

BAD GIRL: FEMINISM, CONTRADICTION, AND TRANSFORMATION

by

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis work developed out of a personal tension and insecurity surrounding the complexity and the seemingly contradictory nature of my identity. For an example, as a feminist, artist, and scholar, is it acceptable to also be a lover of popular culture tropes, makeup, and fashion? I have learned that female empowerment comes in many different forms. This paper will discuss the ways I have been visually exploring the female identity through multiplicity, contradiction, and most importantly: acceptance. I want my work to operate in a way that communicates the complexity of identity, transcends binary thinking, and promotes introspection. Third wave feminist thought provides an avenue for considering the transformative properties that can arise when tension between dominant cultural ideas and divergent peripheral philosophies collide. It is through third wave feminism that I have been able to reconcile my own contradictory ideas, experiences, feelings of guilt, etc. within myself, and realize the importance of acceptance and inclusivity on a personal/societal level.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BSU	Boise State University
GC	Graduate College
TDC	Thesis and Dissertation Coordinator



## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Throughout my studies in graduate school, I have found a resonance with feminist theory and artists that work from the feminist point of view. Although feminism has changed my world view and provided a level of mindfulness to my daily existence, there is also a level of guilt felt and contradiction associated with activities I partake in that do not fit into my conception of mainstream feminism. I am interested in the ways that my choices and actions are at odds with mainstream ideas, and conversely how my interests in popular culture do not align with various feminist ideals.

Aside from my identity as an academic and artist, I am a straight, white, middle-class woman; a technology obsessed “millennial”; newly engaged with hopes to plan the perfect “Pinterest” wedding; and a reader of *People* and *Vogue* magazines. Oftentimes, I struggle to understand how I can be a feminist who strives to be a voice for female empowerment and social transformation yet religiously subscribe to pop cultural mediums and activities that have often been criticized as degrading from a feminist perspective.

My thesis work developed from a variety of questions, insecurities, and guilt I had about myself surrounding female identity based on patriarchal norms and also how my ideas align with (third wave) feminist theory. On the one hand, I feel the pressure and sometimes find enjoyment, in conforming to patriarchal norms of “womanhood”— a perfectly synthesized icon of virtue and accomplishment that conforms to masculine aspirations and acts as a mirror to male desire. Yet, on the other hand, I am acutely aware

and angry about the daily micro-aggressions that take place towards my gender, like slut shaming, sexual harassment (cat calling), or “mansplaining.”<sup>1</sup> Through the process of making and thinking about my work, it became important to communicate the complexity of identity that extended beyond Western cultural ideas of gender.

At the beginning of my thesis journey I read Roxane Gay’s 2014 book *Bad Feminist*. Upon completion, I felt like I had been given permission by the author to accept my contradictory and confusing interests. Gay writes,

I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy. I’m not trying to be an example. I am not trying to be perfect. I am not trying to say I have all the answers. I am not trying to say I’m right. I am just trying—trying to support what I believe in, trying to do some good in this world, trying to make some noise with my writing while also being myself.<sup>2</sup>

Gay gets at something fundamental that extends beyond my own “existential identity crisis”—agency through contradiction. Not only did it become important to communicate the complexity of identity, but to try to embrace and accept all aspects and interests of identity, contradictions included.

Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards write, “[w]hen the artificial boundaries of consistency are revealed, contradictions emerge as powerful tools for creating new choices.”<sup>3</sup> I argue that contradiction has the potential to transform and

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<sup>1</sup>“mansplaining,” *Merriam-Webster.com*, accessed March 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/mansplaining-definition-history>. “*Mansplaining* is, at its core, a very specific thing. It’s what occurs when a man talks condescendingly to someone (especially a woman) about something he has incomplete knowledge of, with the mistaken assumption that he knows more about it than the person he’s talking to does.”

<sup>2</sup> Roxane Gay, *Bad feminist: essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), p. 35

<sup>3</sup> Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards, “Contradiction as Agency: Self-Determination, Transcendence, and Counter-Imagination in Third Wave Feminism,” *Hypatia* 24, no. 2 (2009): doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01029.x.

challenge notions of feminism, womanhood, and gender. By reorienting ourselves *away* from dichotomous/binary thinking structures, and reveling in multiplicity and contradiction, new forms of social action will start to emerge.<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Walker once wrote

There is no betrayal in being yourself...this continuing legacy of feminism, which demands that we know and accept ourselves, jettisoning societal norms that don't allow for our experiences, is a politically powerful decision...it is more important than ever to fight to be all of who we are.<sup>5</sup>

The theoretical inspiration for my thesis, Chapter Two, will commence with a brief discussion of the mainstream perception of feminism today, and how mainstream ideas about feminism have been distilled to caricatures of feminist thought. Further, I will discuss the rhetorical strategy of contradiction and how it has provided agency and transformative potential for women in the various waves of feminism, and particularly in contemporary third wave feminism.

Chapter Three is dedicated to exploring three relevant contemporary artists that inform my own work, and how their approaches to processes, materials, content, and subject matter have informed my artistic practice. All three of these artists have contributed to the ongoing dialogue of contemporary feminism. I will discuss the relevancy of personal narrative in Mona Hatoum's work, the liminal space and interplay

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<sup>4</sup> Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards, "Contradiction as Agency: Self-Determination, Transcendence, and Counter-Imagination in Third Wave Feminism," *Hypatia* 24, no. 2 (2009): doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01029.x.

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Walker, *to be real: telling the truth and changing the face of feminism* (New York: Anchor books, 1995), p. xxxii

of feminist ideals in Francesca Woodman's photography, and the performative works of Janine Antoni.

Chapter Four will highlight my own studio practice and discuss the materials and subject matter I have chosen to use/depict. I will discuss how my artwork relates to notions of contradiction, feminism, and contingency. Also, I will discuss the relationship between my work and the contemporary artists I mentioned in Chapter Three. My hope is that my thesis work provides insight into the complexity of identity today, and how important it is to give voice to and accept difference.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORY

### **Understanding Feminism Today**

Western culture frequently conceives of feminism as a monolithic movement that often is stereotyped as bra burning, man hating, and driven by a hostile agenda seen in the caricature of the “feminazi”. I have observed that there seems to be a general disenchantment with the notion of “feminism” among younger members of the population because it seems threatening, annoying, and whiney.

In a 2016 article from *babe.com*, a number of college aged women were interviewed about why they do not identify with feminism. The general attitude of these women towards feminism in popular culture mirrors exchanges I experience in my own daily life. Ellie, a college student from Nottingham states: “The movement is quite annoying to me at the moment as I think a lot of people who do it do it for the wrong reasons, like because its fashionable.”<sup>6</sup> Liat from Cambridge remarks: “much of [feminism] is now coupled with mindless male-bashing, female entitlement, overlabelling everything as rape...I’m all for breaking stereotypes, so why not act like a strong independent woman and stop whining about everything?”<sup>7</sup> Riska from Kent reflects, “feminism on its own is also problematic because the feminists can’t be on the

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<sup>6</sup>Marissa Lee, “We spoke to girls who don’t identify as feminists,” *thetab.com*, accessed March 2017, <http://thetab.com/2016/05/20/spoke-girls-dont-identify-feminists-asked-91109>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

same page about what they want to achieve, some women saying ‘real feminists don’t hate men and them saying [sic] ‘real feminists hate men.’”<sup>8</sup>

To many, myself included at one time, there seems to be a mythical and ingrained social definition of what it is to be a feminist. For each person, “there is a different set of qualifiers, a different image which embodies an ideal to measure up to, a far reaching ideological position to uphold at any cost.”<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, rather than striving to locate and reconcile where these women find themselves on the feminist continuum, the idea of feminism is abandoned together.<sup>10</sup> Rebecca walker writes,

for many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn’t allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that the identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides.<sup>11</sup>

In actuality, contemporary feminism today (third wave feminism) places an emphasis on understanding the multiplicity and complexity of identity, material reality, and digital existence. The complex and fractured lives that people lead today are supported through the intersectional approach that feminism currently takes. In the "The local is global: third wave feminism, peace, and social justice", the authors explain contemporary (third wave) feminism offers five primary focuses:

(1) Responsible choice grounded in dialogue. (2) Respect and appreciation for experiences and dynamic knowledge. (3) An understanding of "the personal is

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Walker, *to be real: telling the truth and changing the face of feminism* (New York: Anchor books, 1995), p. xxxiii

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. xxxi

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. xxxiii

political" that incorporates both the idea that personal experiences have roots in structural problems and the idea that responsible, individuated personal action has social consequences. (4) Use of personal narratives in both theorizing and political activism. (5) Political activism as local, with global connections and consequences.<sup>12</sup>

A significant challenge in coming to terms with the contemporary self and feminism are the various contradictions that arise out of people's interests in popular culture. It is common for women and men to avoid using the feminist label because the inconsistencies that they experience are not in alignment with the view of mainstream (mis)conceptions of feminism. Rebecca Walker goes on to point out, "[c]onstantly measuring up to some cohesive fully down-for-the-feminist-cause identity without contradictions and messiness and lusts for power and luxury items is not a fun or easy task."<sup>13</sup>

Currently there is not a monolithic understanding of feminism but instead multiple configurations that intersect with race, class, ability, etc. Thus, Walker goes on to write,

the lines between Us and Them are often blurred, and as a result we find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving.<sup>14</sup>

Although it has been twenty-one years since Walker published this essay in her edited collection of writings *to be real*, the relevance and urgency of an identity crisis

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<sup>12</sup> Zimmerman, Amber Lynn; McDermott, M. Joan; Gould, Christina M. "The Local is Global: Third Wave Feminism, Peace, and Social Justice". *Contemporary Justice Review*. 12. doi:10.1080/10282580802681766.

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Walker, *To be real: telling the truth and changing the face of feminism* (New York: Anchor books, 1995), p. xxxiii

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxi

resonates with many feminists today. Books continue to be published like Roxane Gay's 2014 *Bad Feminist* or Jessica Valenti's 2007 book *Full frontal feminism: A young woman's guide to why feminism matters*, that still warrant investigation into the multiple ways women currently come to identify with feminism.

My thesis work strives to connect ideas of the "multiple positionalities" discussed by Rebecca Walker and a personal reconciliation with the complexities of (third wave) feminist thought. Although I have struggled to articulate where my often contradictory ideas lie on the continuum of feminist thinking, like many third wave feminists, I am dedicated to adding my honest experiences to a feminist dialogue. I believe, through feminism, there is transformative potential in recognizing the (sometimes contradictory) nuances of personal identity that "are all fodder for making new theories of living and relating."<sup>15</sup>

### **Contradiction**

Because contemporary feminist thought embraces multiplicity, disruption, and complexity, contradiction becomes an inevitable part of the feminist landscape. Feminist writers Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K Sowards write: "contradictions foster a sense of agency for some third wave feminist[s]... [because it] enables them to understand their identities, diversity, and feminism on their own terms and to explore new possibilities and options for everyday experiences and activism."<sup>16</sup> Consequently, contradiction

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<sup>15</sup> Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards, "Contradiction as Agency: Self-Determination, Transcendence, and Counter-Imagination in Third Wave Feminism," *Hypatia* 24, no. 2 (2009): doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01029.x.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2



becomes a useful rhetorical strategy for negotiating complex lives in a complicated world.

Normally, contradiction is frustrating to dominant Western culture because it upsets a systematic balance, a moral constraint, and coherence.<sup>17</sup> However, according to Michel Foucault, contradictions “function to develop and elaborate ideas, reorganize discourses and ways of thinking, and to interrogate critically discursive formations.”<sup>18</sup> Contradiction, thus, becomes a strategy to promote social change through upsetting the usual inscribed “truth” value of words, ideas, and structures. Through contradiction, there are possibilities for moving in new directions, highlighting antagonisms/struggles, and reorganizing discourse that might be narrowing or exclusionary. Contradiction, then becomes an “agential orientation that enables marginalized perspectives to find voice.”<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary feminism and the contradictory nature it advocates for allows people to live their lives beyond culturally inscribed expectations. In the past, I have struggled to formulate and reconcile my identity and how I fit into the “mold” of feminism because of inconsistencies in my upbringing, education, and interests. Yet, it is through learning about contemporary feminism and the endless array of non-dichotomous possibilities it has to offer that I have found empowerment. Through accepting contradiction and ambiguity I have been able to manifest my own self-determination while and debunking stereotypes of the mythical “feminist.” Rebecca Walker helps us

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1989). p. 149

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149

<sup>19</sup> Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards, "Contradiction as Agency: Self-Determination, Transcendence, and Counter-Imagination in Third Wave Feminism," *Hypatia* 24, no. 2 (2009): doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01029.x.

understand that embracing contradiction in the landscape of feminist identities creates something new that leads us away from divisiveness and dualism into acceptance and empathy. Yes, its okay to simultaneously find empowerment in feminist thinking and keep up with the Kardashians.

### CHAPTER THREE: RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

In this section, I will discuss three relevant contemporary artists that have informed my own studio practice. These significant influences are: the personal and politically charged works of Mona Hatoum, the photography of Francesca Woodman, and the feminist performances of Janine Antoni.

#### **Mona Hatoum**

I am interested in the artist Mona Hatoum because of the creation of multiple layers of meaning in her work through the intersection of visual and conceptual elements. I am drawn to her insertion of personal narrative in conjunction with contradiction/paradox. Palestine born and former refugee, Hatoum creates work that reflects a sense of dislocation and incoherence between her various cultural experiences. She often analyzes power structures in relation to feminism and between the Third World and the West.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Janine Antoni, "Mona Hatoum," BOMB Magazine, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2130/mona-hatoum>.

Hatoum's piece, *Measures of Distance*,<sup>21</sup> underscores personal narrative as complex, confused and contradictory.<sup>22</sup> *Measures of Distance* is a layered video that shows moving Arabic text, letters written by her mother, and read aloud in English by Hatoum.<sup>23</sup> The background imagery consists of various photographs of Hatoum's mother

**Figure 1.** Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1998, video



**Figure 1.** Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1998, video

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<sup>21</sup> See Figure 1

<sup>22</sup> Janine Antoni, "Mona Hatoum," BOMB Magazine, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2130/mona-hatoum>.

<sup>23</sup> Tate, "Measures of Distance, Mona Hatoum 1988," Tate, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hatoum-measures-of-distance-t07538>.

taking a shower. The audio portion is also layered with “taped conversations in Arabic between mother and daughter, in which her mother speaks openly about her feelings, her sexuality and her husband's objections to Hatoum's intimate observation of her mother's naked body.”<sup>24</sup> The overt nakedness of Hatoum’s mother in the video sets up a dissonance between image and audio layer with Hatoum’s naked mother. Hatoum reflects on *Measures of Distance*,

I wanted every frame to speak of closeness and distance. You have the close-up images of my mother’s naked body, which echo the intimacy of the exchange between us, overlaid by her letters which are supposed to be a means of communication, yet at the same time, they prevent complete access to the image.<sup>25</sup>

Hatoum’s analysis of *Measures of Distance* contextualizes her personal narrative within the current (and complex) socio-political climate. *Measures of Distance* was completed in 1988, and since then Hatoum has maintained her conceptual approach of engaging the viewer in open ways that allow for different interpretations.

I find Hatoum’s work relatable to my own studio practice because of the way she elicits a psychological and emotional response from the viewer. This response creates a situation where every aspect of reality becomes questionable, and one has to reassess their assumptions and their relationship to things around them.<sup>26</sup> I think Hatoum’s inclusion of personal narrative and an examination of the multiplicity of identity creates a lush territory for viewers (and myself) to relate to and question assumptions about their

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

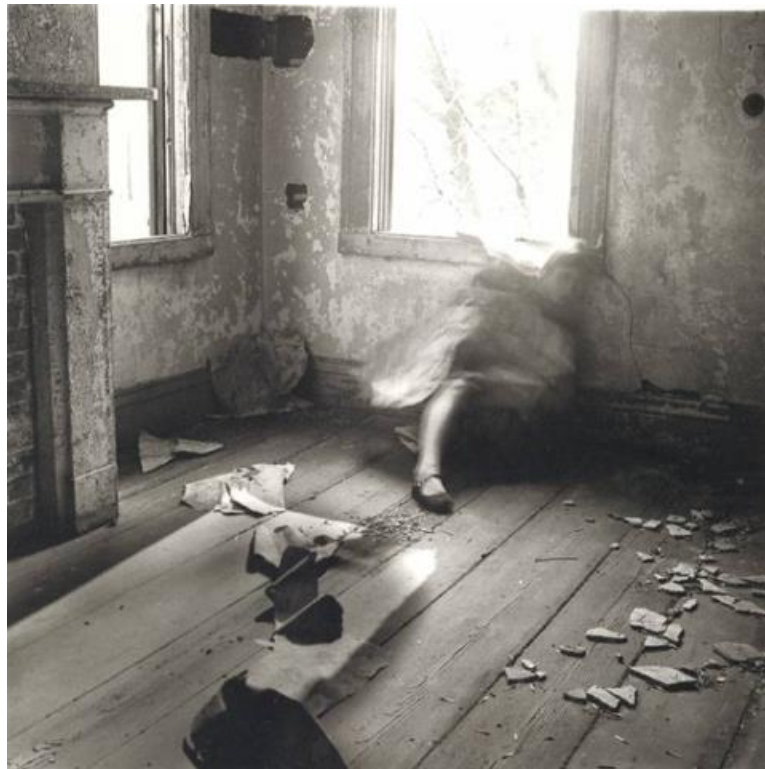
<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Janine Antoni, "Mona Hatoum," BOMB Magazine, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2130/mona-hatoum>.

own identity. The conceptual considerations for layering the video of her mother behind the Arabic text along with audio point to the complexity of identity.

### Francesca Woodman

I am interested in the way Francesca Woodman's photographs convey ambiguity and contradiction, specifically the photographs of female bodies in interior spaces in *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* published right before her 1981 death. In these photographs, the camera captures an obscured image of the body occupying a domestic space. The slow shutter speed and the movement of the body blurs the line between where the body stops and the interior begins. The body, quite literally, starts to become the space surrounding her.<sup>27</sup> The traditionally feminine space of the house begins to



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<sup>27</sup> See Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Francesca Woodman, *House #3: Providence, Rhode Island, 1976*

identify with her body, defining it.<sup>28</sup> Woodman used her naked body (or a model as her surrogate) as the subject of her photographs. She repeatedly posed herself in a way that mimicked the Western visual tradition: “the woman’s role is that of the model for the artist,” (be it in art, cinema, fashion, photography, pornography, etc.).<sup>29</sup> Her photographs reinforce this notion of “female as muse/male as voyeur,” which is one of the most normalized and naturalized depictions of our visual culture.<sup>30</sup> Carol Armstrong suggests Woodman’s photographs hark back to a “time when women was positioned as art’s

**Figure 3.** Francesca Woodman, *Space2, 1976*




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<sup>28</sup> Carol M. Armstrong and Catherine M. Zegher, *Women artists at the millennium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011). pg. 353

<sup>29</sup> Carol M. Armstrong and Catherine M. Zegher, *Women artists at the millennium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011). pg. 353

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353

**Figure 3. Francesca Woodman, *Space2*, 1976**

mistress rather than one of its masters, as the model in the studio; in the case of photography, the figure before the camera as much as the one behind it.”<sup>31</sup>

Woodman works simultaneously behind the camera and in front of it, splitting her gaze and doubling her perspective. The way she occupies the photographic space highlights the contradictory positioning of Woodman as the voyeur/muse.

In conjunction to my own studio practice, I think Francesca Woodman is relevant because of the inherent contradictory nature of her photographs. I was initially attracted and repulsed by Woodman’s photography because of the way she depicted the female body, the desolate interiors, and the aesthetic tonalities. For me, the power of Woodman’s work lies in the tension and ambiguity I experience when I look at her work. Her photographs leave me with more questions than answers. Carol Armstrong writes:

Perhaps the best way to think about Woodman’s [photographs]...is that they represent none of the expected stances of feminism exactly, but a possible feminist position nevertheless: not an identifiable feminist politics but feminist play, in the interstices of (at least two) feminism(s).<sup>32</sup>

I think Armstrong’s analysis of Woodman’s photographs is relatable to the way I examine the complexity of self identity. Like my artwork, Woodman is metaphorically examining the liminal space between different understandings of “woman” and her relationship to the outside world. The female form could be understood (simultaneously)

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 353

<sup>32</sup> Carol M. Armstrong and Catherine M. Zegher, *Women artists at the millennium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011). 358



as sexual, ghostly, depressed, or angelic. Her work provides a spectrum of interpretation while simultaneously suggesting a moment of introspection and empathy.

I keep returning to Woodman's photographs because of the raw and poignant qualities of her work. I find myself identifying with the women in the photographs because there seems to be a dissonance and transgressive quality between the figure, her surroundings, and the camera. The tension arising from Woodman's work relates to my own work because of my interest in heightening the sometimes unsettling and contradictory nature of the relationships between dominant cultural views, feminist theory, and personal history.

### **Janine Antoni**

Sculptor and performance artist Janine Antoni is another artist that is relevant to my artistic approach. Antoni's work is considered performative because she often utilizes her body or parts of her body as tools to create her work and because the artifacts that are available for consideration are inseparably linked to the viewer's consideration of the process of their creation. Antoni employs materials that carry a wide range of cultural associations as well as varying degrees of physical stability.<sup>33</sup>

For an example, in her 1993 work *Loving Care*,<sup>34</sup> Antoni uses her hair as a paintbrush dipped in Loving Care hair dye as the paint. In this performance Antoni creates a simple and perfectly distilled action that evokes multiple layers of association. Viewers of the performance experience an act of labor mopping/painting, which have

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<sup>33</sup> Martha Buskirk, *The contingent object of contemporary art* (Cambridge (Mass.): The MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> See figure 4.

potentially gendered readings, engendering associations outside of conventional understandings by the use of hair dye in place of mop water/paint. The dye (identified in the title of the work as a major brand cosmetic product) in its fluidity has the potential to suggest the materials of the laborer who cleans privileged spaces while remaining invisible to the patron class that use/own the spaces. Simultaneously she evokes the act most associated with these rarified spaces; the act of painting. In the act of mopping/painting the floor/canvas she progressively excludes the elite class of viewer from the space and literally paints them out of the room. Antoni reflects, "I'm aware that I'm not from the generation of women that mopped the floor. I'm getting choices now that they didn't have...at what point do I want to claim that, and at what point do I want to change that?"<sup>35</sup> Working within a simple structure, Antoni asks us to consider power, privilege, class and labor, gender as performance and gender as a thing externally mediated through imposed standards of beauty.

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<sup>35</sup> Kay Larson, "Women's Work (or Is It Art?) Is Never Done," *The New York Times*, January 06, 1996, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/07/arts/art-women-s-work-or-is-it-art-is-never-done.html>.



Figure 4. Janine Antoi, *Loving Care*, 1993

## CHAPTER FOUR: MY THESIS WORK

Having outlined the theoretical influence and relevant contemporary artists that provide a context for my work, I will outline my studio project and its direct relationship to my influences. I will discuss the visual outcome of my material choice, media, content, and subject matter and how these decisions informed one another.

### **Conceptual Approach**

Throughout the evolution of my work, a continual interest of mine has been the depiction of subjective experiences relating to gender. Although my work has evolved greatly from the beginning of my time as a graduate student, I have moved closer to visually representing an existence beyond a culturally inscribed identity, and embracing feminist thinking.

In connection to my own studio practice and writing, the rhetorical strategy of contradiction can be linked to the contemporary philosophy of contingency and the contingent artist/object. In relationship to my understanding of third wave feminism, I am interested in using personal experiences, ideas, and materials that could possibly elevate and simultaneously contradict my/the viewer's conception of gender identity.

The notion of contradiction as a tool to transform mainstream perceptions of female identity is an undercurrent to the layers of visual depictions and substrates I work with. The materials I have chosen to use in my studio work have been carefully selected, and have dominant cultural associations or meanings separate from the traditional art realm. I am interested how these materials interact with one another and oscillate between socially

ascribed meanings and new re-contextualized understandings. The destabilization of meaning within materials, ideas, and subjects often have a contradictory and paradoxical relationship to the way they are thought to exist in Western culture.

My understanding of contingency within the realm of contemporary art and philosophy is mainly informed by Martha Buskirk and her book *The Contingent Object in Contemporary Art*. Buskirk notes,

In the process, the method and materials that the artist selects for creating the work are transformed, so that rather than functioning just as the raw matter or vehicle for the artist's aesthetic expression, the materials themselves generate associations that, together with the forms into which they are shaped, establish the subject or content of the work of art.<sup>36</sup>

The artist acting as a facilitator for new associations and understandings has the transformative potential to destabilize codified understanding of objects and ideas, which can further lead to thinking of ideas like gender and feminism in new unexpected ways.



**Figure 5. Snapshot, 1996**

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<sup>36</sup> Martha Buskirk, *The contingent object of contemporary art* (Cambridge (Mass.): The MIT Press, 2005). p. 14

The subject matter I chose to work with is personal. I selected photographs from my childhood and other snapshots of my mom in her younger years. I was drawn to “snapshots” because of the immediacy and spontaneity they suggest. The basis behind my selection process was rooted in the idea of (re)presenting gender expectations—ways in which I was taught, or my mom was taught to “be” a woman according to Western societal standards of the time. I also wanted to select images that depicted stereotypical gender associations (i.e. through dress or body language) and that portrayed the subjects as joyful or excited. I want the viewer to feel a mix of tension, connection, and nostalgia from the snapshot quality.

For an example Figure 5 shows a snapshot from my childhood in which two young girls pretend to be ballerinas, a highly coveted enactment of “girl” that I was taught to value at five years old.



**Figure 6.** Laura Goodwin, *Bad Girl*, 2017

Figure 6 shows an untitled work based in part on the photograph above presenting this gendered action of “ballerina” and highlights the tension as well as the joy and innocence associated with the act. The incomplete rendering from the photograph highlights the fractured nature and lack of fixity in connection to identity. Also, the unfinished quality of the drawings and like the lack of tonal variation points to the ephemeral and incomplete nature of memory.

Along with personal snapshots, I utilized representations of various objects from my personal life. These representations of objects symbolically reference gender in relationship to the snapshot renderings. For an example, a bed—my bed—is a reoccurring image that is referenced in my works on glassine/duralar and video projection. From my perception, the bed as an image or object has many cultural associations such as: sexuality, loss of innocence, depression, sleep, etc. Again, I varied the renderings of the bed to communicate that the image is not complete (literally and figuratively) and its proximity to other subjects may be dependent on the way the viewer interprets the work.

### Material and Media Choices



**Figure 7.** Eric Fischl, *Saturday Night (The Aftermath Bath)*, 1980, oil on glassine

I was initially interested in drawing and painting on a translucent and delicate materials, like glassine and duralar, that could be layered upon one another. Contemporary artist Eric Fischl's use of translucent materials in his "Glassines" series,<sup>37</sup> and the way he used transparency to layer various elements of a narrative together to construct a scene was particularly influential. Fischl's utilization of multiplicity and layering is something that I have emulated in my own work. Moreover, I wanted to use a material that when hung in the art gallery communicated a provisional and urgent quality, because of my interest in challenging the notion of fixed meanings and associations.

For an example, glassine is typically known as an archival material used to protect valuable images. Other uses for glassine include an outer wrapping/envelope for the disbursement of illegal drugs and protecting food before consumption.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, glassine is a translucent material used as protective barrier. I believe I am using glassine in a way that renders the original job (protection) useless, and am using it in a way that highlights its materiality, fragility and translucency. The oil, graphite, and charcoal applied to the surface of glassine contradicts its original usage.

Another aspect to my work is the inclusion of physical objects like lace, a leather glove, and a fitted bed sheet. I believe these objects have a relationship to conventional understandings of gender, and can be associated with the personal subject matter on translucent material. Further, these objects have the potential to also be reconsidered/re-contextualized when placed in dialogue with hanging translucent materials. The interplay

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<sup>37</sup> See Figure 7. (Eric Fischl)

<sup>38</sup> Wikipedia, "Glassine," Wikipedia, February 09, 2017, accessed February 16, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glassine>.



between objects and renderings is an essential component in the way the viewer comes to understand the piece as a whole.

For an example, in the piece *Traces*,<sup>39</sup> a fitted bed sheet frames the area around the translucent layers. The middle of the bed sheet has been removed, and only the periphery of the sheet remains intact. I chose to remove the center of the bed sheet to communicate the notion of destabilization within an object or an idea, and to contradict its original intention. For me, this symbolically represents a destabilization of the way I conceived of my gender identity, and how it has evolved into a fragmented and contradictory nature. Like the way my drawings/paintings relate to one another through layers, the fitted bed sheet relates to the drawings in various contexts. Any one of these



**Figure 8.** Laura Goodwin, *Traces*, 2017, mixed media

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<sup>39</sup> See Figure 8

cultural associations can relate to my layered drawings/paintings to form a new contextual relationship that may contradict original intended meanings. Thus, through the formation of new relationships between objects, subjects, and materials, the viewer will begin to form different considerations.

Video as a form is another important aspect of my studio work. I find myself drawn to creating video pieces because of the temporality inherent to the medium. Similar to the performative works of Janine Antoni, video is a way for me to re-approach typically uninteresting daily activities. My video work is comprised of self aware performances recording normally private and introspective moments in my life. I brought my camera into spaces where I normally find solace—the shower, or my bed—and perform the activities in a way that heightens my relationship to the surroundings. I think using the camera to place myself in interior private spaces alludes to an introspective quality that simultaneously communicates my personal narrative and implicates the viewer in my work.

In the piece *Hidden*,<sup>40</sup> the subject repeatedly tries to hide in her bed, never quite successfully disappearing. Like the photographs of Francesca Woodman, the woman



**Figure 9.** Laura Goodwin, *Hidden*, 2017, video projection

starts to relate to her environment by attempting to obscure herself within it. An inherent tension arises when experiencing *Hidden* because it becomes apparent that the woman does not *quite* blend in with her surroundings. Since the setting takes place in a bedroom with seemingly feminine décor, different conceptual layers relating to issues surrounding gender and identity can be read in dialogue with the woman.

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<sup>40</sup> See Figure 9

*Enveloped*<sup>41</sup> disrupts the idea of fixity and implicates the viewer as a voyeur. The video of a naked woman sitting in a bathtub taking a shower presents multiple layers of the same action atop one another. Like the hanging translucent materials seen in *Bad Girl*, I wanted the visual layering to be present in *Enveloped* to destabilize and contradict expectations associated with fixity. The woman disrupts the viewer's gaze by turning her head to the camera and acknowledging the viewer; the performance is no longer self-contained but implicates the viewer in her act of gazing back. Again, this implication



**Figure 10.** Laura Goodwin, *Enveloped*, 2017, video projection

creates tension because she disrupts and contradicts the normative relationship of muse/voyeur. Additionally, the video is further complicated by the notion that I, the artist, filmed myself taking the shower. Thus, just like Francesca Woodman, my position as simultaneously artist and “muse” creates a paradox within itself. I think this paradox

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<sup>41</sup> See Figure 10

reinforces my interest in multiplicity, contradiction, and ambiguity in relationship to identity as elaborated within the context of contemporary feminism.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Though my thesis work is a single subjective interpretation, I utilize my own subjectivity/lived experience to highlight, question, and contradict mainstream paradigms of feminism and gender identity. I feel that at this moment in time, as we see polarizing forces elected into office, it is important to explore the various ways lived experiences, values, and ideas reinforce *and* challenge dominant cultural expectations. Third wave feminist thought provides an avenue for considering the transformative properties that can arise when tension between dominant cultural ideas and divergent peripheral philosophies collide. It is through third wave feminism that I have been able to reconcile my own contradictory ideas, experiences, guilt, etc. within myself, and realize the importance of acceptance and inclusivity on a personal/societal level.

*Bad Feminist* author Roxane Gay writes, "We should be able to say, 'This is my truth,' and have that truth stand without a hundred clamoring voices shouting, giving the impression that multiple truths cannot coexist."<sup>42</sup> Like Gay, I hope by *voicing* the confusing, contradictory, and multiple truths within identity—like I demonstrate in my thesis—empathy, connection, and social transformation will occur.

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<sup>42</sup> Roxane Gay, *Bad feminist: essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014).

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