

***The following Essay was written to support my studio work in the final year of study for my Bachelor of Visual Arts at Adelaide Central School of Art.***

***The majority of works mentioned in this essay can be seen in my online portfolio.***

***Deborah Prior, April 2007***

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### **Beginnings...**

This paper is an account of my current concerns within my art practice. As a young, female artist, I have been drawn to investigate art making and art theory from a Feminist perspective. It is important to acknowledge from the outset that I am dealing with a contentious subject, and I make no claims to possessing the only valid perspective. What follows is my interpretation of two years of critical reading, art making, examination of personal experience, and speculative groupings of common themes, iconography and ideas. My recent work has utilised both the physical and symbolic notions of the *bride* and the *bathroom* to address issues of gender and power relationships, the female body, physical and spiritual purity, and societal acceptance and/or rejection of particular modes of behaviour displayed by women.

In this essay I will be investigating the historical, contemporary and personal perspectives that have influenced my thinking, and therefore my final body of work. My art practice, multi-disciplined in materials and thought, does not lend itself well to a linear dissemination. Instinctive actions in drawing or sculpture become difficult to express with text: instead of a concise listing of themes and motives what I have is something akin to an ever-expanding spider's web. Another frustration has been attempting to address every aspect of my practice in a paper of this length. Out of necessity, I have had to edit the width and breadth

of my thinking: many artists that I have delighted in get no mention in this paper, and my own work has been addressed in a highly selective manner. I have divided this paper into “chapters” that address particular iconography or themes within my work, but these too should be viewed merely as introductions to wider study and thought within my practice. My hope is that by the conclusion of this paper, my enthusiasm has engaged the viewer so that they might pursue my ideas and work further, and thus complete the picture for themselves.

### **I. The Question of Brides: Art ‘History’, Feminist Thought, and on being Female.**

The bride’s inclusion in my work began with an accidental discovery. I had been perusing photographs of distant relatives in a family history book<sup>1</sup> when recognition hit me with a physical force. Staring up from the page was my mother, wearing an elaborate Edwardian wedding dress and an enigmatic expression. Closer inspection revealed a young woman called Ida Grace, aged twenty-six, and my mother’s grandmother. She was young, beautiful and somehow tragic (she died before my mother’s birth) and I started to include her image in my work. Sometime later a glimmer of an idea about brides and bathrooms began to form.

Despite being revered by popular culture as an icon of feminine success, the history of wives and weddings, whilst enlightening, is not particularly happy or romantic. Until recent history, weddings were ceremonies of convenience to continue the family lineage. Wives were often viewed as an asset like any other, present to keep the household running smoothly, provide healthy heirs, and behave in the manner society ascribed for them.<sup>2</sup>

For most of my life these were facts I accepted simply as history, further evidence of how lucky I was to be living in the twenty first century. However, recent reading of feminist theory, as well as my own experiences, made me

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Williams, *Nankivell – A Family Affair*, Adelaide, Lutheran Publishing House, 1986, p. 42

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Cox, *I Do – One Hundred Years of Wedding Fashion*, Scriptum Editions, 2002, p. 9-16

reconsider this complacency. How many subtleties of language, dress, custom and human interaction in contemporary life (like weddings and marriage) could be traced back to histories when life was extremely difficult for women? What attitudes and expectations of and towards women might still be reinforced by the image of the bride?

Sociologist Chris Ingraham writes, “*what the white wedding keeps in place is nothing short of a racist, classist, and heterosexist social order,*”<sup>3</sup> or as Susan Maushart has commented:

*“The monogamous unit – a female, her offspring, and a male – is the building block of human society. In marriage we see the entire sexual politics of a species writ small, as an intricate series of biological and social trade-offs.”*<sup>4</sup>

I had always assumed that thanks to a hundred years or more of Feminist thought and action, I lived in a society densely populated with emancipated, powerful, and successful women. Anne Summers’ recent book, “*The End of Equality,*”<sup>5</sup> paints a different picture: Australian women are still underpaid and unappreciated by government and society whether in the paid workforce or working at home to raise a family; incidents of domestic and sexual violence are endemic; and the courts offer inadequate protection for victims of sexual violence, many of whom are still cross-examined about dressing or behaving in a sexually provocative manner.<sup>6</sup> Delving deeper into the past, essays such as Linda Nochlin’s “*Why have there been no Great Women Artists?*”<sup>7</sup> were influential not just from an art history perspective, but also in their critique of a patriarchal Western society.

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<sup>3</sup>Chris Ingraham, in Caroline Cox, *I Do – One Hundred Years of Wedding Fashion*, Scriptum Editions, 2002, p. 9

<sup>4</sup>Susan Maushart, *Wifework: What Marriage Really Means for Women*, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2001, p. 45

<sup>5</sup>Anne Summers, *The End of Equality: Work Babies and Women’s Choices in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australia*, Milsons Point, Random House Australia, 2003

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 112

<sup>7</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Why have there been no Great Women Artists?” ch. 7; in Nochlin, L., *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1989 p. 150

Naturally, my own history has influenced my thinking. Growing up in a house with two Ministers of Religion, I was saturated from a young age with Biblical verse and thought. I went to church several times a week, where as the ministers' daughter, I was expected to behave with a certain level of decorum and piety. Attending a religious school, I was subtly trained to view my body with shame and disgust. It was only later I realised that much of what I was taught at church and school had little to do with being a good, decent human being, and was more about certain institution's beliefs on how women should behave.

The bride is now a constant in the iconography of my art practice. She appears seductive, thoughtful, tough, decisive, indecisive, clothed, naked, and crushed under a hundred kilograms of white rice. She is often depicted in the space of the bathroom, usually alone, and never with her groom. His absence is significant. In my practice I am not interested in love, romance, or the relationship between two people (although these things exist, and are important.) I am interested in the bride as a vehicle to investigate the *identity* and *ownership* of the female mind and body, both universally and personally.

In my final drawing from this year, *Ida and I*, I am standing in my bathroom next to my great-grandmother, born one hundred and one years before me, who started me on this journey. She stands tall in her bridal finery, gazing resolutely out to the unknown viewer. I am naked and unsure – turning towards her as if waiting for an answer – slip on my own wedding dress, or let it go and watch it tumble down into the waiting basin?

## II. Soap and the Bath. Pure Body, Pure Mind

*“Let it be observed, that slovenliness is no part of religion; that neither this nor any text of Scripture, condemns neatness of apparel. Certainly this is a duty, not sin. Cleanliness is, indeed, next to godliness.”*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John Wesley (1703- 1791) in Bartlett, J. *Familiar Quotations. A collection of passages, phrases and proverbs traced to their sources in ancient and modern literature*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed., London, Macmillian Press Ltd., 1955, p. 420

At the time of writing, this sermon from John Wesley was probably sound advice. Living during the Eighteenth Century, it is likely that many of his parishioners would have benefited from the occasional washing of their clothing and bodies. However, “*Cleanliness is next to Godliness*” has endured as a proverb with faintly sinister overtones, forever linking physical cleanliness with spiritual purity.

The history of women and bathing is both intriguing and contradictory. In the visual arts, it was a popular theme for painters, with depictions of *Diana and Actaeon*,<sup>9</sup> countless *Venus[es] at her Toilette*,<sup>10</sup> and *Susanna and the Elders*,<sup>11</sup> where more often than not, the innocent Susannah is implicated in the crime.<sup>12</sup> The popularity of images of bathing women could be attributed to the fact that it was one of few plausible scenes where a male artist could safely place a female nude.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, for much of history, bathing was a mystery-shrouded *event* (rather than an everyday activity) with an aura of sensuality, and associations with prostitution.<sup>14</sup> Immersion in water created an intimate contact with every bodily crevice, and as such *water was perceived as a surrogate lover*.<sup>15</sup> One artist particularly notorious for his images of bathing women was Edgar Degas (1843-1917, France), his work “*gave visual constitution to fears of the feminine and of female sexuality*.”<sup>16</sup> During his own lifetime, critics viewed his work unfavourably primarily because he depicted *contemporary* women instead of

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<sup>9</sup> Whilst hunting, Actaeon comes across the Goddess Diana bathing. An outraged Diana transforms Actaeon into a stag and he is torn apart by his own hunting dogs. A well-known example is Titian’s *Diana and Actaeon*, 1559. (See appendix II)

<sup>10</sup> For example, Rubens’s *Venus at a Mirror*, c.1615 (See appendix II)

<sup>11</sup> For example, Gentileschi’s *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610 (See appendix II)

<sup>12</sup> Compare Gentileschi’s version of *Susanna* to Tintoretto’s, (See appendix II) where Susannah is gazing at herself in a mirror, a common symbol of female vanity. (For more on mirrors, see: John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, British Broadcasting Corporation, Penguin Books Ltd, 1972 p. 50, Marsha Meskimmon, “Introduction: Reflections on Women’s Self Portraiture,” in Meskimmon, M, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists’ Self Portraiture in the Twentieth Century*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 1-7 and:

“...as a potential rape victim who emphatically halted the proceedings, [Susanna] is a rare heroine in biblical mythology...and Susannah’s unusually well-defined resistance throws into bold relief the extent to which she has been distorted into a half-willing participant in post-Renaissance art.”

Mary D. Garrard, “Artemisia and Susanna,” ch. 8; in Broude, N & Garrard, M, D, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, Harper & Row, 1982, p. 152

<sup>13</sup> Meskimmon, op. cit. p. 2

<sup>14</sup> Anthea Callen, “Degas Bathers: Hygiene and Dirt – Gaze and Touch,” in Kendall, R, & Pollock, G. eds., *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, Pandora Press, 1991 p. 173

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* p. 159

<sup>16</sup> *ibid* p. 160

mythological women.<sup>17</sup> In nineteenth century France, the bath of a Bourgeois woman was a private, infrequent event, and something of a two-edged sword. Bathing and personal hygiene were gradually becoming important to retain one's respectability. However, by removing her clothing to bathe, a woman became implicated in the crime of knowing and touching her own body.<sup>18</sup>

The mass production and marketing of soap was vital in the evolution of bathing becoming an essential weapon against physical and moral pollution. McClintock writes:

*“For the elite, a sun darkened skin stained by outdoor manual work was the visible stigma not only of a class obliged to work under the elements for a living, but also of far-off, benighted races marked by God’s disfavour. From the outset, soap took shape as a technology of social purification.”*<sup>19</sup>

I am fascinated by soap. It touches the most intimate parts of our body, starting off as a tangible, solid object, then dissolving and disappearing down the plughole with our bodily *filth*, leaving us *clean*. I use it in my practice not only because it is an excellent sculptural medium, but because it seems to be a physical manifestation of society’s desire to be clean, and to regulate certain behaviours.<sup>20</sup> I am interested in brides together with bathrooms because of the comparisons and contrasts this pairing suggests. For instance: the clean washed body and the luminous white wedding...the clean washed body and the (supposed) clean, virginal bride...the clothed and the unclothed...the revealed and the concealed.

Whilst brides inhabit the bathroom spaces of my work either physical or symbolically, they are never seen bathing. Perhaps the bathroom is a backdrop for internal events or revelations. Perhaps the bath is too private an event to

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid* p. 159- 85

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> Anne McClintock, “Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity racism and imperial advertising,” in Mirzoeff, N. ed., *The Visual Culture Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Routledge, 2001, p. 510

<sup>20</sup> It is an interesting paradox we use soap to clean ourselves when soap itself is not made from particularly “clean” ingredients – animal fats and lye (sodium hydroxide)

bestow upon the unknown viewer. Or maybe, this non-action is a statement of sorts: *I am already clean enough and I am already good enough...*

### III. She Had Long Golden Hair<sup>21</sup>

As a child, I had very long blonde hair, which I diligently plaited each morning until the age of fourteen, when in an act of rebellion and despair, I marched into the hairdresser and demanded it be chopped off. Hair (depictions of, or, the real object) features prominently in my oeuvre of work, and from personal beginnings, I have examined hair within a wider social framework. Hair is an intriguing substance: at once desirable and undesirable, a marker of femininity or masculinity, (or a deliberate disorder of gender) and as much as clothing or behaviour, a marker of the social and moral status of an individual.

In fifteenth century Europe, brides wore their hair loose and flowing, as symbolic of their sexuality and fertility, but also of their proper virginal state.<sup>22</sup> After marriage, women wore their hair tied up, and covered from public view, to be unbound in private as signal of surrender to their husbands.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, whilst for much of European history long hair has been both desirable and fashionable, it has also been viewed with deep suspicion. Women with long loose hair were viewed as dangerous, sexually charged, intent on entrapping men with their curls, *femme fatales*, *loose*. An example of such attitudes can be seen in artists' depictions of Saint Mary Magdalene, where she is shown with long, disordered locks, such as in Titian's "*Mary Magdalen Repentant*."<sup>24</sup>

In a series of drypoint prints, "*An Abrupt End*," "*Loose*," and "*Curl*," I have depicted long, *severed* hair. Despite their immediate graphic appeal, these images are also unsettling: the desirable becomes repellent in its severed state as it dances across the page as an independently animate creature. Cut hair carries

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<sup>21</sup> In reference to Jill Orr's performance of the same name, 1980, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide (See appendix II)

<sup>22</sup> Penny Howell Jolly, *Hair: Untangling a Social History*, The Francis Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, January 31 – June 6, 2004, p. 47

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> See appendix II

many connotations; it can be cut during mourning, it is a sign of liberation, or of a symbolic castration.<sup>25</sup> In “*Wedding Night*,” I reference Frida Kahlo’s “*Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*,”<sup>26</sup> which was produced soon after she divorced the chronically unfaithful Diego Rivera (1886-1957, Mexico.<sup>27</sup>) Wearing men’s clothing and seated in a landscape littered with scraps of hair; Kahlo represents herself more defiant than grief-stricken. My own work, “*Wedding Night*” is an account of a fictional wedding night; I have depicted myself in the process of shearing my head, with the plait from my childhood hanging perilously from the sink. Grief, rebellion and an impending sexual encounter loom large, but my immense, cropped figure leaves little doubt to the resilience of this new bride.

Other work, including “*Pretty Pink Soap*,” references hair of a different nature. If the long, loose tresses of women have caused consternation, body hair is an even more inflammatory topic. The removal of body hair for women (and men) has fallen in and out of favour through history, but regardless of what has happened underneath clothing, the absence of body and pubic hair on the classical nude reveals the “ideal” female form.<sup>28</sup> Hairiness is a potent sign of power and sexuality, and as such has often been met with fear or disgust: “*It is a key sign of masculinity for men, but deplored as a sign of unfemininity for women.*”<sup>29</sup> Rumours abound that John Ruskin (1819-1900) was so horrified by the sight of pubic hair on his new wife that he never consummated the marriage.<sup>30</sup> In contemporary Australian society, the popularity of the full bikini

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<sup>25</sup>Jolly, op. cit. p. 52-53, 60, cites the populist version of the Biblical character Samson, who loses his strength after his hair is cut off by the seductive Delilah, and the liberating short bobs for women during the 1920s.

<sup>26</sup> See appendix II

<sup>27</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, 2005, *The Collection: Frida Kahlo*, viewed October 4 2006, <[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?object\\_id=78333](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=78333)>

<sup>28</sup> One notable Nineteenth Century exception is Courbet’s “*L’Origine du Monde*,” (see appendix II) although it was produced as a private piece of erotica rather than a work of art for public display.

Meecham, P & Sheldon, J, “The Female Nude as the Site of Modernity,” ch 4; in Meecham, P & Sheldon, J, *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction*, London, Routledge, 2000

<sup>29</sup> Suzanne Carbone, The Age, March 8 2003, *Grin and Bare It*, viewed October 4 2006, <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/03/07/1046826539347.html>>

<sup>30</sup> Alison Smith, ed., *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, New York, Watson-Guption, 2002, p. 23, The Guardian Unlimited, March 24 2000, *What to say about John Ruskin*, viewed October 4 2006, <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/artsandentertainment/story/0,6000,150244,00.html>>

wax continues to gain popularity,<sup>31</sup> and Dr Maryanne Dever, from Monash University comments that

*“What we're really being told is that the female body, in its natural state, is highly deficient and in need always of augmentation, alteration and remedy... once we're getting down to processes such as Brazilian waxes, essentially what we're stripping away from the female body is a key marker of adult female sexuality.”<sup>32</sup>*

“*Pretty Pink Soap*” was difficult and time-consuming to create, with hairs individually inserted into flesh-coloured bars of Cussons’ Imperial Leather, and this element of time became significant in the work. I enjoyed the perversity of spending hours *adding* hair, when as a woman I spend too much of my life *removing* hair that my society deems unacceptable. I named this work as I did because I also enjoy the paradox of a formally pleasing work that still makes people recoil because of the loaded nature of the materials I used. We normally associate soap with *cleanliness*, but the hair renders it *unclean*. Or as de Zegher has written of Mona Hatoum’s hair-work, “*Recollection:*”<sup>33</sup>

*“While connoting beauty and identity, the most delicate, eroticised and lasting of human materials is also considered unclean, as ‘matter out of place.’”<sup>34</sup>*

#### **IV. The Abject & the Female Body**

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<sup>31</sup> Suzanne Carbone, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Dr Maryanne Dever, Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research at Monash University in Suzanne Carbone, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> See appendix II

<sup>34</sup> Catherine de Zegher, “Hatoum’s Recollection: About Losing and Being Lost” in Archer, M, Brett, G, & de Zegher, C, *Mona Hatoum*, London, Phaidon, 1997, p. 93

When speaking of “*matter out of place*,” de Zegher quotes British anthropologist Mary Douglas (b.1921). Douglas proposed that things we regard as pollution are not innately unclean; rather they are in the wrong place or defy classification systems we possess, and our “*contemporary concern with hygiene, and the ritual imposition of taboos are symptomatic of a need for order, a desire to make the world conform to an abstract idea we have of it.*”<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore:

*“Dirt then is never an unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity.”*<sup>36</sup>

Douglas’ theories can be compared to the concept of the abject, as coined by psychoanalyst, feminist and semiotician, Julia Kristeva (b.1941Bulgaria / France). The abject is that which “*disturbs identity, system, order,*”<sup>37</sup> and the “*abject covers all the bodily functions, or aspects of the body that are deemed impure or inappropriate for public display or discussion.*”<sup>38</sup> The abject also has a strong feminist context – Kristeva first associated abjection with the maternal female body<sup>39</sup> – in that female bodily functions are *abjected* by a patriarchal social order.<sup>40</sup>

Many artists, including Louise Bourgeois (b.1911, America), Cindy Sherman (b.1954, America), Carolee Schneemann (b.1939, America) and Kiki Smith (b.1954, America),<sup>41</sup> have addressed the abject. The abject is also of particular

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<sup>35</sup> Lynn Holden, *Encyclopaedia of Taboos*, Oxford, ABC-CLIO Inc, 2000, p.58

<sup>36</sup> Mary Douglas in Lynn Holden, op. cit. p. 59

<sup>37</sup> Sonya Andermahr, Terry Lovell & Carol Wolkowitz, *A Concise Glossary of Feminist Theory*, Arnold, a member of the Hodder Headline Group, 1997, p. 7

<sup>38</sup> Tate Online: British and International Modern and Contemporary Art, 2006, *Tate Glossary: Abject Art*, viewed October 7 2006,

< <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=7>>

<sup>39</sup> Sonya Andermahr, Terry Lovell & Carol Wolkowitz, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Tate Online, op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Smith’s work has been of considerable influence within my own practice, conceptually and materially. A website produced in conjunction with a 2003 - 2004 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, provides an interesting account of Smith’s use of the female body in her practise:

interest to me in my own practice. The physical/biological bodies, and the behaviour of women, (what *society* deems appropriate/non-appropriate) seem to be inextricably linked. I made “*Hair, Dirt, Blood Soap*” because I enjoyed making visible all those things we hope soap will wash away. By making this work, I made a perceived *clean* object (soap) into a *dirty* object. However, my intervention as an artist also transformed these *abjected* materials of my own body into a work of art - something of value and worthy of display.

Another related work is “*Little Plugs*.” I think plugholes are a potential source of anxiety. They are hidden, uncharted territory and a reminder of our own bodies, and body elements we wash away during bathing. The vagina is often perceived as a similar type of threat, whereas they could also be considered infinitely powerful, mysterious and intriguing. The plugholes I carved in “*Little Plugs*” are sourced from real drainpipes from Adelaide bathrooms, but despite being sourced from human constructions, their hand carving resulted in a “slipped geometry,” and uniqueness of form for each. I would like to think my audience would accept them as beautiful and distinctive individuals.

## **V. Saints and Sinners: The Young Ladies Instant Online Absolution Booth**

My interest in brides and bathing stems from a belief that they are both symbolic of a social order with an authoritarian attitude towards women’s actions and opportunities. One work that implicitly addresses my interest in this belief is “*The Young Ladies’ Instant Online Absolution Booth*.” Given the plethora of sources I discovered that linked physical and moral purity,<sup>42</sup> I was inspired to create the Absolution Booth, an interactive website to provide young ladies with virtual “absolution soap” to cleanse them of their sins. I was attracted to the

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“As a woman, Smith strove to universalise the human experience through depictions of the female form, thereby challenging the long tradition of male artists’ exploitation of the female body as an erotic subject.” The Museum of Modern Art, 2003, *Kiki Smith: Prints, Books & Things*, viewed September 17 2006, <<http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/2003/kikismith/>>

<sup>42</sup> Including “*Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin,*” Psalm 51:2, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV Version*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 171

conundrum of *literal* and *physical* cleansing using *virtual* bars of soap, and to the concept of sin. I used a Christian framework for the Absolution Booth, as it is a familiar structure in Western thought, and also an example of a highly patriarchal tradition.

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, sin is

*“Usually equated with an individual’s failure to live up to external standards of conduct or with their violation of taboos, laws or moral codes,”*<sup>43</sup>

This suggests that a sin could be a major, or, a very *minor* misbehaviour.

Taking inspiration from antique etiquette guides for ladies, including “*The Two Paths*,”<sup>44</sup> and Peter Mullen’s movie *The Magdalene Sisters*,<sup>45</sup> where “bad”<sup>46</sup> girls are incarcerated in laundry workhouses, I devised forty-nine sins that a young lady could “fall prey to”. For each sin I invented an “absolution soap” with botanical and other ingredients to produce an ironic punishment/absolution appropriate to the sin. For instance, for the sin of *sex for pleasure rather than procreation*, the sinner is required to use soap containing fertility enhancing herbs to receive absolution. Each soap is represented by a hand-drawn image and sadistic (and sometimes humorous) instructions for use, including cold baths, excessive scrubbing, scold’s bridles, and the ingestion of soap. Watching over the website is an unsympathetic Virgin Mary with a pulsating, red bath sponge. The sins featured in the Absolution Booth range from minor misdemeanours to healthy human behaviour, with the punishment/absolution quite out of proportion for the crime. Whilst moral codes still have merit in contemporary life, the

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<sup>43</sup> *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc, (please see Encyclopaedia Britannica in the State Library of South Australia for more details)

<sup>44</sup> American Women: A gateway to library of congress resources for the study of women’s history and culture in the United States, 2003, *The Two Paths*, viewed October 6 2006, <[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/awhbib:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(ppmsca+02925\)\):displayType=1:m856sd=ppmsca:m856sf=02925](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/awhbib:@field(NUMBER+@band(ppmsca+02925)):displayType=1:m856sd=ppmsca:m856sf=02925)> Originally published in *Social Purity, or, the Life of the Home and Nation*, L. Nichols Publishing Company, 1903

<sup>45</sup> Peter Mullen, (director) *The Magdalene Sisters*, United Kingdom / Ireland, Miramax, 2002

<sup>46</sup> e.g. young mothers, rape victims, and the mentally ill

Absolution Booth stands as a commentary on the potential hazards when rules of etiquette and morality become over zealous, or get used to maintain the structures of power in society.

## VI. Good Girl / Bad Girl: The problem of Language

I created The Absolution Booth to be vindictive in language and intent, this being an unfortunately daily reality that many women face. The work is peppered with colourful language: with users being accused of being *Treacherous Sluts*, a *Filthy Whores*, *Indolent Beasts*,<sup>47</sup> and worse, when being prescribed their punishment/absolution. The words I used were a reflection on the suggestive power of language. Surveying a thesaurus, I uncovered a plethora of antonyms for words like *pure*, *washed* and *clean*, such as *licentious*, *unchaste*, *debased*, *immoral* and *wanton*.<sup>48</sup> It was disturbing to discover that many of these negative words suggested not only a gender specificity, but also implied loose<sup>49</sup> sexual morals and godliness. Given even our language vilifies women, it is no surprise that women have often been judged accordingly.

Another example of the power of language can be seen in binary oppositions. Binary oppositions, used and/or critiqued by structuralists and post-structuralists, describe the western pattern of language where two words or concepts are contrasted with each other.<sup>50</sup> Examples include *male/female*, *black/white* and *subject/object*. According to Derrida,<sup>51</sup> “one term in binary opposition is always *subconsciously or implicitly assigned dominance over the other.*”<sup>52</sup> Binary oppositions are hierarchical, where the weaker in the word pair is deemed undesirable and cast into the category of “the other.”<sup>53</sup> Given the structures of language and society seem inextricably bound; binary oppositions are of interest

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<sup>47</sup> See the Absolution Booth online at <http://www.instant-online-absolution-booth.org>

<sup>48</sup> Laurence Urdang, *The Oxford Thesaurus*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 212 This language was also the subject of an early work, “*Pure Soap*” (see appendix I,) where I inscribed 46 bars of soap with antonyms and synonyms for “pure.”

<sup>49</sup> Another loaded term.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Mautner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., London, Penguin Books Ltd, 1997, p. 69

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004), French Philosopher, often named as the founder of Deconstruction.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Mautner, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*

to me in my own practice.<sup>54</sup> Binaries including dress/undress, clean/dirty, pure/impure can be discovered in my own body of work. For example, the narrative of “*Scrub you ‘till you bleed*” is self evident, a black paper dress-stand-in for the female protagonist- has been obsessively scrubbed in an attempt to reach a clean, *white*, acceptable state. In the process, the dress has been damaged, with essential character and personality physically and symbolically erased. In part a commentary on the nineteenth century Pears soap advertisement<sup>55</sup> where a black child is rendered white after a bath, and Janine Antoni’s “*Loving Care*,”<sup>56</sup> “*Scrub you ‘till you bleed*” links the “other” status of femaleness, blackness, and dirtiness.

Binary oppositions are very clearly problematic. It is frustrating working within this particular framework of language, where white, heterosexual males are deemed to be the norm. Another annoyance is the assumption that you must carry one label or the other; you must be *male* or *female*, or *good* or *bad*. A popular binary that has been long ascribed to women is that of *virgin* or *whore*. I am neither the Virgin Mary nor Mary Magdalene,<sup>57</sup> and I resent that myself, or anyone else, should have her complex and rich existence so simplistically labelled. In my practice, soap is embellished with dirt and blood, and dirty, messy charcoal drawings are given equal status to carvings on clean white soap. I cannot avoid binaries, but I hope that when looking at my work, the viewer will begin to consider and appreciated the underprivileged of our language and society.

## VII. Self-Portraiture

One notable feature of my practice is that when representing the figure, I concentrate entirely on self-portraiture. One reason I have chosen to focus on

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<sup>54</sup> As in any critical analysis of the cultural norms of race, gender, sexuality etc.

<sup>55</sup> See figure 44.1, Anne McClintock, “Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity racism and imperial advertising,” in Mirzoeff, N, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Routledge, 2001, p. 511

<sup>56</sup> See appendix II

<sup>57</sup> Mary Magdalene is another example of a woman defamed by a white, Christian, male ruling class.

self-portraiture is because of the personal nature of my subject matter. Although my oeuvre is not solely a personal narrative, many pieces *have* emerged from reflections on my own experiences. To not include myself in my imagery would therefore be an evasion of the issues at hand. I can only speak for myself, and furthermore, I could not expect viewers to relate to images of an unknown model after hearing a detailed account of my personal thoughts and feelings. I hope my presence in the work will allow viewers to relate to my work better, to perhaps consider their own similar (or different) experiences, and therefore begin to make the shift from personal to universal experience.

However, to engage in the representation of self in visual arts, particularly for a female artist, is fraught with danger. There is always the possibility that the viewer will consider you narcissistic, self indulgent, or as, Meskimmon has written:

*“Women artists who seek to become ‘subjects’ must examine gender difference and representational strategies in order to produce self portraits; a woman simply cannot take for granted that she will be seen as the subject rather than the object of the work.”<sup>58</sup>*

Until recently, the accepted pattern in art making was that of a male artist (the subject) and female model (the object.<sup>59</sup>) John Berger’s *“Ways of Seeing,”*<sup>60</sup> and Laura Mulvey’s (b.1941, Britain) essay *“Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,”*<sup>61</sup> which described the way in which images of women are produced for consumption by men, have been significant in the feminist reading of art works every since their publication.

In my own body of work, *“Grandma’s Wedding Dress”* in particular walks a fine line between exploration and exploitation. This series of photographs was influenced by Deborah Paauwe’s (b.1972, Australia) work, and as Marsh has

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<sup>58</sup> Marsha Meskimmon, “Women’s Self Portraiture Explorations of the Body,’ ch 3; in Meskimmon, M, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists’ Self Portraiture in the Twentieth Century*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 103

<sup>59</sup> Another binary opposition particularly pertinent in a feminist reading of art history

<sup>60</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books Ltd, 1972

<sup>61</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Screen*, 16.3, Autumn 1975, p. 6-18

commented about her, “*the erotic aspects of the photographs position them within a discourse about the objectification of the female form for the male gaze.*”<sup>62</sup> “*Grandma’s Wedding Dress*” was a deliberate act of misbehaviour: the minister’s daughter playing up in her grandmother’s wedding dress, sans underwear. This work could be perceived as playful, cheerfully erotic, a salutation to female sexuality, a study in aesthetics, pornographic, paedophilic<sup>63</sup>, or pandering to male tastes. Meskimmon has stated that:

*“When one confronts the use of ‘woman’ as object and the nature of pleasure in visual imagery, rather than merely avoiding the representation, the potential exists for critical misreadings.”*<sup>64</sup>

As I have chosen to represent women in my art, this is an issue I will continually encounter. However, as Meskimmon has explained, self-portraits by women begin to defy the conventions of art making because they begin to break down the subject/object and artist/model binary.<sup>65</sup> As the artist, I am the *master*<sup>66</sup> of the images of myself, rather than simply being the *object* in a male artist’s image. “*Grandma’s Wedding Dress*” was produced without assistance, by using the automatic feature on a digital camera, then editing images of choice. By being both the subject and object of these images, and controlling the views I allow the spectator, I hope that “*Grandma’s Wedding Dress*” will be viewed as liberating rather than exploitative.

## **VIII. Thought, Materials and Process**

Just as my practise has addressed a wide range of ideas, my art is materially diverse. Rather than adhering to one discipline, I have enjoyed using a wide range of techniques and materials significant to the intent of my work. Drypoint

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<sup>62</sup> Anne Marsh “Through a veil brightly: recent works by Deborah Paauwe” in Paauwe, D, *Double Dutch*, Kent Town, Greenaway Art Gallery, 2002, p. 8

<sup>63</sup> For viewers unaware the images are self-portraits, the age of the figure could be difficult to discern.

<sup>64</sup> Marsha Meskimmon, op. cit. p. 103

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*

<sup>66</sup> Another pitfall of language: *Mistress* clearly does not have the same power.

printmaking, fine pen drawings<sup>67</sup> and soap carving for instance, were labour intensive, obsessive techniques, which became a physical manifestation of the desire to be *clean*, as well as suggesting compulsive activities such as repeated hand washing. To carve soap, I fashioned a toolkit of needles, drill-bits, linoleum-carving tools, fine brushes and sandpaper to painstakingly uncover my designs, rather like working on an archaeological dig. One work in particular, “*Absolution Soap*,” was a literal translation of my interest in bathing. After carving bars of soap, I literally *washed* them for three hours to achieve a worn down effect. (And in a disturbing case of life imitating art,<sup>68</sup> after submerging my hands in soapy water for so long, my already pale skin was bleached even further from the wrists to finger tips.)

Time has been an important element in my practice. I want the viewer to appreciate the labour intensity of inserting hundreds of hair into soap, or of scratching thousands of marks onto acrylic.<sup>69</sup> Even if the viewer does not fully understand the intent of my work, I hope they would find it successful on a visual level, and appreciate the laborious hand made quality of each piece. Fiona Hall’s (b.1953, Australia) work has been influential for me, as I have admired her skill in manipulating ordinary materials such as sardine cans or soap to create precious and symbolically loaded art objects. Whilst we may share a common material in soap, I believe my work, such as “*Pretty Pink Soap*” to be distinctly different in intent and process. For example, Hall’s work is often preserved within glass vitrines, as in “*Cash Crop*”<sup>70</sup> which becomes part of the language of the piece. For my own work, the overwhelming sensory experience of soap is vital. I want the viewer to smell the sickly scent of good intention, to detect a taste of it on the tip of their tongue, and then to marvel at the fragility of the work as their breath shifts the hairs implanted in “*Pretty Pink Soap*.”

In contrast to a body of tightly worked soap sculptures, digital images<sup>71</sup> and drypoint prints, I also completed a series of large-scale self-portraits worked in

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<sup>67</sup> In the Absolution Booth

<sup>68</sup> The Pears Soap advertisement from Anne McClintock, op. cit.

<sup>69</sup> In drypoint

<sup>70</sup> See appendix II

<sup>71</sup> Including “*Cleaning Bride*” and “*Absolution Mary*,” see Appendix I

charcoal. In many ways, charcoal is an antithesis to soap. It is messy, *dirty*, and I generally use *soap* to clean it off my skin after a day of drawing. I began these drawings by covering the paper with a quickly applied wash of Indian ink. I relished in the mess, and the chance situations: drips and odd ink shapes show through in the completed charcoal drawings. The charcoal portraits were sourced from staged photographs, and I enjoyed the transition from photograph to drawing; features were added, erased, altered and ignored. It was liberating to take a photograph and reduce it to the rawest of marks and tones. I looked to Paula Rego's drawings for inspiration;<sup>72</sup> I wanted drawings that were unsentimental, unrelenting, and physically and emotionally tough. The scale of these drawings was important. I wanted my brides to be large and resilient, with the larger than life figure in "*Wedding Night*" particularly successful. The scale of the charcoal drawings was also physically demanding, I needed to use my entire body to work, and this provided a respite (in both working and viewing) from other works.

One of the potential hazards of working with such diverse materials is that the work does not hold together as a harmonious body. I addressed this issue in several ways. Firstly, I sought to use an approach whereby materials (such as paper) were each systematically used in different guises. I made the changes in state, from digital print, to paper as sculpture, to bold charcoal drawings and then to delicate printmaking, easily apparent to the viewer, so that contrast became an expected and unifying force within my work. I also worked primarily monochromatically. Not only did this unite the work, it also made the occasional inclusion of colour more powerful.

I also use consistent iconography, for example, the (wedding) dress.<sup>73</sup> I have been particularly interested in the way the dress shapes the female body, and its dual purposes of modesty and display. "*Scrub you till you bleed*" in particular, was an interesting exercise in the qualities of the dress. This work was constructed from paper for a number of reasons. Firstly, I wanted to make a link between the two-

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<sup>72</sup> Including "*Snow White Playing with her Father's Trophies*," 1995, see appendix II

<sup>73</sup> The social, cultural and economic implications of the dress could easily be the subject of another complete paper.

dimensional and three-dimensional pieces in my oeuvre, by exploring sculpture and drawing in one work. Another work, "*The Fitting*," was a scaled down version of the large paper dress, and used the "fabric" scraps from the larger project. It was displayed flat in seven pieces, pre-construction, with Hannah Wilke<sup>74</sup> style eruptions of pink silk, framed by worn cotton sections cut from my old bed sheets. "*The Fitting*" was further reinforcement of the two-dimensional to three-dimensional change of state. Both paper dress works were also partly constructed by hand stitching with embroidery thread, a nod to often maligned and undepreciated "women's work."<sup>75</sup>

Another reasoning for a *paper* dress was the way in which it amplified one of the purposes the (fabric) dress: to impose certain proportions on the female body. When I tried on a prototype of "*Scrub you till you bleed*" I suddenly possessed breasts and hips of outlandish proportions due to the stiffness of the paper, and the transformation was so startling, I used the prototype in a large charcoal drawing, "*Paper Cut*." Paper was also important for its structural strength. Despite the abuse suffered in its making, "*Scrub you till you bleed*" remains standing. The dress may have sunk into the mud a little,<sup>76</sup> and torn at the hem, but it remains upright and resilient.

### **More Beginnings...**

In this paper I have endeavoured to provide a brief yet captivating introduction to my studio practice. I have discussed the historical, contemporary and personal in an attempt to describe my passions in both the visual arts and wider life. I have provided readers with an array of art (both my own, and that of others) to investigate further, and have given brief descriptions on the physical processes

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<sup>74</sup> As in "*S.O.S. Stratification Object Series*," see appendix II

<sup>75</sup> See Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, London, The Women's Press Limited, 1984

<sup>76</sup> One of the most arresting images from Jane Campion's "*The Piano*" was character Ida's billowing black dress as she collapsed into the mud after the mutilation of her finger. Jane Campion (director) *The Piano*, New Zealand, Miramax, 1993

used in my work, this being both an interesting insight, and significant to the symbolic meaning of my work. Having completed this paper, I have found that my ideas regarding the bride, the bathroom, morality, and on being female, have proven to be rigorous and well-founded. More importantly, this essay has been an exciting period of development. On many occasions during this project I uncovered new knowledge and ideas, some of which have already prompted me to begin new work. Whilst this paper has reached its conclusion, I will look back upon it as the first small step in a greater journey of learning and discovery in my art practice.

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## Appendix II

### Listing of Cited Works

#### **Janine Antoni**

b. 1964, Bahamas / United States

*Loving Care*

1992

Performance at Anthony D'Offay Gallery, London

#### **Gustave Courbet**

1819-1877, France

*L'Origine du monde (The Origin of the World)*

1866

oil on canvas

46.0 x 55.0 cm

Musee d'Orsay, Paris

#### **Artemisia Gentileschi**

1597-1651, Italy

*Susanna and the Elders*

1610

oil on canvas

170.0 x 121.0 cm

Private collection

#### **Fiona Hall**

b. 1953, Australia

*Cash Crop*

1998, Australia

soap, gouache on banknotes, labels, vitrine

Art Gallery of New South Wales

#### **Mona Hatoum**

b. 1952, Lebanon / London

*Recollection*

1995

hair balls, strands of hair hung from the ceiling, wooden loom with woven hair,  
table

dimensions variable

installation at Beguinage St. Elizabeth, Kortrijk, Belgium

De Vleeshal, Middelburg, the Netherlands

**Frida Kahlo**

1907-1954, Mexico

*Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*

1940

oil on canvas

40.0 x 27.9 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

**Jill Orr**

b. 1952, Australia

*She Had Long Golden Hair*

1980

performance

Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide

**Paula Rego**

b. 1935, Portugal / Britain

*Snow White Playing with her Father's Trophies*

1995, Britain

pastel on paper, mounted on aluminium

178.0 x 150.0 cm

The Saatchi Gallery

**Peter Paul Rubens**

1577-1640, Netherlands

*Venus at a Mirror / The Toilet of Venus*

c.1615

oil on panel

124.0 x 98.0 cm

Private Collection

**Tintoretto**

c.1518-1594, Italy

*Susanna and the Elders*

1555-56

oil on canvas

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

**Titian**

c.1488-1576, Italy

*Mary Magdalen Repentant*

1531

oil on canvas

Private collection

**Titian**

c.1488 – 1576, Italy

*Diana and Actaeon*

1559

oil on canvas

190.3 x 207.0 cm

National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

**Hannah Wilke**

1940-1993, United States

*S.O.S. Starification Object Series*

1974

chewing gum on paper

84.3 x 66.5 cm

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc, New York