

# **FIXING FEMININITY**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

Informed by my personal experience with organized religion and conditioned ideologies, my photo-based practice aims to explore my position as a female photographer who contributes to the commodification and consumption of women's images while also undermining and complicating standard and stereotypical versions of female narrative. In this paper, I unpack the impact of my personal history with Evangelicalism, the importance of nature as a reoccurring motif in my images, the role of the camera and photographic exploration, and the trajectory of my practice as established by my thesis photo series titled *Finding The Pieces*.



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## Introduction

My photo-based practice employs various photographic genres and formats that share a common thread of investigation into the influences and intricacies of female identity as influenced by mass media and culture. Within the Master of Fine Arts degree, I've worked with landscapes, portraiture, still life, and staged photography, while also navigating between digital and analogue, and small, medium, and large film formats. The multiplicity of my artistic methods is a critique of the simplification of female identity stereotyped in mass media. My work aims to explore my position as a female photographer who contributes to the commodification and consumption of women's images while also undermining and complicating standard and stereotypical versions of the female narrative.

Reoccurring themes in my images are representations of nature, femininity, and the influence of religious ideologies in my understanding of female identity. In the context of female identity, nature and femininity are historically perceived as interconnected and have been used to illustrate gender-based oppression and ideologies that create and support gender roles as fixed and limited within a patriarchal and inherently Western framework. I am engaging in a long tradition of feminist inquiry that uses imagery of the female body and natural elements in art, in the tradition of artists like Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta, and Honey Long and Prue Stent.<sup>1</sup> My background in Evangelical Christianity, which largely rejects feminism and perpetuates misogyny, creates complicated personal implications in my work. Feminism has troubled the accepted truths of my upbringing, and the implications of negotiating the belief systems of my community. The development of my own perspective has been, and will continue to be, a

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<sup>1</sup> Frida Kahlo explored identity through painting self-portraits, depicting herself surrounded by Mexican folk symbolism and elements of nature. Ana Mendieta created "earth-body" art which integrated her body or traces of her body with natural environments as an engagement with the concept of ecofeminism (a term first used by Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 to highlight the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of females). In contemporary culture, the photographic duo Honey Long and Prue Stent engage in forth-wave feminist theory by entangling the female form with natural environments so as to disrupt reductive binaries and classifications placed on the female body. (Shepherd)

complicated and extended process. My photography integrates these personal entanglements with the intricacies of understanding self and womanhood.

In this document, I will use my photographs as context for describing the evolution of my inquiry into female identity and the placement of my art practice in relation to contemporary photography. In the first section, titled “Female Identity Within Evangelicalism,” I explain my experience with organized religion as context for my personal perspective on female identity and spheres of influence. In the second section, titled “Femininity and The Natural World,” I provide context for the elements of nature evident throughout my art practice, focusing on the constructed connection between females and nature, and the introduction of large format photography into my practice. The complexities of female identity and subjectivity are addressed in detail within the third section, titled “Exploring Identity Construction.” Finally, the fourth section titled “Expanding The Female Narrative,” focuses on my thesis project and how my art practice is currently situated amongst other female art photographers.

## Female Identity Within Evangelicalism

My practice is informed by my personal connection with Evangelical Christianity and my religious upbringing. Creating the typology *Bible Belt* (Figure 1) was my way of beginning to gain some perspective on the social and cultural implications of the church's influence. It functioned as the starting point for my inquiry into the systems which shaped my female identity and the conceptual possibilities for rebelling against them.



Figure 1. Kat Grabowski, *Bible Belt*, 2018.

*Bible Belt* is a monochrome typology of church buildings photographed in the community where I grew up, known at one time as BC's Bible Belt.<sup>2</sup> Displayed side-by-side, each individual image is seamlessly pressed up against the next to create a ten-foot long composition that is encountered as monochrome horizon line. The images employ the straight-on perspective typically used for building typologies, a strategy notably utilized by photographers Bernd and Hilla Bechers and Ed Rusha, which allows the structure's visible and intellectual qualities to be compared and contrasted (Zlatanovski). The church buildings present a mixture of modernist architecture: a landscape of reinforced concrete, peaked roofs, and oversized crosses.<sup>3</sup> There is a connection suggested between the quantity and presence

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<sup>2</sup> In the 90s the Fraser Valley was considered BC's Bible Belt, but as the area experienced rapid growth in the early 2000s, there has been a noticeable decrease in the Christian population. (Olsen)

<sup>3</sup> One church, third from the left on the bottom row, shares the same uniquely peaked roof as iconic modernist architect Le Corbusier's *Notre-Dame-du-Haut*.

of the buildings and their influence over their community, but also between their dated appearance and their commitment to traditions. This project emerged from a place of personal frustration with the Christian church, its dated perspectives, and its formidable impact on my identity construction.

I grew up in a conservative, Christian community with middle-class parents who both worked from home and shared parenting duties. Up until enrolling at Emily Carr University of Art + Design, my education was exclusively within the Evangelical worldview at private schools surrounded by peers from similar backgrounds as my own. The Christian worldview emphasizes “Christ-like behaviour,” which on the surface means we are to follow the Ten Commandments and evangelize to the world. In reality, it means accepting conservative ideals as truths and necessities for living a fruitful life. I was taught that my role as a woman was to ensure my body didn’t provoke unwanted behaviour from men and my purpose was to seek a good husband, keep my body private (even from myself), have a pro-life stance, and possibly most importantly, guard my virginity until marriage.

The nature of my home life and early educational background allowed me the privilege of remaining largely oblivious through my formative years to the implications of gender inequalities. Even so, specific memories of experienced gender bias stuck with me: my mother telling me that boys don’t like funny girls, my parents removing us from our church community because the pastor had altered the pronouns in congregational hymns to be gender-inclusive, my Opa repeatedly telling me to smile more, strategizing a getaway plan just in case the men catcalling me from a passing truck were to circle back around, being told it was inappropriate to wear yoga pants because it caused men to think impure thoughts, and a parent stepping in between an older boy and myself to resolve an argument that men will always be stronger than women (I was not willing to accept this as truth). These memories, a few of many, highlighted the implications of my gender within evangelical Christianity. The Christian church has a history

of reacting slowly to cultural changes because of the weight placed on the ‘Word of God’ within the Bible, despite its many translations and versions. There are many problematic verses in the Bible, both Old and New Testament, which have specifically supported polygamy, slavery, stoning, homophobia, and gender inequality. With the exception of homophobia<sup>4</sup> and gender inequality, these verses have been generally accepted as guidance relevant within the context of ancient culture, but not acceptable in today’s society. Patriarchal influence continues to guide Biblical interpretation. Christian communities shape their home and church structures around verses like 1 Timothy 2:11-12 (NIV) which states: “Women should learn quietly and submissively. Do not let women teach men or have authority over them. Let them listen quietly.” This verse, among many,<sup>5</sup> shapes the way women are raised to understand themselves and their place in the world. Growing up in a community where everyone I knew was either from my church or my Christian school created an echo-chamber of how a woman “should” act. Identifying specific unfair biases caused cracks to form in the ideological truths I had been taught and prompted me to start questioning cultural ideologies beyond my Christian bubble.

Acceptance of feminism or feminist concepts have been slow to catch on in the Christian community. Many churches still prevent females from preaching, participating in major decisions, or leadership training<sup>6</sup> and perceive contemporary feminism to still align with the perspectives of first or second wave feminism. Christian feminist Sarah Bessey has pushed for a version of feminism that is updated but still compatible with Christianity. She doesn’t

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4 Acceptance of the LGBTQ community continues to be heavily debated in the Christian community and has caused divisions in churches and denominations. Arguments against the blessing of same-sex marriage and acceptance of LGBTQ people into church membership or leadership reference Genesis 1:27-28, Romans 1:26-27, Leviticus 18:22, and Jude 7 as justification for their bias.

<sup>5</sup> Notable verses which explicitly devalue women are Ephesians 5:22-24, Colossians 3:18-19, 1 Peter 3:1-2, and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

<sup>6</sup> It’s common for a woman to be given an alternative title, such as Woman’s Ministry Leader, despite carrying out all the same roles as their male equivalent who has the title of Pastor.



discredit the Bible, but challenges its interpretation<sup>7</sup> as influenced by the patriarchy and stifling of woman. She writes in her book *Jesus Feminist*:

When women are restricted from the service of God in any capacity, the Church is mistakenly allowing an imperfect male-dominated ancient culture to drive our understanding and practice of Christ's redeeming work, instead of Jesus Christ and the whole of the Scriptures. (69)

Culture has evolved from ancient times, but can still be classified as a male-dominated culture, causing these interpretations to continue to dominate in the Christian church. And the sentiment is not exclusive to evangelicalism. "The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact," explains anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner (67). Working from my personal experiences in Evangelicalism doesn't isolate me or my artistic practice from relating to non-religious audiences; the female experience with patriarchal limitations, though varied, is not isolated to organized religion.

A moment of awakening regarding the value of feminism to the evolution of culture and my female identity occurred while reading a news article four years after graduating from my undergraduate degree. It was 2016 and Jian Ghomeshi had just been acquitted of five accounts of sexual assault. His defense attorney had managed to defame the female complaint-ants using evidence of their "flirtatious" behaviour surrounding the time of the alleged assaults (Fraser). Reading the testimonies of the women involved, and realizing how common it was to misconceive the definition of sexual assault and sexual harassment, created an extraordinary shift in how I understood society's treatment of women within a patriarchal structure and how I understood, even formed, my own perception of womanhood. Ghomeshi's victims were relatable and the gaslighting they experienced was uncomfortably familiar to me. I

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<sup>7</sup>The literal interpretation of the Bible from its original Hebrew and Greek as well as its application to everyday life.

empathized with his victims and their actions, but more alarmingly, I understood why Ghomeshi was found innocent. The concept that women are responsible for the way they are treated, even when on the receiving end of sexual harassment or assault, was deeply engrained in my understanding of womanhood. In that moment it occurred to me how dangerous this mindset could be and I began to ask a lot of questions. What affect had my ingrained ideologies had on my sense of self and identity? What vulnerabilities had it exposed me to? What other beliefs do I need to reconsider? And how might I use the visual language of photography to explore the complexities of identifying as a female in a patriarchal society? These questions have informed my research and created the framework for how I approach my artistic practice.

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## Femininity and The Natural World

In the summer of 2019, I produced a series of female portraits taken in forest landscapes. Each image presented a singular female figure gazing directly into the camera with an awareness of the viewer. Creating the images, individually titled with the model's name in a series called *Females & Forests*, (Figures 2 and 3) introduced large format photography into my art practice,<sup>8</sup> but more importantly, it established questions of female identity and representation in relation to nature as key themes in my images. These images prompted reflection on my engrained patriarchal understanding of femininity and triggered my desire to create images that would engage with religious and cultural entanglements of my female experience.



Figure 2. Kat Grabowski, *Sierra*, 2019

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<sup>8</sup> I was introduced to large format photography the semester previous and was still engaged in the learning curve of transitioning from more accessible camera types.

My background in photography emerged from a tension between fine art photography and a commercial practice, both largely concerned with the representation of women. My commercial practice revolves around the lifecycle and milestones of women, capturing clients on their wedding day, giving birth, and other milestones related to the experiences of women. Men are present, but rarely the primary focus—always secondary to the bride who steals the spotlight and the mother who endures a birth. The predictability of my commercial images is reflective of the predictability of the rites of passage I'm asked to capture. I know how to prompt poses, choose the best light, and deliver a gallery to the client which exhibits the beauty and emotion of their milestone moments. My fine art practice provides an opportunity to question what has been a seamless commercial process, and to think through why such imagery is important to women as markers of real or imagined achievements. For example, what purpose is served or perpetuated through emphasizing these traditions and milestones? How might I explore the depth of femininity beyond, or in periphery of, patriarchal traditions?

Disrupting my image content begins with disrupting my image making process. My fine art approach to photography focuses on analogue, rather than digital photography, specifically large format 4x5 film. In contrast to the rapid, multiplicity of digital photography, large format photography demands a slowing down of my process and careful consideration of my subject. The size and mechanics of large format photography does not lend itself to candid or documentary photography. Rather, it places enormous importance on each individual exposure, demanding attentiveness, focus, and a consideration of intent. The subjects must be posed in a position they can hold still for a full minute or more. Lighting, focus, and composition are double checked, and still mistakes are easily made. The process of creating the *Females & Forests* series was largely a matter of trial and error as I learned and unlearned my photographic habits. More than a refinement of my artistic methodology, the shift to large format photography was a disruption of my photographic ideologies—the unraveling of my process and systems which created predictable results. The influence of other commercial and

mass media images I saw around me created automatic, unconscious habits that allowed my images to fit in with the general accepted concept of a “good image”. Disrupting my process parallels my desire to disrupt my conceptual ideological habits and unravel my identity as a female photographer and approach to photographing female subjects.



Figure 3. Kat Grabowski, *Annaliese*, 2019.

Within the gallery space, the portrait *Annaliese* (Figure 3) was displayed as close to life size as printing logistics would allow so that the print carried a human-like physical presence.<sup>9</sup> The large scale of this *Female & Forests* portrait is intended to give the image a strong, empowering presence, but its language of representation is also encountered in a familiar way akin to a

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<sup>9</sup> The width of paper available allowed the print to be approximately three-quarters life size

billboard fashion advertisement. Like the models used to sell denim, the female subjects stand passively, aware of her viewer and willing to be observed. However, unlike iconic ad campaigns, such as Brooke Shields for Calvin Klein, it is not made clear to the viewer what the image is 'selling'. There is no clarity of product or brand recognition, and the grounding of women in nature disrupts any instantaneous reading. The women were told to stand tall and keep their chins up so that they possessed a pose of confidence. Yet the expectation, based on the size and focus of the female subject, is that the image is an advertisement of some form. This highlights the struggle of taking on women-centric portraits: the history of patriarchal representation, as perpetuated by the visuals used to advance capitalism and commerce, has corrupted the way in which female portraiture is received and read. As a female photographer working with female subjects, I'm compelled to identify ways in which my photography contributes to patriarchal ideologies and consider strategies and techniques for reimagining female representation.



Figure 4. Rineke Dijkstra, *Hel, Poland, August 12, 1998*.  
Removed due to copyright restrictions.



The straight on, full body posing convention is reminiscent of Rineke Dijkstra's large format portraits in her *Beach Portrait* series (Figure 4). Her work has a focus on the transitional period of adolescence and functions in connection to time, or a documented moment in a child's development (Woodward). The directness of the portraits creates a sense of vulnerability reflective of both the adolescent's position in front of the viewer and their position in life, but also nostalgia, as it is a relatable life stage to anyone who has experienced puberty. My work with female subjects in their mid to late twenties, placed in a forest landscape, represents a later life stage when an individual develops a consciousness of their female subjectivity and patriarchal limitations. With the forest backdrop indicating the growth and life cycles,<sup>10</sup> creating these images is a documentation of the subjects coming into themselves from an ideological perspective. For myself, this stage has been defined by a reevaluation of my Evangelical upbringing, an awareness of the contention and competition nurtured between women,<sup>11</sup> and the power imbalances created by gender associations. It's a realization of the manipulations used to pit women against each other and the illusion that there was an advantage to being identified as male.<sup>12</sup> I was led to believe that it was more desirable to be associated with males than females and tended to diminish or distrust female connections. The time and labour of maneuvering a full frame camera around a forest landscape created an opportunity for my subjects to experience a unique camera apparatus and engage in the construction of the image. Spending time in a serene forest, transporting, assembling, photographing, and disassembling the camera equipment, formed a memorable positive experience shared between myself and my female subjects. Working on a summer-long series that required connecting with other women one-on-one was an intentional way of challenging my history of bias towards building relationships with other women. Whereas the power dynamic between photographer

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<sup>10</sup> The specific forests I used were logged in the early 1900s and are now second-growth forests, a parallel to the second growth I'm highlighting in my subjects.

<sup>11</sup> Which I now realize is internalized misogyny.

<sup>12</sup> Prompted by the gender income gap and male dominant leadership, but also the high standards placed on women in comparison to men.

and subject in Dijkstra's *Beach Portraits* emphasizes her subject's adolescent vulnerability, the power dynamic between myself and my female subjects emphasized female empowerment despite the complications involved in female representation.

Placing my female subjects in the forest points to the connection between women and nature. Feminist theory has struggled with the association of the female body and nature as essentializing the female position and emphasizing patriarchal ideologies. Historically, poetry, paintings, and literature have equated woman and nature as one, primarily because of the connection between the idea of mother nature and a woman's fertility, but also suggesting that like nature, women are wild, unpredictable, and need to be tamed. This notion promotes the concept that women are "other" and sets the groundwork for harmful ideological thinking, such as the concept that a woman's purpose is reproduction or that women's emotions are too unpredictable to be suitable for leadership positions. The Female artists like Ana Mendieta who created images of her nude body in nature to address identity and displacement falls under critique for essentializing femininity as tied to nature. In her essay *Nature and Body*, ecofeminist Catrin Gersdorf reasons "that the associations of female body and landscape, while they can never completely skirt the danger of rearticulating oppressive ideologies, can nevertheless trouble established ways of thinking, speaking, and visualizing selfhood and cultural identity." (217) Drawing on the connection between women and nature can be used effectively as a tool to divert expectation and question conditioned positioning. This perspective is reiterated by feminist philosopher Susan Griffin, who wrote: "the equation is not that woman equals nature, but that by understanding how and why woman is associated with nature, one can decode many structures of injustice in Western society." (220) Likewise, my intention is not to perpetuate the equation of woman with nature, but to analyze the meaning and implications of their association. The women in *Sierra* and *Annaliene* are posed in a manner reminiscent of the goddess Venus in Sandro Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Venus* (Figure 5) so as to allude to the history women's association with nature in art. However, their



denim attire prevents them from blending into their natural surroundings and diverts their associations with the qualities Venus represents: purity, fertility, desire, and sex. My aim is to indicate the agency of my female subjects as individuals with a close connection with nature but not synonymous with nature.

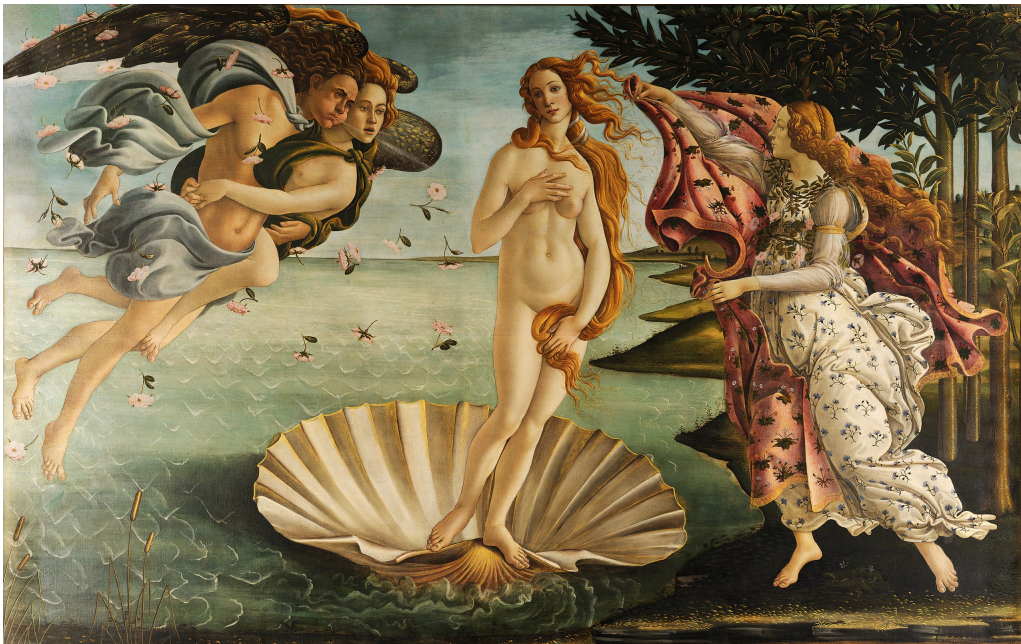


Figure 5. Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1484–1486). Tempera on canvas. 172.5 cm × 278.9 cm (67.9 in × 109.6 in). Uffizi, Florence. Source: <https://www.wikipedia.org>. Public Domain.

Sherry B. Ortner unpacks woman's association with nature in her essay *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?*, and explores how this association has contributed to how women are historically and universally seen as lower than men. The aspects of female physiology and social roles — her reproductive system and ability to develop unmediated relationships — are seen as closer to nature than men. These aspects are common characteristics of a female, but their importance in relation to their ability to contribute to society is a cultural construct that is imbedded in cultural ideology, shaping gender roles and feed back into the ideology.

The result is a (sadly) efficient feedback system: various aspects of woman's situation (physical, social, psychological) contribute to her being seen as closer to nature, while the view of her as closer to nature is in turn embodied in institutional forms that reproduce her situation. The implications for social change are similarly circular: a different cultural view can only grow out of a different social actuality; a different social actuality can only grow out of a different cultural view. (Ortner 87)

As an artist, my challenge is to create a crack in the cycle so that there is space for women to move past these restrictive ideologies. My own experience is the driving force for my interaction with this complicated matter. I feel a deep connection with nature, but not to the concept of fertility and motherhood. I'm drawn to the sublime of nature, the spiritual experience of encountering its grandeur and the sense of self I gain by acknowledging my ability to exist alongside it. Growing up, boys were brought into nature to learn about masculinity and girls were kept inside to nurture their femininity. Once I realized I could exist and learn from nature as well, I began to understand the complexity of my own identity, specifically my physical abilities, bravery, and fears, that challenge what I once thought I was incapable of due to my gender. Placing my female subjects in nature and creating experiences together in that space expands the traditional associations of females and nature and the essentializing of femininity.

## Exploring Identity Construction

The three photographic, object-based explorations titled *Relics*, *Prize Flowers*, and *Forest Re-Photographed* were a study in understanding how identity is developed and affected. The art historian and theorist Kristina Huneault suggests that the development of our sense of self is connected to the spaces we inhabit, our relation to the world, and the elements within.

(Huneault 15) The church typography *Bible Belt* explored the spaces of influence I inhabited and the portrait series *Females & Forests* explored my relationship to the world. Creating photographic, object-based studies engaged with the elements which influenced my understanding of identity.



Figure 6. Kat Grabowski, *Relics*, 2019.

*Relics* (Figure 6) is a still life diptych which presents childhood objects as traces of the ideological environment in which two separate individuals were raised. The two images were

displayed side-by-side so as to be closely examined, compared, and contrasted with one another. The arrangement on the left is created using objects retrieved from my own childhood bedroom, and the arrangement on the right is comprised of objects supplied by an acquaintance. With dramatic lighting, and velvety pedestals, the formal construction of these images bare similarities to still life memento mori or vanitas, which are meant to draw attention to the shortness of life and mortality. Rather than pointing to the end of life, *Relics* is focused on the beginning, or developmental stages, and their enduring impact. The images also bare a resemblance to an altarpiece, which often consist of diptychs or triptychs, and display or illustrate sacred saints or objects.

A relic is a surviving object of significance from an earlier time. Each object serves as a relic of adolescence and evidence of the construction of the subject through nurtured belief systems. The displays hold many similarities, each sporting cameras, books, and sentimental trinkets. The subtle differences point to the specificity of each subject's construction. The display on the left includes books used as instruction manuals for developing good Christian character. In contrast, the display on the right features a large cigarette advertisement and measuring tape. The objects are loaded with memories, projected meaning, and symbolism. Their artificial, forest backdrop suggests the compositions of objects are acting as stand-ins for the female subjects in *Females & Forests*, illustrating their adolescent years. Including an element of nature points back to the connection between women and nature, whether as a looming gendered expectation or a nod towards the complexity of female identity. The vignettes reflect the traces of ideologies embedded in the objects around us which can be traced back to our development of self.

The tryptic *Prize Flowers* (Figure 7) further explores the ideological power that can be embedded in objects. The photographs depict three treasured artificial flowers I recovered from my childhood home, enlarged in the gallery space so as to clearly reveal their artificiality as the

viewer draws close to them. The silk flowers, tied with swirling plastic ribbons, were given to me in congratulations following childhood figure skating competitions. In the photographs, their artificiality is easily overlooked—it's not immediately obvious that these flowers are two decades old, but once the pattern of the synthetic fibres are identified, they become somewhat unsettling. The meaning these faux flowers possessed is hidden behind their deceptively realistic appearance—it's not until their artificiality is identified that questions around their existence and purpose start to arise. To my ten-year-old self, they were feminine prizes which represented value, pride, and accomplishment, reenforcing the connection of my adolescent femininity to dainty, budding flowers. Now, they are undying, kitschy relics from a time in life when cheap tokens of approval directly impacted my perception of self. The camera facilitates a slippage between perception and reality which reveals the strangeness of their existence, but also illustrates how easily an ideological belief can be conditioned and reinforced.

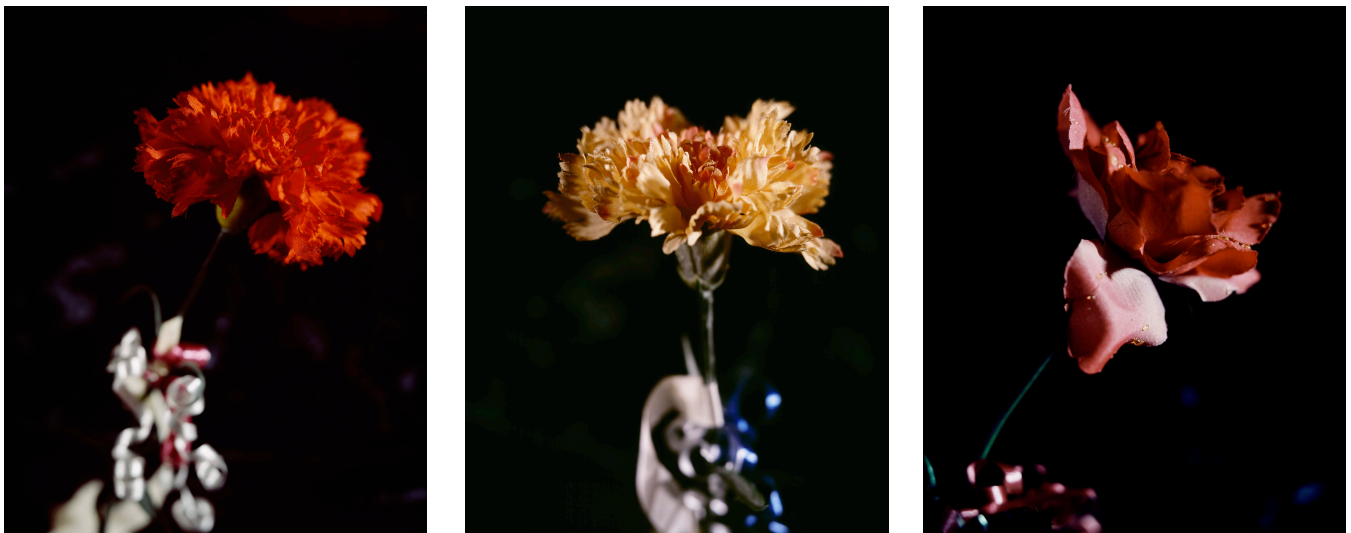


Figure 7. Kat Grabowski, *Prize Flowers*, 2019.

I broke down the relationship between perception and reality further with *Forest Rephotographed*, which revisited the forest motif. (Figure 8) This landscape/still life hybrid utilized three modes of image capturing which, when flattened onto a single image plane,



creates a break down of the viewers relationship with the subject. The original image was a 35mm colour film exposure of a forest landscape, which was then enlarged and manipulated digitally so that it could be printed in sections, reassembled, and rephotographed. The final photograph was taken on a large format camera, utilizing its potential to create an image that could be produced large scale with the details of the image's production seams fully preserved. Within the gallery space, the immense size of the forest image<sup>13</sup> hung like a tapestry. The disconnect between the appearance and reality of the image mirrors that of *Prize Flowers*. In this case, an abstracted forest reveals itself to be an image of fifty printed papers tapped together. It prompts the viewer to consider the camera's subjectivity and the way in which the world around them is projected and perceived.

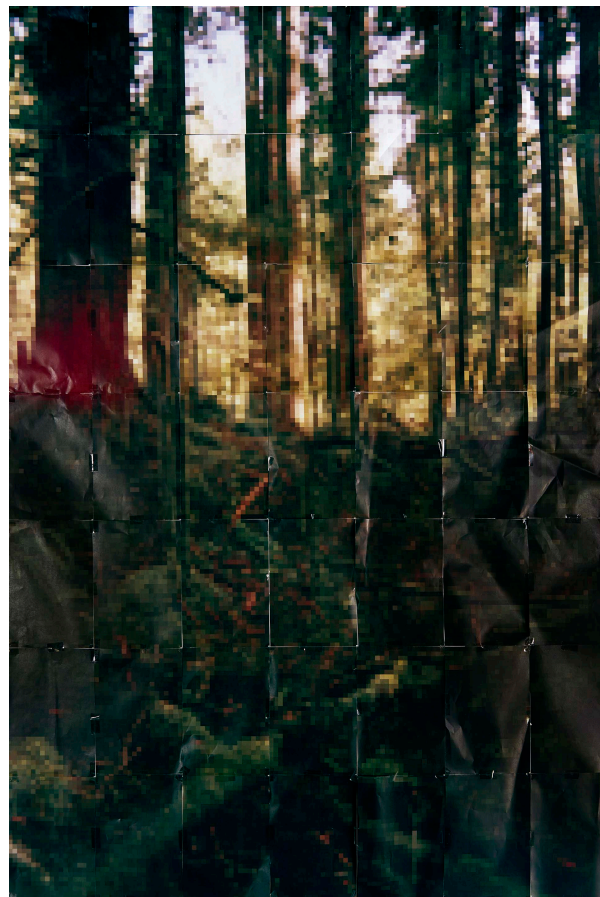


Figure 8: Kat Grabowski, *Forest Rephotographed*, 2019.

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<sup>13</sup> Printed at 40" x 70"

These three photographic explorations set the groundwork for my thesis work by serving as conceptual investigations into the role of the camera in smudging the lines between engrained perspectives and undermined realities. The prompt to reevaluate what is being perceived in an image suggests that a reevaluation of perception beyond the image is necessary as well. This ties into the research question: what affect has my ingrained ideologies had on my sense of self and identity? Pursing this question has led my practice into investigations around perceived and constructed perspectives, seeking to uncover my own invisible biases and the elements (spaces, environments, and objects) which fostered them. I've held onto the objects in *Relics* and *Prize Flowers* because they held sentimental meaning. Investigating the root of that meaning exposed their ties to the high standards I've set for myself (and other women) and my desire to seek approval. However it's not all problematic, even as critique of my religious upbringing expands, the pull towards spiritual experiences, such as the sublime found in nature, continues on as a key aspect of who I am and why I create.

## Expanding the Female Narrative

The goal of my thesis project is to create work which participates in the broadening of the understanding of female identity by challenging the expectations, assumptions, and restrictions placed on woman. In creating the images in my thesis series, titled *Finding The Pieces*, (Appendix A & B) I took on two contrasting methods of production: staged narrative using large format film and informal compositions using specialized 35mm film. These two approaches are used to portray a gathering of young women in a secluded cabin in the woods. As with all my work, this series alludes to the presence of nature and its connection to womanhood, however the focus is on the interior cabin environment which allows the women to interact and exist within a private environment. The implication that the camera is capturing personal interactions and moments points to a duality of vulnerability and intimacy experienced by females.



Figure 9. Kat Grabowski, *Untitled (Finding The Pieces)*, 2020.



There are four scenes portrayed in the large format images. (Appendix A) In the first, a woman gazes out at the viewer through binoculars, flanked by three other woman. In the second, four women sit around a kitchen table, inattentively playing cards and avoiding eye contact. One of the four's gaze is focused over her shoulder at something out of frame. In the third, five women occupy a bedroom in various stages of activity while seemingly listening in on the story of the central figure who stares into space. (Figure 9) In the fourth, a thin, tattooed arm, baring a large, red scar, holds the curtain that hangs over a doorway, in-explicitly either pulling back the curtain as an invitation or covering the doorway for privacy. These images were constructed by utilizing the scale and intentionality of the large format camera to create dynamic, yet unclear, narrative compositions. The setting, clothing, and props are curated to be ambiguous to time and place to allude to cyclical experiences. This ambiguousness could justifiably be contested —the images are not seamlessly timeless—nevertheless the removal of technology and the subduing of specific fashion and beauty trends opens up the images to relate to women from a range of generations.

Within the gallery, the relational narrative is expanded through the interaction of the images with the viewer and with one another. The four large format images were installed across three walls, surrounding the viewer and creating an intimate space which echos the cabin interior. (Figure 10) Their large scale<sup>14</sup> allows for the details of the compositions to come to life and for the viewer to interact with the scenes at a life-size scale. This is particularly evident in the image of the woman looking through binoculars. The extreme detail of every hair on her arm and fibre of her clothing draws the viewer in close, only to then be confronted by her staring back out at them. This push and pull of engagement and confrontation is found again in the room full of girls which draws the eye into the central figure, then confronts the viewer with the intimacy of the scene and implicates them in the voyeurism of their gaze. The gazes of the

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<sup>14</sup> Three of the images are displayed at 30" x 40" and the fourth (women at the table) is 40" x 50". The 35mm film images are displayed at 8" x 10".

female subjects themselves are also more evident within the gallery as they seem to glance out at one another: the woman with binoculars watches the woman at the table, who stares over at the woman on the bed. It could be that the women are watching over each other or perhaps longing for one another. This triangular movement between the images further emphasizes the dualistic aspects of the female experience and relationships: longing and belonging, intimacy and vulnerability, performative and non-performative behaviour, connections and boundaries.



Figure 10. Kat Grabowski, *Finding The Pieces*, 2020, exhibition installation.

The seven small scale images were created using a uniquely engineered film which converts yellow and green tones to fascia and indigo. (Appendix B) This method, which is a subdued imitation of Kodak's retired Aerochrome color infrared film<sup>15</sup> developed by Lomography, creates an alternate view of the world, causing familiar scenes of humans and nature to seem strange

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<sup>15</sup> Aerochrome film has a distinctly magenta appearance and was manufactured to be used by the U.S. military to survey land and spot camouflaged targets. It was most notably used as an artistic medium by Richard Mosse in his documentation of the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. (Schreibstein)

and displaced. Within the nine images are a mixture of everyday scenes: women smoking, laying amongst daisies, (Figure 11) sleeping, and taking a photo, as well as lawn chairs outside a house, moisture on a window pane, and fingers braiding hair. The shift in colours creates a shift in how the images are read and complicates their narratives: the woman laying in the daisies becomes a post-morbid body or mannequin figure, the smoking woman seems to slip between eras, and the two empty lawn chairs, framed by large purple shrubs, appear otherworldly. The affect is a collection of images which slip between the familiar and unfamiliar, again opening up their interpretation to be ungrounded in time. When placed alongside the large format images, these small compositions act as the in-between moments—the dreams, remnants, and solitary moments of their experiences.



Figure 11. Kat Grabowski, *Untitled (Finding The Pieces)*, 2020

*Finding The Pieces* was created in the areas around Chilliwack Lake Provincial Park and Manning Provincial Park — forest landscapes consistent with the settings of my previous images. These are environments which to me represent personal growth and freedom from the expectation of everyday life. Working within natural spaces around the Lower Mainland and large photo prints immediately connects my work to the history of photography in Vancouver, namely the Vancouver School of photo-conceptualism. This male-dominated collection of photo-based artists proved large format photography's dynamic abilities as an artistic medium and created a rekindled interest in photographic representation, but also perpetuated a colonizing, patriarchal perspective. (Modigliani) I'm inspired by the impact these artists' made on photography in Vancouver that was recognized worldwide by pushing the aesthetic experience of photographic images, but am critical of their tendency towards self-grandeur, seamlessly produced tableaux, and the exclusion of female artists who worked within the same photography genre. The large scale and production value of their work is evidence of the conditions historically limited to male artists which advanced their careers and boosted their confidence. As a female, I am constantly fighting against my instinct to downplay the value of my work.<sup>16</sup> Identifying this self-deprecating trait as conditioned behaviour and not reflective of the quality of my work or my right to stand alongside photographers of any gender is empowering. I have an opportunity as a female artist to bring an intersectional perspective to the landscape of Vancouver photography.

Karin Bubaš and Justine Kurland are female photo-conceptual photographers who also interact with the relationship of females and nature. These artists both use photography to feature female figures within intricate landscapes. Bubaš' *Studies in Landscapes and Wardrobe* series (Figure 12) uses large format photography to feature solitary female figures facing away from the camera in dramatic, natural settings. Her images allude to the portrayal of woman in

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<sup>16</sup> I was taught that pride was a negative character trait synonymous with boastfulness.



cinema and the sublime as portrayed by 19th century paintings. (Arnold) Though not considered part of the Vancouver School, Bubaš works out of Vancouver and uses similar formal strategies, such as printing at immense scales, to enhance the open-ended storytelling in her work. She sets an example as to how formal strategies can be used to reflect narrative through single-frame images and the role a female perspective can play in the context of Vancouver's fine art photography. ('Studies in Landscape') My work connects with Bubaš formally<sup>17</sup> and conceptually, though I aim for my images to function more like Justine Kurland's work which push the character and identity of the female subjects, rather than exclusively their psychology.



Figure 12. Karin Bubaš, *Woman in Grass (Ladner)*, 2018, 40" x 114", archival pigment print with matte uv laminate.

In *Girl Pictures*, (Figure 13) Kurland uses staged photography to imagine a world in which unbridled young girls run free across the American landscape, taking part in practices usually reserved for their male counterparts. (Kurland) This extensive series of large format images, staged across America, taps into an imaginary world of girlhood, which asks the question:

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<sup>17</sup> Besides the similarity in large format approach, her series *Hidden Valley* features a similar fuchsia film effect.

what if girls were raised differently?<sup>18</sup> Her ability to stage narrative-rich scenes, which vary from playful to harrowing, has played an influential role in how I approach staged narrative still images and for contextualizing the placement of my work in conversation with the history of feminism in art. I relate to Kurland's rebellious instinct, however my work deviates from hers in a key thematic way: my images are rooted in the reality of female subjectivity not the fantasy. I want to reflect and expand on lived understandings of femininity—the relentless influence of the male gaze, the intricacies of female relationships, the inescapable projections of gender normative behaviour, and the pressure of performance.



Figure 13. Justine Kurland, *Daisy Chain*, 2000.  
Removed due to copyright restrictions.

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<sup>18</sup> In the afterward of her photo book *Girl Pictures*, she admits that her work focuses on “fantasies of attachment and belonging that sharply diverged from the hardships experienced by so many actual teenage runaways.”

Though Kurland's ambiguous narratives would seem to align her with the Vancouver School (conceptually, though not geographically), her young, female subjects placed her instead alongside Rineke Dijkstra within the 'panty photography' trend, labeled by Lucy Soutter in "Dial 'P' for Panties: Narrative Photography in the 1990s". In the article, Soutter creates a conceptual analysis of the adolescent girl focus she observed in photography in the late 90s. Kurland's work is used to represent the complexity of working with female representation in photography, which too easily slips into the realm of fetishism when half-dressed adolescent girls are used as models. Creating and consuming images within the shadow of the male gaze perspective on female representation hinders woman from indulging in their own exploration of the female subject. As a woman, I relate to the vulnerability of Dijkstra's images because of the adolescent girls' awkward efforts to pose for the camera, not because of their minimal swimwear. In Kurland's images, the adventurous and reckless spirits of her adolescent subjects are relatable as a restrained aspect of my own adolescent female identity, which I still dream of fully unleashing. This reveals the largest challenge of working with female-focused content: managing a lived experience with engrained expectations. In an afterword Soutter added to her article a decade after its original publication, she admits that 'panty photography' had a legitimate and lasting impact on art photography:

The border between staged and documentary work continues to fascinate because it offers a space to explore real-life attitudes, subject positions and relationships with limited real-life consequences. It is not a coincidence that so many narrative photographers are women; staging provides an ideal opportunity to explore gender roles and power relationships.

While staging the images in *Finding the Pieces*, I found myself pushing against the perceived instincts of my female subjects as I sought to downplay their socially conditioned way of performing for the camera. I wanted facial expressions which were neither a model's pout or a

forced smile and clothing which wouldn't heighten their sexuality, but also didn't shy away from it. The reality is that female-centric art photography is loaded and complicated, but the female photographers who have been tackling this conundrum for decades have created a context for my work to exist and further female narratives.



## **Conclusion**

The trajectory of my research has revolved around exploring the way in which my personal experiences with organized religion, and its influence, relate to my identity and approach to art making. Negotiating the complexities of this integral aspect of my identity through photography has been a vulnerable process that has strengthened my awareness of the commonality of my experiences and the value of creating space to address conditioned concepts of femininity. Disrupting ideological concepts has become the foundation for the use of nature and female subjects in my images as I expand on concepts of female representation and conditioned expectations.

Introducing new ways of working with photography into my practice has changed and challenged my relationship with photography as a medium. I have experimented with cameras, film formats, and photography genres to expand my understanding of photography's placement in contemporary art. Playing off the camera's ability to freeze a moment in time, or exposing its limitations, has refined my ability to use visual languages to explore the complexities of identifying as a female and created opportunity to reconsider embedded ideological beliefs, such as the expectations placed on the way in which I behave, express myself, and make decisions.

Moving forward, I intend on furthering my inquiry into the complex interconnections of femininity, nature, and spirituality as reoccurring themes in my art practice. Additionally, I intend to further develop my approach to staged narratives and female representation by working further with female-based tableaux and the integration of my personal perspective. This genre is an exciting, new development in my practice and is yet to be resolved, providing the potential for digging deeper into the female experience, femininity, and feminism.

## APPENDIX A

Katrina Grabowski, *Finding The Pieces*, 2020. Large format slide film.







## APPENDIX B

Katrina Grabowski, *Finding The Pieces*, 2020. Lomochrome Purple 35mm film.















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