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**THE MATERNAL ABJECT**

By

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Photomedia

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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.

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## **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.

Through the mangroves  
I give birth  
And choke on an aerial root  
The size of an umbilical cord.

Mireille Astore

"I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. Columbia University Press, New York 1982. p. 3

## **Introduction**

I, like most human beings, am constantly crossing boundaries. Each crossing throws me in deep torments and makes me come face to face with the abject. It is only when I embrace the abject that I am able to surface from the mires of my soul and understand both the meaning and necessity of each passage.

In my work and in my research paper, I have been exploring the abject as it relates to art and motherhood. I will firstly address the general context for the term abject and its appearance in contemporary theoretical writing and then I will explain how my work relates to abject theories, in particular a form I call the maternal abject.

Historically, Bataille calls abjection the inability to come to terms with the imperative of excluding the repulsive. He places the abject at the heart of our collective existence and tests the hypocrisy of a social order through its treatment of the abject. Kristeva defines the abject as a state of crisis, of self-disgust and disgust towards others. It is not so much the physically repulsive but that which disturbs identity, social or theological systems. Kristeva's definition of the abject encompasses a wide range of ideas and situations which interest me and which are relevant to my research. For this reason, I will focus my research on her writing and the interpretive writings of Elizabeth Grosz.

Then, following a discussion of the above, I will explore the maternal abject. This form of the abject is the one I am most

interested in, and the one which manifests itself in my artwork and indeed in the works of the artists who inspire my work. My interest in the maternal abject is a search into all the processes a woman undergoes when she becomes a mother and the subsequent mother/child separation. The latter occurs when the child forms its own identity as separate from the mother and realises that it has a body and an identity of its own. My search for what binds me and separates me from my own children is the driving force behind this particular art project.

From the above, I take on a political stand to bring to light the misconceptions about the place of the mother in the history of art and the effect of the maternal abject on some artists. Physical, semiotic and social phenomena take place when the child separates from the mother and forms its own identity. I will highlight how this separation manifests itself in relation to art and motherhood. These issues, which have historically not been given much credence, fuel my art and my need to give a visual representation of what it is to be a mother. From this viewpoint, I will discuss representations of the mother in the work of contemporary artists.

I will investigate the barriers and misconceptions, which a woman faces when she enters motherhood. I will examine the way motherhood in society is relegated to the domestic and how this renders her invisible. I am hoping that through my art, I can reach a better understanding of this phenomenon and bring it to the public attention.

Aesthetically, I am most interested in exploring my fascination with the abject and its visual representation. Therefore, I will examine how other artists relate to the abject and whether my obsession with the abject is a personal trajectory or a well-rooted enquiry into the artistic process. As such, I will investigate how some artists deal with the abject such as with the works of Francis Bacon, Joel-Peter Witkin, Paul Quinn, Mona Hatoum, Hieronymus Bosch, Fiona Hall and Gregory Crewdson, and those who deal with the maternal abject specifically; artists such as Mary Kelly, Louise Bourgeois, Frida Kahlo, and Cindy Sherman.

These discussions will lead to an explanation of my own work and how issues of abjection and motherhood are inherent to my current working practice.

## **The abject**

I make art in order to understand the self. It is my way of bringing different life forces together, of combining the ordinary with the extraordinary, the normal with the abnormal, and the subject with its abject. I do this through schisms, contradictions, and at times confrontation. Other times I try to render grotesque, safe and familiar imageries. Through these combinations I am most interested in boundaries as they are the sites of awakenings, of transformations, of reaching higher selves.

So what is this powerful force called the abject really about? Historically, Bataille defines abjection as

“The inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things (and that act establishes the foundations of collective existence).”<sup>2</sup>

His interest in heterogeneous elements constitutes a project to strip away ideological screens or veils, to expose the hypocrisies, which try to conceal and make palatable a basically meaningless

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<sup>2</sup> Bataille, George. “L’Abjection et les formes misérables” in *Essais de sociologie, Oeuvres complètes*. Gallimard, Paris.1970, vol 2. p. 217

and squalid existence. As a result, Bataille considers "the vilest, most discouraging and corrupted things in the world."<sup>3</sup>

Bataille has a great deal of distaste for the hypocrisy of exclusion and for banning from view, processes which are very much part of life. He gives the example of temples, which in times past were places of prayer and slaughter. Now the two functions have become separated to such an extent as to become antithesis to each other. It is as if "acts of purification" are taking place with the sole purpose of rejecting the abject and to relegate it to the unseen.<sup>4</sup>

According to Julia Kristeva , abjection is a state of crisis, of self-disgust and disgust towards others. It is not so much the physically repulsive but that which "disturbs identity, system, order"<sup>5</sup>. It is something, which simultaneously fascinates and repels, distresses and relieves. It does not exist outside the self and yet it threatens it. It is that which has emanated from the person's sense of order be it biological, social or spiritual. Abjection is not only the individual's relationship to the more acknowledged forms such as vomit, shit, and the corpse, it is a whole set of systems that nurture that relationship. In religion for example, it manifests itself as taboo or sin, and in a social and legal framework it is not unlike corruption. Therefore to be in

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<sup>3</sup> Ades, D. . "Web of Images" in D. Ades, ed., *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*. London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976. p. 12

<sup>4</sup> Hollier, D. . *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* MIT Press. Cambridge. 1992. xii.

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva. *Powers of Horror* p.4

a state of abjection is to merge the Other, that which is outside the self, with the self. It is truly an intolerable state of being. It signifies an apocalyptic spiralling of the unconscious while being conscious. It is seeing unforetold death moments before dying. Kristeva describes the abject thus:

“We may call it border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.”<sup>6</sup>

The all-encompassing world of abjection does fill me with a simultaneous sense of horror and peace. The knowledge that I can never contain the abject and that it is within me fuels my search for it. It is, as Elizabeth Grosz expresses it “the impossible desire to transcend corporeality”<sup>7</sup>. In fact, it is this search, which I yearn for and which constitutes my artistic process. As Kristeva says:

“When one is in a state of abjection, the borders between the object and the subject cannot be maintained”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>7</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. *Sexual Subversions*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney. 1989, p. 72

<sup>8</sup> Penwarden, Charles. Of Word and Flesh an interview with Julia Kristeva in *Rites of Passage, Art for the End of the Century*. Tate Gallery. London, September 1995. p. 22

## The Maternal Abject

Through the process of art making I explore my own psyche. I am currently searching for my own identity as a mother and that of my children, through the paths that link us and the channels that separate us. It is a process of trying to understand the nature of that most intense form of love that occurs between two human beings. A love whose roots stem from an abject relationship whereby a mother tries to keep herself bound to the child whilst at the same time working continuously at teaching her child to become independent, to acquire language and finally, to separate from her. John Lechte interprets the role of this love as necessary for the child to exit the oral and anal phase and to enter the acquisition of language phase.<sup>9</sup>

I believe that it is in the maternal that the abject is most prominent. If we were to itemise the abject, the cycle begins at the onset of pregnancy with the woman's "nausea" – also known as morning sickness. There, the abject resides within the visceral substance of the lining of the womb for the duration of the pregnancy.

Grosz interprets Kristeva's abject this way:

“Like the abject, maternity is the splitting, fusing, merging, fragmenting of a series of bodily processes outside the will or control of the subject”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lechte, John. *Abjection, Melancholia and Love*. Routledge. London. 1990, p.29

<sup>10</sup> Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* . p. 79

The abject surfaces again during the birthing drive with the painful convulsions of the womb known as contractions, the rupture of the membranes and the gushing of the amniotic fluid. Abjection then intensifies with the emergence of a squirming visceral infant possibly via a tear in the woman's flesh, as in an episiotomy or in a caesarean section. There, both mother and child face simultaneously and yet not independently, the life and death drives. The umbilical cord, another piece of flesh, is cut with a sharp instrument to initiate the transformation of one being into two. Finally, the placenta, which has been the life-giving force for the infant, is expelled from the woman's body, not unlike shit.

Very soon after the birthing process, abjection presents itself with the cause and effect process: mother's breast milk/ infant's shit. For the mother, the infant's shit, as separate from the screams, becomes the most intimate way the child could communicate with her. Through this shit: its colour, consistency and frequency, the mother faces the abject and returns herself to the pre-verbal stage of signs in order to learn and interpret the child's needs. It is at the end of the breast milk/infant's shit phase that another form of abjection takes place: the child's separation from the mother, its acquisition of language and the mapping of its body.

Rosalind Krauss explains:

"...the child's losing battle for autonomy is performed as a kind of mimicry of the impassability of the body's own

frontier, with freedom coming only delusively as the convulsive, retching evacuation of one's own insides, and thus abjection of oneself."<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Krauss alludes to the fact that as a child attempts to separate from its mother it approaches the act of abjection in order to free itself from within. From the time of birth, up until the child begins to form its own identity, it does not distinguish between its own body and that of its mother. Therefore to the infant, the mother's body is an extension or a part of its own, and it remains so until the child recognises firstly its own body parts, then its unified body. As such, the child is driven to expel the mother in order for it to exist. It is as if the child instinctively feels that as long as the mother is within it, it will never be allowed to grow and form an identity. Expulsion of the mother's body is the child's first act of non-corporeal abjection such as sucking, screaming, shitting or vomiting. Therefore, by attempting to understand our relationship to the maternal or indeed trace its origin, we are in fact trying to understand our state of abjection.

Kristeva explains how separation from the mother coincides with the acquisition of language through the negation of the image and the isolated object.<sup>12</sup> In effect, what Kristeva is saying is that, the relationship between a pre-verbal infant's physical world which constitutes its mother's body, and the infant's

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<sup>11</sup> Krauss, Rosalind. "Informe" without Conclusion. In *October 78*, Fall 1996 p. 89

<sup>12</sup> Oliver, Kelly (ed.) *The Portable Kristeva*, Columbia University Press. New York 1997 p. 42

attempts at formulating language and entering the semiotic, has to reach a state of crisis for the acquisition of language to occur. This is abjection and this is where the process of negating the maternal presence or separating from her, becomes a prerequisite to the child's acquisition of language.

Kristeva goes even further and relates the authority of the semiotic, the system of written and spoken signs, to another very important aspect of a child's socialisation : the mapping of the body.

" Through frustrations and prohibitions, this authority shapes the body into a *territory* having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted."<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, this is where the body and the mapping process become the point upon which all social systems and orders are built. Again Kristeva points out how the mother's body becomes the mediator of the symbolic law organising social relations.<sup>14</sup>

Grosz also explains how abjection serves the post-separation child to connect different parts of its body. In other words, it is necessary to make the child realize that its own toes are connected to its own leg for example, and that the leg belongs to

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<sup>13</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.72

<sup>14</sup> Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva*, p. 37

the self. Also that the child's hands, which are touching its own stomach, are all parts of a unified subject called "my body". She further explains how understanding abjection involves examining the ways in which the inside and the outside of the body relate, such as with food, or air, and the means by which the child's body becomes a unified whole. <sup>15</sup>

Melanie Klein's psychic analysis of the child's separation from the mother is based upon a field of objects to be fused or split, possessed or destroyed by means of fantasies produced by bodily drives. According to Klein, the first object of aggression for example is not the mother or father, but a series of part-objects – breasts, milk, penis, children etc. to which the infant fantasizes the connection of other part-objects – mouth, teeth, urine, shit<sup>16</sup>. Therefore through these fantasies, the body is mapped and a social order is built upon.

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<sup>15</sup> Grosz. *Sexual Subversions*, p. 71

<sup>16</sup> Nixon, Mignon. Bad enough mother; psychoanalytic study of the use of the body in contemporary feminist art, in *October* (Cambridge, Mass) no71, Winter 1995. p. 70-92

## **Abjection in the artistic process**

I have looked at theories of abjection through Kristeva and the interpretive writings of Grosz; the role of the maternal in abjection theory and the relationship between acquisition of language, a child's separation from the mother and the mapping of the body, the latter being a signifier in social orders, taboos and sin. Through this search to understand my fascination with the abject and its manifestation in my own art practice, I begin to examine the relationship between the artistic process and the maternal abject. First, I examine Kristeva's analysis of the artistic process. She says, that the aesthetic process consists in finding a certain harmony between the "semiotic functions and the energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother."<sup>17</sup> She explains that the aesthetic process is a form of pursuit to resolve or harmonise the conflict between the semiotic and the forces which gyrates the person towards the mother's body. <sup>18</sup>

"We must emphasise that "drives" are always already ambiguous, simultaneously assimilating and destructive; this dualism... makes the semiotized body a place of permanent scission."<sup>19</sup>

In an interview on the Tate exhibition "Rites of Passage, Art for the End of the Century", she explains how the art works have a cathartic value and how the artists who produce them are in a temporary state of harmony while experiencing a malaise. She further explains

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<sup>17</sup> Oliver. *The Portable Kristeva*. p. 37

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p.37

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 195

however that the artistic process “does not seal the [malaise] off or ignore it.”<sup>20</sup>

The abject by definition is that which disturbs identity, systems or orders. It is by its very nature the permanent scission or crisis, which resides in the life of the individual. This scission has its roots at the time the infant separates from its mother and performs its first act of non-corporal abjection. It is also the time the body of the infant is mapped through the teaching of the language and the initiation of what is taboo and what is the norm. Through this mapping, the individual is introduced to the particular social structure it will grow in. For example, in a specific Islamic culture, a baby girl who is not yet verbal learns through signs and while acquiring language, that hair on a girl’s head must be covered, whereas hair on the body is considered unclean and must be removed. Therefore, a girl’s hair becomes a signifier for a range of prohibitions, which form the basis of that particular social order. At a particular time in history and in a certain social hierarchy, Chinese girl’s feet had to remain small and were painfully bound restricting the girl/woman’s movement. A girl or woman’s feet therefore become a signifier for a complete set of social rules and expectations. In Jewish and Islamic cultures a baby boy’s circumcision is performed as a ritual and become the basis of what is clean and unclean within a social and spiritual order.

These three examples illustrate how the mapping of an infant’s body is the building block of social structures and the possible

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<sup>20</sup> Penwarden. *Rites of Passage, Art for the End of the Century*. p.23

site of scission or malaise in an artist. Shirin Neshat is an artist who illustrates well how the body is mapped through the veil and how this mapping becomes a malaise or a scission in the life of Neshat. In her work *Rapture* and many of her previous works, she focuses on the meaning of the hidden female body in an Islamic culture, in particular the veil. She also illustrates how it acts as a object of repression. I quote James Rondeau in an explanation of her work:

“Neshat maintains a critical distance that has allowed her to locate both the poetics and the power of the veil. At the same time that she celebrates the strength and beauty of Islamic women, however, she remains keenly aware of the horrors of repression.”<sup>21</sup>

Neshat shows us how when she expresses her abject experience in a particular social or spiritual order, she inadvertently refers to the maternal abject which, as mentioned above, constitutes the mapping of the body (in this instance the covering or removal of a woman’s hair), separation from the mother, and acquisition of language.

Kristeva postulates that there exists in the life of the artist an oscillating continuum between the production of art and the coming to terms with the presence of a scission or separation. It then follows, from a psychoanalytical point of view, that in order for the artist to exist, s/he has to experience a state of

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<sup>21</sup> Rondeau, James, Shirin Neshat in *Biennale of Sydney 2000*. Biennale of Sydney Ltd. Sydney, 2000. p. 92

conflict echoing the original abject experience that begins at the time the child tries to separate from its mother. The maternal abject with its scission and malaise therefore becomes the driving force behind my own art practice. Through becoming a mother I have become a witness to the formation of the maternal abject in my children. This observation has led me to examine my own work in that light, and that of other artists who illustrated the maternal abject in their own work.

## **Construction of the work**

There are key elements to my work, which bind it together. Firstly, I focus on the relationship between mother and child from the perspective of the mother. In order to contextualise my work, I examine the works of artists who deal specifically with that relationship : artists such as Mary Kelly, Cindy Sherman, Louise Bourgeois, Mona Hatoum and Frida Kahlo. Secondly, I am interested in surfacing the abject of that relationship and focus on Fiona Hall, Paul Quinn, Gregory Crewdson, Joel-Peter Witkin, and Francis Bacon who deal with the abject in general without any obvious reference to the mother. However, I do so through an investigation of the maternal abject.

My work is in two parts. The first part consists primarily of photographic images, which have been scanned, layered and manipulated on a computer using Photoshop. Each layer represents an idea or a reference. The layers are then merged together in one image in order to create a dense landscape of visual dialogue.

The second part consists of baby-related furniture, in this case a bassinet, which I have pierced with thousands of pearl-head pins. A bassinet is used to symbolise the relationship between the mother and her baby. The bassinet is the first piece of furniture designated for the baby when first born. It is a symbol for the woman having entered motherhood and therefore it is

loaded with preconceptions as well as misconceptions about the series of events, which take place at the bassinets site.

As a result, my work consists of the construction of layered images and an intensely worked object. The thousands of sharp pins tend to threaten the fragility of the photographic images and therefore symbolise again an abject relationship .

## **The maternal abject and the works of Mary Kelly**

I will now look at the work of Mary Kelly of 1985: *Post-Partum Document*<sup>22</sup>. In this work, Kelly constructs an archive of her mothering experience using a linear device. The work is presented primarily in the form of verbal language with traces of maternal memorabilia such as nappies, clay imprints of a child's hand, specimens of plants the child collected, his name written by himself etc.... The work is in five sections following the processes by which the child separates from the mother. This traverses the child's development from stains of shit on nappies and the child's daily dietary charts to documents of the child's induction into the written language.

The visual absence of the mother in the work however, is quite striking given that the work is about the author/artist as mother. This is best illustrated in section three where the mother's diary of her private thoughts and feelings is erased or rubbed over by the oval crayon patterns of her child. It is as if the act of rearing, nurturing and separating is in effect an abject performance by Kelly as a mother. This is an act of expelling from herself that, which is within herself. An intellectual and emotional birthing process takes place, in slow motion where the child emerges from Kelly the mother as separate and independent, but not without effacing his mother. Kelly is also abjecting the self in section four where her interpretation of her child becoming

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<sup>22</sup> Kelly, Mary. *Post-Partum Document*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London.1985

difficult, is overridden by the father's last word on the subject, "on the contrary he said, it's because we're on top of him too much"<sup>23</sup>.

Indeed, I feel as if Kelly's extraordinary work is a narrative, not only of the mechanics of rearing a child but also of abject processes such as surrender and loss of self, guilt, separation and contradictions. Freda Freiberg's reading of Kelly's work suggests that motherhood is a psychological and social construction based on two contradictory criteria:

"...on the one hand, total commitment of time, effort and emotion to the welfare of the child; on the other hand, total relinquishment of the child to society, the domain of the Father. Whether we hold on to the child, or relinquish it, we are made to feel guilty of inadequate mothering, and judged as such."<sup>24</sup>

The total construction of the Post-Partum Document is tedious, lacking beauty symbols and instant gratification, requiring careful reading and close examination. Through the multi-layered media Kelly chose in her work, she succeeded in fragmenting the visual and aesthetic process, and in expelling that which is comfortable and familiar. She merges the abject through imageries, which disturb our social space. Here I refer to the shitty nappies, the scribbles over heart-felt diary writings, the reversed rubber stamps and so on.

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, Document IV Transitional Objects and Diagram 1976. 8 units

<sup>24</sup> Freiberg, Freda. The Post-Partum Document; Maternal Archeology. In *LIP, a Feminist Arts Journal*. 1982/3 Issue number 7. p. 62

Central to the maternal abject and the aesthetic process are the inherent conflicts which Kelly illustrates both intentionally through the absence of the mother and child figures and the use of text in a visual context, and unintentionally through the effacement of the mother.

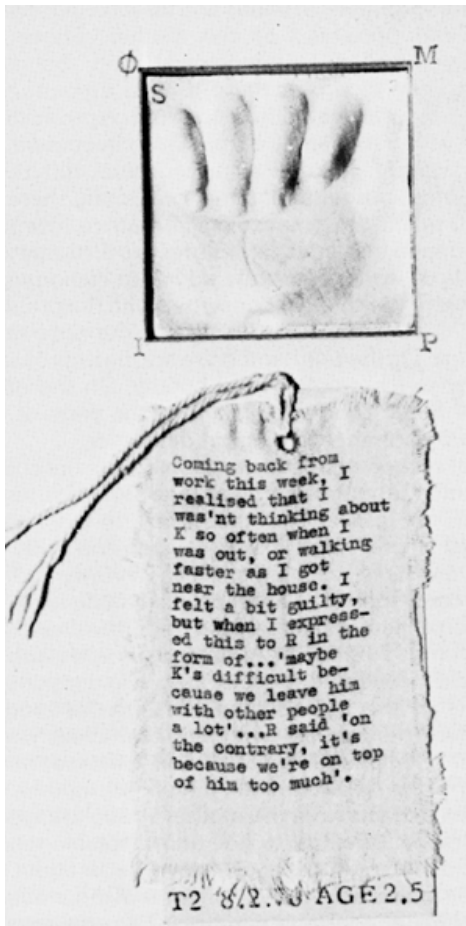


Fig. 1, *Post-Partum Document*.  
*Document IV Transitional Objects,*  
*Diary and Diagram*, Mary Kelly 1976

I explore three major areas in the construction of my work which Kelly chose not to.

Firstly, the visual presence of the mother is more pronounced in my work than in Kelly's. This is primarily due to the fact that

apart from the Madonna and Child icon, women as mothers are very rarely seen in art. I note their absence and crave their presence and so decided to saturate my work with the mother's presence with the abject.

Secondly, I incorporate the naked body of the mother in all images in order to highlight the vulnerability and strength of her body and to focus on the physical nature of mother's work. This was a conscious, deliberate and laboured decision given the widespread presence of images of the female nude in art and the subsequent objectification of the woman's body. Danielle Knafo points out how the shift, to a new female aesthetic has taken place in the last decade precisely because female artists have chosen to use the female body to signify their own experience.<sup>25</sup>

In essence, I use the nude as an encoded message to extract the voyeur in the viewer but only to reflect and subvert his or her voyeurism. In order to do this, I merge with the body threatening structures such as spikes, metallic constructions, and rocky surfaces. At times, I strip the skin and attempt to expose what lies beneath, such as veins and organs. In doing so, I aim to construct a performance of pain.

Paradoxically, these painful inflictions serve a different purpose. The hard labour a woman faces right from the beginning of her journey into motherhood, at the onset of the birthing process, through to the time the child is walking, talking and is toilet trained, is often hugely underestimated. Except for the birthing process, the toll on her body is very rarely acknowledged.

Through the use of these threatening objects, I attempt to give to these ephemeral intruders a material presence which then act on the naked and vulnerable body.

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<sup>25</sup> Knafo, Danielle. In her own image: Self-Representation in the Art of Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta, in *Art Criticism*, vol 11, no.2. p.1

This is also the reason behind the use of thousands of pearl-headed metallic pins protruding through the outer layer of the bassinet. It is a vessel for the most fragile and precious being, the newborn infant. It is also the site of much anxiety, torment and sleep deprivation for the mother. The walls of the bassinet then become a metaphor for the mother's skin, which has been perforated by the pins. The pearls on the inside of the bassinet signify the preciousness of the woman's experience while the outer layer's pin tips signify the aggression and pain she feels through that experience. I invoke the abject in the viewer through the schism and contradiction of the pierced object. The jewelled inner layer of the bassinet contrasts with the harsh and aggressive outer layer.

Finally, I use aesthetic processes such as a glossy and delicate surface of rich colours in a darkened background. I do this in order to draw the viewer inside the work rather than adopt Kelly's approach of letting the viewer physically walk along with the various components of the work. This way, the images are denser and they offer the viewer a visual complexity as opposed to a linear narrative. I further intensify the viewer's experience by placing the pin-pricked bassinet in close proximity to the delicate surfaces of the images.

## The maternal abject and the works of Cindy Sherman

Earlier, I mentioned how images of mothers in art are rarely seen apart from the Madonna and Child icon. For this context, I examined the work of Cindy Sherman who subverted the iconic representation of Madonna and Child from Renaissance paintings. In her series "art history" Sherman focuses on the mother figure and her child and explores the theme of the one directional child/artist abject construction of the maternal. Here she uses photography and is, as in her other works, the model. Make-up and prostheses simulate conventional high art and aid in reconstructing signified art objects of artists such as Giovanni Bellini's Madonnas.



Fig. 2 *Untitled #216*, Cindy Sherman.1989

In these works, she refers to abject maternal functions such as breast-feeding and the pregnant body. The repetition in Sherman's work of the mother's gaze into the distance beyond the child as in for example Untitled 216, 225, 205, parodies the phantasmic and misogynist notions of motherhood where the maternal body, including the breast, are represented in a manner which revolve around the fears of the child and negates those of the mother herself.

Angela Smith describes Sherman's work this way:

"As well, these portraits, with the vacuous gazes of the women, ...., emphasise in their mocking repetitions the historical focus of art upon the idealised/feared maternal figure in relation to the threatened child/artist."<sup>26</sup>

Kristeva alludes to these misogynistic interpretations by referring to a rage against mothers not only because they take care of the child but also because they carry it in their bodies. She refers to this as a "certain negative desire" which then translates as rejection. <sup>27</sup>

I, like Sherman, work with these iconic imageries. Immediate recognition of the Madonna and Child in those signified works aim to anchor the works and to act as points of departures. Where Sherman uses props to synthesise the maternal abject in

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<sup>26</sup>Smith, Angela. <http://english.cla.umn.edu/Visiting/MJanette/Installations/Angela/Sherm5.htm> p. 4

<sup>27</sup> Guberman, Ross Mitchell. *Julia Kristeva Interviews*. Columbia University Press. New York. 1996. p. 118

the Madonna and Child, I use reproduced iconic imageries such as Perino del Vaga's *The Holy Family* (c.1545)<sup>28</sup> (I have given them a place in the construction of my work because my first contact with these pieces was via the medium of miniature card sized reproductions of saintly figures given to me in catechism classes.)



Fig. 3 *The Holy Family*, Perino del Vaga. c.1545

Until enough mother/child imageries are created, I cannot leave the Madonna and Child iconic image behind. This iconic image is so pervasive over the centuries that any other representation of the mother/child relationship necessarily refers to it in order to depart from it.

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<sup>28</sup> Australian National Gallery. *Esso presents Rubens and the Italian Renaissance*. Canberra 1992. p. 48

This is one area where I both simulate and differ from Cindy Sherman's project. As such, I chose to use scanned reproductions as opposed to constructing a studio scene as did Sherman.

These images I merge with the images of the naked female body to the point where they seem as one. I then embed them in a dark, dream-scape reminiscent of night time. The naked body of a woman is contorted to signify various states of emotional upheavals. From despair and dread, to resignation and surrender, the body takes a shape in a dark void. The very darkened atmosphere is intended to signify the night where much of mothers' work takes place to the oblivion of sanity and the unionised workforce.

Night time is the site of much conflict in mothers, be it physical and/or mental. Exhaustion, anxiety over the well-being of the infant/child and sleep deprivation, ironically act as catalysts for a heightened level of awareness of what it means to me to be a mother. Kate Figes in her book *Life after birth* dedicates a whole chapter to exhaustion. She says that the exhaustion that mothers experience can be so profound that it makes those women more susceptible to other problems common after childbirth such as "ill-health, depression, lowered self-esteem, angry outbursts, and poorer social or sexual relationships"<sup>29</sup>

The darkened atmosphere also adds another dimension to the works. It is as if the viewer is invited to go down a well where

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<sup>29</sup> Figes, Kate. *Life after birth*. Penguin Books. London. 2000. p. 110

mystery and intensity merge in order to create a sense of loss and ambiguity.

The child in my images, on the other hand is often acting on the mother's body and mind. I attempt to portray a sense of relentless attachment. Either on the breast, on the stomach or on the feet, the child is omnipresent. In one image, the child even takes over the whole head of the mother and they become one. The symbiotic relationship is symbolised with the merging of the two bodies. At times, the child is in the same image at a different age. This is to accentuate the perpetual demands a child makes on the mother and to highlight the different roles the mother is meant to perform.

Other artists who deal with the abject in the form of blood, vomit, filth, and corpse and who inspire my work are Gregory Crewdson and Joel-Peter Witkin. These two artists could also be read in the light of the maternal abject as discussed.

## The maternal abject and the works of Gregory Crewdson

Gregory Crewdson uses the abject object in such a way as to merge it literally with the erotic/sexual Oedipal complex. In the 1995 work *Untitled* Crewdson juxtaposes in the photographic image, the cadaverous human body with the erotic. Here the sexual merges with the abject in a stupefying array of images, which are simultaneously seductive, viscous and repulsive.



Fig. 4 *Untitled*, Gregory Crewdson. 1995

The abject manifestation is evident with his reference to the life cycle of the butterflies, which begins from within the depth of the vaginal and decaying wound. In this work, Crewdson is attempting to harmonise the physical presence of the abject in

association with the birthing process; this could be read as his maternal abject. Crewdson himself refers to the images he produces as "forensic photographs of his own psyche"<sup>30</sup>. Another aspect of the abject is the invocation of the voyeuristic gaze in the viewer and the subsequent readily recognisable social taboo of voyeurism it constructs at the time.

Like Crewdson, I aim in my work to merge the seductive with the abhorrent. This is done in order to create a seamlessness between the horrific and the beautiful and to merge the abject with its object, much like Bataille's description of ancient temples with their all encompassing functionality as places of worship and sacrifice.

The construction of Crewdson's image "Untitled 1995" is another point of convergence with my own work. It is dark on the periphery with the brightest and most colour intensive area at the centre of the image. Like Crewdson, I construct my images in such a way as to create a more focused view of the main elements of the images. By doing so, I try to create the illusion of a tunnel with no way out except through the body of the woman and the various elements acting on it.

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<sup>30</sup>Arning, Bill. Still Lives. in *World Art*. Vol.14, p. 68

## The maternal abject and the works of Joel-Peter Witkin

Joel-Peter Witkin is another artist who works with the abject as a way to expose and accept it. Both attraction and repulsion are fundamentally embodied in his work. His manufactured scenes,



Fig. 5  
*Feast of Fools*,  
Joel-Peter Witkin.  
1990

which like the *Madonna and Child of Sherman*, resonate with a Renaissance tableau (this time Caravaggio's).

These scenes are both attractive and grotesque forcing the viewer to not only admire the sensual beauty of the repulsive but to face the horrific. Body parts sewn up in vaginal shapes amongst putrid but sensual fruits such as grapes and pomegranate serve to take the viewer further along the road of the maternal abject. Witkin says:

"I have devoted my soul to the philosophical and artistic investigation of what it means to be human" <sup>31</sup>

This investigation is not dissimilar to the way I make art. Mine is a search into my own psyche in order to understand better what it is to be human and more precisely, the nature of being female.

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<sup>31</sup> Witkin, Joel-Peter. *Fotofeis-International Festival of Photography in Scotland, 5 October-5 November 1995*. Fotofeis Ltd, Edinburgh 1995. p. 34

## Constructing the abject in the works of Hieronymus Bosch

The composition of the images in my work is similar to Hieronymus Bosch's construction of his demoniac figures. Monstrous hybrids of insects, reptiles, chunks of human anatomy and bits of machinery all merge to accentuate the grotesque while at the same time drawing the viewer in with their seductive colour and lustrous palette. I draw on Carl Linfert's interpretation of this enigmatic painter who says that by presenting all elements as contaminated by a devilish brood, Bosch escapes from the traditional Christian belief of afterlife judgment. He then infers that the price of sin is on-earth suffering.<sup>32</sup>

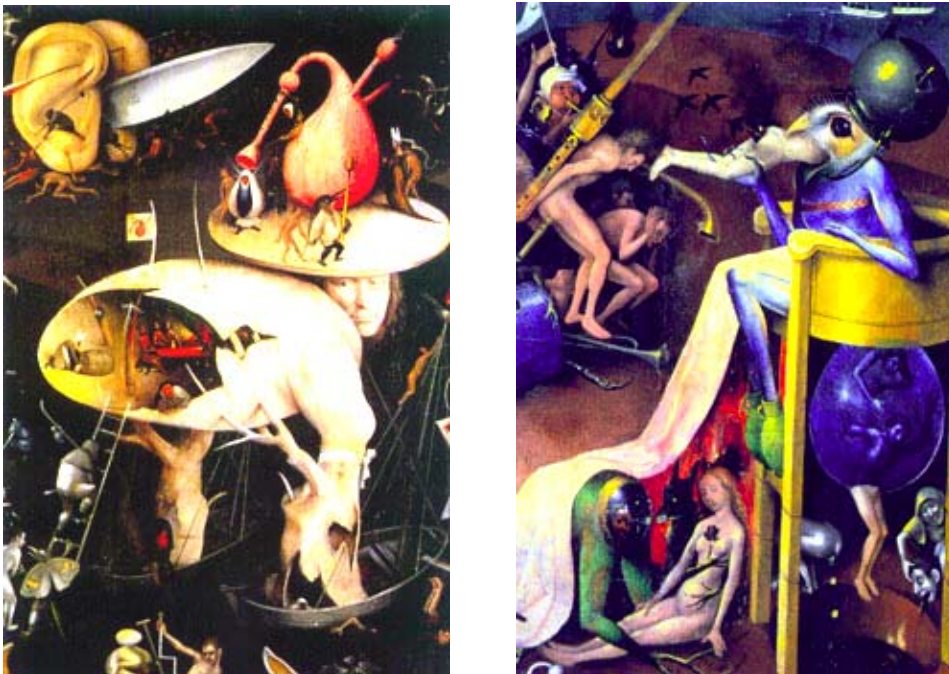


Fig. 6 *Garden of Earthly Delights* (details), Hieronymus Bosch. c.1504

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<sup>32</sup> Carl Linfert *"Hieronymus Bosch"*, (English translation) Thames & Hudson, Great Britain, 1989. p. 29

Christian sin, which according to Kristeva is a form of abjection, is the “threatening otherness”<sup>33</sup>. There, the sinful person experiences on-earth suffering when rejection by fellow human beings isolates the subject from the spiritual order. The subsequent abjection experienced by the sinful is well illustrated in Bosch’s explorations of demonic figures. In my work, I merge animals and objects with human figures even though I choose at times not to render this merger visually obvious.

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<sup>33</sup> Kristeva. *Power of Horrors*. P. 17

## Naming the Abject in the works of Paul Quinn

I am also interested in Paul Quinn's interpretation of the abject. Here, Quinn references the sexual and the animal. He does so, by synthesising body parts, which ooze bodily fluids, and constructs artificial animal skins with orifices in order to eroticise them<sup>34</sup>.

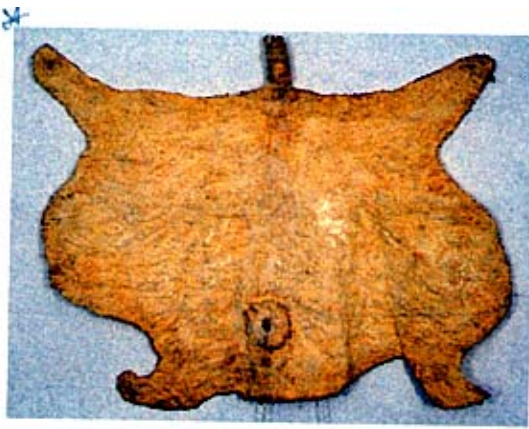


Fig. 7 *Skin*, Paul Quinn. 1995

The presence of the abject in his work is multifaceted. Firstly, Quinn refers to abject objects such as bodily fluids. Secondly, he extends the interpretation of the abject to the bestiality taboo. Thirdly he invokes the semiotic and calls the body of work "PhD Economics". The latter is a reference to the system of economics which commodifies the human experience and therefore, by merging it with abject objects, he invokes the systemic abject.

It is interesting to note here, that the economic absence of the mother and her maternal related work is best pronounced when

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<sup>34</sup> Colman, Felicity. Reanimator in *World Art* Vol. 4, 1995. p. 26

one remarks that the only country in the world that gives mother's breast milk an economic value and includes it in its Gross Domestic Product is Papua New Guinea. Whilst commodification of the human experience is abhorrent, its absence from one specific area, such as mothers' role and contribution in the economic sphere, becomes a symbol of denial.

Quinn chooses artificial material to create illusion in his work. It is as if to remove the signifier and to replace it with the signified through other media, is akin to holding up a mirror to the viewers' own abject experience. This forces the viewer to come face to face with their own maternal abject, which more often than not is buried beneath constructed assumptions.

This multilayering of seemingly incongruous ideas such as economics and bestiality, is of interest to me and the way I construct my work. The seductive and the repulsive, economics and sexual taboos all gather in the same image and create so much dialogue and tension that the image invokes in the viewer powerful and archaic emotions.

## **The personal is political**

Other artists such as Mona Hatoum focus on various forms of the abject and invoke the political. This idea of the personal versus the political holds an important place in my work.

One intriguing question which persists in my work and which is the driving force in all my artistic pursuits is the belief that all my experiences are not particularly abnormal or unique. Indeed, my desire to articulate, demonstrate and exhibit my enquiry into the self, stems from a strong belief that I am not alone in my experience as a mother. Whilst a biologist demonstrates that the building block of all living things is the cell, I believe that the self is the fundamental building block of a coherent and healthy social order.

However, my experiences, which by no account can be called particularly extraordinary, lead me to believe that the self is mostly misunderstood or effaced in order to negate, as Bataille writes, the presence of the all encompassing abject experience. Bataille disregards the hypocrisy of exclusion and the hiding of abject processes which are very much part of life.

It is as if the inherited social order is the inertia or gravity, which the self cannot escape from and which acts as the agent to destroy the abject within the self. The question that drives my enquiry is then, how can a social order continue to exist if it

negates the existence of the abject within itself? One method is the relegation of the abject to the private sphere and the public dismembering of its existence. The festering anger, the silent sobs, the closed doors, all merge and are confined to the home, which becomes a sanctuary for these abject processes. The abject, however, is no less a public function of the human experience than a natural spring spewing out water from the earth. The earth, which is the recipient of abject objects such as corpses and shit is at the same time the nurturer of seeds and trees. Therefore, by exposing and framing the abject publicly in my artwork I am exposing that which is hidden in the self. Piero Manzoni talks about art production as a deep exploration of the self. He says that being subjective while being inventive is the only means of discovering objective realities, and that this is the only possible means to communicate<sup>35</sup>. He explains that subjective invention through the production of art emanates from the self and that objective realities are the public manifestations of that art. Communicating is certainly an essential part of why I produce visual art and my need to bring the personal to the public sphere.

This is undeniably a political process and I believe that it is fundamentally this political process which would serve to eliminate the need for one human being to dominate and/or suppress another. I am referring here to a human being who chooses to expose a collective abject publicly and is then

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<sup>35</sup> Manzoni, Piero. For a Discovery of a Zone of Images, 1957 in *Mona Hatoum*. Phaidon Press, London 1997, p.108

ostracised for doing so. Stephanie Sehlach writes, in describing Joel-Peter Witkin's work:

"Horror is not contained purely in the aesthetic, rather, it is the fact of its possibility that both terrifies and attracts the viewer. He [Joel-Peter Witkin] pushes forward towards realities which the viewer might prefer thrust aside but which must be faced in order to live honestly."<sup>36</sup>

Like Witkin, I aim to strip bare inhibitions in order for the viewer to live more honestly.

Returning to the reading of the maternal abject of contemporary times, I will now look at and explore the relegation of the maternal to the personal or private sphere. In effect, when a Modern western woman surrenders to the biological demands of motherhood, she enters the sphere of the private, her home, where the only social or public interactions she has, take place either through the father of her child or her child's support agencies. Here she is not seen and a social blindness takes place. The unquestioned fact that mother's daily work has no monetary value translates as peripheral or private in all social manifestations. It would appear puzzling how the tasks of a mother such as planning, analysing, supervising, cooking, feeding, nursing, cleaning, purchasing, educating, counselling, documenting, preserving, liaising, and budgeting are not ascribed an apparent monetary value. And yet, all these tasks

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<sup>36</sup> Sehlach, Stephanie. In *fotofeis-International Festival of Photography in Scotland, 5 October-5 November 1995*. p. 34

performed outside the home do indeed have wide ranging salaries and associated benefits such as retirement plans and social status.

Therefore the maternal, through a series of historical, biological and economic realities has been relegated to the private sphere where it is allowed to merge with the abject silently, away from the public sphere. One only has to take note of the media debates that take place periodically as to whether breastfeeding should take place in public spaces.<sup>37</sup> Rita Felski explains how the slogan “the personal is political” serves to emphasize that , child-care, rape, abortion, and the gendered division of labour are in fact political issues. She adds that these supposedly “personal” problems, which have particularly affected women, are fundamental questions of power, and underpin the most deeply rooted aspects of social organization<sup>38</sup>.

As a result, I choose to express the public manifestation of the personal through the body of the mother and to expose it, like the abject, as belonging to the public sphere.

Whilst the maternal experience has of course been present from the beginning of time, its female expression in art is miniscule in comparison to other issues, a notable example being the sexual.

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<sup>37</sup> Giles, Fiona. *The Nipple Effect*. Sydney Morning Herald 12 May 2001

<sup>38</sup> Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*. Hutchinson Radius, London 1989. p.72

Felski proposes that the whole notion of female aesthetic and the artistic process is inherently an autobiographical function.<sup>39</sup> If that is so, where then can a mother with the previously listed tasks find the time to practice a maternal aesthetic. This indeed adds to the isolation of the mother and the enforced domestication of her work. It is as if the weight of her role serves to deny its self-expression and becomes publicly scarce and private: abject.

To quote the Victorian feminist critic and writer Anna Jameson:

“You must change the physical organization of the race of women before we produce a Rubens or a Michael Angelo.”<sup>40</sup>

In other words, we must change a whole set of values and social structures for women to be able to dedicate a good proportion of their life to the production of art and to produce lasting masterpieces such as those of Rubens or Michael Angelo. Then, once they have been able to produce works of such grandeur, a further issue is to keep the author’s identity from disappearing through male dominated historical channels.

The imposed isolation is not only the product of her home centred experience but also of the mother-unfriendly environment outside the home. From non-sloping footpath kerbs to a total absence of seats in supermarkets, these public

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* p. 25

<sup>40</sup> Holcomb, Adele M. Anna Jameson on Women Artists. In *Woman's Art Journal* Vol. 8 (1987-88) p. 15

indicators communicate a social or economic taboo for women as mothers and pushes them further back in the realm of the hidden and private. Figes concludes:

“The outside world seems at times so hostile and difficult to navigate with a small baby that many women retreat into isolation”<sup>41</sup>

And indeed this isolation feeds on itself and becomes a terrain fraught with anxiety, low self-esteem and depression.

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<sup>41</sup> Figes. *Life after birth* p. 210

## The “personal is political” in the works of Fiona Hall

Fiona Hall illustrates well the domain of the isolated, private and female work with its tedious repetition, particularly in her piece *Untitled: table construction with white pipes*. Here, Hall merges the abject drain pipes of refuse with the repetitious and private

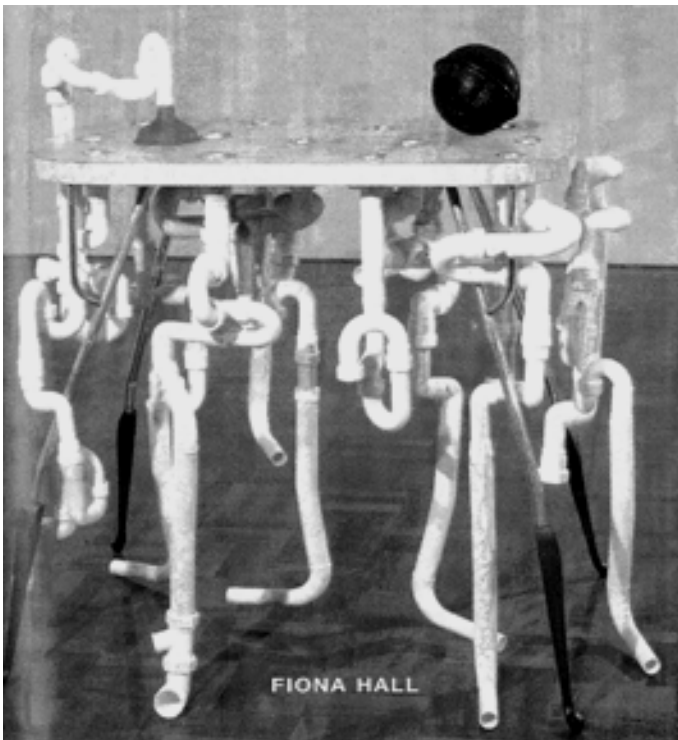


Fig. 8 *Untitled: table construction with white pipes*. Fiona Hall.

work of women. The white drains are pierced into thousands of small holes. These holes are designed and traced in decorative patterns reminiscent of embroidered or lace table cloths. As such, the abject pipes are rendered precious objects to be admired. She also employs in her art knitting, beading and weaving, work which has no beginning and no end, work which

can be interrupted a thousand times. This type of work symbolises the millions of cells a mother breeds which merge in the domain of the private sphere of the mother : the domestic. This notion inspires my bassinet piece with its thousands of pins laboriously and painfully worked through the thick skin of the bassinet.

## The “personal is political” in the works of Mona Hatoum

A clear example of the political nature of the personal can best be illustrated in Mona Hatoum’s performance *Pull* and the three installations *Recollection*, *Mother and Child* and *Prayer Mat*.

In *Pull* The viewer was invited to pull a hank of hair hanging down in a specially constructed niche below a TV screen. When the hair was pulled, the artist’s face on the screen registered a feeling of pain or discomfort. The hank of hair was in fact attached to Hatoum despite the illusion of the TV screen above

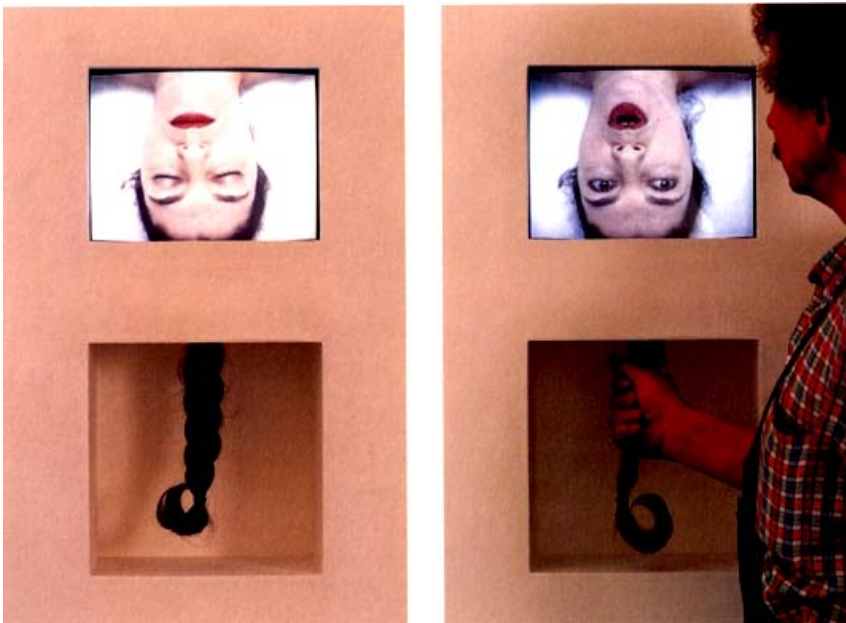


Fig. 9 *Pull*, Mona Hatoum. 1995

it. The TV screen and the viewer acted as the public sphere and the artist’s face and body physically behind the screen acted as the personal sphere. In this three day performance Hatoum placed her actual face and body behind a TV screen rather than

making a recording representing it. This is in order to draw the spectator's attention to the private versus public dichotomy and to invite the participating viewer to question the realm of the public and the private.

In *Recollection* where hundreds of hair balls are strewn on the floor of a room, she confronts the viewer's revulsion with the personal bodily item: hair. Hair invokes contradictory reactions from fascination to abjection, particularly when detached from the body. A detached hair on a shoulder is brushed away while a mass of hair on a shoulder acts as an attractor. Catherine de Zegher extrapolates Kristeva's systemic abject through Hatoum's works by explaining how the connotation of beauty and identity,



Fig. 10 *Recollection*, Mona Hatoum. 1996

the most delicate, eroticised and lasting of human materials is also considered unclean. De Zegher believes that Hatoum leads us directly into symbolic systems of purity - that is abjection and consequently towards issues of power and oppression. She

says that Hatoum's work is "a complex reflection on bodily pollution, involving the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, and life to death." According to De Zegher, this work affirms the way in which social ordering is based upon behavioural patterns of dirt-affirmation and dirt avoidance.<sup>42</sup> In choosing a personal bodily item and placing it in a public room for viewing, Hatoum has successfully highlighted the political nature of the personal object.

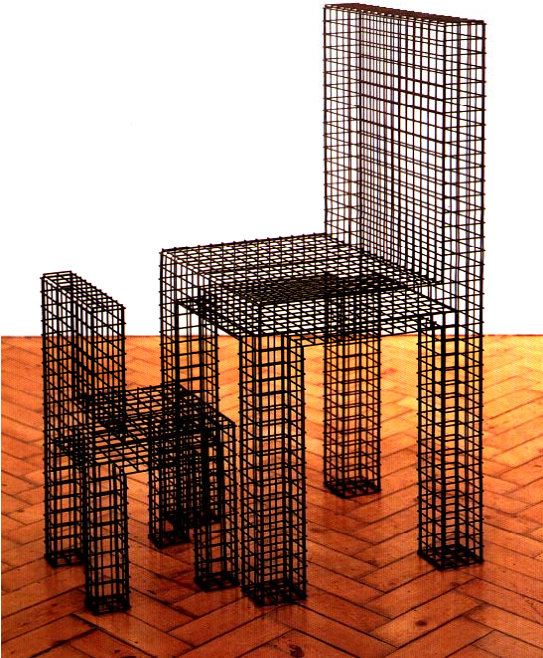
*Mother and Child* holds a specific interest for me through its implied violence and the piece's relationship to the maternal abject. Violence is inherent in all my work and I am interested in Hatoum's relationship with her own mother as represented in this piece. The piece is meant to deal with violence on the personal level and Hatoum referred to it as "Mother and Child"<sup>43</sup>. The two chairs have an unequal but inescapable relationship. They are angular, cold, and cage-like symbolising an entrapment, but at the same time there's a symbiotic relationship between them because they are similar. They are facing each other and positioned too close for comfort. If one were to imagine people sitting on them, the body on the large chair representing the mother, would simply engulf or squash the person sitting on the small chair representing the child. It seems as if Hatoum in this piece has come as close as she could get to materialising and symbolising her maternal abject through her separation from her mother and the conflict she feels as an artist within this separation.

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<sup>42</sup> Catherine de Zegher. Hatoum's Recollection : About Losing and Being Lost In *Mona Hatoum*. Phaidon Press, London 1997.p. 88

<sup>43</sup> Mona Hatoum interview, *ibid.* p.23

Fig. 11 *Mother and Child* .  
Mona Hatoum. 1992



These three examples of Hatoum's work relate to my own work in the way they render the personal abject experience as a public manifestation. Emotions and gestures which typify the mothering experience such as the breastfeeding infant, the cuddles, the entrapment, the claustrophobia, the birthing pains, the visceral infant, the dread, the self-doubt, the sleeplessness I render public in my work. This is not unlike the way Hatoum explored the façade of the public rendered private with the performance piece of hair pulling, the viewer's and her own relationship to hair, her cage like chairs and her relationship to her own mother.

Another work, *Prayer Mat*, which consists of thousands of nickel-plated brass pins standing upright on a black canvas, fascinates me with its repetitive nature and its reference to the religious

abject. Here in the middle of the piece sits a compass, which directs the person towards Mecca during prayer as is required in



Fig. 12 *Prayer Mat*. Mona Hatoum. 1995

Islam. Its satirical stance is rendered poetic however with its invocation of the starry nights. This particular ambivalent work informs my bassinet piece particularly with its thousands of steel pins piercing a treasured surface.

## **Are mothers to blame?**

I have examined the relationship between the abject and art through an investigation into various artists' projects. What I would like to emphasise here is that this investigation should not lead the reader into the well known response of "blaming" mothers for causing the maternal abject or conflict in artists. It is intended as an examination of the point at which the artist and the mother become separate entities, without either having any conscious awareness of the natural laws governing this mother/child relationship. Susan Maushardt explains this unfortunate pitfall this way:

"Where motherhood has been the subject of serious, sustained enquiry, it has been seen almost invariably as a cause, not an effect. This tendency is particularly marked in the field of psychology, wherein researchers have historically been more interested in apprehending mothers than comprehending them."<sup>44</sup>

Comprehension is in fact the driving force behind my investigation, which is more a reading into my own psyche. This investigation aims at creating a field of questions and answers in order to open the reading of my visual work. As such I was driven to investigate whether some artists have been subjected to a psychological reading of their work and whether the

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<sup>44</sup> Maushardt, Susan. *The Mask of Motherhood*, Random House, Sydney 1997 p. 41

maternal abject featured in their various projects. I will look at  
Frida Kahlo, Louise Bourgeois, and Francis Bacon.

## **Psychoanalysis, the Maternal abject and the works of Frida Kahlo**

One of Frida Kahlo's most startling works, "My Birth," made in 1932 was in process when Kahlo found out that her mother was dying of cancer. She completed the painting after the burial; perhaps it is the encapsulation of her grief and failure that makes the painting so abject. It is a powerful and eerie scene, one in which Kahlo demonstrates her own separation from her mother and herself as a non-mother. The scene is a suffocating and horrifying expression of Kahlo's abjection and isolation. Above the bed is a religious icon, a representation of the weeping Virgin of Sorrows, overlooking a stark room furnished only by a neatly made bed. The birthing mother is dead, as represented by the sheet covering her head, upper torso and arms. The baby being born from this dead woman is still born. The baby is Kahlo herself.



Fig. 13, *My Birth*.  
Frida Kahlo. 1932

In this piece Kahlo illustrates, seemingly painfully, the maternal abject through the birthing process. Danielle Knafo proposes that the site of much of Kahlo's work resides at the separation phase with her mother. She specifically focuses on the absent mirroring experience, which Kahlo missed and longed for, from her mother<sup>45</sup>. Mirroring, according to Jacques Lacan is responsible for providing the infant with its sense of identity and body presence<sup>46</sup>. This is equivalent to Kristeva's interpretation of the mapping of the body, which occurs at the same time as the separation from the mother. Kahlo's obsession with mirrors and the numerous self-portraits she painted in her short life echo the need for her to remind herself that indeed she does exist. Kahlo found in art the act of creation she dearly wanted and could not have; she says:

"Painting completed my life. I lost three children...Paintings substituted for all this"<sup>47</sup>

As Kristeva stipulates, the aesthetic process is the site of inner conflict, which the artist tries to harmonise. And indeed, this is the case with Kahlo. The abject in *My birth* (the blood, two corpses, the stabbed Virgin of Sorrows, separation anxiety, and the birthing process), which this painting depicts, inform my work where symbols of abjection collide in the one image.

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<sup>45</sup> Knafo, Danielle. In her own image. In *Art Criticism*. Vol 11, no. 2 p.5

<sup>46</sup> Samuels, Robert. On recognition in Lacan. In *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society*, Fall 2000 Vol. 5 no.2 p. 343

<sup>47</sup>. Knafo, D. In her own image. P.8

## **Psychoanalysis, the Maternal abject and the works of Louise Bourgeois**

Louise Bourgeois deals with the abject through body parts according to the Kleinian model. Rosalind Krauss explains Bourgeois' works through the fantasies initiated by involuntary bodily drives on body parts, this way:



Fig. 14 *Fear Four*.

Louise Bourgeois. 1984

"The part-object, speaks to the imperiousness of the drives, to the rapacity of their demands, to the way the body can, in the grip of fantasy, be riven."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ronald Jones , Francis Bacon, Louise Bourgeois, & Franz Xavier Messerschmidt. (sculpture, Lombroso Museum, Turin, Italy, and the Ethnological Museum at the Trocadero). In *Artforum International* April 1999 Vol. 37 . no. 8 p.119

This aggression on body parts is a system, which I use in my work, however rather than isolating the parts I fuse them in the one image in a dislocatory manner in order to render them grotesque and to highlight the monstrous. The bassinet on the other hand, like Bourgeois's spider, is my way of projecting aggression onto a destructive external object. Bourgeois explains her need to harmonise her maternal abject through this analysis of her own state of mind:

"At that point, I had my subject. I was going to express what I felt towards her....First of all I cut her head, and slit her throat....And after weeks of work, I thought, if this is the way I saw my mother, then she did not like me....What you do to a person has nothing to do with what you expect the person to feel toward you.... Now at the end I became very depressed, terribly, terribly depressed."<sup>49</sup>



Fig. 15 *Quilting*. Louise Bourgeois. 1999

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<sup>49</sup> Bourgeois, Louise. Beds. In *October*, Vol 71, Winter 1995. p. 87

Clearly, in this instance Bourgeois felt unable to come to terms with this abject experience, a graphic illustration of her need to kill her mother, which led her to experience anxiety about aggression and its destructive effect. This is abjection and is what keeps driving Bourgeois to search for harmony in the aesthetic process.

## **Psychoanalysis, the Maternal abject and the works of Francis Bacon**

Francis Bacon shares with Bataille his aim to expose the baser aspects of life, to reduce the human to its animality, in other words to release the repressed beast in human beings. In his works, emotions and passions are embedded within the harsh realities of the flesh. In so doing, Bacon dedicated an entire decade to painting the mouth.<sup>50</sup> The mouth fascinates me. Like Bacon, it appears repeatedly in my work. The mouth in Bacon's works is invariably stretched in a cry or scream with the head tilted in such a way as to be an extension of the spine. This posture is meant to liken humans to animals.

Bacon's mouth paintings in the light of the maternal abject may seem irrelevant. However a possible reading of his works suggests that Bacon's preoccupation with the mouth has its roots in the maternal abject where acquisition of language and separation from the mother take place. The mouth is a prime organ for the breast-feeding infant and in the acquisition of language and as such plays a critical role in the maternal abject. D. Kuspit illustrates the separation phase with this apt description of a Bacon "mouth":

"In Bacon's scream, feeling dominates fact ... formal control is released ... the sense of an appropriate

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<sup>50</sup> Davis, H.M. *Francis Bacon: The Early and Middle Years 1928-1958*. London. Garland Publishing, 1978. p. 8

relationship between the cause of the scream and effect is stretched to breaking point."<sup>51</sup>



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

That "appropriate relationship" or "breaking point" is one of the manifestations of the maternal abject, in particular the separation from the mother and the mapping of the body. The focus on the mouth as a site of conflict in Bacon's work is well illustrated in the dichotomy of this muscle. On the one hand the recipient of breast milk, vomit, meat as in dead flesh, and another's saliva as in a kiss, to the effacing and purifying function of communicating through words and expulsion of air.

Bacon's obsession with the mouth is not dissimilar to Antonin Artaud's need to strip away language. Artaud, the French cultural

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<sup>51</sup> Kuspit, D.. *Francis Bacon: The Authority of the Flesh*. In *Artforum*, Summer 1975. p. 54.

theorist, called for a "theatre of cruelty that would represent the modern human condition with unprecedented fullness and ferocity."<sup>52</sup> Artaud's own fascination with conflating the mouth and the anus echoes Bacon's reflection on a book about mouth diseases:

"...the book which had beautiful hand-coloured plates of diseases of the mouth; they fascinated me, I was obsessed by them".<sup>53</sup>

In this violence of the mouth, conflict is located. It is as if language is a disease and is perhaps where Bacon's juncture with his mother is located.

These interpretations feature repeatedly the maternal separation as the driving force behind the works of these prolific artists. Separation, which is the site of the maternal abject, is according to Kristeva and psychoanalysts, where much of art is located.

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<sup>52</sup> Finter, Helga. Antonin Artaud and the impossible theatre: the legacy of the Theatre of Cruelty. In *TDR (Cambridge, Mass.)* Winter 1997 Vol. 41 n. 4 p. 15

<sup>53</sup> Sylvester, D. *The Exhilarated Despair of Francis Bacon*. In *ArtNews*, May 1975. p. 26

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I explored the abject and the maternal abject. Historically, Bataille calls abjection the hypocrisy of hygiene. He has a great deal of distaste for a society which excludes and bans from view, vile and repulsive processes which are very much part of life. The true artist becomes then the conduit, which brings the abject to centre stage, and harmonises the social order.

Kristeva's analysis of the abject however, has been the main focus in this paper. According to Kristeva, the abject exists within us and yet we are in a constant state of expelling it from ourselves. Abjection has no borders and as such becomes the site of much conflict in any social or spiritual order. The maternal abject is the point at which the infant separates from the mother, maps its body and acquires language. Kristeva also states that the aesthetic process is a need to harmonise a conflict whose roots stem from a problematic maternal separation. Therefore it is a critical point in the life of an artist whose main object in life becomes a need to expel the maternal abject, while it resides forever within him or her.

Elizabeth Grosz interprets Kristeva's writings on the abject by explaining the relationship between the child's separation from his or her mother and the way the child identifies its own body.

Klein resembles the abject to fantasies of object aggression. According to Klein the first object of aggression in a person is a series of external-objects, which an infant fantasizes about and connects to internal-objects such as in biting food. It is through these fantasies, prohibition, and resistance, that the body is mapped and a social order is built.

Following on from these theories on abjection, I looked at various artists projects, and examined where the maternal abject is located in their work. Mary Kelly's experience of mothering is displayed as a chronicle with her son's archive effacing her own identity. Here Kelly presented the maternal abject as a displacement and a negation of herself. Cindy Sherman used irony and repetition to emphasise and mock the idealised and feared maternal figure. Here she invoked her maternal abject experience through the aggressive laughter she invites in the viewer at these idealised maternal figures of Renaissance art.

Gregory Crewdson signifies the abject in such a way as to merge it literally with the erotic. His images are more like tunnels, which drive the viewer into focusing even harder on the main object in the image: in *Untitled* 1995 it is a vagina shaped wound. This wound, together with the birthing cycle of butterflies could be read as Crewdson's relationship to the maternal abject. Crewdson's method of channelling the vision is used repeatedly in my work.

Joel-Peter Witkin is another artist who worked with the abject as a way to expose and accept it. Body parts sewn up in vaginal

shapes amongst putrid but sensual fruits such as grapes and pomegranate served Crewdson to give a possible interpretation of his work as dealing with the maternal abject.

I also drew inspiration from Hieronymus Bosch's construction of his paintings. Here, the abject was presented through the merger of part-objects, which he turned into demonic figures. Bosch's painting resonates with Bataille's abjection theory of inclusion of the repulsive as opposed to the pursuit of purification inherent in Christian belief.

Paul Quinn illustrates the multilayering of seemingly incongruous ideas such as economics and art. The seductive and the repulsive, economics and sexual taboos all gathered in the same image invoking again the abject.

Also in this paper, I explored the personal versus the private and its place in the political arena. This is particularly poignant when a woman becomes a mother and is relegated to the home, where what ever happens there is signified as private and therefore of no consequence to the economic or social order as a whole. What I have been proposing is that personal experiences of individuals should be seen as building blocks for a healthy social order and therefore should not be shunned from view. This is the political stance I took in which I was influenced by Mona Hatoum and Fiona Hall's works.

Hall explored the political nature of the domestic in many of her works but particularly in her tedious and beautiful piece,

*Untitled: table construction with white pipes.* This work consisted of miniscule holes pierced in drain pipes beneath a table presumably a kitchen or dinner table. The abject of the pipes merged with the private sphere of the home and the domain of knitting or embroidery to signify the political nature of her work. Mona Hatoum also explored the political nature of the personal. I used four examples: the performance *Pull* and the three installations *Recollection*, *Prayer Mat* and *Mother and Child*.

The maternal abject, the Kleinian aggression and repair of an object, the personal versus the private, and the body politics, were each illustrated using a different component of the personal experience.

I also highlighted through the writings of Susan Maushardt that the field of the maternal abject is fraught with accusations towards mothers. Maushardt concludes by saying that any investigation should look into comprehending the maternal process rather than apprehending individual mothers.

I looked at abjection and psychoanalysis and focused on Frida Kahlo, Louise Bourgeois, and Francis Bacon. I was particularly interested in the painting *My Birth* by Kahlo, which culminated in the summation of all her maternal abject experiences namely: her failed separation from her mother, her three miscarriages, and her constant pain following her street accident. Bourgeois on the other hand was interested in obliterating her own mother and chose to turn her aggression on body pieces. Last but not least, Bacon's obsession with the mouth and the distorted body

as sites where the maternal abject reside, informed my own fascination with the mouth.

Throughout this paper, I examined and demonstrated that many artists have in common with me a personal exploration into the abject. My personal trajectory of in particular, the maternal abject, although less common, is also significantly expressed by some of the artists. Additionally, I gave new insights and possible interpretations of the maternal abject in some works of Francis Bacon, Gregory Crewdson, and Joel-Peter Witkin. These insights and interpretations highlight for me that the maternal abject could, within the realm of possibilities, exist in works which do not display at first reading an association with the maternal abject.

Finally I would like to say that my mothering experience might be more, and might be less traumatic than most mothers but there is no denying that nothing changes the life of a woman like the birth of her first child. It is truly an experience, which brings together the abject with its object and the life drive with the death drive.

Through this project, I began to watch with fascination how my children discover their own body, how they overcome their "separation anxiety", how they acquire language and how I teach them through language what is right and what is wrong, and what is clean and what is dirty. I observe their socialisation and reflect on my own. Through this series of biological, intellectual,

and emotional events I observe a transformation taking place which I now know is the maternal abject.

One of the issues I faced when writing this paper is the number of artists I feel some kind of connection with. The number was far too vast and I invariably felt as if I had not covered enough ground or had left out a relevant artist's contribution to this discourse.

Certainly, this project has served me to define the way I make art and as such, I will continue to explore my personal experiences. No doubt, I will cross many more boundaries and therefore I will use the tools I learned through this project to launch myself into the next phase. My introduction to psychoanalytical writings has been useful in aiding me to search for possible answers. I will use this in the next projects. Equally, the use of objects or installation work for the first time has opened up for me a new avenue to express my thoughts and ideas. This is indeed an invaluable addition to my art making.

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## **List of Slides**

1. Deadbird Mary
2. Endoscopic journey
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6. Night life
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8. Net Reproduction Rate=1 (work in progress)

## **Catalogue**

1. Deadbird Mary, Ink-jet Photograph, 1.4m x 1.0m
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