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THE MATERNAL ABJECT

By

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements-----	4
List of Illustrations -----	5
Summary/ Abstract -----	7
Course Proposal -----	9
1. Introduction -----	13
2. The Abject -----	16
3. The Maternal Abject-----	19
4. Abjection in the Artistic Process -----	24
5. Construction of the work-----	28
6. The maternal abject and the works of	
Mary Kelly-----	30
Cindy Sherman -----	35
Gregory Crewdson-----	40
Joel-Peter Witkin -----	42
7. Constructing the abject in the works of Hieronymus Bosch-----	44
8. Naming the abject in the works of Paul Quinn-----	46
9. The “personal is political” in the works of	
Fiona Hall -----	54
Mona Hatoum-----	56
10. Are mothers to blame? -----	61
11. Psychoanalysis, the Maternal abject and the works of	
Frida Kahlo-----	63
Louise Bourgeois -----	65
Francis Bacon -----	68
12. Conclusion-----	71
13. Bibliography-----	77
14. List of Slides -----	81
15. Catalogue of Work Presented for Examination -----	82

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A special acknowledgement goes to my children Miro and Carla, who inspired this project and who informed my enquiry into the "maternal object".

I would like to dedicate this paper and studio work to my husband Fabian Astore without whom this project would not have been possible. His artistic wisdom, insightful perception and support have been critical at every step of the way.

List of Illustrations

- Fig.1 *Post- Partum Document. Document IV Transitional Objects, Diary and Diagram*, Mary Kelly 1976
- Fig. 2 *Untitled #216*, Cindy Sherman,1989
- Fig. 3 *The Holy Family*, Perino del Vaga, c.1545
- Fig. 4 *Untitled*, Gregory Crewdson, 1995
- Fig. 5 *Feast of Fools*, Joel-Peter Witkin, 1990
- Fig. 6 *Garden of Earthly Delights (details)*, Hieronymus Bosch. c.1504
- Fig. 7 *Skin*, Paul Quinn, 1995
- Fig. 8 *Untitled: table construction with white pipes*, Fiona Hall
- Fig 9 *Pull*, Mona Hatoum, 1995
- Fig.10 *Recollection*, Mona Hatoum, 1996
- Fig.11 *Mother and Child* , Mona Hatoum, 1992
- Fig.12 *Prayer Mat*, Mona Hatoum, 1995
- Fig. 13 *My Birth*, Frida Kahlo, 1932

Fig. 14 *Fear Four*, Louise Bourgeois, 1984

Fig.15 *Quilting*, Louise Bourgeois, 1999

Fig.16 *Head VI*, Francis Bacon, 1949

Abstract

In this Research paper and through my Studio practice, I search for what binds me and separates me from my children.

I investigate abjection theories through Julia Kristeva and Georges Bataille and focus on a particular form I call the maternal abject. This occurs at the time an infant separates from its mother, acquires language and maps its own body. I am proposing that the mapping of the body is the point at which an individual perceives social structures and learns about prohibitions and taboos, hence the abject. I also investigate the relationship between the maternal abject and the artistic process through the writings of Kristeva. Abjection is illustrated through the works of Mona Hatoum, Fiona Hall, Hieronymus Bosch, and Paul Quinn. The maternal abject is illustrated through the works of Mary Kelly, Cindy Sherman, Frida Kahlo, Louise Bourgeois. A possible reading of the maternal abject is given through the works of Gregory Crewdson, Joel-Peter Witkin and Francis Bacon.

The studio work is in two parts. The first part is a series of layered photomedia images. The layers consist of a naked female body, which has been merged with Renaissance like Madonna and Child images. Texture, such as stones and spikes, is embedded to signify the fragility and strength of the body. Children are also present and are merged with the adult female body. All images are cradled in a darkened atmosphere in order to draw the viewer inside the images. The second part is a bassinet, which has been drilled and pierced by thousands of

pearl-headed steel pins. This piece signifies the dichotomy of the motherhood experience, which on the one hand is rewarding and fulfilling and on the other an abject and isolating experience of no apparent economic value. The two parts interact so that the bassinet piece with its threatening exterior acts as an aggressor towards the photomedia images.

Course Proposal

Below is the course proposal as amended.

As a female artist I concern myself with the exploration of human emotions and their environment as they apply to the self. The production of art is therefore my way of reaching a deep and thorough understanding of what it is to be human and to contextualise my experience within the framework of contemporary discourses.

The theoretical contexts of my work lie in the interpretations of the Other as they relate to the female identity. The feminine self as the Other is the symbol for the way the subject experiences power and language. Julia Kristeva states that "The woman effect" entails a specific relationship to both power and language...this particular relationship is based on...being a source of silent support, a useful backdrop and an invisible intermediary."

The work I wish to undertake through this research will take on the sheer expanse of the experience of becoming a mother for the first time. The schism between the former and the present self will undoubtedly present a major advance in my explorations to date. I will attempt to reconstruct both the systemic isolation and the cultural invisibility of contemporary motherhood. In my images, the dismantling of spontaneity will merge with the surrender of the self: that self which has been painstakingly constructed in the past from dispersed and in some instances lost realities. Perceptions and inherent conflicts about motherhood will form the building blocks of my exploration.

Mothering is invisible and castrated. Susan Maushart in her book *The Mask of Motherhood - How Mothering Changes Everything and why we pretend it doesn't*, details the way women negate their experience. Artists, including

myself, have tended to also make less of the actuality of mothering. Julia Kristeva states that "we should recognise the civilising role that mothers play.... Feminists have not stressed this enough and neither have the media, who usually portrays mothers as housekeepers ... Mothers perform a sort of miracle by separating themselves from the children while loving them and teaching them to speak...this gives them [the children] a corporeal and sensory pleasure as well as an intellectual one." As such my artistic practice will concentrate on this aspect of the human experience and in particular on womanhood.