual taboos.

In Kathy Acker's infamous<sup>12</sup> book *Blood and Guts in High School*<sup>13</sup> the author uses shock tactics like violating the incest taboo to demonstrate a transgressive narrative. Acker tells a story of a young woman in love with her 'father'. The author's direct and dirty language elicits an emotional response to her character's insecurities and anguish: "He fucked her in the asshole cause the infection made her cunt hurt too much to fuck there, though she didn't tell him it hurt badly there, too, cause she wanted to fuck love more than she felt pain" (21). Acker has received criticism by feminists for using phallocentric themes as it creates a causal objectification of women. A legitimate fear of perpetuating negative stories about women, though it is in this uncomfortable place that Acker disarms her readers into experiencing her protagonists' unjust world. Throughout the story the main character objectifies herself by sexualizing her body for mistaken love putting her male lovers needs before her own. "Michiko Kakutani described Acker's style in a 1987 review in *The New York Times*:

"Characters exchange identities with the ease of snakes shedding their skins; and bits of myths, folktales and older novels also turn up transformed -- juxtaposed, in a sort of post-modernist collage, with political screeds, dream-like hallucinations and strange, comic exchanges. The language is nervous and skewed; the authorial stance, adversarial and abrasive; the world view, cynical verging on the nihilistic." (NY Times).

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<sup>12</sup> The book was banned in West Germany and South Africa.

<sup>13</sup> *Blood and Guts in High School* is considered a metafiction as it refers to its own fiction.

Acker's cut-up/collage writing methods leaves her reader with the unsettling inability to forecast the stories next step creating an affective anxiety in her audience. Her ability to evoke anxiety in tandem with abject signifiers are intertextual connections that I am exploring in my own artwork. In *In a Minute* the figure's open pussy is at the forefront of the picture plane; with this central imagery my intention was to point directly to an aberration of normative representations. In researching transgressive fiction I've discovered the protagonists in this genre are usually characterized as troubled outsiders or free agents living outside an established social order where the rules either don't apply or they simply disregard. Although Bataille and Acker's stylistic choice of shock tactics might turn some audience away, their subversive expression calls attention to a marginalized voice experiencing the imbalances and injustices of a class ranking system. I find this type of risk taking inspiring as their subversive stories have pioneered and defined the outer fray of artistic expression.

## PART 3) AFFECTIVE UNDOING:

### 1.1 The Abject



Fig. 7: Karin McGinn, *Bloody Hell*, 2017. Collage and gouache on paper, 41 x 31 cm. Photo: Ross Kelly.

The materiality of paint offers an expressive means to insert my personal narrative or voice into each painting. In *BLOODY HELL* I sought to visually induce mess and spillage as a way to allude to a very bad day. Water spurts out of the sink and pools onto the floor while the death mask figure absently spills coffee from her mug making its

own messy puddle (fig. 7). The seepage continues as her menstrual blood collects inside her pantyliner and seen once more in the blood-soaked tampon inch worms crawling in formation across the tiled floor. In Julia Kristeva's *POWERS OF HORROR: An Essay on Abjection* the author points to the power of the abject not to forecast death but as signifier(s) calling attention to the immediacy of life:

"A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death — a flat encephalograph, for instance — I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I am at the border of my condition as a living being" (3).

Applying abject imagery is a strategy I have recently tuned into in the work *BLOODY HELL* I call attention to skin, blood and bones as a reminder of my own humanness, physicality and impermanence. These uncomfortable signifiers disrupt idealized notions of the feminine by exposing tabooed private moments of discharge and drainage. Signifiers of spillage push out to create an inevitable loss of boundaries and affective anxiety in the inability to contain them. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler considers how humanity's reliance on each other beginning at "infancy constitutes a necessary dependency, one that we never leave behind" (24). The philosopher reflects on how our affect on one another renders us vulnerable by poetically stating, "we're undone by each other" (19). In pursuing female embodiment my research seeks out this ineffable emotional and psychic undoing using the abject as an affective visual language. The absence of skin on the woman's face exposes her skull to reiterate acts of undoing and impermanence. Disparate and uncomfortable narratives emerge between reality and fantasy.

### 3.2 Systemic Undoing

In tracing Western culture's recent history back to colonialism one can situate a subjectivity constituted from the assumptions of class, race and gender exclusion. My understanding of hegemonic power is formed by political theorist Michel Foucault's historical research on the interrogation of systemic powers of influence in contemporary Western and Eurocentric cultures. In Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences* the philosopher calls upon 'epistemological awareness' to understanding present day order he examines past systems which gave shape to the knowledge of that time:

"It is here that a culture, imperceptibly deviating from the empirical orders prescribed for it by its primary codes, instituting an initial separation from them, causes them to lose their original transparency, relinquishes its immediate and invisible powers, frees itself sufficiently to discover that these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones" (xxii).

Through the application of knowledge Foucault questions modes of power looking for evidence and possibilities to expand our limited space of knowledge and thusly gain insight into how one can think beyond our own linear systems. Foucault encourages terms of otherness as a means to destabilize the unitary voice of conformity, creating space for new idiosyncratic systems. In my art practice I similarly look to concepts of otherness to question assumptions about the prevailing systems of order and policing gender.

Aligning with Foucault's interrogation of systemic power, Donna Haraway in her essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" delivers a feminist viewpoint of Western masculinist philosophers and scientists misuse of the term objectivity in order to administer the illusion of one atomic truth. Haraway explains objectivity as a philosophical impossibility by pointing to the shortcomings of this male-centric constructed perspective: "The god-eye trick is an illusionistic and ideological vision that fails to demonstrate real objectivity" (582). She argues that the hegemonic majority is so focused on flexing power that they can never truly portray objectivity. For this reason, the author believes that subjugated groups

might in actuality be closer to discovering a place of “objectivity as its origin comes from embodied knowledge and not one of allegories and governing ideologies” (583).

Foucault and Stewart’s interrogation of hierarchal order encourage forms of otherness to question hegemonies inherent notion of absolute power. By portraying subversive narratives alongside a feminist perspective I see emerging ways to destabilize the unitary voice of conformity and to create space for my own idiosyncratic voice.

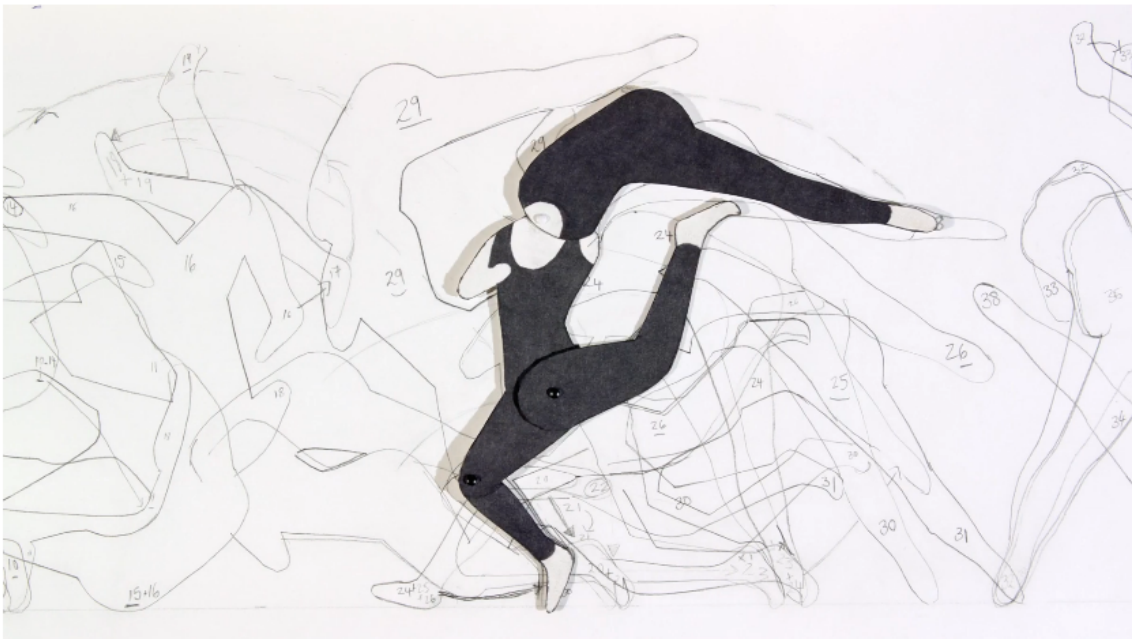


Fig 8: Allison Hrabluik. *This Is The Way They Make Us Bend*, 2013. Screen capture of animation short, 3:25 min. Used by permission of the artist.

In *This Is The Way They Make Us Bend* (2013),<sup>14</sup> a single channel video, Vancouver artist Allison Hrabluik takes on the invisible forces of hierarchal power (fig. 8). Beginning with the title the audience understands that ‘they’ infers to a loss of control for the sole character in the film. Who are they? Is a question that the audience never

<sup>14</sup> You can watch Allison Hrabluik’s animation here: [\*This Is The Way They Make Us Bend\*](#)

discovers the answer to; this knowledge exists in the prelude along with an undisclosed story of how this human-like form came to be. Constructed as a 2-D cutout, she is made from human-shaped paper parts fastened together to form a creature-like entity. The artist sets the stage with pencil numbered silhouettes drawn onto the paper backdrop numbered 1 up to 300 choreographed movements foreshadow her imminent steps. The figure begins her dissent across the screen, pausing at each coordinate; she carries herself with a jarring motion that is reminiscent of unwieldy machine parts. Hrabluik envisions a female figuration without a head to empower itself— a headless conjoined twin pinned together at the neck supports two torsos and three legs; the result echoes a violent intervention. The figure hop-steps backwards then flipping her twin onto her other back determinedly piggybacks forward to retrace any missed coordinates. The audio transmits the chug of mechanical clunking, squeaky parts that need lubrication, and a door shutting. These noises are the strange sound-offs her body makes each time she shifts into the next move. The figure's submissive yet persistent performance conveys an undoing for the audience that her actions are met with an empathetic response. In *BLOODY HELL* I too imagine the permeation of outside forces by depicting a man outside of the window, his presence a lurking reminder of these exterior influences. The man cast in shadow looks up to the window linking him to the interior scene of spillage and undoing. While the influence of Hrabluik's work on my own might at first appear disconnected, this psychological presence that the artist evokes has seeped into my imagination and open process.



### 3.3 Humour and Absurdity



Fig. 9: Karin McGinn, *Mrs. PEE*, 2017. Collage and gouache on paper, 41 x 31 cm. Photo: Ross Kelly.

In *Mrs. PEE* my female figuration escapes the confines of the bathroom, but not without first highlighting its central abject signifier– the toilet (fig. 9). I paint a woman with a literal potty bowl in place of a real head as a metaphor for the illogical that I encounter in my own everyday reality. Employing transgressive tendencies I subvert the natural order of things by implementing absurdist possibilities. I imagine absurdity as a formal question and in the process destabilize both the audience and myself. A comic

incident takes over as her bowl head teeters and sloshes seconds before bright yellow urine and pooh hit the floor. Following this inversion of logic, I try to envision what it would mean to have a toilet head instead of a real head, a dreadful way of being in the world signaling a lack of bodily control. Pictures of Mrs. PEE's family are hung behind her on the wallpapered living room wall. I paint a small potty head boy and an old-fashioned grandfather urinal both fixed into collage wood-textured frames. Ancestral lines are hard to escape from and impossible to break. I find Mrs. PEE's painterly existence equal parts disturbing and funny. In Sheri Klein's book *Art and Laughter* the author asks her reader to consider the subversive nature of humour by questioning why artists create humour driven work? And what can be achieved through this specific form of expression? Klein investigates humor as a way to communicate what lies beneath the surface stating: "All humour is subversive, that is, it aims to disrupt our assumptions, emotions, patterns of thinking, ways of knowing and the world as we know it" (132). The material collage at times refuses to be contained; it spills over the paper substrate and ruptures the idea of kept order. I think about how I am attracted to rebellious thinkers and cherish moments filled with abject seepage (birth and sickness) that also refuse to be contained. In this way both the material collage and the abject contribute to a loss of control. Humour helps me to temper this sense of loss in both the real and imaginary. Laughter's affect allows me to stay loose and to invoke play as an integral component of the creative process.

In Henri Bergson's essay, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* the philosopher explains how laughter is used to explain current events and connect a community together using societal signifiers:

"To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification. [...]" (22).

In the artwork I apply humour to point to absurdist moments observed in authority, consumerism and the everyday. In *BLOODY HELL* a dark *mise en scène* of misshappenings detail the woman's plight that is except for a personalized coffee cup

reading *Mom*. The cup is Bergson's social signification of the familiar to convey 'a life in common.' Although the woman's flesh on her face has disintegrated leaving her skull exposed, her humanness remains visible via the cup, after all haven't we all had a bloody hell kind of day? In *Mrs. PEE* the woman's ridiculous toilet head attempts to explain the tension between absurdity and tragic circumstance. In my real life I have observed a parallel between absurd happenings and tragic incidences, a realization that has enabled me to appreciate dark humour as life occurrences are complicated and enduring without laughter's release.

#### PART 4) CRITICAL REFLECTION: *a stick in the spokes*



Fig. 10: Karin McGinn. 2017 *a stick in the spokes*, ECUAD MFA Graduate Exhibition, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver, BC. Photo: Ross Kelly.

During our graduating group exhibition critique of *a stick in the spokes*, the attending curators<sup>15</sup> made thoughtful and humorous contributions to how *Mis(s)representations* (fig. 10,11), my series of five works operate within the context and reception of the gallery. Throughout the critique I noted the explicit language used for speaking about these artworks. It was as if the paintings themselves gave the idea of a frank response from its audience. Prior to the opening I comparably observed how viewers encountering the work would make comments using an unabashed vocabulary. One example occurred while discussing space allocation with a fellow classmate; she shared a comment her husband made regarding our works close proximity in the gallery. In a deadpan manner, he cracked, “Looks like you’re right next to the tits and

<sup>15</sup> 2017. Graduating exhibition group critiques held in the *Charles H. Scott Gallery* with visiting curators: Jonathan Middleton, Vanessa Kwan and Pablo de Ocampo.

turds section.” His comment made me laugh, not only for its directness but also for its crude accuracy. The show didn’t stop there.



Fig. 10: Karin McGinn. 2017 *a stick in the spokes*, ECUAD MFA Graduate Exhibition, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver, BC. Photo: Ross Kelly.

The curators similarly described all of the works in *Mis(s)representations* using explicit potty mouth terms. Pablo de Ocampo noted a reduction of body parts—pointing to the collaged “dickhead” in *The Milky Way* as well as the painted “fishhead” in *Seaman’s Prize Catch* as “two examples of large stereotypes associated with gender roles; the catch is a prize to possess and dickhead conveys the relationship between male and female alluding to the objectification of the body.” From the two larger works de Ocampo moved his commentary onto the bathroom themed pieces by stating: “The three smaller scale works are unified by body shaving, blood, piss—things that are not seen nor talked about. Disfigured forms spewing piss and shit out of a toilet.” In contrast

to de Campo's colourful expletives came a different reaction from another curator. With one eyebrow raised, Vanessa Kwan cast an uncomfortable and wearisome gaze towards the three potty themed pieces *Mrs. PEE*, *BLOODY HELL* and *In a Minute*. Kwan wondered aloud, "Who is the audience for these images?" Moments later, answering her own question she stated: "Desire and horror. The male gaze makes visible and describes what that trajectory is—femininity and how we look at women." She described feeling, an affective curiosity towards the work and wondered aloud, "Is it meant as a social critique?" Kwan summarized with a bold statement: "Fuck you. The work is affront; this is what happens. These paintings are making a vocabulary of what happens."

Notably, the curators paid special attention to my most recent addition in this series *The Milky Way*. In Jonathan Middleton's words he observed, "*The Milky Way* gives an open read with a perplexity of things to come back to which makes it strong; like the nipples which have a tentacular quality." Kwan finished off the discussion of *The Milky Way* with a summation that the work shows a consideration of sexual pleasure," with a final declaration, "Lets all fuck in space!"

## 4.1 The Future



Fig. 11: Karin McGinn. *The Milky Way*, 2017. Gouache and collage on paper, 46 x 61 cm. Photo: Ross Kelly.

Upon entering Emily Carr's MFA program two years ago, I felt a pull to make work about what I felt most knowledgeable, that is and remains an intimacy of my own bodily knowledge. With my final piece, *The Milky Way* I have experienced a slight shift towards a less subjective position. While making this work I dreamt of a cosmological stage, a state of mind that enabled me to see outside of the comfort of my own personal experiences. In this cosmic cabaret sexy skeleton women dance alongside a celestial myriad-breasted wonder. Here I sought to create a cast of characters that didn't already exist in the world, a consideration that has led me to conjure playful interrelations between a fleshy octopus and a tentacular-titted Queen. *The Milky Way* has given me new confidence to build on my political agency in order to address the absurd

hegemony of this era. In *The Milky Way* I collage a woman's leg donning a thigh-high black leather boot with the word *NASTY* bedazzled on its shiny surface; a nod to the highly contentious US president Trump's multiple offences including misogynist commentary directed at his rival Hillary Clinton. Discovering collages political agency alongside intertextual strategies and transgressive inversions has provided emergent understandings as well as alternative forms to visually express being in one's body and in the world. This brings me back to my central research question: Can one affect the conventional order of things through transgressive renderings of the female form?

Current sociopolitical events in my own spatiotemporal existence show me that gendered mis(s)representations persist in Western culture as women still strive for the same rights as men. According to a recent article published by *The Globe and Mail* gender pay disparity isn't going away anytime soon <sup>16</sup>despite higher levels of education women earn 10 - 30% less than their male coworkers in Canada. Simultaneously advertising campaigns propagate a cultural obsession with celebrity and youth culture as a way to endorse products based on falsities of immortalization and unattainable beauty standards. Contrary to the perfection that we see in commercial advertising the transgressive body signals an aberration of idealized representations. Its messy imagery of visceral blood and decay recalls the physicality of nature demanding our immediate attention to acknowledge other world systems of eroticism, continuous and non-continuous bodies encapsulated within life cycles that live outside of advertisers reach. This art as research investigation has led me to envision the body as transitory and fluid, to continue to push the boundaries of otherness and bad taste as a way to question the accepted realities of a franchised world.

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<sup>16</sup> "A woman working full time in Canada makes 73.5 cents for every dollar a man makes, according to updated Statistics Canada income data produced for The Globe and Mail – a persistent wage gap that continues even though women's educational attainment has surpassed that of men and amid widespread recognition of the issue among Canadians" (The Globe and Mail).



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