Theatre of the Female Self

By Kate Rogers

Theatre of the Female Self

By
Kate Rogers
BFA, OCAD University, Drawing & Painting 2017
BFA, York University, Dance Choreography & Performance 2010

A THESIS SUPPORT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2020

TABLE OF CONTENT

Abstract

This thesis project is auto-ethnographic research and practice-based inquiry, into the cultural construction and representation of women. Movement, video installation, photography and handmade collage are combined to examine the marginalized spaces of the domestic. Exploring metaphors of the fragmented female body, this document seeks to challenge Western patriarchal ways of knowing and interpreting the world. Inspired by fourth wave feminist theory and artwork, I discuss the female experience as one that is made strange through gender codes, rape culture and spectatorship.

List of Figures

Introduction

After months of isolation due to the COVID-19[1] global pandemic, I have had an opportunity to refocus my research as well as my approach to writing this thesis paper. I have also had time to reflect deeply on domestic life, feminism and the violent oppression of capitalism. I feel deeply changed by the past few months both personally and artistically.

In previous drafts of this thesis, I had struggled to force my research into clear, academic, and analytical writing. When I tried to infuse the personal within it, I felt exposed and foolish. This was never laid out as the ideal format for my paper, but I had spent so many years in university programs, being warned not to make my work too personal or sentimental.

This anxiety I was experiencing around appearing overly emotional, I now recognize, as a feminist issue. It is an example of how patriarchal culture attributes emotion and personal identity writing with women, and by doing so, undermines the inherit values in these traits. As Canadian author and feminist Erin Wunker has put forth, "We are taught to dismiss or be wary of any language that could be read as feminized or, for that matter, racialized" (Wunker 82-3). This dismissal silences marginalized voices further, when we refuse to allow for emotion and the sharing of embodied experiences.

[1] Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), was first identified in late 2019. Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses found mostly in animals. In humans, they can cause diseases ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). The disease caused by the new coronavirus has been named COVID-19.

Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020. (BC Centre for Disease Control)

Autoethnography

I have chosen to write this thesis project in an autoethnographic approach, and mix theory with passages of personal storytelling. My intent is to evidence how everyday experiences can accumulate to alter how the gendered body relates to space, the world and themselves. Autoethnography is a form of research that exists across many disciplines in differing forms (Chang 110). In writing, autoethnography "seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005).

If one of the main goals of the patriarchy is to impose a silence on women through killing "off stories and women to maintain power" (Solnit, 85), then to persist at telling one's story, is to perform a radical act of defiance. This is the basic idea behind the 2nd wave feminist mantra 'the personal is political'(Hanisch); and so autoethnography becomes an extension of this view, in modern form. There is immense subversive power in feminist, autoethnographic texts for their ability to "challenge the fundamental hegemonic discourses and assumptions of selfhood, identity and gender by positioning women at the centre of the narratives and knowledge making" (Metta, 29).

This is my first attempt at autoethnographic writing, though my artwork has been exploring personal themes for some time now. There is a risk in this approach of privileging my own narrative above others (Chang, 114), and so I acknowledge the limitations of my own

perspectives and do not claim them to be universal. The "I" that I refer to in this project is one that is continually revised and resituated; not one that claims to be all-knowing.

My practice operates from the idea that when we share personal experiences in relation to cultural conditions, we empower others to do the same. Sometimes we may even begin, with our stories, to chip away at the power structures of oppression. A recent example of the potential force of sharing women's personal narratives is the reckoning brought forth by the "me too" Movement. Originally conceived in 2006 by survivor and activist Tarana Burke, the "me too" Movement began as Burke's community building response to stories of sexual abuse that were revealed to her during her time as a youth worker (Burke, 2016).

In 2017, the hashtag #metoo had begun gaining popularity on social media, and within six months women worldwide were sharing stories of men abusing positions of power (Burke, 2016). The unprecedented nature of this movement was not that it was the first instance of women sharing stories of gender oppression. Instead, it was the first instance in history of women's testimonies being listened to on a grand scale, "and even then, as we've seen in the case of Christine Blasi Ford testifying against supreme court nominee Brett Kavanaugh[2] — continuing to be silenced" (Solnit, 7).

[2] Dr. Christine Blasey Ford faced the US Senate Judiciary Committee on September 27th, 2018 with allegations against, then judge, Brett Kavanaugh. The allegations were that Kavanaugh, who was a Supreme Court nominee, had sexually assaulted her thirty-six years ago. Though Kavanaugh did end up with the lifetime appointment of Supreme Court Judge, Blasey Ford's testimony emboldened women worldwide to come forth with their own stories and the hashtag #whydidntIreport gained momentum on social media. Her treatment during the trial gave evidence to the hostile reception women face when coming forth with accusations against powerful men (TIME, 2018)

“Woman”

I continue to use the word ‘woman’ and refer to ‘female subjectivity’ within this project. This is because while the concept of ‘woman’ is not scientific, misogyny and the patriarchy continue to threaten the lives of those living in bodies inscribed with this cultural sign. Art historian Anne Wagner points out that “in social and cultural contexts ‘woman’ continues to signify and resonate, as in art, whether it is actively claimed as an identification, avoided or externally imposed” (Wagner 26). I use the term ‘woman’ with caution, while keeping in mind the diverse experiences that are included under this category. I do not claim to represent for a universal experience. As Butler warns, “it is one thing to use the term and know its ontological insufficiency and quite another to articulate a normative vision for feminist theory which celebrates or emancipates an essence, a nature, or a shared cultural reality which cannot be found” (Butler 529).

Positionality

My sisters and I were raised in Toronto, Canada, by my disabled, single mother and my maternal grandmother. When I was four years old, my mother got the courage to leave my increasingly abusive and alcoholic father. My father then vindictively evicted us from our family home, repossessed our car, and refused to pay any child support. He left my family homeless and eating out of food banks. He also regularly called to scream and emotionally terrorize my mother—and by extension us.

These experiences showed me the resilience of strong determined women. They also ingrained in me a deep mistrust of men. This division of genders in my life was compounded by the fact that my Catholic grade school class only had five boys in it by the time we had made it to Grade 8 (1 of which had bullied me through it all). After this, I attended an all-girls Catholic high school. Most of my formative years were spent separated from boys. Any interactions I did have with men or boys, was often traumatic. This definitely did not lead to a healthy view of men or relationships.

My childhood existed at the intersection of gender and class issues. I learned that although women are associated with domestic space, they often have no legal claim of that space. The women in my family were evidence of the physical and emotional dangers living in a female body could bring forth. However, there were many forms of oppression that I did not and have not had to experience.

I am learning to recognize the many ways that my body has afforded me privileges. I am a third-generation Canadian citizen, of English, Irish and Slavic decent. I am an able-bodied, cisgender woman. I am university educated and hold several degrees (and an appalling amount of student debt). Entering into the conversation of feminism, I am working to learn the many ways BIPOC[3] and LGBTQIA+[4] bodies experience oppression in varying overlapping forms. I am

[3] BIPOC is an acronym for Black, Indigenous, People of Colour
[4] LGBTQIA+ an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Pansexual, Transgender, Genderqueer, Queer, Intersexed, Agender, Asexual, and Ally community

actively engaging in the life-long work of ensuring my body is not weaponized against other bodies. (Wunker, 44).

Research Inquiries

In my practice, I experiment with the subversion of materials and props, to explore female subjectivity and the marginalized spaces of the domestic. Through the concealment of my visual identity, I attempt to complicate easily readable and universalized depictions of women.

The primary questions posed in my thesis project are:

- Can depictions of female subjectivity through autoethnographic art and written texts, highlight how violence and control shapes the lives of women?
- Can the sharing of female subjectivity, through video and handmade collage, show the fragmented and varied experiences of gender?
- Can non-linear, experimental film making be used to address the troubled notion of gender as a fixed identity?

Collage and Gender Representation in the Media

My thesis studio work has consisted of two streams of overlapping material research: a handmade figurative, collage practice, and an experimental film and digital photography practice. In my handmade collage pieces, I use imagery sourced from a variety of fashion, psychology, photography and other types of popular magazines. Sifting through the glossy print pages, I extract the hands, limbs and hair of women subjects I find interesting or provocative. I search for body parts that are making specific gestures or imply a certain movement. These disparate clippings are then pieced together, usually on watercolour paper, to create hybrid female characters. Sometimes I add fabric trims, beads or other embellishments to highlight aspects of the collage.

In *Untitled Collage 1 (Fig.1),* I used decorative trim from a fabric shop to veil the collaged figure in the image. The pink fringe, adhered to the board, hangs down and covers the top of the woman's image, casting a seductive shadow across her face. The problematic hybrid form of the woman is highlighted through the addition of this decorative upholstery trim. The materiality of this household element brings the collage into the physical space and creates another dynamic tension of interior and exterior space, hidden and revealed.

Figure 1. Untitled Collage 1, magazine collage on watercolour paper, 2019.

Figure 2. Untitled Collage 2, mixed media collage on wood, 2019.

One artist whose work has been inspiring to my collage practice is Kenyan and New York based contemporary artist, Wangechi Mutu. Although Mutu has recently begun to work primarily in the mediums of sculpture and drawing, she originally began her career as an artist creating magazine collage mixed with watercolour. In this work, she combines imagery of body parts, teeth, hair, animals and patterns extracted from "magazines where publications; where photography, is used to represent women in a way that doesn't feel at all accurate to what women are" (Mutu, The Met). Her pieces explore representations of the Black female body in Western culture.

Mutu's figures engage with similar issues of representation as my own handmade collage pieces, although her practice is an exploration and reclamation of the Black female body, whereas my work has explored issues of gender construction and its affects. As well, Mutu's collages are intricately layered works whereas mine are minimal pieces that function almost as preliminary sketches for my video work. While engaged in the act of making collage, Wangechi has spoken of how she is able to "vandalize the original narrative and to make something dignified, beautiful, unreal and, to me, attractive, about these things that bothered me" (Mutu, Inside my Studio). I feel this same act of defiance when creating my collages. It is empowering to take photographic material of idealized, infantilized or unrealistic women and make something new from them. I enjoy taking images that are meant to scold or shame me into my gender role and reconfiguring them until their meaning has been subverted.

The representation of bodies in the media is significant to identity formation, because it plays a large role in shaping how we view, relate to and think about ourselves, and each other. If we do not take a critical eye to these representations of identities, we can miss their hidden motives. We might take a category, such as gender, and come to believe that it is a defining characteristic of our personhood, but as American gender theorist Judith Butler attests, it is, "a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time" (Butler, Big Think). One of the central ways that gender is created and policed, is through the media.

Figure 3. Good Girl, magazine collage on watercolour paper, 2020.

Through the dissemination of images of bodies that are deemed 'acceptable', patriarchal culture uses the media to shape ideas and normalize concepts and perceptions around what being a male or a female entail. These images translate into guidelines for how bodies should behave. The media does not hold a mirror up to society, but through the assigning of meaning to male and female identities they are "involved in actively producing gender" (Gill 12). How do these representations of female bodies limit the lives of the women who adopt them as personal identity?

Your Body is Not Your Own

I am 23 and in my second year of an undergraduate degree in dance. I take dance lessons 5 days a week, regularly run on the elliptical and take semi-private Pilates lessons. Over the summer I participated in an intense training program which has fine-tuned my skills and increased my confidence. My professor notices and praises me in a private meeting. She tells me I have what it takes to succeed, if I could just lose twenty pounds or so. I feel devastated. The worst part is that I know that she is right: female dancers should be small enough to be lifted by male partners. I already train hard and eat healthy though, what is left that I can do?

I am in my 3rd year of the dance program and my long-term boyfriend dumps me. I fall into a depression that manifests itself in obsessive working out, chain-smoking cigarettes, bouts of binge-drinking and eating very little. I lose the twenty "extra" pounds and then some. I feel dead inside. My professors notice the weight loss and praise me for my dedication. No one asks how I lost it so fast. No one cares, as long as I fit into the expected dainty body type of the female dancer.

I am in my final year of my dance program. After 3 years of intense work, I have made it into the school's pre-professional dance company. Over the summer, I have healed my heart and my body. I quit smoking and drinking and start eating healthy again. The pounds come back, but I feel myself again. My company director notices and she seems perturbed. If my weight loss was a sign of my commitment, what is my healthy body signifying to her? For our final performance she tells me I must purchase a corset. I am humiliated. With my limited student budget, I purchase one for $70 and am uncomfortable in it the entire time. When I graduate, I attack the corset with scissors and throw it in the garbage. I don't feel the same love for dancing anymore or a connection to my body.

Through my work I am looking to challenge representations of complacent female bodies that participate happily in their own suppression. Instead, I am interested in depictions that reflect the subjective experience of a body dominated by gender codes and rape culture. In the collage, *Good Girl (Fig. 3),* I consider how representations of women in the media can translate into a lived violence if women are not obedient to the rules of their gender. So often, women are encouraged to be 'good girls' and not put themselves in compromising situations. The onus becomes on the woman to become hyper vigilant of herself and her surroundings, so as to avoid male aggression. This attitude becomes the basis of what is known as rape culture. As feminist author Sara Ahmed explains, "To become girl is to learn to expect such advances, to modify your behaviour in accordance, if you're not careful and cautious, you can be made responsible for the violence directed toward you" (Ahmed 18).

In the collage *Good Girl (Fig. 3),* I have combined images of female body parts from three separate popular magazines, to create a faceless figure. The arms of the subject protectively encircle the rest of its body. A ponytail of light blond hair, perfectly braided and secured with a satin blue bow, sits where a face would presumably be. In this piece, I am portraying how the need to be hyper-vigilant of your own safety as a woman, modifies your daily bodily postures. It can change your relationship to your body by forcing you to take up less space in the world. The hairstyle brings to mind a well-groomed child and is tacked on top of the figure as though it were a mask, hiding the parts of the body that we cannot see. The female figure is closing in on itself in an attempt of self-preservation.

Starting Over

I am 34. I am a new Graduate school student. I have left my home province to escape an emotionally abusive relationship that has been dominating my life for two years. I am away from his daily berating now, but I can still hear it my head. I walk the halls and I don't feel that I belong. Someone is going to see that I am just as useless as he said that I am.

Figure 4. Pink Spiral, Video Stills, 2019.

Video and Photography Processes

In my video and photography practice, I have used my own body to explore personal stories of female subjectivity. I draw on my previous performance training as a contemporary dancer, to play with movement as a tool for translating complex emotions or ideas into gestures of metaphor. I begin by improvising movement and capturing it on camera. Through an intensive editing process, I work in Photoshop to crop, loop, reverse, layer and alter the speeds of my video clips.

In *Pink Spiral (Fig. 4),* repetition and speed manipulation were used to focus in on one gesture that increased in emotion and ferocity. Standing alone in a dark black box studio, my head partially cut from the frame, I began grasping and struggling against a giant ball of tangled pink tinsel, until I was frantically throwing it around my body and panting from the effort. The mass of sparkling pink strands writhed around me in an attempt to constrain my body.

The tinsel material used in this piece was intended to symbolize the internal female body spilling out. It was also a piece about my frustrations with constant encounters of misogyny. These accumulated experiences were starting to feel like a physical force that was slowly restricting my movement in the world until it was suffocating. I imagined the tinsel as an uncontainable and relentless force, visualized as menstrual blood, knotted wet hair or

afterbirth. Through these associations with the repulsive functions and by-products of the body and my own lack of control over them, I was also referencing American writer and feminist Rebecca Solnit's variation on abjection[5], the 'Exquisite'. Solnit defines the term as "this zone where the repulsive and the beautiful intersect, or rather in the zone where what is conventionally considered most beautiful—the female body—and what is conventionally considered most repulsive –also the female body – intersect" (Solnit 212).

Distinguishing the term the Exquisite from the abject, Solnit asserts that "it is the very beauty of the work that makes it subversive, for to present the denigrated or disgusting as such can be perfectly conventional, but to redeem it at the cost of cherished categories is a revolt indeed" (Solnit 215). In *Pink Spiral (Fig. 4),* the tinsel material may cause spectators to mentally recall ideas of the abject, but the sparkling pink strands are also quite beautiful. During the editing process of this video, I had heightened the saturation of the pink tinsel, added filters to exaggerate its glittering effect, and manipulated the speed at which the strands moved and fell. This editing worked to aestheticize a dark subject matter that would not traditionally be considered beautiful: the angered and violent female body.

[5] Abject – a term created by philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva. "In practice the abject covers all the bodily functions, or aspects of the body, that are deemed impure or inappropriate for public display or discussion," (Tate), which would include the feminine bodily fluids found so offensive in a patriarchal society.

This work was meant to produce both an anxiety and empathy in the viewer, through an increasingly anxious audio of laboured breathing and by denying the audience any definite ending or resolution. The movement in the video came to a final crescendo, with a slight pause, only to reverse into a never-ending loop. The audience was presented with a body in a continuous loop of frustration as they witnessed her struggle and fatigue against herself and the outside forces of the material.

When experiences accumulate, they begin to feel like truth…

I am excited for this class and have heard encouraging things about this professor. He received his degree from a prestigious international university, and he never lets his students forget this.
He has given us a personal writing assignment and assures us that we can freely express ourselves as they will be kept private. When he later uses intimidation to forcefully convince others to share their intimate writing, I refuse. He asks to speak to me in the hallway. He questions whether I belong in this school, or in any post-secondary institution if I am not willing to be open. When I tell him, I feel I am doing well, he demands to know my grades in other courses. I oblige and tell him my average and he lets me know I'm at best doing mediocre. Yes, he uses that word, making reference to my progress, my art and my abilities. I can feel that my cheeks have gotten hot and I start to cry. I'm mad at myself for crying. He takes this as weakness and tells me higher education is hard and it is not for everyone. I am embarrassed and he has confirmed my deepest feelings of inadequacy. I become emotionally distant from my classes, my studio and my classmates. I want to hide. I want to quit.

The Self-Portrait with No Face

Figure 5. Rose Mask Portrait, digital photograph, 2019

The idea of hiding my visual appearance through the purposeful covering, decapitation or veiling of my face, has been a recurring element throughout my video and photography work. In earlier pieces, fabric was draped over my figure or thinly veiled my facial features. Hiding and revealing has become a means to explore ideas of visual identity markers and the interior spaces of the body versus the exterior in my practice.

This process naturally led to the creation of hand-sewn masks. In the piece, *Rose Mask (Fig. 5),* I used a flowered tapestry fabric, lace and a clothing zipper to hand sew a mask, employing materials and practices traditionally associated with women and the domestic space. The result was an identity obscuring hood that allowed me to have complete control over how my own image was viewed. It was also meant to create a tension for the viewer who was unable to take on the traditional role of the spectator.

In the creation of this mask, there was again in my work, a reference to Solnit's category of the Exquisite and to the violence of female subjectivity. I subverted the meaning of the ornately flowered and traditionally beautiful tapestry fabric by using it to construct a mask that resembles something between an executioner's hood and a sadistic fetish garment. When I posed for the self-portrait, in a black box studio, I wore the mask and all black clothing to fade my body into the background. A single spotlight illuminated the mask and a strand of pink tinsel (a reoccurring material in my works), hung from the neck hole of the hood. My eyes do

not confront the viewer straight on in the image, but instead, they gaze off camera in a posture reminiscent of school portrait photography.

My work has questioned what it means to present an image of a woman with no visible face. British historian and academic, Ludmilla Jordanova, has put forth that "veiling implies secrecy. Women's bodies, and by extension feminine attributes, cannot be treated as fully public, something dangerous might happen, secrets might be let out, if they were open to view" (Jordanova, 92). I was fascinated by this idea of women's bodies seeming dangerous to patriarchal society and therefore needing to be contained.

Rose Mask (Fig. 5), references not just the need for patriarchal culture to contain the bodies of women, but also their desire to impose a silence or control over our experiences. Patriarchy does not want for women to share their stories and find solidarity with each other or the strength to mobilize. As writer and Black feminist bell hooks articulates, "we have been socialized to be the keepers of grave and serious secrets – especially those that could reveal the everyday strategies of male domination, how male power is enacted and maintained in our private lives" (hooks xiii). *Rose Mask (Fig. 5),* is a garment that enforces silence, through the gesture of a zippered mouth, pulled tightly shut. The ability of the hood to read as an execution or torture accessory, suggests that this silence has been inflicted violently. The posture of the

middle school portrait in the image grounds the picture within everyday life. The image becomes a portrait of the violent silencing of women in their everyday lives.

The work of American artist Cindy Sherman has informed my exploration of masks and costuming. She has spent almost fifty years endlessly re-imaging herself in front of the camera, using props and make-up to transform herself into different characters. Through this process of carefully crafting and then photographing a wide array of visual identities, Sherman creates "grotesquely familiar versions of the masks we all wear to face the word" (Julavits, 178). Her costumes and disguises have been "so extreme and so varied, that we can almost say we don't know what she really looks like, even though the photography itself is straightforward" (Loewenberg, 401). In my thesis work, most of the photographs and videos, hide or distort my face and body, so that the characters become ambiguous figures, much like in Cindy Sherman's practice.

I also have a process of dress-up, disguise and improvisation that mirror Sherman's practice. There are no set preconceived ideas for my characters before I enter the photo studio and begin improvising movements and trying on different props. I select my objects and materials with general ideas in mind and allow myself the freedom in filming to let things develop as they happen in the studio. In the resulting videos and photos, there is a distance between my own individual identity, and the one I have chosen to perform for the camera.

Speaking of her photography process, Sherman revealed a similar approach of improvisation, "Once I'm set up, the camera starts clicking, then I just start to move and watch how I move in the mirror....I may be thinking about a certain story or situation, but I don't become her. There's this distance. The image in the mirror becomes her – the image the camera gets on the film" (Julavits, 186).

While Sherman works with her own image to explore characters or tropes from the history of film, my own figures are more abstract. I create collages of bodies or characters on film that are meant to reveal a feeling of subjectivity rather than reference a specific movie or actor. In films like *Pink Spiral (Fig.4),* I am communicating a feeling of frustration and entrapment in the experience of living in a female body. This differs from Sherman, who has restaged movie stills and characters to re-examine popular characters or scenarios of film.

Strange Shadows

Figure 6. Video Still from Watcher in the Woods Series, Video Clip, 2019.

After the incorporation of masks in my work, I began to play with the use of household objects and materials. Through a process of scouring local thrift shops and fabric stores, I gathered together a collection of items that could be activated within the photographic/film

space. I sourced objects and materials that I related to domestic space, the female body and spectatorship. In particular, I was interested in finding objects whose original functions could be subverted and made strange through the creative process. My studio space quickly became crowded with a variety of velvets and other fabrics, upholstery trims, and bits of reflective plastic, lampshades, old chairs or light fixtures and handmade papers.

In the black box photo studio, I gathered the objects and materials. Wearing the pieces or somehow activating them through gestures, I photographed and filmed them. Using video editing software, I fragmented the video clips with excessive cropping. I then played with their speeds to further solidify a sense of unease in the movement; which no longer appeared human.

The 'making strange' of these items is meant to evoke the strange relationship women have to domestic spaces. It also references the odd feelings that can develop or intensify for women as they learn to decode previous encounters through a feminist lens. Australian scholar and feminist author, Sarah Ahmed suggests that for women "feminism can be experienced as life alienation" as we begin "recognizing how our lives have been shaped or have taken shape" (Ahmed 2-3). Previous interactions are resituated, and failed opportunities can be identified, and this process can "be how the world reappears, becoming odd" (Ahmed 14). Through the

representation of haunted domestic objects or space I have explored this life alienating process in some of my video works.

In the *Watcher in the Woods Series (Fig. 6),* I transformed myself into a mysterious figure, cloaked in a dark green velvet fabric, that emerged from the darkness. The figure ominously faced the camera holding a small mirror over its covered face. In its other hand was the jumbled hardware removed from an old junk shop chandelier that swayed from side to side. The character's forward-facing stance showed an eerie awareness of the audience's presence.

Similar to the process of my handmade collage, I fragmented the chandelier to identify how its image could be transformed into something else. Abstracted from its original object, the knotted chain of the hardware became threatening and open to multiple meanings. The speed of the video was slowed down so that the sway of the metal became the trance-inducing pendulum of a hypnotist, a weighted noose or the metal censer that holds incense waved by a Catholic priest in a ceremony.

In the video installation *Spectral Bodies,* I created backlit projections containing familiar objects of the home sphere that were repurposed, distorted and stripped of their originally

intended functions. The piece consisted of 3 dining room chairs placed in the centre of a darkened room, each chair holding a large digital projector. The projectors faced clear plastic photography screens and threw short looping videos at them. The material of the screens caused a double of each of the videos to appear on the wall behind it. One projection from the installation, *UFO Lampshade* contained a single floating pink lampshade. The fringe of the theatrical domestic item rippled back and forth, and the object mysteriously spun, hovering in the black space around it. The swaying of its rounded form mimicked the sauntering hips of a voluptuous woman or an alien spaceship.

Figure 7. Floating Scales, **Video Still from the Spectral Bodies Installation, 2019.**

In another video from the series, *Floating Scales (Fig. 8),* an old bronze scale and a metal embroidery hoop glistened in the darkness of the frame and seemed to hover in mid-air. To film the clip, I dressed all in black and wore the hoop around my neck while I balanced the scale on one extended arm and moved about the studio. In the editing process, I erased my body from view so that the objects appeared to dance around by themselves in a magical ritual or ceremony of haunted items. The scales have several metaphorical links to female bodies. They can represent the injustice of gender relations and the balance of trying to conform to prescribed gender roles. They can also represent commerce and the effects of capitalism on the female body: a system that depends on the oppression of women and BIPOC for its survival.

In other clips from *Spectral Bodies (Fig. 8)* the shadows of an old chandelier swung dangerously from side to side. The thick wire of a broken light fixture cord hung like an ominous noose on another projection screen. Another projection depicted the shadow of a draped and ghostly figure that watched the scene while slowly sitting down into a dining room chair.

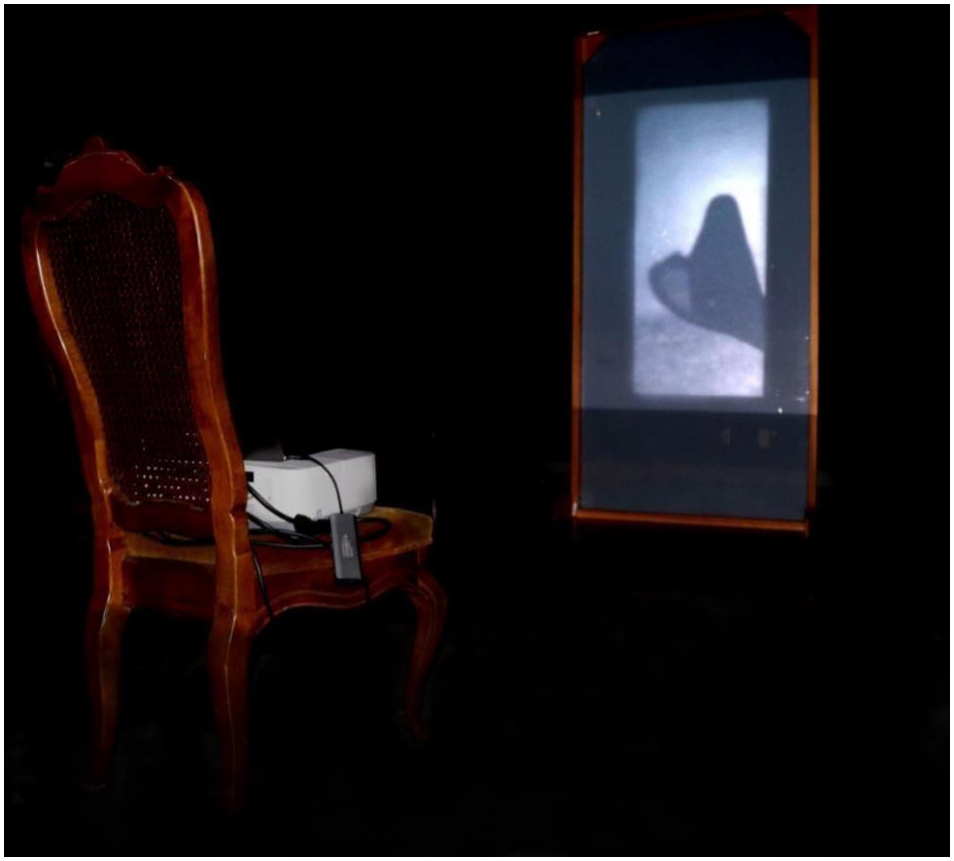

Figure 8. Sitting Ghost, Video Still from the Spectral Bodies Installation, 2019

In the American, contemporary installation artist Jessica Stockholder's practice, there is a similar investigation of domesticity. This is done through her combinations of a variety of colourful household objects "drawn from the stuff of hardware stores, second-hand furniture shops, garage sales, and basement storage rooms" (Doll Sutan 19). I found her *Kissing the Wall Series* particularly relevant to my installation *Spectral Bodies.* In this series of assemblages, Stockholder left visible cords trailing from her human-scale sculptures that connected to outlets in the wall and were reminiscent of umbilical cords. In discussing this series, feminist art theorist, Fiona Carson, noted that Stockholder "constructs an architecture of interdependence and attachment by mimicking the mother-child relationship" (Carson 249).

In *Spectral Bodies,* the digital projectors were propped up on stacks of books, with a tangle of cords, haphazardly hidden behind them. One long black cord extended from each of the projectors and connected to outlets on the wall, similar to Stockholder's piece. However, Stockholder allowed the long cords coming from her installations to remain intentionally visible, whereas, I used black electrical tape to try to cover and deemphasize the cords. In future renditions of *Spectral Bodies,* I am interested in exploring Stockholder's approach, by emphasizing the electrical cords and where they connect with the chairs and wall outlets. This addition would further add to a feeling of eerie familiarity with the anthropomorphized projectors, while also referencing maternal relationships to space.

Another creator who works with the subversion of household items and is inspiring to my current practice, is Swedish artist Ulla-Stina Wikander. In her process, she covers domestic items from the 1970s with repurposed, thrift-store, cross stitch embroidery pieces. Her work engages with conversations around kitsch, women's labour and crafts (Wikander). By covering the objects with the cross-stitch pieces, she transforms the original domestic item into something that appears magical and yet familiar. In my own work I have repurposed household items but have never combined them in the dramatic way that Wikander does. I would like to start playing with the look of the objects I source, as well as their functions. How do different combinations of the objects, and materials (layered, wrapped over, sewn into) change their context? The objects and materials can become a collage in physical space.

Domestic Bodies

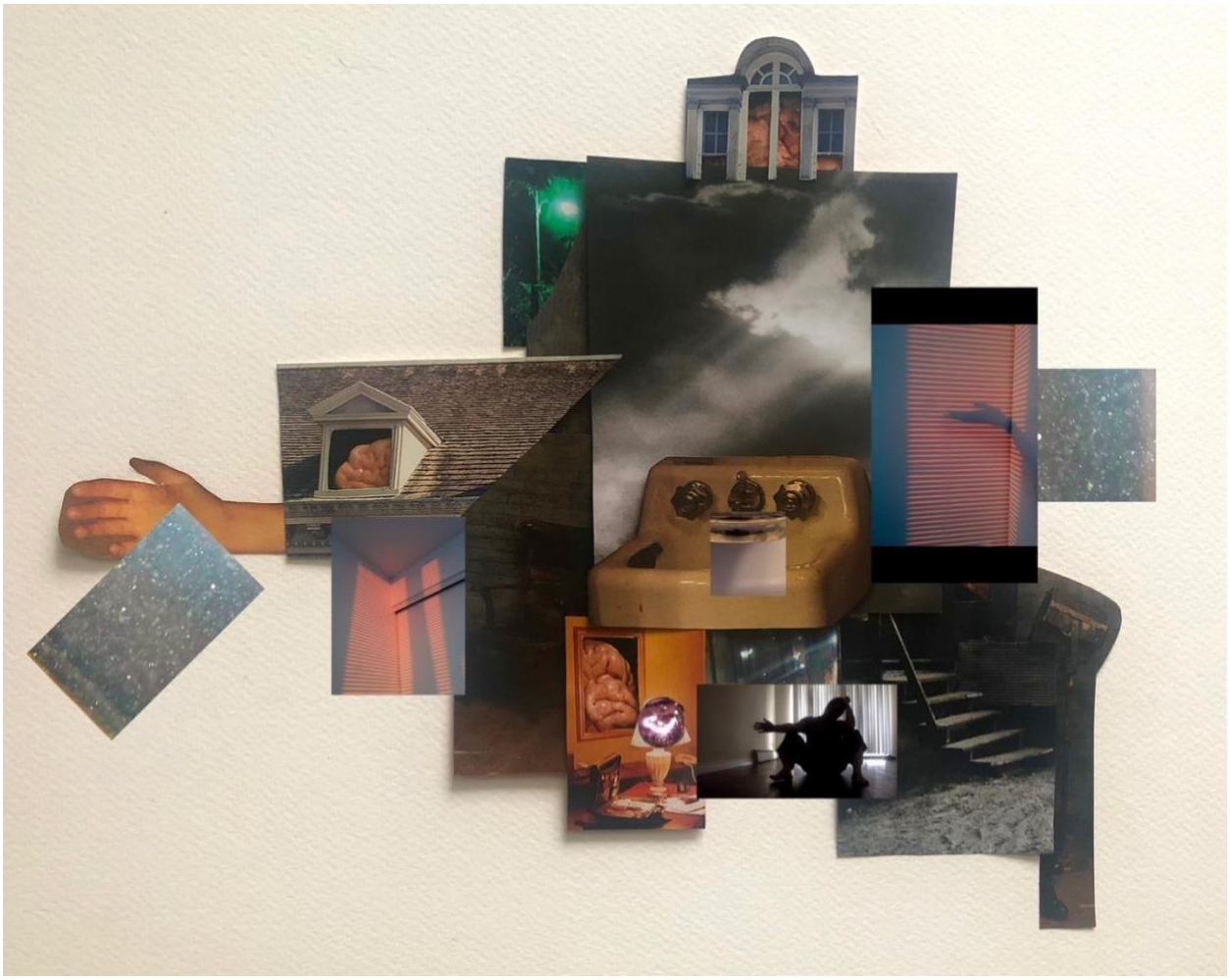

Figure 9. Homebody, Video Still, 2020

In recent films, I have begun to layer videos files on top of each other in Photoshop, to create video collages. Several videos are combined with still images, to create short, non-narrative vignettes. In the piece *Homebody (Fig. 9),* I collected images from magazines of exterior and interior elements of domestic space. Arranging the clippings on watercolour paper, I constructed the abstracted shape of a home. Peeking through the windows of the

house are dissected, close-up images of a brain. A cut-out of a hand and arm reaches from the left side of the composition.

The handmade collage was then photographed and opened in Photoshop, where I layered a mixture of my own footage and found video clips on top of the composition. A faucet steadily dripped water, a lamp turned on and off, dust particles floated in the air, and the silhouette of a distressed figure moved through an anxious loop of movement. The video clips faded in and out of the film, creating an overall image of a house that has become merged with a human body.

Homebody (Fig. 9), was created after I experienced an early miscarriage and became confined to my home in the process of physically and emotionally healing. The imagery in the collage represents my mental space during this time. My home, that had felt like a safe haven of protection, now felt confining and acted as a constant reminder of my grief. The audio of the video, a continuous dripping of water, slowed down through editing, represented my strange relationship to time. Hours turned into days and then weeks of retreating in my bedroom with little sleep.

Creating this collage became an act of pulling myself out of, and making sense of, a depression that was settling in. My domestic space had become strange through my body's traumatic association with it. I wondered how many women throughout history had experienced similar distaste for their domestic surroundings as the result of bodily trauma or abuse? Feminist writer Sara Ahmed points out that "Feminists archives are full of scenes of domesticity, in which domestic objects become strange, almost menacing" (Ahmed 65). I wanted this collage to embody this feeling of the familiar turning hostile; monotony mixing with an alienating oddness.

Embodied Contemplation (Fig. 10), is my latest video piece exploring isolation and deep thought. In this work, I have blended a series of videos and photographs and unified them through a pink and purple colour palette. The piece takes place in two settings: a domestic scene, and a nature scene. The videos are meant to play one after the other, on loop.

The first video is of the interior of an apartment. The scene has been constructed through the piecing together of abstracted photos of a living space, and shadow videos of domestic items (a ceiling fan, hanging laundry, a balcony fence). An oval window fades in and out of the video, revealing the shadow of a figure, repeatedly puffing on a cigarette. In the background, the white noise of the fan is punctuated by the steady ticking of a clock. This setting, like *Homebody (Fig. 9),* explores my relationship to my apartment after months of

forced isolation within it. Time is no longer linear and my actions: smoking, laundry, and deep thinking, are repetitive and never-ending. I have found myself contemplating the isolating nature of the domestic labour of women throughout history during this confinement and may explore this idea further in future works.

The second video is set in a field of pink flowers after a rainfall. A portal appears within the field with the silhouette of a fern. A shadow hand then enters the portal, interacts with the fern and proceeds to perform a series of gestures over the field. The setting is peaceful and soft, and the hand glides gracefully over it. The dance is a meditative process of connecting with the earth through movement.

While creating *Embodied Contemplation (Fig. 10),* I had the opportunity to take online contemporary dance classes with renowned Canadian dancer and choreographer Margie Gillis. She led a dance series which she called 'guided movement meditations', focusing on keeping the mind and body open and explorative during this time of intense transition (Gillis 2020). During the classes, she discussed accessing varying states of mind in order to relate to the world and deal with one's own reactions to trauma. Her approach draws on Tibetan Buddhist concepts of nonlocality which I would like to research further for future videos.

Figure 1. Embodied Contemplation, Video Stills, 2020.

This piece has been an investigation into non-linear ways of thinking and challenging established patriarchal ways of knowing. I have felt extremely emotional over the past few months as a response to current world affairs. My natural instinct is usually to attempt to suppress or hide this reaction, as it is often deemed by society, as not an appropriate response. Author and academic, Siri Hustvedt explains, “a stubborn sense of emotion as dangerous, as something that must be controlled, put down and subjugated to reason has remained a part of Western culture” (Hustvedt 6). In these videos, I embrace the emotional feelings that have arisen through this time, as a fertile ground for exploring new ways of creating, moving and thinking.

Conclusion

With a critical inquiry into the construction of gender, how it is performed, and how this performance affects its subjects, this research project questions what it means to live out a life marked with the cultural signifier 'woman'. The work I have started in this thesis project is an on-going and shifting process. Much like the concept of gender, it is both fluid and fragmented. It develops as I learn to decolonize my own thought processes from patriarchal and colonial ways of knowing and experiencing the world. Through this I am able to recontextualize previous experiences and connect them to a larger socio-political framework. This means that the work has become a journey in personal growth and reclamation as well.

Rooted at my practice is a grounding in materiality and gesture. A bundle of tangled pink tinsel or upholstery trim has the metaphorical power to stand in for larger concepts about a female body in physical distress or hiding. An old tapestry fabric, reconstructed into a menacing hood, carries with it, associations to bourgeois living spaces, domestic violence or sado-masochistic costuming. Fragmentation at various stages and forms has also become important to my process as a disrupter and as an aesthetic tool.

Going forward, I will continue to explore the realm of the domestic in relation to the female body. The recent pandemic has reinforced the relevance of this area of research and has

also allowed me to re-engage with domestic crafts that I grew up learning from my mother and grandmother. I am interested in combining these mediums of embroidery, rug-making and quilting into my material practice. Connected to these ways of making, is the opportunity to continue my engagement with a conversation around gender and class that I began with my autho-ethnographic writing in this paper. These areas are all rich with potential as I find ways to weave my writing and visual practices together. As well, I am eager to allow my materiality to grow in the amount of physical space it claims in the gallery and to create larger video and collage installations that assert the importance of women's experiences.

.

Works Cited

"About COVID-19." *BC Centre for Disease Control*, 2020, www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/about-covid-19.

Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, p. 519., doi:10.2307/3207893.

Butler, Judith. *Your Behaviour Creates Your Gender*. Big Think, 6 June 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc.

Chang, Heewon. *Handbook of Autoethnography*, by Holman Jones Stacy Linn et al., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016, pp. 107–122.

"Dancing from Your Soul in the Time of the Virus - Guided Movement Meditation with Margie Gillis." *Margie Gillis - Dance Foundation*, 1 June 2020, margiegillis.org/dancing-from-your-soul-in-the-time-of-the-virus-guided-movement-meditation-with-margie-gillis/.

Edwards, Haley Sweetland. "How Christine Blasey Ford's Testimony Changed America." *Time*, Time, 4 Oct. 2018, time.com/5415027/christine-blasey-ford-testimony/.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Historical Social Research*, *36*(4), 273-290. https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.4.273-290

"Get To Know Us: History & Inception." *Me Too. Movement*, 16 July 2020, metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/.

Gill, Rosalind. *Gender and the Media*. Polity Press, 2007.

Hanisch, Carol. *The Personal Is Political*. 1969, webhome.cs.uvic.ca/~mserra/AttachedFiles/PersonalPolitical.pdf.

Hooks, Bell. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Washington Square Press, 2004.

Hustvedt, Siri. "A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women." *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind*, by Siri Hustvedt, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2016, pp. 3–18.

Jordanova, Ludmilla. *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

Juliavits, Heidi. "Cindy Sherman." *The Gentlewoman, 2019,* pp. 176-189.

Metta, M. (2010). *Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory: Lifewriting as Reflexive Poststructuralist Feminist Research Practice.* Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang.

Mutu, Wangechi. "Inside My Studio." Anderson Ranch Arts Center, 30 May 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5u4GGniG2I.

Polsky, Cynthia Hazen, et al. "Women and the Critical Eye — A Conversation with the Artist Wangechi Mutu." *The Met*, 28 July 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMUFl__m1KI.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Whose Story Is This?: Old Conflicts, New Chapters*. Haymarket Books, 2019.

"The View From Mount Venus: Notes on the Aesthetic of the Exquisite." *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art*, by Rebecca Solnit, University of Georgia Press, 2001, pp. 205–218.

Wagner, Anne. *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe*. University of California Press, 1996.

Wikander, Ulla-Stina. “About.” *Usw*, ullastinawikander.com/About.

Wunker, Erin. *Notes From a Feminist Killjoy: Essays on Everyday Life*. Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication, 2016.