

Drawing The Lines Of Female Sexuality

By

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Abstract

This thesis document seeks to explore and expand on the topic of gender and sexuality through representational figurative drawing. Specifically focusing on the female-identified form in current society, this thesis investigates the plurality of ways in which the gaze, feminist art practices, sexuality, censorship, and historical events have shaped, defined, and conditioned the perception of the female nude in art. By studying and researching the theories behind the gazes, the practice intends to subvert and refuse the masculine gaze, in attempts to place the feminine queer gaze at the forefront of artistic inquiry. Second wave feminist artists and fourth wave, postfeminist disciplines inspired the direction and intentions behind the work produced in the MFA program. This thesis paper provides analytical support to my exploration, uncensored.

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Acknowledgements

I have lived all my life on the traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, specifically that of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil Waututh nations. From a young age I was introduced to Indigenous culture and the politics that have had a negative historic legacy throughout Canada. Being exposed to these highly relevant conversations and implications from a young age forced me to listen and acknowledge my self-reflexivity as a Canadian settler. My interest in wanting to connect and engage in these colonial histories is evident by my involvement in working in art spaces that provide a platform for Indigenous arts such as The Museum of Anthropology, Macaulay & Co. Fine Art, and in giving or facilitating talks at galleries and art events to support further and promote the awareness of indigenous artists. These are small steps but a meaningful way I practice my respect and gratitude towards the land, peoples and histories that have come before me.

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Introduction

When I started the MFA program at Emily Carr University, I had over 100,000 Instagram followers¹ of my drawings and paintings which examined women and female sexuality in contemporary society. Women and female are used in this context to include female-identified and feminine gender identities not exclusive to cis-females or cis-women. This includes trans women, trans females, femme queers, masculine women, genderqueer, two-spirited and more.² My initial focus was to add my voice to the post-feminist and fourth-wave movement³ by illustrating the power and importance of female sexuality as forms of identity, liberation and freedom from male hegemony. My work depicted hyper-sexual intimate portraits and scenarios that explore queer culture, girlhood, desire, and shame. Instagram was a platform to post and share stories that could provoke discussions about sexuality to a wider audience. However, what appeared to me as a coherent thesis focused on the liberation and empowerment⁴ of some women, through the female form in explicit and provocative images, ran afoul with some feminists who interpreted my art as exploitive and art that perpetuated the male gaze. Questions were raised from members of Emily Carr University as to whether my art was in fact more exploitive than empowering. Clearly, there was a divergence in interpretation and acceptance of my art between the Instagram followers and the academic community.

¹ Since 2015, I have accumulated up to 108,000 followers for my account @bonercandy69.

² This is an expanded definition of the terms Woman/Women and Female. In this thesis, I hope to be respectful and inclusive in how I incorporate the language behind women and female sexuality as I understand that this is a broadened category on the spectrum of gender identity and expression.

³ I will elaborate about post-feminism and the forth-wave online movement in section 2. *Feminism* and 4. *Current Feminist Landscapes*. My work posted to Instagram gained lots of momentum in 2015-16, and I was asked to participate in a post-feminist group exhibition in New York entitled, "Hotter than July- Hands off my Cuntry" curated by Savannah Spirit. The exhibition highlighted women's rights and was a visual protest against Donald Trump's nomination to President of the United States. Held days before the inauguration, the exhibition was well received with media coverage by Forbes, Huffington Post, Dazed and Confused, Vice and was mentioned on Bill Maher's Talk Show. From this experience, I connected with international feminists and artists who shared similar views on censorship, erotics, and politics.

⁴ This word has various definitions and can mean something different to anyone who speaks it. In this writing, I define empowerment as strength, agency, choice and freedom.

The attempt to reconcile these two very different communities required me to abandon my painting practice and concentrate exclusively on drawing to focus on the various manifestations of female-identified sexuality. Extensive research and investigation resulted in dissatisfaction and lack of conclusion but more insight into feminism, objectification, and the contradictions inherent in the gazes⁵. As I continue to study and research the history and philosophy behind feminist art practices, I find communicating an artistic message through the medium of drawing is not only efficient and effective but valuable to the furtherance of experimentation and development to my art practice.

In my work I examine under what conditions the act of drawing can empower female sexuality. I acknowledge that my interest in creating a reimagined vision of the feminine body can also be viewed as reductive and stifling to the liberation of some gender identities and cis-women outside of the white narrative. As a white, young and privileged, queer and cis-woman, I understand what is at stake and the limitations of my artistic investigation and representation of sexuality. I recognize that the questions I ask and the assertions I make may not be an option for all women in communities around the world. I am aware of the hierarchical structures I am a part of and the implications of representing communities outside of my experience as this can lead to further exploitation and disingenuous misrepresentations. I focus on my personal experiences that have shaped my understanding of the world around me subject to this recognition and acknowledgment. In my research I reflect on my own body image and how many women are affected by unrealistic and idealized portrayals from a young age. I also acknowledge that my vision and depiction of empowerment and sexuality can perpetuate more stereotypes and patriarchal ways of "objectifying" female bodies. However, I hope that by

⁵ I will elaborate on some of the various gazes I investigate in my work in section 3. *Navigating the Gazes*

continuing to investigate sexuality through various forms of drawing, I can strengthen my feminist voice as an artist, and support other voices that are part of this feminist movement. In this thesis, I review an artistic progression through a series of drawings and discuss how they differ in theory, method and methodology, and form a connected and progressive journey.

Multiple Feminisms

Feminism is a word that has many definitions, intersections and connotations. There are different waves and forms of feminism that both inspire and critique present and past movements. According to feminist theorist Sara Ahmed, “feminism as a collective movement is made out of how we are moved to become feminists in dialogue with others. A movement requires us to be moved”(Ahmed 2017:4).⁶ My interest in the feminist narrative stems from fourth-wave feminism, second-wave feminist artists, queer and post-feminist disciplines. The first-wave movement in the 1920s granted women the right to vote. It also offered women possibilities for work outside the domestic home in spaces traditionally occupied by men while they were at war. First wave suffragettes based in the United States worked and fought for political freedom and equality. However, their politics were not universal or intersectional. The second-wave feminist movement, also known as the women's liberation movement in the 1960-80s, provided women with a strong political and social platform to fight for reproduction rights, equal pay, sexual liberation and challenged patriarchy. This wave gave rise to the phrase “the personal is political,” which suggests that women and their experiences are entwined with

⁶ Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life.* , 2017. Print.

power structures.⁷ During this wave in 1963, Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* shed light on dissatisfied social/gender roles, specifically those of middle to upper-class white housewives and mothers as "the problem that has no name"(Friedan 1963).⁸ Although there were many pioneering works produced from feminists and artists at this time, they neglected to recognize and acknowledge voices beyond the privileged white narrative. In 1990, third-wave feminism emerged as a reaction and response to second-wave feminism. Third-wave feminism campaigned to further encourage intersectionality, anti-essentialism, post-colonialism, gender/queer identity and fought against workplace harassment and stereotypical patriarchal ideas of femininity. Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Judith Butler are notable figures in this movement. Their writing on feminism brought forward and challenged issues of the gender binary, intersectional diversity and essentialism perpetuated in second-wave feminism. This movement gave rise to fourth-wave feminism, which developed in the 21st century advocating against sexual harassment, body-shaming, slut-shaming and worked to secure sex-worker rights and gender identity. The fourth-wave became a global and broader movement in that it pushed feminism towards supporting more intersectional causes. Post-feminism, which I will outline in section 4, is a type of feminism that critiques past feminisms and exists online through hashtag activism, advertisements and consumer culture. Some forms of post-feminism promote controversial ideas of empowerment, sexual liberation, and confidence through online commercial campaigns (Banet-Weiser 2018). Although the various forms of feminism differ from each other, they share the common feminist doctrine to fight against gender inequality, sexism and to explore and examine alternative ways to critique patriarchy.

⁷ Judith Butler further analyzes this phrase in *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* p. 522-525

⁸ Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York :Norton, 1963

Sexuality

Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth*, *Misconceptions*, and *The Vagina: A Biography*, states that according to feminist writer Germaine Greer,⁹ “women will be free when they have a positive definition of sexuality”(Wolf 1990:160). Female sexuality presents itself in a plurality of ways, which makes it unique, elusive, and mysterious. Because of these complexities, female sexuality has been feared, shamed, and controlled by the patriarchy. In Wolf’s book, *The Vagina: A Biography*, she declares, “Female sexual pleasure, rightly understood, is not just about sexuality, or just about pleasure. It serves, also, as a medium of female self-knowledge and hopefulness; female creativity and courage; female focus and initiative; female bliss and transcendence; and as medium of a sensibility that feels very much like freedom.” (Wolf 2012:7). In this context, I think about how my sexuality shapes my identity and creative expression. Sexuality has many complex connections but can be effectively communicated through various forms of art and activism.

Though the medium of drawing, I explore the various artistic techniques in which sexually confident and self-determined feminine bodies are respected and treated as equals rather than objectified for male visual pleasure. While it is argued by many feminists that we can never entirely escape the male gaze because we live in a patriarchal system, I have experimented with techniques to determine if the male gaze can be challenged and subverted by the female gaze or queer gaze. I address this topic by asking the question: is there any way to depict a sexually confident and liberated female-identified nude in art or will the image always be subject to scrutiny and criticism of objectification and exploitation? Moreover how

⁹ Germain Greer was widely recognized for her profound book, *The Female Eunuch*

can social media platforms like Instagram or public spaces such as art galleries allow for the discussion and possibilities of another gaze in contemporary art and society?

Navigating some of the Gazes

Male Gaze

The male gaze is the viewpoint in which women are sexualized as objects of desire by the masculine gaze. Laura Mulvey, a vital film critic, coined the term male gaze in her profound and controversial essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975. Mulvey discusses the gaze of the male spectator from a psychoanalytic Freudian approach in response to how mass media has depicted the female form. Mulvey structures the male gaze in a triangular formation between the spectator (audience), the person behind the lens (cameraman), and the subjects or objects on set. Mulvey states, “the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact”(Mulvey 1975:62). These masculine fantasies or desires manifest from many film techniques like voyeurism and stereotyping to spark responses in male spectators and the fetishized object on display.

John Berger, the author of *Ways of Seeing*, analyzes the relationship between women in society and pop culture. He states: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at... The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object.”(Berger 1972:47) This concept is especially relevant today as we are living

in an image-obsessed digital era bombarded by advertisements, social media, fashion statements and unrealistic beauty standards. These standards of beauty are outlined in Naomi Wolf's book, *The Beauty Myth*, and are aggressively directed towards women through the influence of mass media. Wolf states that some of these beauty ideals are promoted through the "multibillion-dollar dieting industry," a rise in plastic surgery (specifically breast augmentation), beauty cosmetics (anti-aging creams) and soft and hard-core pornography (Wolf 1990: 2,3-17). Popular culture depends on the overly sexualized imagery of women in advertisements to sell their products. Because of this, some women have felt that their sexuality has been taken away from them and sold back through hyper-sexual and violent pornographic content. From my perspective, contemporary artists who incorporate pornographic references in their work are political and courageous. Some important artists that use this controversial aesthetic are Lisa Yuskavage, Marilyn Minter, Sue Williams, Ghada Amer, Marlene Dumas, and Betty Tompkins.

In this section, I examine two artists who exemplify problematic representations of the male gaze in their work. Although the work of Lisa Yuskavage and Tom Wesselmann are indicative of the male gaze, both their perspectives and paintings have contributed to this ongoing critical debate in contemporary art. Yuskavage paints curious, sexually charged and sensual women in a world of their own, often in a state of dressing, undressing and examining their bodies. Her hyper-sexual portraits of women are doll-like as she elaborately distorts their breasts, buttocks, pregnant stomachs, and hips. Male produced pornographic imagery taken from *Penthouse Magazine* makes up most of Yuskavage's reference material for her work. Many feminists, art critics and curators within the Western art market argue that this type of representation is objectifying and continues to support male gaze depictions of women. While

some of her representations of the female nude adhere to the male gaze, it is her process and transformation of stereotypical imagery into paintings that open possibilities towards another gaze. Her paintings, whether created in gouache, watercolour or oils are systematically thought-out through application, colour and stylistic techniques. Yuskavage provokes questions about desire, ways of looking and continues to walk the thin line of unsettling, controversial and explicit female representations and social acceptance. Her compositions are sensual, compelling and leave the viewer questioning if what they just experienced was exploitative, erotic or feminist.

Although many male artists receive criticism for their interpretation of the female experience, I reference their artwork in my own art practice in an attempt to challenge the male gaze. This, of course, raises the question how studying male artists alters the way female-identified artists intend to reclaim their body in their own representation. Wesselmann, a pop artist renowned for his treatment of colour, form, social commentary and historical iconography of the American Sexual Revolution reveals his male gaze through his voyeuristic perspective of the ideal Western female nude. His subjects are presented in the bedroom, nude, with exaggerated tan lines and legs spread wide open. Breasts and nipples are portrayed perky, symmetrical and rose coloured to signify youth and beauty. He weaves between painting his desire and his muses' sexual pleasure to both parties satisfaction. Many of his paintings are close-up and cropped with open-mouthed smiling red lips signifying an oral fixation and state of ecstasy.

Furthermore, his *Smoker Series* (Figure 1.) is a blatant sexist representation of oral fixation. Wesselmann's use of contour, outlines and positive and negative space create bold

methodical formations intended to seduce the viewer. Although his compositions are uniquely original, his work is highly problematic due to his objectification and stereotypical representations of female sexuality. His work glamorizes patriarchal dominance over women's bodies as he advertises them like consumer goods. I bring forward Tom Wesselmann in this thesis as I believe his work has provoked extensive commentary from contemporary artists attempting to reclaim their body and subvert the male gaze.



(Figure 1.) Tom Wesselmann, *Smoker #1*, 1967, oil on shaped canvas, 108-1/2 x 82-1/2 inches, The Museum of Modern Art

© Estate of Tom Wesselmann / Licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York / SOCAN, Montréal (2020)

Female Gaze

The female gaze is the refusal to the domination of the male gaze, where the attempt is not to objectify the woman but to position woman as subject. This oppositional gaze encourages and promotes ways to portray feminine subjects independent of the male gaze in art and popular culture. The feminist challenge to the male gaze is an attempt to re-learn how to look at women in art. In response to Laura Mulvey's male gaze, Jill Soloway, writer and creator of the television series *Transparent*, *I Love Dick* and author of *She Wants It*, discusses a term defined as the female gaze at a talk at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2006. Similar to Mulvey's triangular structuring, Soloway deconstructs the female gaze into three parts: a way of feeling seeing; the gazed gaze or how it feels to be seen; and finally, returning the gaze (Soloway 2016). Through an inspiring and informational speech, Soloway elaborates on how one can alter the gaze in representing the female body in art, mass media and contemporary culture.¹⁰ This paradigm shift has resulted in a rise of female-identified artists depicting the female form on their own terms to break open the boundaries of the patriarchal gaze.

In the book, *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze*, author Charlotte Jansen interviews 40 female photographers from 17 different countries. She focuses on experiences from a female photographer's point of view in response to taking pictures of their female subjects. The photographers interviewed in this book describe the varied ways to portray complex emotions, inclusive bodies and vulnerable narrations. Zing Tsjeng, editor of *Broadly Magazine* gives insight on this book as she states in the forward, "A woman taking a

¹⁰ Talks, TIFF. "Jill Soloway On The Female Gaze | MASTER CLASS | TIFF 2016". *YouTube*, YouTube, 11 Sept. 2016

photograph of a woman isn't just performing a political act; it is also a powerful act of imagination" (Jansen 2017: 7). Her assertions on Jansens project are to pay attention to inclusivity and agency among women as the book aims to highlight some of the different ways to look at women(8). Because of the problematic history of women objectified as a desirable muse for the male creator, this book embraces and celebrates how more women are taking control of their bodies, identities and subject matter as artists.

My interest in photography not only complements my practice by adding more layers to the process but adds more visual and sensory information to the work. I have used photography in the past to help develop and correct realistic proportions of figures and connect environmental compositions. Through my experimentation and research with photography, I can understand the arguments and contradictions that accompany how female-identified artists depict women through their point of view behind the lens of the camera.

Feminist pioneer Carolee Schneemann is vital to my practice as her work deals with sexual imagery and the naked female body. I connect Soloway's notion of "seeing feeling" to Schneemann's performances as they state the female gaze is "reclaiming the body, using it with intention to communicate Feeling Seeing" (Soloway 2016: 17:34). Emotion and feeling are exemplified in Schneemann's visceral performances as she uses her body to paint traces¹¹ of internal movement and kinetic energy that emanates from within. In her acts, Schneemann responds to the cultural moment of her time and pushes back against Mulvey's male gaze to reclaim her naked body. Furthermore, she challenges the male gaze by celebrating feminine sexual power and pleasure by connecting her body to the erotic. In the performance, *Interior*

¹¹ Schneemann considers herself a painter as she came from a classical painting practice prior to her performance work where she uses her body to paint traces in and onto her surroundings. She uses her body as a paint brush to leave markings on the wall, floor, and on participants involved in her performances.

Scroll, 1977, Schneemann uses her body as a way to communicate sacred interior knowledge as she reads a passage from a scroll pulled out from her vulva. The passages written on the scroll outline the blatant sexism and double standards continuously faced by women in the art world (MIT Press 2002:153).

In my drawings, the subjects are best presented naked as I attempt to cast a light on the sexual double standards that patriarchal systems have established for women. Nudity or nakedness is an essential visual motif in my portrayal of feminine representation. Similar to Schneemann, I incorporate the naked form to challenge objectification in current society. I find Schneemann's work relevant as it has influenced contemporary artists to respond to the feminist environment and the male gaze in their attempt to reclaim their bodies. Artists like Erin M. Riley, Leah Schrager, Shona McAndrew, Stacy Leigh, Jen Mann, Ness Lee and Bianca Nemelc focus their representation on the naked body in response to censorship, the male gaze and the politics of the erotic. In their work, they use the classical theme of the reclined bedroom nude but from the female point of view. Some of the objects surrounding the bedroom are indicative of the times, not unlike Wesselmann, and feature items like laptops, iPhones, movie posters, books, selfie-sticks, feminine products like birth control or tampons and vibrators. However, the women portrayed in these bedroom scenes differ from Tom Wesselmann's reclined female nudes in that they are represented as real bodies that many women can identify with. For example, some scenes feature women of all sizes, ethnicities and sexualities, with tattoos, acne or cellulite, wearing face masks or in a state of grooming.

The Queer Gaze

The queer gaze performs on a similar yet different level than the female gaze. While some gazes act as a response or denial to specific ways of looking others are deeply rooted and can crossover and connect. According to Soloway, the female gaze is not strictly tied to women but encompasses “the non-gaze, the other gaze, the queer gaze and intersectional gaze”(Soloway 2016: 41:43). In this instant, Soloway suggests that the female gaze, which can also identify as the queer gaze, can be taken up by folks that do not necessarily identify as cis-females. The fact that the female gaze has been coined by someone who identifies as non-binary and gender non-conforming also adds to the various intersections and intertwined complications of the gazes. The crossing over of possibilities and entangled nature of feminine sexuality is inherent in Elizabeth Wright’s analysis of Lacan and Postfeminism. In her book she states, “biological differentiations are inadequate. Too many people seem to cross over: there are biological males with feminine structures and biological females with masculine structures”.¹² (Wright 2000: 54) Masculinity and femininity are gender notions studied and theorized by American gender theorist Judith Butler. In her work, *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender identity is constructed from “stylized repetition of acts” and “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”(Butler 1999).¹³ In this instant, Butler suggests that identity is produced by repeated action and behaviour based on ingrained social structures and relational models. Thus through conscious performances, individuals can reclaim their power and restructure their gender experience to create identity and shift social norms.

¹² Wright, Elizabeth. *Lacan and Postfeminism*. Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd, 2000. Print.

¹³ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London, Routledge: 1999 (p. 33, 179)

Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, states in *Tendencies* that “queer refers to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”¹⁴ Rather than responding to any dominant gaze and possibly sexual orientation, the queer gaze embraces ambiguity, difference and universal relationality. This notion of difference deconstructs the absolute binaries and challenges heteronormative structures.

As my practice comes from a queer perspective as in, how I define my sexuality, I must consider how my gaze and depictions translate not only to heterosexual women and men, but also the LGBTQ community. I navigate contradictions as a queer cis-woman, as my work intercepts and weaves through both aspects of the female and queer gaze. In addition, I incorporate female gaze concepts mentioned by Soloway in artwork where I intend to celebrate queer desire and position woman-identified as subject rather than object. In section 5 entitled, *B(r)east*, I elaborate on how this art series attempts to capture what a queer female gaze “imagines itself” to be.

¹⁴ Sedgwick, Eve K. *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. Print.

Drawing Process

Interviews + Photography

Initially, I incorporated interdisciplinary approaches such as photography, digital collage, recorded interviews and perspective drawings to create a depiction worthy of the female gaze. In the first semester, I photographed and interviewed models¹⁵ with pre-determined questions. The conversations were recorded in a safe space¹⁶ where the models and I could talk freely about experiences or issues involving sexual identity. This process formed a circle of care, kinship and solidarity through the act of listening and storytelling. The dialogue was essential as it deepened my understanding of the subject and the emotions expressed by their body language and movement. As I drew each model with ink, I focused on the shape of their body, complex facial expression and strength emanating from self-directed poses. In a series of 10 mixed-media portraits, I attempted to depict strong emotion and personality alongside the sexually empowered poses of each model.

The bonding experience between the model and the artist was collaborative;¹⁷ however in retrospect, I portrayed them in a way that was counter-productive to what I originally had intended. While I enjoyed working with women between the ages of 20 to 36 for the first

¹⁵ In this project, I worked with 12 friends and acquaintances. I have referred to them as models in this paper.

¹⁶ The spaces alternated between my apartment, a photography studio in East Vancouver, and the model's apartments. The use of the word "safe" indicates that there was no judgment, shame, or censoring in the discussion. The interview was personal and vulnerable, with both myself and the model sharing the experience.

¹⁷ Collaboration, in this regard, is outlined through both parties involved in the project. The poses were determined and explored by the model with lighting direction from the artist. After the photoshoot, both the artist and model organized the pictures together and picked the top five, which the artist would use as a reference to draw the final image.

series, I was reminded of the problematic male-dominated history of how men have photographed or painted young women in the past.¹⁸ The models were encouraged to take up any desired position that would emanate individual empowerment without shame or stigma. This process was challenging as the models chose to pose in hyper-sexualized and self-objectifying positions. Although I firmly believe in sex-positive¹⁹ self-expression, I found myself confused and in a state of contradiction between my research and artistic intent and the results of my work.

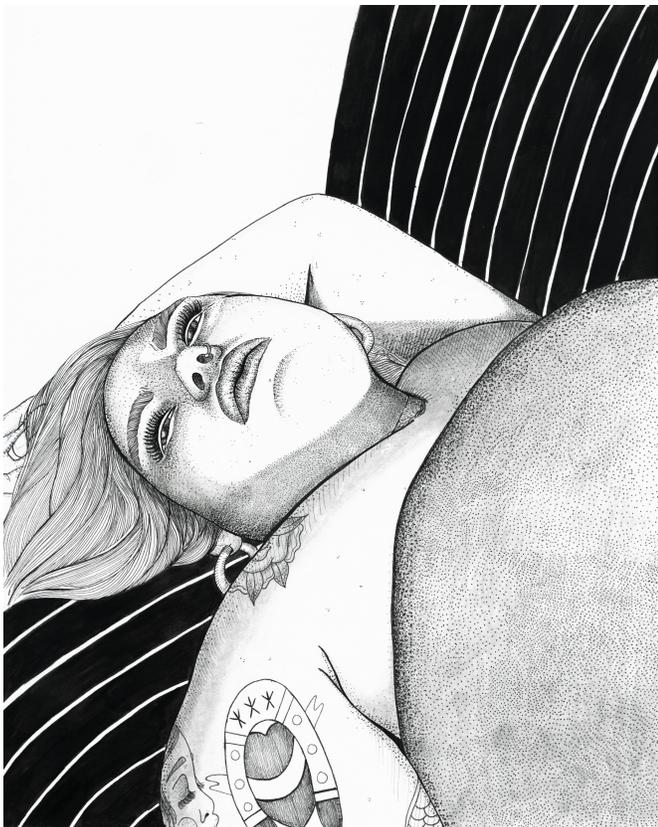


Figure 2. *Natalie*, Mixed media on paper, 8 x 12", 2018



Figure 3. *Simone*, Acrylic Ink on paper, 8 x 12", 2018

¹⁸ Here, I think about how artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Claude Manet and Albrecht Dürer objectified and exploited their young muses through painting and drawing.

¹⁹ According to the International Society for Sexual Medicine, the term "sex positive" can be interpreted in different ways. For most, it involves having positive attitudes about sex and feeling comfortable with one's own sexual identity and with the sexual behaviours of others. "International Society for Sexual Medicine." Accessed January 25, 2020. <https://www.issm.info/>.

Live modelling + Mirrors

In an attempt to reconcile these artistic results, I loosened my approach from a more realistic figurative representation to minimalistic ink drawing. The figures and subjects became less detailed but more stylized. In this new investigation, I used repetition, live-model drawing and mirrors in my attempt to challenge a pre-meditative and structured way of working with photography. The practice became less focused on the final outcome and more centred on the free flowing process of drawing. The figures, including myself, were hand-drawn numerous times to memorize the gesture of drawing the body on paper. This was incredibly helpful in my attempt to loosen up and lose control. I interchanged between two-to-five minute drawings, ten-to-twenty minute drawings and thirty minute drawings. By changing the speeds of various poses, the motion became the focus rather than refining a detailed photo-realistic rendering.

Accentuating the form and movement of each subject became an effective way to give agency to the body illustrated. The sexuality expressed from the subjects was recorded through overlapping layers of thick or thin paint outlines and patterns. This ongoing series features 50 drawings exhibited as a constellation rather than a linear grid. By presenting the drawings in this style, the audience can make connections with the drawings without the influence of a linear or hierarchal order. For me, the figures depicted in *Hardcore Whimsey* (Figure 4.) reinforced the importance of female-identified sexual freedom.



Figure 4. Install view of *Hardcore Whimsey*, mixed media on paper, 2018-2020. Image Credit: Barb Choit

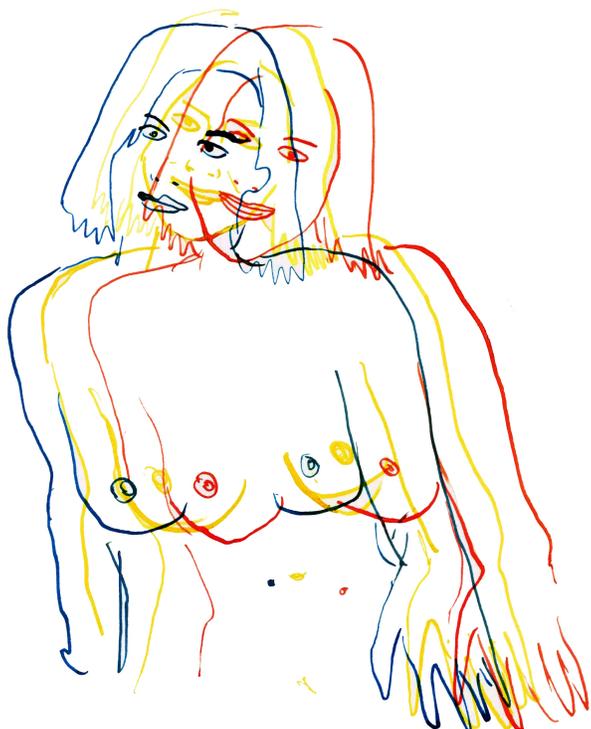


Figure 5. *Holly*, Acrylic Ink on paper, 8 x 11", 2019 (detail)



Figure 6. *Sophia*, Mixed Media on paper, 11 x 8", 2018 (detail)

Lines + Layers

Drawing is an effective medium to portray female sexuality as the process is intimate, messy and personal as well as time-efficient. In the drawing *Hot Wheels* (Figure 7.), I introduce a new arrangement of contour lines, shapes, and styles that allow for a more in-depth reading of the images. Rather than collaborating with models for this specific series, I portray myself. As I place myself in the role of subject, I focus on the curvatures of my body and state of mind while I draw. I incorporate accessible and straightforward materials in my depictions, such as graphite and ink, to connect the viewer to an adolescent time in their life where they were discovering their sexuality. Graphite is simple yet versatile and depending on pressure one can create smooth, sensitive shapes, jagged, rough sketches or sharp emphasized lines to achieve varied tonal marks. The graphite tonal shading softens the harsh contour ink outlines and gives weight, density and dimension to the lines.

Helene McDonald, author of *Erotic Ambiguities; The Female Nude in Art* examines and challenges representation of the female body through history, feminism, queer studies and future speculations. Ambiguity, according to McDonald, is “an effect of representational processes, a complication, a blurring, an uncertainty or vagueness” (McDonald 2001: 14). McDonald claims deconstruction of the female body through ambiguous representation is one of the many positive ways to depict the body in contemporary art (McDonald 2001:5,12-14). Ambiguity in this case, encourages a different way of looking; one that proposes more complex and conceptual interpretations of feminine sexuality. Her stance is to push the boundaries of inclusivity and diversity to reject the idealized and patriarchal vision of a beautiful female body. One can argue that this in fact is not only taking up the aspects of the female gaze, but the

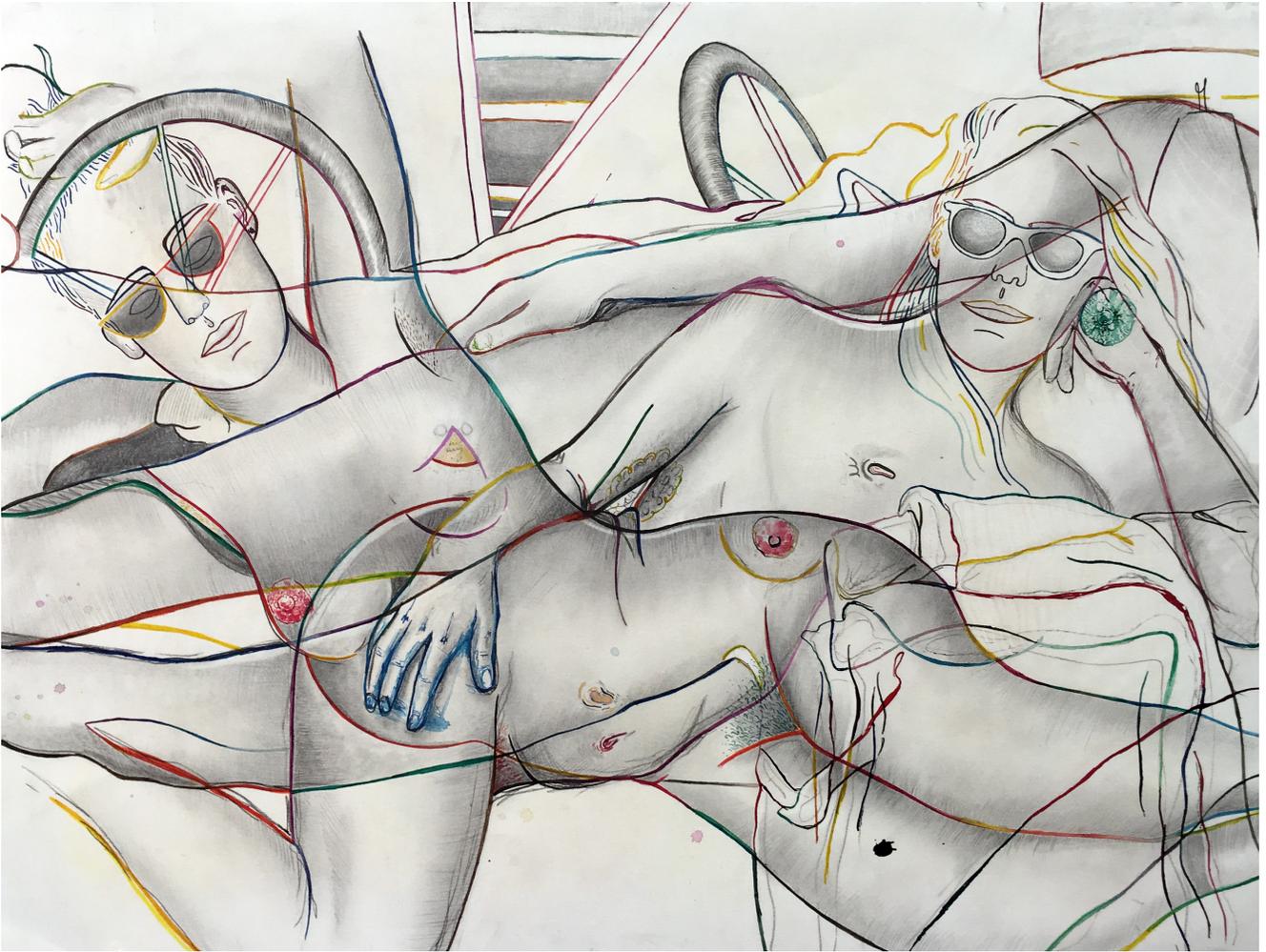


Figure 7. *Hot wheels*, Mixed Media on paper, 22 x 30", 2019

difference in the queer gaze. *Hot Wheels* (Figure 7.) is influenced by McDonald's thesis as the bodies overlap and transform from solid to translucent forms as they intertwine with the architecture of the background. The bodies create an illusionistic effect where the pictorial perspective breaks in areas and the physical form is reduced to the line. In this artwork, the viewer is left to question where the body begins, ends and where does the connection start. This work further investigates the layered technique which also gives rise to confusing emotions that can be hard to define like sexuality. In this series, I attempt to reinforce the female gaze and queer gaze and underscore this point through ambivalent, ambiguous but sexual renderings.

In one of her essays, "The Uses of Erotic", queer feminist activist and poet Audre Lorde suggests that erotic knowledge is gained through curiosity, acknowledging the feeling of emotion and connection. Audre Lorde's writing focuses on identity and social injustices, specifically around systems of race, class, gender and sexuality. Her work is multi-dimensional and informative. Lorde claims that patriarchal systems distort the meaning of the erotic and use it against women as a tool for oppression(Lorde 1984:53). I am interested in bringing Lorde's essay into the work by investigating this notion of the erotic and how it can be used as a mechanism to "create change." Lorde also states that, "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (Lorde 1984:53).²⁰ This is essential to my work as I attempt to depict the desire, emotional connection and sexual liberation experienced through female interaction.

B(r)east

I am interested in the parts of the body that are fetishized and over-sexualized by society, such as the female nipple. I think about how these parts of the body are constructed, censored and sexualized to control ones sexuality. According to feminist historian Marilyn Yalom, the breast "has been coded with "good" and "bad" connotations since the beginning of recorded time"(Yalom 1997: 4). These connotations of the breast can be seen through representations of motherhood, goddesses, deities and liberation, while at other times the bare chest associates the woman as a harlot, witch, femme fatale or monstrous figure. The exposed breast and nipple are represented in historical depictions in art where women are reclining

²⁰Lorde, Audre. Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. "The Uses of The Erotics: The Erotics as Power", p.53. Trumansburg, 22 NY#Crossing Press, 1984.

nude in a bedroom, bathing in a tub, riding a broomstick, gazing into the mirror, nursing a child or standing with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Whether the woman is passively or suggestively posing, she has been historically conveyed by the male point of view. Yalom states in her book, *A History of The Breast*, “from the outside, the breast represents another reality, and one that varies in the eyes of each beholder. babies see food. Men see sex. Doctors see disease. Businessmen see dollar signs. Religious authorities transform breasts into spiritual symbols, whereas politicians appropriate them for nationalistic ends. Psychoanalysts place them at the centre of the unconscious, as if they were unchanging monoliths. This multiplicity of meanings suggests the breast’s privileged place in the human imagination” (Yalom 1997:275). This argument is essential to my recent series (seen through Figures 8-11.) as I explore the ever-so-changing meanings and associations behind the breast.

The breast nourishes and comforts the young and is generally the first form one will see when they enter the world. In today's society, the bare nipple can immediately result in criticism, scrutiny and objectification. In fact, nipples shared and posted to digital and social media platforms like Instagram continue to be censored and banned. In feminist art, revealing or "freeing the nipple"²¹ is a protest against the status quo and an act of political and sexual resistance. By both examining and drawing the breast, I acknowledge and explore my own gender identity and sexual experience. In my work, I draw the breast using various techniques to alter both its form and meaning in the context of the current environment and by doing so change the gaze.

²¹This campaign received media attention globally in 2012, and with the production of the 2014 movie, "Free The Nipple" directed by Lina Esco, became a viral hashtag on the internet and social media platforms. #FreeTheNipple includes exposing one's areola in public as well as one's right and refusal to wear a bra.

In the series *B(r)east*, I moved away from sketching a perfect and accurate rendering of a female body. Moving towards a more ambiguous depiction of the nude has enabled me to portray liberated sexuality in a way that operates beyond the male gaze. The change was essential and necessary for my practice as I shift the focus on depicting feminine sexuality from the surface or exterior of the body towards a more embodied interior. To further explain this thought, I use memory, impulse and imagination to express sexuality through surreal figurative drawing. By altering the method, the narrative changes from the representation of a one-dimensional woman to the various components that make up a woman. One-Dimensional, a term coined by cultural theorist Nina Powers in her book, “One-Dimensional Woman”²² is based on philosopher Herbert Marcuse’s book “One-Dimensional Man”.²³ She claims this one-dimensional woman is a type of feminist who is positive, upbeat, and superficial. In my work, this one-dimensional aspect is seen through my very specific and limiting representations. I recognize that although the bodies I have drawn in the past are sex-positive and queer members of my community, they are white, middle class, thin and within the ages of 20 to 36. Although this representation is the closest to my experience, I acknowledge that these depictions can still be interpreted and critiqued within the queer community as exclusive, limiting and essentialist. I am also aware that many of the critiques I have received representing feminine sexual desire and celebration have come from a heterosexual perspective. In the future, I plan to strengthen a deeper connection with my queer subjectivity and how I collaborate and communicate with members of the queer community.

²² Power, Nina. *One-dimensional Woman*. Winchester, UK: 0 [Zero] Books, 2009. Print.

²³ Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991. Print.

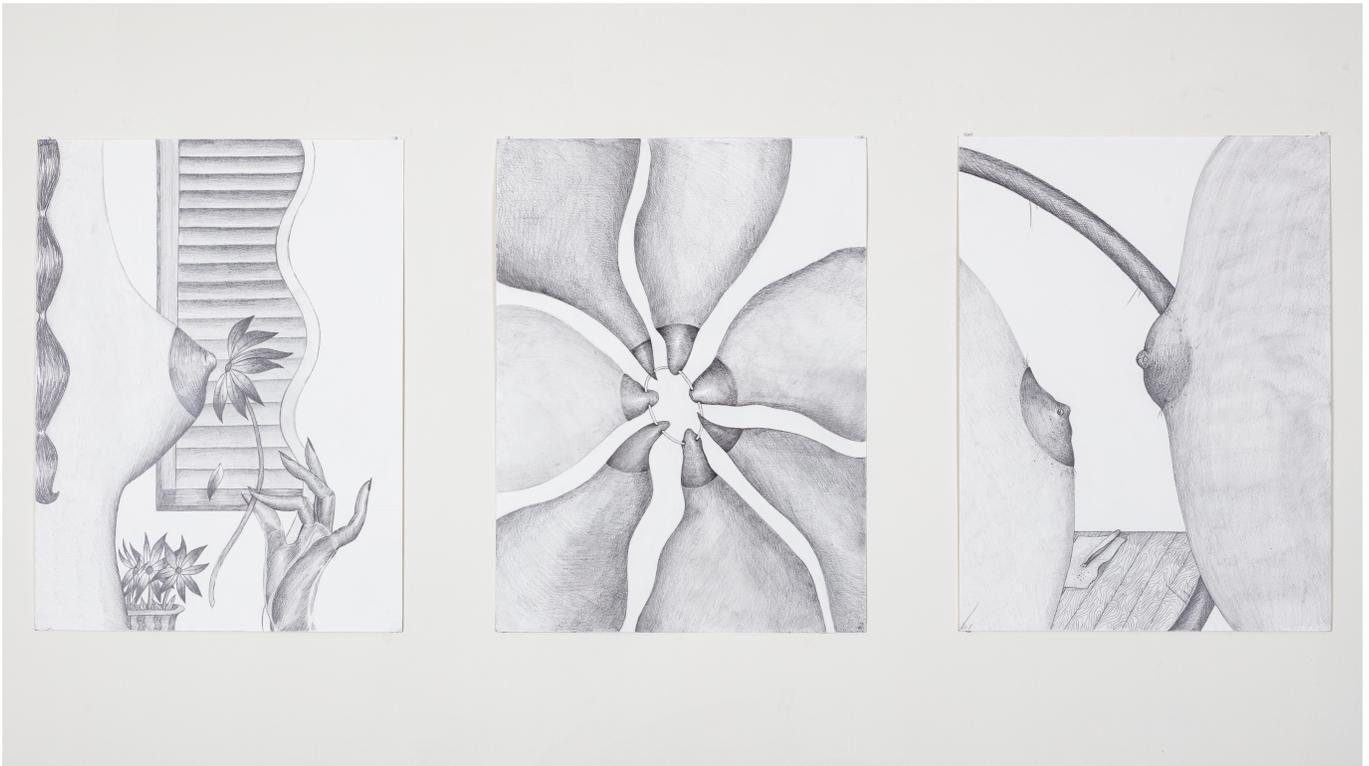


Figure 8. Install view of *Wouldn't Thou Like To Live Deliciously? Cone of Power*, and *I'll Be Your Mirror*, graphite on paper, 15 x 20", 2019. Image Credit: Barb Choit

In this series of graphite drawings, (Figure 8.) I present a different and re-imagined way of looking at the female nipple. The breasts are portrayed as natural body parts and subjects, full of emotion and personality. By adding human-like qualities to the breast, I attempt to normalize and de-sexualize the stigma around the nipple. Giving breasts anthropomorphic qualities allows the viewer to feel a greater sense of empathy and reflect on their subjectivity. The breasts hold agency, whether they are looking at their reflection in the mirror, gazing out the window, grooming, smelling a flower or conversing. There is a humorous and whimsical quality to them, where they are detached from bodies and exist as their own entity. Through my current drawing process, I consider how we can acknowledge the breast without objectification or condemnation. In my investigation, I think about why breasts are considered so powerful and threatening that they need to be kept hidden.

As I weave between different styles of drawing, I think about how my process and materials translate into sexuality, ambiguity and the erotics. I look to American artist Sue Williams as she paints arrangements of strikingly bold and bright doodles of male and female genitalia. These forms are abstracted with lines missing, marks smudged and colours bleeding across the surface of the canvas. Forms are distorted through negative and positive space as a metaphorical way to emphasize the division between what is visible and invisible. Her political view is both confrontational and discrete and is in direct response to patriarchal toxicity, the sexualization of women and the control of female bodies (Jrp|Ringier 2015). One can see this reference through her sexually erotic scenes of violence, harassment and misogyny directed toward women in abject cartoon forms. I am particularly interested in how she plays with control, fluidity and spontaneous line-work as she questions the problematic representation of gender in the art world.

The work *Space Boobs* (Figure 9.) is drawn meticulously using three different black ink pens on grey 22 x 30-inch paper. The rectangular drawing features multiple uncensored breasts and free-flowing nipples. This piece is playful as it is political and is concerned with maximizing freedom of self-expression and self-surveillance.²⁴ The rendered complex forms seek to explore the positive and erotic power of feminine sexuality. The hand-drawn breasts vary in proportion to acknowledge the difference in bodies and identities. It is important that the breast is rendered in a way that deviates from being perfect, ideal or gendered to represent better the complex nature of bodies and societal diversity.

²⁴ This term is outlined in John Berger's *Ways Of Seeing*. Berger, John, and Michael Dibb. London: BBC Enterprises, 1972

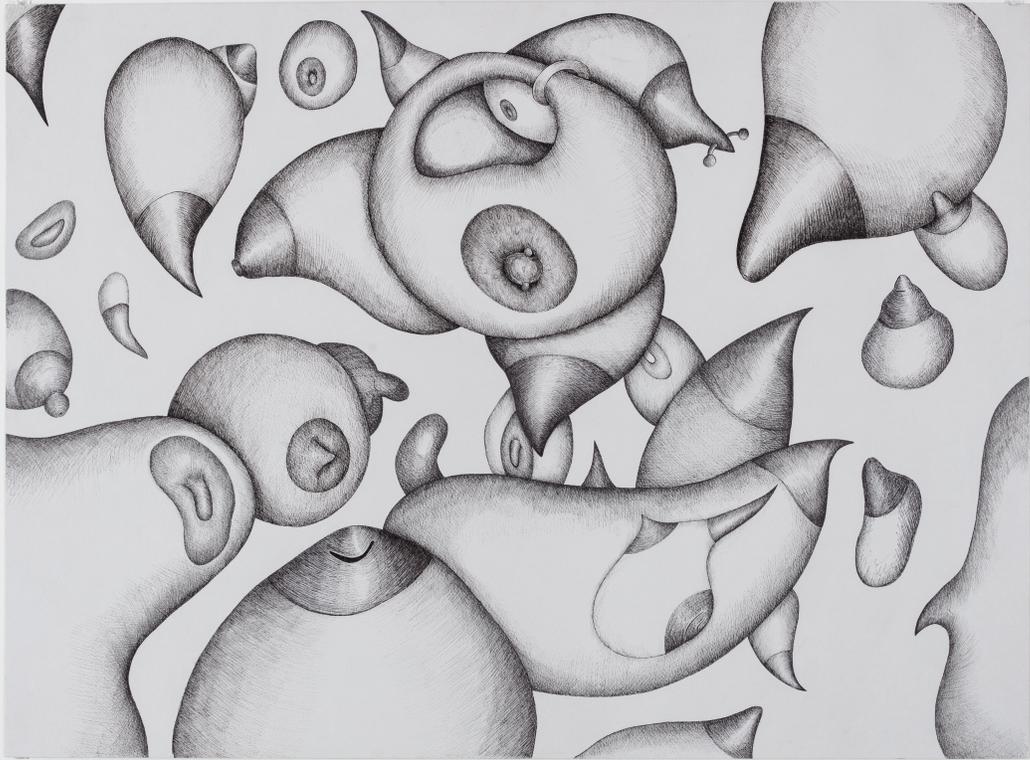


Figure 9. *Space Boobs*, Ink on paper, 22 x 30", 2019. Image Credit: Barb Choit

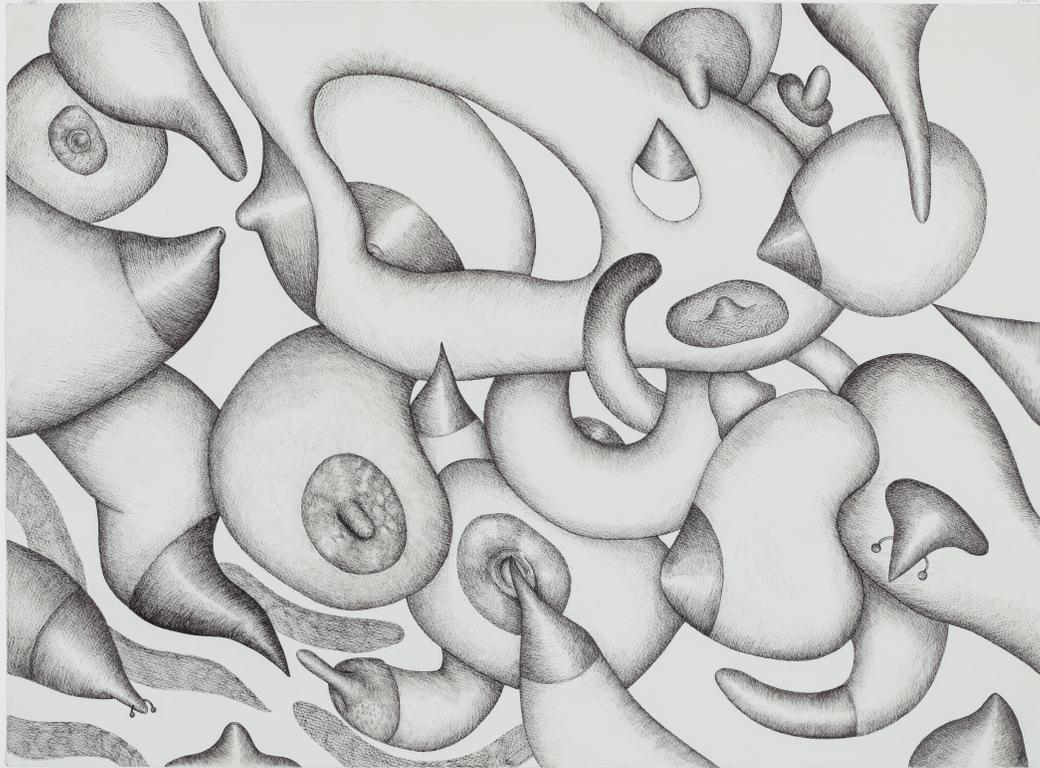


Figure 10. *AcornDickTitty*, Ink on paper, 22 x 30", 2020. Image Credit: Barb Choit

In her book, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*, Lynda Nead discusses how the patriarchy and Western society control women's sexuality because it is something that is feared. There is a patriarchal system in place that is meant to disempower the woman and subjugate her experiences and or her sexual desires. In *Space Boobs*, (Figure 9.) the breasts can be seen as space invaders as they take up space and push the boundaries of meaning. Breasts intertwine, stretch, hide, bounce and morph into one another to create new formations in space. In this work, I reference McDonald's idea of ambiguity as she states, "ambiguity is a both a space where different meanings blur, overlap, and are conflated..."(McDonald 2001:14). The formations shape-shift from figurative to more abstracted renderings to signify the ever-present changing and varied interpretations of the breast. Although the borders of the paper confine the forms, this is their world where they are in a free state of mind and reinforce sexual self-expression.

The breasts in *AcornDickTitty* (Figure 10.) are drawn using similar lighting and shading techniques, but from various angles, directions and positions. I focus on the exaggeration of the image by zooming in with cropping techniques, accentuating the thick graphic line, playing with positive and negative space and layering forms. Some of the breasts in this piece are pierced to push sexual expression, identity and freedom. These strategies add a harmonic and choreographed dimension to the composition. There is a decorative element to the images as they mimic paisley and feminine and masculine patterns. The sensuality and harshness of the ink shading enhances the depth of the composition while giving the breasts visibility, urgency and individuality. Although the forms resemble the breast, upon closer inspection, one might start to recognize different shapes such as orcas, finger nails, spaceships or acorns, phallus objects and tails. Some breasts are elongated with pointy, claw-like nipples, while others are

more rounded, tubular or smaller with pierced erect nipples. Other breast look like the have been taken apart or detached from a gendered body. In these depictions the gender is ambiguous and shifts between feminine and masculine identities. The lines are sensual but harsh as they leave imprints in the paper.

Current Feminist Landscape

My practice aligns with certain aspects of fourth-wave feminism and post-feminism particularly as I look at the current feminist landscape and the importance of feminist campaigns online, such as the women's march, #MeToo, #FREETHENIPPLE, #WETHENIPPLE, sex-positive, and LGBTQ movements. This specific area focuses on emerging models of intersectionality, womanhood, queer identity, censorship, agency, liberation and the ownership of one's sexuality. Through the internet, social networking and the #MeToo movement, communities are exploring ways to express their sexuality and reclaim the agency of their bodies and physical representations. This international movement pushes towards the inclusions of all bodies and genders for equality, respect and awareness. More queer, feminine, and non-binary artists are continuing to critique patriarchal systems and speak out against slut-shaming, gender intersections, sexual harassment and assault through art.

However, as we look to the history of #MeToo, It is important to acknowledge that the popular slogan was initially coined by woman of colour activist Tarana Burke in 2006. In her pursuit to create awareness for survivors of sexual violence, Burke founded the campaign "Girls for Gender Equality," which she continues to support today(Adetiba 2017:23).²⁵ In an interview

²⁵ The Verso Report, et al. "Tarana Burke Says #MeToo Should Center Marginalized Communities." *Versobooks.com*, Verso, 2018, www.versobooks.com/blogs/4078-tarana-burke-says-metoo-should-center-marginalized-communities.

outlined in the book, *Where Freedom Starts: Sex Power Violent #MeToo*, Burke talks about the deeper issues of how the slogan became a tool used by Hollywood for white women to call out and shame men for sexual violence and harassment (Burke 2017:25). This viral sensation again failed to acknowledge or credit the origin of the slogan and further silenced marginalized people and the collective political conversation it was intended for.

Sarah Banet-Weiser presents and examines ideas concerning postfeminism in her recent book, *Empowered: Popular feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Her research outlines a widespread phenomenon and trend in feminism that has found its way in the capitalist marketplace (Banet-Weiser 2018: 1-41). She also claims that there is a rise in misogyny as more women identifying as feminists are becoming outspoken about their bodies and sexuality resulting in more harassment, anger and public shaming. Banet-Weiser suggests that this deeply problematic cycle occurs in spaces that have a higher economic visibility such as on social media platforms where networking and community building have become widely accessible. It is in this contemporary milieu that I attempt to progress my artwork to point out the ever-present censorship constraints still placed upon feminine bodies.

Marilyn Minter is an American painter and important figure in the current feminist movement. As we are riding the fourthwave and post-feminist movement, Minter's work is gaining critical momentum and recognition. In fact, Minter's work can be seen on her Instagram account which features talks and posts about American politics including abortion bans, female reproductive rights and disagreements concerning President Trump's misogynistic behaviour. Her paintings are politically charged, controversial and feminist. Minter paints the female nude



Figure 11. Marilyn Minter, *Control*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York

in popular culture through erotic and intimate interactions and seeks to expose the commercialization of sex and fashion photography by way of hyper-sexual imagery.

Minter's earlier work focuses on hard-core pornographic content as she was fascinated by taking male produced photographs of women and reclaiming the images in a way that celebrated female desire and sex. She states in an interview with CNN, "I thought it was time for women to own sexual imagery and make sexual imagery for their own pleasure and for their own amusement. And at that time I was picking images from abusive history and repurposing them." (Ko:2018). In her latest work, Minter takes back the overly-used female bathers motif but with a contemporary twist in which her subjects are abstracted behind steamy shower glass doors.²⁶

²⁶ Figure 13. Shows her most recent photographs from a two part group exhibition entitled, *Abortion is Normal* at Eva Presenhuber and Arsenal Contemporary in New York, January 2020. <https://www.artsy.net/show/downtown-for-democracy-abortion-is-normal>

Censorship

Extensive censorship regulations exist both online and offline. Moreover, digital platforms such as Instagram are becoming widely popular by many artists, celebrities and art activists. Some of these attempts to push back against censorship online via hashtag activism, notably #freethenipple have been through women organizations like Femen²⁷ and radical statements from artists/celebrities like Petra Collins, Lena Dunham, Rupri Kaur, Emma Watson, Jameela Jamil, and Scout Willis. Although this attempt to free the nipple is a stance against patriarchal control and can be seen as sexually liberating and an engaging campaign to fight oppression online, it still lacks diversity. This lack of diversity is not representative of society and is recognizable and visible as one clicks through the various photographs posted and tagged under #freethenipple. Shortly after this campaign, #Wethenipple emerged. #Wethenipple centres in on censorship regulations against nudity in contemporary and traditional fine art circulating on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The campaign was started by National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and American photographer Spencer Tunick (Robinson: 2019).²⁸ Many of Tunick's photographs in this campaign feature people of all ethnicities and genders holding up cardboard cut-outs of nipples over their naked bodies in a collective protest.

Censorship is not only harmful to bodies and their self expression, but it can be used as a mechanism to silence and diminish needs and or experiences. I consider and recognize my privileges as a white cis-woman posting online in my exploration of feminine sexuality. The question remains, however, of what I can do to support and listen to other voices that continue

²⁷ Femen is a feminist Ukrainian activist organization. Femen's radical political interventions feature topless campaigns in mass media to protect and promote women's rights.

²⁸ Robinson, Matthew. "Facebook to Meet #WeTheNipple Campaigners amid Nudity Censorship Row." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 6 June 2019, www.cnn.com/style/article/facebook-wethenipple-protesters-meeting-intl-scli/index.html.

to fight on digital platforms for sexual, gender and racial equality. At an increasing rate, the younger generations are finding ways to express and reclaim their bodies in sex-positive ways that celebrate sexuality as a defiant response against censorship laws. This is evident through controversial and contradictory approaches like self-objectification through selfie-culture²⁹ as a form of empowerment and potential validation.

²⁹ This is a 21st-century phenomenon, where one takes self-portrait on a smartphone. Selfie's focus on the face, but with the help of a selfie-stick, one can capture a full-length photo to show the whole body.

Conclusion

My artistic journey addresses questions of how to portray a sexually strong and confident body in art in a radical period of liberation that encourages awareness and the importance and ambiguity of sexual identity. However, many important questions remain unresolved. Can the female gaze still objectify the feminine body? Can feminism be deemed politically incorrect, if the end goal is to put down patriarchy and encourage feminist approaches to art-making or activism? If times are shifting and sexual freedom is becoming more fluid, why is sexuality a threat? Lastly, if the male gaze is anti-feminist, how does one portray a hyper-sexual image of a female-identified body in contemporary society and art?

By promoting awareness of human sexuality, one can think critically and politically about the agency of our bodies. I am interested in how these conversations are discussed, viewed, and interrogated in public spaces such as the institution, Instagram and the art gallery. One of the various ways I intend to further my practice is by negotiating how these spaces can be related and where and how my drawings fit in. I look forward to reconnecting with the online community in ways where I can encourage, de-stigmatize, celebrate and challenge sexual representations of women that exist beyond the patriarchal framework. By driving feminist discussion online and in real life through representational figurative drawing, I intend to continue to expand my creative expression through uncensored dialogue. I hope to add to this exciting and important field of artistic study by continuing to investigate the gaze and the unresolved complications of feminine and queer sexuality depicted in contemporary society.

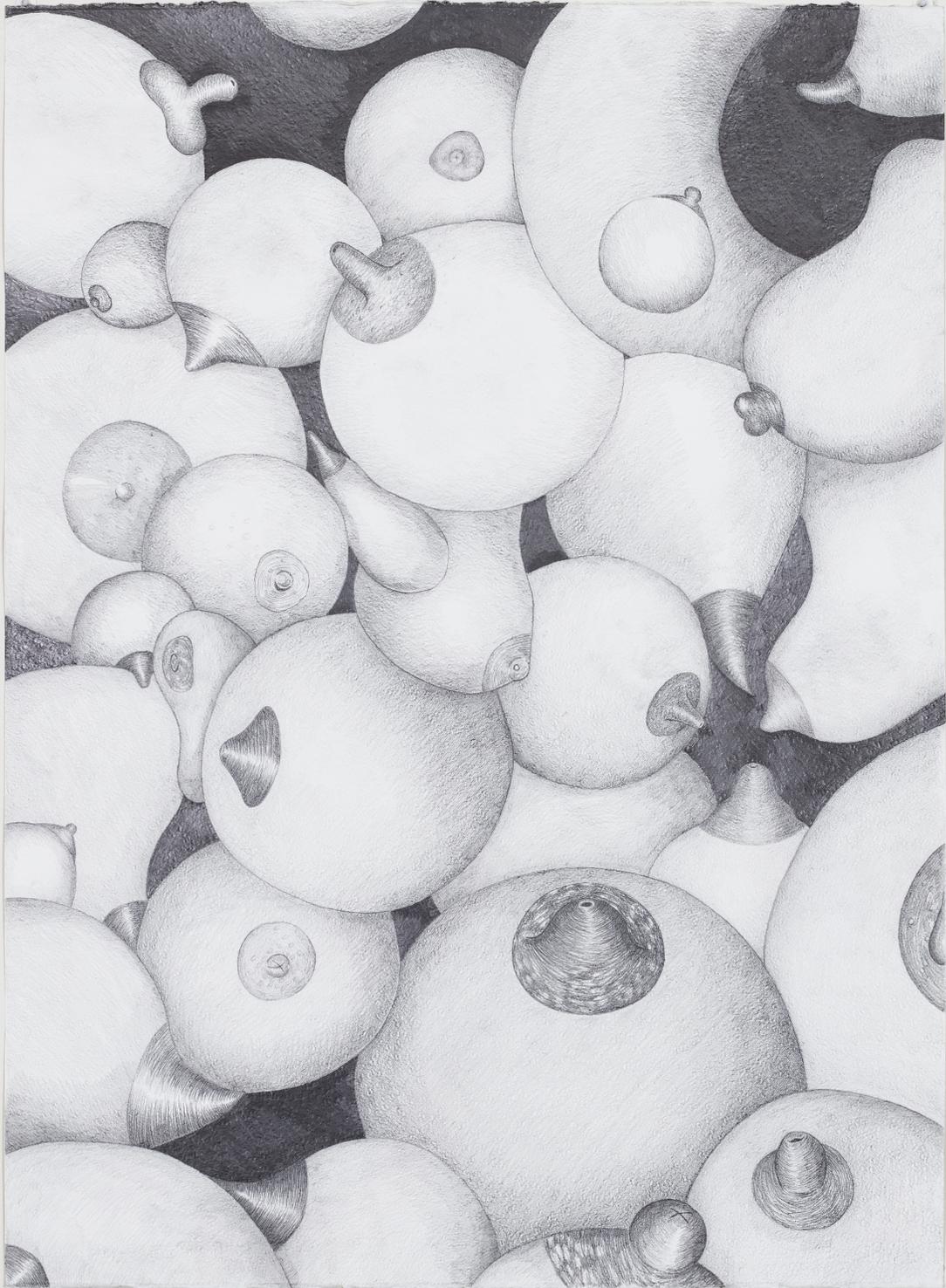


Figure 12. *Bloobs*, Graphite on paper, 30 x 22", 2019. Image Credit: Barb Choit

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