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<i>Master of Fine Arts</i>	
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The Objects of Femininity



By Sandra O'Dea

Objects of Femininity

A paper in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Fine Arts (Research)
submitted to the Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University

March 2005

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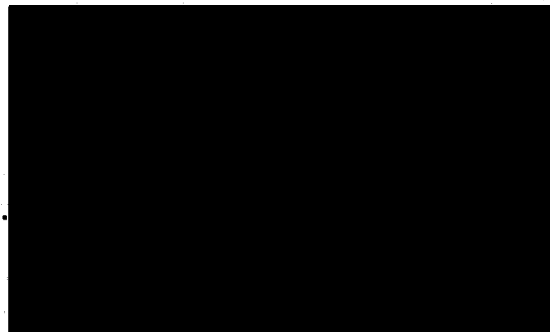
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Abstract

This research documentation has been a response to a studio investigation of the feminine sculptural forms that I have produced in the shape of empty dress, garment and gutted female hung torsos. I have produced a body of work that is intrinsically tied to my own feminine construction within contemporary society. During this documentation, I look at the discourses within society that have and continue to shape the feminine. I have discovered that despite many years of feminism women continue to judge themselves by an internalized perspective that has been shaped by and for the male gaze.

My documentation aims to show that by reflecting upon the theories of post structural feminism I have been able to establish a strong feminine voice. This voice expresses itself through semiotic forms and installation sculpture. My primary focus has been to question why I make what I make, and what universal purpose my works serve. I have made (Seventy-Two Virgins) in paradise from tissue paper and pressed white plastic. I present these in a lyrical installation space that will speak of the dogma and powerful myths that have shaped patriarchal society.

This documentation is meant to compliment my art practice and strengthen my small feminine voice.

Sandra O'Dea

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Monash University and the staff of the Faculty of Art and Design for their support. Special thanks to my supervisor and Sculpture Studio Coordinator, Dr. Dan Wollmering, who has been supportive and patient with me during this journey. It has not been easy for me to complete this documentation and it is only through the guidance and understanding of my mentors that I have been able to reach my final goal. In reflection there are many who have come and into my life and interacted positively and critically to support my venture in producing this research investigation paper on the *Objects of Femininity*. Special thanks to Dr. Robert Nelson, Head of Art the Theory of Art and Design Department, who has guided me in the right direction to complete this documentation. Thank you to Mr. Graham Birch of the Theory of Art Department for his guidance and support with my writing and documentation. Others I would like to thank are Mr. Andrew Mackenzie art historian and writer whose invaluable advice has been gratifying. Mr. James Meldrum artist painter former lecturer at RMIT, who has been my dear friend, critic and sounding board. Lyn Plummer whose acquaintance has inspired my journey. Fiona Orr who, without her friendship and support, I could never have believed in myself; her direction and mentoring are part of the treasures in my life. I also thank my dearest friend and mentor Mr. Ken Cato, Australia's leading image-maker who kept me motivated to continue my journey as an artist. My friends and family especially my two daughters Belinda O'Dea and Monica O'Dea who have never stopped believing in me. My son James Dick for his patience and understanding. I also thank sincerely Judith Morgan for her services in proof reading this documentation. Lastly, a special thanks to all the staff of the Monash University Library Caulfield.

Sandra O'Dea

Table Of Contents

	PAGE
Front Page	1
Declaration	11
Abstract	111
Acknowledgements	1V
Table of contents	5-7
Illustrations	8 -9
INTRODUCTION	10 -18
CHAPTER ONE <i>Theory to Practice</i>	19- 42
1.1 Post Structural Theory	20
1.2 Lack of Femininity	21
1.3 Dominate Perspective	22
1.4 Sigmund Freud Psychoanalysis	23
1.5 Creation of Myths	23
1.6 Constructs of Patriarchy	24
1.7 Semiotic Feminine Form and Signs	25
1.8 Patriarchal Structures of Society	26
1.9 Madonna As A Role Model	27
1.10 Perceptions of the Female Body	27
1.11 My Background	28
1.12 Virgin Mary Iconic Image of Woman	32
1.13 Empty Dress	34
1.14 Louis Bourgeois	35
1.15 Cindy Sherman	36
1.16 Studio Investigation	39
1.17 Conclusion	41
1. CHAPTER TWO <i>Artistic Genres</i>	43-63
2.1 Installation space	44

2.2	Doll Story	45
2.3	Vanessa Beecroft	46
2.4	Madonna As A Role Model	48
2.5	Perceptions of the Female Body	49
2.6	Louise Bourgeois	54
2.7	Cindy Sherman	56
2.8	Wendy Stavrianos	57
2.9	Lyn Plummer	61
2. CHAPTER THREE	<i>Methodology and Making</i>	64-75
3.1	What I make	64
3.2	Other Sculptural Influences	64
3.3	Intention	65
3.4	Subjectivity	66
3.5	Themes	66
3.6	Techniques and Processes	67
3.7	Materials	67
3.8	Forms	68
3.9	Exploration of Identity	69
3.10	Empty Dress as Feminine Object	71
3.11	Outcome	75
3. CHAPTER FOUR	<i>Exhibition / Examination</i>	76-86
4.1	The Exhibition/ Examination	76
4.2	Virgins in Paradiso	77
4.3	Cornered	78
4.4	Table	79
4.5	Sisters	80
4.6	Lace Tree	81
4.7	Stairway to Heaven	83
4.8	Lace Torsos	84
4.9	Angelic Ideals	85

4.10	Outcome	85
4. CHAPTER FIVE	<i>Summary / Conclusion</i>	87-90
5.1	Conclusion	87
5.2	Understanding Where I've Come From	87
5.3	Main Points	88
5.4	My Case	88
5.5	Where To From Here	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY		91-95

ILLUSTRATIONS

- | | | |
|------|-----------|--|
| 1 | 10 | <i>Virgins in Paradiso</i> , tissue paper and pressed plastic, S.O'Dea, 2005 |
| 2 | 11 | <i>Field of Angels</i> , tissue paper and pressed plastic, S.O'Dea, 2003 |
| 3 | 14 | <i>Self Portrait</i> , black and white photograph, S.O'Dea, 1996 |
| 4 | 16 | <i>Self Portrait</i> , black and white photograph Hatta S.O'Dea, 1995 |
| 1.1 | 19 | <i>Constructed feminine</i> , black and white photograph, S.O'Dea, 1997 |
| 1.2 | 24 | <i>Adam and Eve</i> , Italy sketch, S.O'Dea |
| 1.3 | 26 | <i>Catterdrale</i> , postcard, P.Uccello |
| 1.4 | 32 | <i>Madonna and Child</i> , oil on paper, S.O'Dea, 1996 |
| 1.5 | 40 | <i>Male and Female</i> , in Box mixed media, S.O'Dea, 1996 |
| 2.1 | 44 | <i>Self Portrait</i> , black and white photograph, S.O'Dea, 1995 |
| 2.2 | 46 | <i>Role reversal</i> , black and white photograph, S.O'Dea, 1996 |
| 2.3 | 49 | <i>Wear No Angels</i> , tissue paper and plastic, S.O'Dea, 2003 |
| 2.4 | 53 | <i>Angel</i> , BHG 2003 tissue paper and pressed plastic, S.O'Dea, 2003 |
| 2.5 | 55 | <i>Prophet and Single White Female</i> , cement and latex, S.O'Dea, 2000 |
| 2.6 | 57 | <i>Role Reversal 2</i> , black and white photograph, S.O'Dea, 1996 |
| 2.7 | 59 | <i>Twig work</i> , twigs, pigment and latex, S.O'Dea, 2001 |
| 2.8 | 60 | <i>Leafwork latex</i> and autumn leaves, S. O'Dea, 2001 |
| 2.9 | 62 | <i>White Torso</i> , tissue paper and plastic, S.O'Dea, 2005 |
| 2.10 | 63 | <i>The Walking Tree</i> , photograph, Maurice Tabard ,1947 |
| 3.1 | 71 | <i>Pink Dress</i> , material, S.O'Dea, 1998 |
| 3.2 | 73 | <i>Reflections of You</i> , lazer cut acrylic mirror, S.O'Dea, 2001 |
| 4.1 | 76 | <i>The Examination /The Exhibition</i> , tissue paper and pressed plastic, S.O'Dea, 2005 |
| 4.2 | 77 | <i>Wall of Virgin</i> , tissue paper, S. O'Dea, 2005 |
| 4.3 | 78 | <i>Cornered</i> , tissue paper and pressed plastic, S. O'Dea, 2005 |

- 4.4 **79** *Table*, tissue paper and pressed plastic, S.O'Dea, 2005
- 4.5 **80** *Sisters*, tissue paper, plastic, mirror, marble dust and cement,
S.O'Dea, 2004
- 4.6 **81** *Lace Tree*, lace, marble dust and cement, S.O'Dea, 2004
- 4.7 **83** *Stairway to Heaven*, mirror and wood, S.O'Dea, 2004
- 4.8 **84** *Lace Torsos*, danish white cement, marble dust and lace, S. O'Dea,
2005
- 4.9 **86** *Web Dress*, acrylic material, S.O'Dea, 2005

Introduction

Objects of Femininity



fig.no.1 *Virgins in Paradiso*, tissue paper and pressed plastic, S.O'Dea

In producing this paper I have discovered that despite many years of feminism women continue to judge themselves by an internalised male perspective along with expectations that society and cultural background place on them. These contemporary times have been and continue to be one of huge insurgency and development for women in society. It is my aim in this documentation to show that only by the holding up of the mirror and reflection upon the ideas of femininity; in relation to learned and instinctual behaviour, which controls the construction of femininity in a patriarchal society: that are we then able to change our perception of the feminine and each other.

It is my aim in this paper to discuss how the objects and dialogue through 'words,' that we are exposed to as women, influence our perception and identity of self. I also discuss how my studio investigation has been able to development through a semiotic language of forms that connects our femininity to the environment, mythology and each other. For this Masters exhibition and presentation, I have explored many areas of the artistic process through my works in progress in relation to this exegesis *Objects of Femininity*. The subject matter I have chosen in the form of garment, cloth and feminine persona is the driving force for this research investigation.

The mediums I have used for this final project is pressed white plastic shopping bags, tissues paper, Danish white cement, marble dust, mirror and wood constructions. I have made seventy-two life-size female virginal forms and torsos cast from a mannequin as my model. I present these in the form of an installation both as wall and freestanding sculptures. This work crosses the genre boundaries of sculpture, painting, drawing and performance; all these art methods have influenced the finale outcome. See fig. no.2 below as evidence.

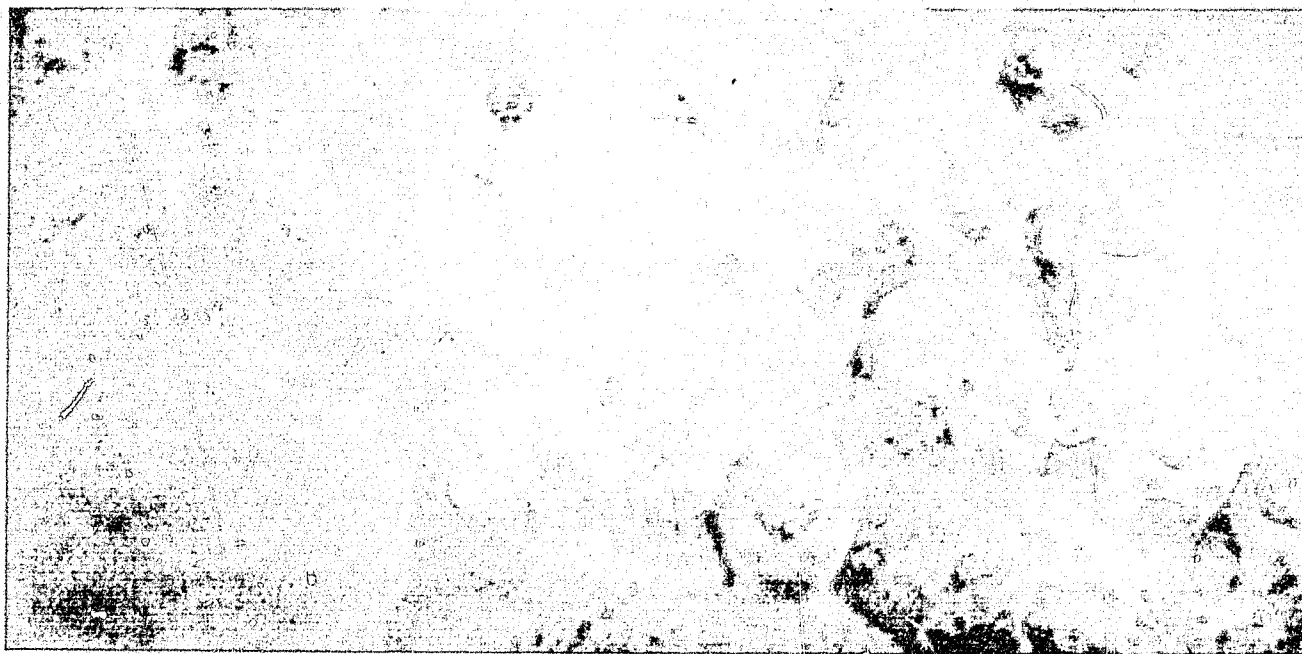


fig. no.2 *Field of Angels*, tissue pare and pressed plastic S.O'Dea.

Theories I Have Identified With

I identify with the theories associated with post structuralism and deconstruction. I have identified my artistic practice as being part of the past and deconstructive dialogue. In that, the work I make uses my experience of place, materials and idea in an effort to create a new way of seeing the objects I create. I look at the influences of Sigmund Freud¹ the father of psychoanalysis and in particular the work he did with his study of '*Hysteria*' to indicate that identity is subject to sexual desire and the unconscious. Karl Jung² who gave us the word, archetypes as common themes of mythic forces from the collective unconscious, shared dreams of humanity. He was a prodigy of Freud and artist in his own right. Jung links Freud's initial discoveries and observes the powerful influence of myths and dreams on the unconscious mind. This I compare with contemporary philosopher Jacque Derrida³ who offers a post-structural, deconstructive concept that relates to binary positions in relation to written language. I then compare this to the dense readings of Michel Foucault's⁴ discourses on the subject of sex and power and discuss how this has shaped society. Jacques Lacan⁵ looked at phallocentrism perspective and reveals how men and women are constructed according to patriarchal structures. Roland Barthes⁶ the critic of '*visual texts*', of popular culture and psychoanalysis looks at the decentralised focus on the author as artist maker. But more importantly I compare these male theories to that of feminist philosophers, critics and writers such as Melanie Klein⁷ who writes in depth about how the Oedipus theory tells of the construction of the female child experiences as an equivalent to a boy's castration anxiety discussed

¹ Phoca. S. & Wright. R. *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, UK, 1999, p15-25

² Krauss R.E. *The Optical Unconscious*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp323-324

³ Phoca. S. & Wright. R. *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, UK, 1999, pp 46-9

⁴ Lechte J. *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers M. Foucault*, Routledge, 1994, p116

⁵ Phoca. S. & Wright. R. *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, UK, 1999, pp36, 58, 69

⁶ Sontag.S. *Edited R.Barthe Selected Writings*, Forland Collins, Oxford 1982 pp

⁷ Phoca. S. & Wright. R. *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books,UK, 1999 pp 26-9

in Freud's findings. Other female theorists I delve into are Julia Kristeva⁸ whose semiotic language of form discusses the speaking subject and Luce Irigaray who believe that psychoanalysis is patriarchal, phallocentric and has not recognised the role of maternal or female sexuality. Camille Paglia⁹ encourages women to be female and sexual while still exercising control in a patriarchal world. From all these influences, I link and support my own theoretical content in this documentation on the '*Objects of Femininity*'.

Artistic Genres That Have Influenced Me

The artistic genre that my work identifies with is contemporary installation sculpture. The style I use is derived from my love of classical sculpture. My recent trips to Italy and the United Kingdom have influenced this presentation immensely through my intense studies of classical art. The 'subject matter,' that I believe my work lives within is part of the deeply dense theories of feminism. Within the content of my work, I am exploring the gender expectations of femininity in today's modern world. I have drawn my influences from Louise Bourgeois French sculptor, Cindy Sherman's artistic studio practice, Vanessa Beecroft United Kingdom installation artist, as well as Australian painter Wendy Stavrianos and sculptor and the installation work of fellow Australian Lyn Plummer.

In addition, I also converse about the many other artistic influences that have shaped my own artistic and theoretically development to date.

⁸Phoca. S. & Wright. R. *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, 1999 UK pp 60-8, 154, 157, 158, 165

⁹Phoca. S. & Wright. R. *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, 1999 UK pp 12, 23-5, 61-3, 79-80, 96, 107, 111

Discoveries and Discussion



fig. no. 3 '*Self Portrait*' Black and White photograph, S. O'Dea

I think it is a rather strange position that I have come from as a woman to analysis the roles I have been subjected to play in my life through the making of Art. However, ever since I can remember I have questioned the expectations of society upon what I feel as a human being. I have discovered that I have been influenced greatly by the patriarchal structures that construct our society. In addition, this has affected the way I have viewed my own femininity through the unconscious adoption of the external gaze of men. Please see above fig. no. 3 *Self portrait 1996*, investigating the male gaze.

Theory to Practice

In chapter one, I discuss the :

1. Links to post structural theory within my art practice.
2. The issues of femininity within a feminist paradigm, which have become the driving force behind this studio investigation of my work.
3. I look at the roles I have played in my lifetime as a woman and the expectations placed upon other women in today's society.

I link these concepts with the idea that our perception of self is always within the framework of a male gaze in a patriarchal society. I will discuss how language relates to a semiotic form of feminine signs in my work. I examine how these signs developed through a deconstructive paradigm. Looking at the way this work is seen and interrupted by the viewer audience. I look at the issue of whether it is possible for, a woman to truly examine her own perception of self within a patriarchal construct. In so doing I look to investigate the influential structures that shape patriarchal society in an effort to determine meaning and value for this research paper.

Artistic Genre

In chapter two, I examine the underlying theory on which my creative efforts are based. Looking at the artistic genre in my art practice, which is poststructuralist contemporary installation sculpture, I compare examples from the past and present influences with my current body of work. I do this by probing my own studio practice and examining what I make to align myself with the work of other contemporary artists working within the same genre. I examine how, when and why these past genres have been utilised to initiate change in society. In doing so I am able to clarify my own position as a practicing contemporary sculptor in 2005.

I draw my influences from Louise Bourgeois, Cindy Sherman, Vanessa Beecroft, Wendy Stavrianos and sculptor and the installation work of Lyn Plummer. In addition, I also converse about the many other artistic influences that have shaped my own artistic development practically and theoretically to date.



fig. no. 4 'Self Portrait' black and white photograph, S. O'Dea

Methodology and Making

In chapter three, I will talk about my methodology of making art and I look at why and how I go about making art. Discussing the different techniques and processes I have used to make this current body of work for this Masters

research presentation. I will also investigate, the way in which this work has evolved over a period using different methods and practices to explore the issues of feminine subjectivity. In doing this I link my works to my particular artistic influences theoretically and practically. I will argue why this exploration has lead to the best possible outcome through this process of investigation.

The Exhibition / Examination

In chapter four, I will expand upon my vision of this exhibition and look at the physical qualities within each subdivision of the installation. I link how all of the research links to produce the best possible outcome for the viewer to judge my efforts as a contemporary sculptor. I also discuss how my art stands apart from current art in this genre to establish a signature style. In addition, launch my own career a practicing artist.

Summary and Conclusion

In the concluding chapter, I recap the important issues of this investigative project. Through examining the theories that underpin my work, I am able to give confidence to my voice and art practice. My studio investigation has established a sense of place as an artist. It is through the identification of theories and theorists that I am able to relate the work I do on another intellectual level. My work falls into the artistic genre of post structuralist feminism and it is through this research that I identify with other practicing artists working in the same genre. I have been able to examine the methodology of my art making and relate this as a link to semiotic language of forms. I have been able to discuss how these objects I make support the concepts of femininity and feminism. I feel confident that this research paper will support my final installation and exhibition for this project.

It has already incited another body of work that opens up the questioning further.

Chapter One

Theory to Practice

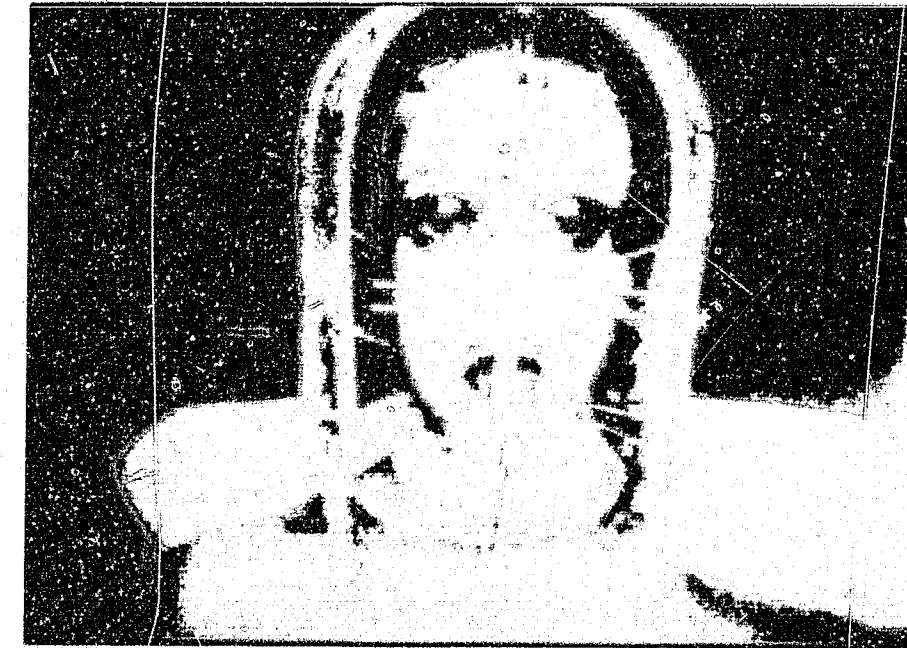


fig no.1.1, *Constructed Feminine*, Photograph , USA , S.O'Dea

In producing this paper I have discovered that despite many years of feminism some women continue to judge themselves by an internalized male standpoint along with expectations that society and cultural background place on them. These times have been and continue to be one of revolution and development for women in society. I believe that by the holding up of the mirror and reflection upon the ideas of femininity in relation to a learned and instinctual behavior that this reflection will capture the essence of femininity and produce change.

In this paper, I will discuss how the objects and dialogue we are exposed to as women influence our perception and identity of self. I also discuss how my studio investigation has been able to develop through a semiotic language of forms that connect our femininity to that of each other. For this Masters exhibition and presentation, I have explored many areas of the artistic process, through my works in progress, in relation to this exegesis '*Objects of Femininity*'.

The subject matter I have chosen in the form of garment, cloth and feminine persona is the driving strength for this research investigation.

Art and feminism alike are about confronting and unmasking roles, knowing full well that no one can live without them. They are about turning platitudes into conscious choices.¹

In this chapter, I investigate the links between post structural theory and my art practice. Post structuralist theory concentrates on forms of social regulations and social implications and values, which the theory can either ratify or dispute. I also compare this with the subject of femininity within a feminist paradigm, which forms the foundations of this studio enquiry. I will reflect on the roles I have played in my lifetime as a woman along with the expectations placed upon other women in today's society. I argue that, in a patriarchal society, these concepts and our perception of self is always arbitrator within the framework of a male gaze. I will discuss how the language I use as a maker is relative to a semiotic form of feminine signs that emerge in my work. I scrutinize how these signs developed through a deconstructive paradigm. In addition, I look at the ways in which the viewer audience interprets this work. I will also look at the issue of whether it is possible for a woman to truly examine her own perception of self within a patriarchal construct. In doing so I look at the influential structures that shape patriarchal society in an effort to determine meaning and value for this research paper.

POST-STRUCTURAL THEORY

Firstly, let me talk about the links to post structural theory within my art practice. My understanding of Post structural theory is that it addresses the issues of

¹ Haber, J. *The Empty Dress* www.haberats.com/pieta.htm, New York, p2

construction of the individual in society. Poststructuralists discern a theory between language, subjectivity and social organization and power incorporating signposts that deal with women's subjectivity. These signposts influence what we believe about society and our world through text and the word. This relates to my work in that as a female practicing artist, I constantly and instinctively address an internal language that has been primarily constructed by the predominately 'masculine male gaze'.

I use visual signs of femininity, such as the motif of dress to distinguish actual gender roles. See fig. nos.2.7 p 59, 2.8 ,p 60,2.9 p 62 and 3.1 p 71 The belief system underpinning this idea is patriarchal by nature and reveals in my work as an extension of my own experiences. I look to theorists such as Foucault who describes knowledge and power as being linked in a symbiotic relationship. I see this in the overexposure of an ideal femininity in the media today. As a female, I am constantly questioning my role as a woman in today's society, for and from the male glare; let's take for example, the issue of cover girls and how they affect woman's perception of self and men's perception of women. For women respond with deep feelings of envy for what is missing, longing, shame and desire are linked to woman's anxiety over the male gaze. For men the response is that women become idealized and unreal, a commodity that can be purchased used and thrown away or discarded.

Lack of Femininity

My work consists as a vacated form or a female body that no longer physically or mentally exists. The female bodies seen on the covers of fashion magazines are often flat, objective, picture surfaces that reproduce the mirror of the male gaze. This leads me to discover an emotional feminist response to what is happening to femininity today.

My torso work speaks of gutted feminine forms that leave behind a superficial shell; a beautiful angelic casing but nevertheless a shell. (See fig.no.2.9, *White Torso*, p 62). I am interested in why women and others choose to accept the secondary position given to us by society's masculine perspective. Why is it that we want to please and sacrifice the self to please men? This is where post structuralism addresses forms of social organization and social meanings. It has been associated with a range of theoretical positions. We can see this in the work of Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, Althusser and Foucault. The concepts found in the works of these theorists lead one to acknowledge that there is no clear definition of what it means to be female.

The Perspective of Domination

Secondly, I am interested in why women give up their power to fit into society under a male perspective. In addition, I query how this is still happening in today's society. Recently, whilst I was doing a teaching round I came across a year eleven work. It was a crucified self-portrait with the text scrawled all over it 'I wanted to be like those girls'. This girl is no more than fifteen years old and the pressure to be someone else is very evident in her work. The fact that she is not satisfied with who she is shows a dissatisfaction with herself as an ideal feminine form. I believe I touch on this issue in my work and research study. I agree with theorist Weldon who says:

*We need to understand why women tolerate social relations which subordinate their interests to those of men and mechanisms where by women and men adopt particular discursive positions as representative of their interest.*²

² Krauss R.E., *The Optical Unconscious*, The MIT Press Cambridge, 1993, pp323-32

Sigmund Freud: Psychoanalysis

I examine the influence of Sigmund Freud¹ psychoanalysis and in particular the work he did with his study of 'Hysteria' to indicate that identity is subject to sexual desire and the unconscious. In the late nineteenth century psychiatry classified 'Hysteria', as an exclusively feminine pathological form of behavior related to the female sexual organs. Freud discovered that this disease was also found in men and related to a neurosis connected to sexuality. The theories of psychoanalysis and deconstruction began with Sigmund Freud. His key concept is that identity emerges in relationship to sexuality and desire. He aimed to explain, 'How the unconscious processes are involved in constructing the subject'³

The basis of his theory relates to the powerful desire for the mother in the 'Oedipus Complex,' which is drawn from the Greek myth of Oedipus who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother.

Creation of Myths

A student of Freud, Karl Jung² links dreams and the unconscious mind with the creation of myths. These myths present an idealized civilization structured on morals about femininity in which women are created for the benefit of man; for example, the story of Adam and Eve. (See fig. no.1.2 p 24 *Adam and Eve*.)

Woman has been created according to the bible from the rib of man. She is a second-class citizen created for and from man, for his pleasure. In this ideology woman is made flesh to be evil, and associated with the fall of man. These are very powerful phallogocentric thoughts that have controlled the construction of women for centuries. As a female artist working within the post structuralism

¹ Phoca S. & Wright R., *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, UK, 1999, pp15-25

³ Phoca S. & Wright R., *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, UK, 1999, pp 46-9

² Krauss R.E., *The Optical Unconscious*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp323-324

framework, I seek to destabilize this patriarchal viewpoint through the concepts I present in my work as an artist and socialist feminist.



fig. no 1.2, 'Adam and Eve', sketch, S.O'Dea

Constructs of Patriarchy

Women are constantly being manipulated by the media to be something more than what they are or can physically be capable of. Moreover, if this strategy is formed within the constructs of patriarchy, how can a woman stand apart from this and give an objective viewpoint when it is always from the notion of the male gaze? For me, it is the language of the Catholic religion that has shaped my world and viewpoint however, it is the language of sculpture, which relates subliminally to a semiotic form of feminine signs that I use in my art practice. These signs, the objects I make emerge in the making of my work and become the intrinsic link to my perceptual growth relating to Post Structuralism. Scrutiny of the objects and signs I create produces a deconstructive narrative. This leads

me to the one of my main points in this project: nature verses culture. This angst exists within the feminist paradigm, with radical, liberal and socialist feminist points of view.

Semiotic Feminine Form and Signs

In my work I am in search of a language that relates to semiotic feminine forms and signs. These signs develop through a deconstructive paradigm in my studio practice. For example take the use of the image of a hung female torso made from tissue paper in my work, this is reminiscent of the image used for 'The Female Eunuch' by Germaine Greer in the late 60's and 70's. This image and the work that Greer initiated became a new feminist dialogue that continues to provoke interest today. The image a sign of the empty gutted female has remained a powerful symbolic sign of the female voice. (See *Wall of Virgins* fig. no. 4.2 p,77). I have looked at Derrida who ³offers post-structuralism, deconstructive concepts that relates to binary positions. For Derrida language or 'texts' are not a natural reflection of the world we live in rather text structures our interpretation of the world. Within these texts, language is a series of signs that link together to create a string of ideas, which form the basis of our understanding of the world. My work relates to these idea through the way in which I deconstruct the internal language of signs by giving tangible forms to this subconscious language during the process of art making. The exhibition then allows these objects I make to have a new life; a life that the viewer brings to it, a relationship with their own personal dialogues and experience. It is, in a sense, an external questioning and dialogue that grow quite apart from me.

³ Phoca S. & Wright R., *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, 1999, UK, pp 46-9

In addition, Derrida's³ theory links to Barthe's⁵ theory of looking up when reading, allowing the reading to have the authority to create the myth, the continuation of the experience through the reader's own personal language and experience. By understanding this, as a socialist feminist, I see my work as having a life of its own and therefore existing in the world, provoking a dialogue that promotes questions and change for a structure to incorporate the feminine on a truly equal basis within patriarchal structures of society. I link these concepts with the idea that, in a patriarchal society, our perception of 'self' is always within the scaffold of a male.

Patriarchal Structures of Society

In my work, I apply the theories of post structuralism as a study of this gaze. Later I look to this point when I will refer to the topics of fashion icons and cover girls of men's magazines and how these affect the construction of the contemporary woman. The position in which I dwell in the social order requires a feminine theory to look at the related signs that shape my work. I use this idea as a major objective for developing confidence with the intimacy of my individual vision. This then will bring a sharp awareness to the artistic sensory process in my studio practice.



fig. no. 1.3, 'Catterdrale'. postcard Italy P.Uccello

⁵ Phoca. S. & Wright R., *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, 1999, UK, pp36, 58, 69
26

Madonna as a Role Model

A further influence on my work has been the work and theories of Camille Paglia⁹ who has taught women to be female and sexual while still exercising control. Her writing brings a celebratory and uplifting condition to my studio research. Paglia promotes the influence of pop icon Madonna as a role model of true feminism. The issues that Madonna has covered in her career as a performing artist to date have been evolutionary and in response to the changing feminine view of women in society. She has for me almost taken on a Cindy Sherman³⁷ line of artistic expression, in that she deals head on with contemporary feminist issues. Her whole career has been about challenging the phallogocentric thoughts of a patriarchal society. She uses the consumer system to deconstruct ideas associated with women's construction, language and thoughts. For example, in her video clip in the late eighties Vogue, Madonna deals with the preconceived images that influence our lives. Images such as this with video visual messages have changed the way art reaches a wide audience and revolutionizes societies perception of itself and the world we live in.

Perceptions of the Female Body

This influence can be seen in this installation 'The Exhibition,' (see fig. no., 4.1 p. 76) where the theoretical concerns relate to my own perceptions of the female body in relation to the journey. This point has become the main area of substance in developing this exhibition. Here I have an interest in the idea of a displayed, perfect female form i.e. Madonna, linked to a significant interest in the feminine sensitivity (with a view to the socialized images of the female body) as being either angelic or whore. In this work, the impact of western culture, capitalism, branding, marketing and healthy interest in fashion, has intercepted with my

³⁷ Bourde. N. & Garrad. M., *The Power of Feminism*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1994, pp28, 29, 190, 255, 257, 263, 271, 274, 275, 278

knowledge in the making of sculptural forms and communicates these concerns through the work itself. (See fig. no. 4.4 p 79 *Table*.)

As Weldon states:

*The stress laid on biological sexual difference as the basis of women's oppression under patriarchy leads radical feminists to posit an essential femaleness which women must seek to recapture beyond the structures of the patriarchal family.*⁴

Therefore, from this I understand that because of women's biological difference they are still being oppressed within a patriarchal world. It takes a stronger and more radical female voice, such as *Madonna*, to ask women to think beyond their female body. This then brings me to issues of femininity within a feminist paradigm, which have become the dynamic strength behind this studio investigation of my work. In my research I am primarily interested in the perceptions of the body, the female body in relation to life's history, process, and my own approach to making art in the studio.

My Background

My background comes from having lived through the backlash of feminist activities of the seventies, which has made me reluctant to give time to any notion of feminist theory in view to my art practice till now. Previously, I have thought it to be counter productive and aggressive. However I have discovered the powerful irony of feminine and feminist values within me though this study in my work. This turmoil is due to my experience of the world and the fact that I have lived through the dynamic changes in feminine values and their position in

⁴ Weldon. C., *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Blackwell, UK, 1987 p17

society. However, as much as I have tried to ignore the conscious conceptualizing within my art practice, the more my methodology is subverted, subconsciously. This concept has developed to be part of the process that is my own experience and how I have had to confront and grow, through feminist theory, my own practice. This process quite often reveals a negative emotional response that can be somewhat daunting and self-destructive. However I believe it is important to go through a cathartic process when making and developing a work; this is part of the growth that mirrors the structures we have grown up with. Being an artist is being brave enough to put these ideas out to the world, in the hope that the artistic audience will benefit from them in questioning and critically reviewing the concepts raised in my work. (See fig no. 2.8 p 60. *Leafwork*)

This brings me to the issue of whether it is possible for women to truly examine their own perception of self within a patriarchal construct:

Oppression of women through sexual slavery and forced motherhood.'
*The stress laid on biological sexual difference as the basis of women's oppression under patriarchy leads radical feminists to posit an essential femaleness which women must seek to recapture beyond the structures of the patriarchal family.*²

How is it possible for women to deny their body and its function for the sake of radical feminist point of view? I have never been able to do this, it is not men who have made us women; it is the way we are by nature. However, men use the systems of control in the institutions of society. These institutions are responsible for keeping women oppressed. My point here is that women's bodies are built to function for the procreation of society. That keeps them in a position of being oppressed because of the energy, time and resources required

motherhood not to mention career prospects. (See fig. no. 2.2 p. 46 *Role Reversal*, as evidence).

It makes much more sense from a socialist feminist point of view to share the responsibilities of child rearing between the sexes for the sake of balance and equality I believe we cannot blame men for women being given this role initially. Women's bodies are designed to reproduce and along with that go all the required natural disposition to care for their offspring, I believe this is inherent and not constructed. However, it is true that women because of this predisposition have been taken for granted and manipulated by the power position in heterosexual relationships. In a hope to clarify this point further, I will look into the institutions that have shaped our understanding of the feminine in society.

I now will look to investigate the influential structures that shape patriarchal society in an effort to determine meaning and value for this research paper. I have been affected by the world in which I have lived. The combination of the feminist movement, Catholicism and postmodernist theories has fragmented my perception of self. It has been a constant struggle to deal with the expectations of society in my roles as a woman, individual, wife, mother and artist in contemporary society. Constant change and critical review have shaped my world and reality. I manifest the roles I have played in my lifetime as a woman, along with the expectations placed upon other women in today's society, by examining the key factors that have affected this development to date, in the construction of femininity in the twentieth century.

An analysis of the patriarchal attitude in Jungian popularized psychology and mythological interception has had a strong impact on social discourse.

Through the dependence of discourse on the twentieth century psychological

interpretation of myths, fairy tales and dreams. In addition, compare this to the resurgence of the goddess in new age circles, concentrating particularly on the

Mesopotamian discourse of Lilith³⁹ from goddess to witch. The story concentrates on the dark side of femininity composed of many details that were combined in different historic and religious settings. These still affect many different cultures and society's consensus of the gender relationship, today. Lilith has been described as lady of the heaven. Ironically, compare this with the other lady of heaven. Mary mother of god, through whom femininity has been portrayed as passive and earth as if She is a silent mother holy, perfect with unobtainable values as icon for women. I am interested in these myths as powerful sources of research into the construction of the 'feminine' today.

I believe the influence of these archetypes and fables have been the basis of my current body of work. I am interested in the deliberate exclusion of the feminine from the heavenly realm unless she is perfect, silent and totally controlled. Hence, the work in this exhibition '*Wall of Virgins*', (see fig. no.4 2 p.77), looks at the lack of feminine recognition in the angelic realm. I am also interested in how these concepts have affected my own life and the way I relate to the world and to men.

³⁹ Von Stuckard K. *Constructing Femininity*, www.uni-erfurt.de/vergleichende-religionswissenschaft/lilith.pdf *The Lilith Case*



fig. no.,1.4 'Madonna and Child', oil on paper, S.O'Dea

Virgin Mary Iconic Image of Woman

Recently I went to Italy to study for three months in Prato. I was interested in the image of the Virgin Mary as an iconic image of womanhood. It struck me as ironic that Mary, mother of god, could possibly be human not goddess, virgin, and all holy, thus an unobtainable image for women to live up to within this patriarchal discourse. I became fixated on the image of this myth in the particular area where I was staying in Italy. The legend is about Mary rising up to the heavens and dropping her girdle, which is not a girdle, as we know it today, it was a belt embroidered with cord that drew her robe into her waist. I play with the language of this idea by deconstructing the juxtaposition in the idea of constructing womanhood where, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, mother of Christ. Through this juxtaposition, I am able to link the narratives with the responses that society places on women.

This research has lead to a work of the crucified woman. I have taken tissue paper and cast female mannequins in the crucified position 'Butterfly' Instead of being hung and tortured on the cross, I have preferred to present 'her' as a metaphor and in the form of a butterfly. More of a transformational language that directs the viewer away from the original concept. This, I then associate the concept of angels and such evolved flying forms with the constantly evolving feminine language, which is newly developing a sense of place and history within today's world.

By looking at the way, this work is seen and interrupted by the viewer audience; I can step away from my own ideas and learn through the experience. In a sense when I create a form, I want my viewer to look up and experience something other than my personal viewpoint. This idea comes from a moveable axis or decentralized position;⁶ my ideas and concepts are therefore not fixed; they are seeking a form of reconstructing language through the feminine objects I create; for example, in my work 'Angel' (see fig no. 2.4 p 53), which has been constructed of tissue paper and white plastic bags. The material is recyclable, changeable. It has been pressed into the shapes of feather like textured form. The material and the final piece in form of virgin 'Angel', hung torso has a light airy nature that when installed, has the ability to move and follow the viewer through the space. In a sense, this is a metaphor for the idea that language is moveable, constantly been challenged and rewritten to incorporate the balance in gender issues. In addition, the viewer is confronted with this accidental flowing experience of forms and ideas that they individually relate to their own experience. In this way, the object becomes separate from the maker, me, the author. In doing this, I reconstitute my idea of angel and by putting it out there allow the viewer to bring his or her own internal dialogue to the work. My peers have described my work as an uplifting religious experience. In this piece, I want

⁶ Sontag. S., Edited *R.Barthe Selected Writings*, Forland Collins, Oxford, UK, 1982

the viewer to have a relationship with the experience of the work as one enters the environment.

Empty Dress

My central theme is the empty dress as a feminine object associated with a feminist post structuralist interpretive framework that empowers women's femininity. I have literally stripped back the image of any association with the female body other than to leave a shell. Whilst at the same time, a very strong feminine presence exists in the negative spaces that are left behind. That is the space or dominion of other spiritual realms. By knowing this, I can create forms that reflect those feelings and poststructuralist theories. The language of sculpture is my vehicle for exploring these concepts and feelings, three dimensionality. It connects the internal concepts with the external forms that I create. I incorporate the voices and theories of other practicing artists, who are working in the area of reconstructing femininity. I use isolation, emptiness, social construction and the garment to support my research. In my work, these feminine objects are exorcised through the process of exploration.

I consciously use these ideas and materials that promote a sensual physical quality. These sublime feminine layers are conceived from a much deeper level of self as woman as well as for a link to meaning. From this perspective, my work is more of a private exploration of the construction of a personal subjectivity, which is contained through the process of making.

The theme of the dress appears in the work as an overexposed and obsolete representation of femininity, whilst the image of the empty dress remains subverted. The themes I use are associated with the artist's body that is the female body; my body. This is an attempt to identify the influences of my art practice with other women artists within this genre. Wendy Stavrinanos, Lynn

Plummer, Vanessa Beecroft and Judith Shea are women artists who deal with the garment and its subjective. In doing so, I seek to define and explore the depth of a small feminine voice that reveals itself in a powerful metaphoric language of my own studio practice. I see the past as an enormously enriching experience affecting the conceptualization of this paper. I will site the theoretical history of my art practice with the past works of other masters, mentors and peers from genres that investigate both the critical arguments, laterally, with a holistic approach in developing the themes within the work.

Louise Bourgeois

I have a dedicated interest in the art practices of French contemporary sculptor Louise Bourgeois, whose intrinsic autobiographical dialogue determines an independent unique view of her universal concerns for relationship and family ethics. Bourgeois has been a huge influence on me personally as a practicing sculptor. Her lead and direction are reflected in my own ideas of making art. It is something about the angst that exists in Bourgeois work that attracts me to her sculptural dialogue. I recently saw an exhibition in Ireland that consisted of many small sewn figurative pieces. I like the way Bourgeois is not afraid to use the skills of the feminine realm to make her work. I have adopted the same philosophy in constructing my 'Virgins', for this exhibition. My tools are the tools I have been associated with as a constructed woman in society I iron, press and form these sculpture for this exhibition.

Louise Bourgeois has been a pioneer of using installation as a way of engaging audiences in the experience of art. Her work has had a major influence on international contemporary art since the late seventies and continues to inspire and motivate successive generations of young artists.⁷

⁷ Phoca S. & Wright R., *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, 1999, UK, pp 26-9

Bourgeois' artistic practice has spanned the best part of a century. She, amazingly, has lived through art movements from cubism to postmodernism and continues to create. Her wisdom and experience have had a profound influence on my own art practice.

Cindy Sherman

I am also interested in the work of Cindy Sherman American contemporary performance photographer, who uses her female instinct to explore the intrinsic journey of the constructed self. Sherman takes control of the method and methodology of her art through her process of discerning powerful photographic, autobiographical images. She has been able to retrieve, conceive, produce direct and finally edit her concepts of constructed self from start to finish. In a fascinating exploration over the past, few decades she has managed to reveal some of the most confronting dialogue through her role-plays of femininity in popular culture. (See fig no. 3 p14, 4 p16, 1.1 p19, 2.1 p44, 2.2 p46 and 3.2 p73.)

Therefore, what is the appropriateness of post structuralism to the feminist, and in particular me as a feminine feminist artist. Weldon puts it into words and I quote:

I would argue the appropriateness of post structuralism to feminist concerns, not as the answer to all feminist questions but as way of conceptualizing the relationship between language, social institutions and individual consciousness which focuses on how power is exercised and the possibilities of change.⁹

⁹ Weldon C., *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* Blackwell, UK, 1987, p.19
36

Post structuralism looks at the constructs of society and this is where I believe my link is in my art practice. I am constantly questioning and reinventing the language of the feminine spirit in the studio in my own conscious and subconscious thoughts. This brings into question, through the making of forms, the values and attitudes I have grown up with in my time on this earth as a woman. It is almost as if regurgitating the past to examine what went wrong, and reinventing the self to face the future. This bring to mind the work of Cindy Sherman's excessive party scenes, where we see the remains of an over indulgent lifestyle mixed with the decorative celebration of subject matter. What have we become? In a sense, this is what occurs in the studio when I am? working through these issues of femininity and feminist motif:

Advertising is focused on controlling and preserving the contemporary subject, regardless of gender. The vast range of dietary, slimming, exercise, cosmetic and body eminence products is advertised as a means of "preserving" the body. Consumer culture markets the concept of self-preservation by offering products which will combat physical deterioration and decay.¹⁰

Other contemporary Australian artists I am interested in and who have influenced my own art practice are Roslyn Piggott and Lynn Plummer who explore feminine traces screen / memories and Jill Orr, who uses her whole body in her art practice, which may be seen as an extension of drawing as performance. Another Australian, Merrin Erith, is an artist who uses everyday objects in her work in relation to her experience as woman and mother, which intrigues me. In addition, I am interested in the sculptural intellect and direction of Elizabeth Pressa as a postructuralist artist and mentor from the VCA. I draw from these women to form part of the of the infrastructure in producing the final

¹⁰ Weldon C., *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Blackwell, UK, 1987, p.19
37

research outcome. I recognize their contributions to the feminist post structuralist position hence, I am part of a continuing contemporary tradition.

I will also examine the feminist theories related to construct the feminine through writers and critics such as the Germaine Greer, Lucy Lippard, and Susan Sontag, and French philosophers such as phenomenological driven Gaston Bachelard. I am interested in the theories and issues that relate to our own experience and our own personal perception of the world. I also look at the deconstructive theory of Derrida with a view to raising the issues from domesticity, psychological subversion, mythology, psychological as well as philosophical, and dogma that still dominates to this day in the contemporary culture of the Western capitalist system.

This research project has been evolving for sometime, therefore, it reflects a natural progression in the process of intellectual growth and spiritual awareness. I see the project as a kind of transcendental process; the confronting of deep rooted socially taboos that are trapped deep within my own the psyche.

The connection between sexuality and morality clearly reflects contemporary concerns about the social threats posed by women's emancipation, and occurs throughout the nineteenth century. Jane Eyre appeared in 1847 but as early as 1814 the risqué elements of Lovers' Vows threatened the peace of Mansfield Park, and in 1897 Bertha Mason was reincarnated in Bram Stoker's horror fantasy Dr.¹¹

¹¹ Waller D.G., *Angels, Vampires and Women's Emancipation*, Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK, 2004

I see the decision to undertake this line of investigation as a cross link with issues not strictly personal but, on another level of communication, having some wider insight for humanity. Whilst this is somewhat intuitive and sublime, this is all part of the process that claims its integrity within the body of work. It may be argued that this concept is naïve and open to question as to where this direction is seated within my own subconscious. Generating, a body of work that speaks of a particular time, space and subjectivity that may offer insight for change both individually and ultimately outwardly is a type of transformation or transcendence. The particular relationship that I have with the selection of materials, themes, subject and objects provide points of departure for an open-ended interpretation. A sensibility that has a strong association with femininity rather than feminism may be one of the antagonists within the project.

Studio Investigation

This brings me to the following body of work produced for a show 'Knetwork' see fig no. 2.7 pg 59, at Axiom in June 2001. In this work, I explore my ideas about the body as display and the influence of the fashion industry on the construction of feminine persona. This work harks back to an innocent time of play with association to the feminine sensibility that is so much a part of who I am. Using the concept of the paper cut -out, I reconstruct my learning experience by recreating the objects of femininity, all those years later, with a perspective somewhat influenced by the adult. It is the concept of the 'display' that interested me in forming this exhibition. The process began with a strong link with selection phenomenological discernment and process that come together to create the theme of women's link to nature and how this compares to the constructive theory.

The cliché 'beauty is only skin deep', the dress, the cloth, the fashionable, and

speaking, the close relationship between inside and outside.

I am intrigued by the close link and language used by women, which is flanked by covering and revealing something. In this way, I endeavor to tap into this sublime, semiotic language of forms. The materials I have used include, pigmented, twigs, latex, paper, autumn leaves, red pigmented cement, knitted copper, lace and copper plumbing pipes that link together to create a juxtaposition of my own position of self as constructed and natural woman (see fig. no 2.7 'Twig work', p 59). The forms I create relate to the choices I make in my studio investigation about the construction of femininity and the natural self. These ideas are not new to my art practice; they have been part of the ongoing journey since 1995 when I created several significant pieces of work that I now link to this current studio investigation. With a notion of performance always in the background, I further dissect my own ideology. Whilst studying at Frankston TAFE in 1995 I did a series of sculptures based on found objects, which were placed in boxes. I was very interested in the work of Joseph Cornell at the time. I was intrigued with the surreal worlds he created in the contained area of the box. One of my works in particular consists of two glasses in the shape of the ideal male female forms (see fig. no.1.5 below) in which I placed two figures of a woman in a suit with a mobile phone and suitcase in hand, the other an over maculated superhero man in their opposite gender form. I believe the work was one of the first objects that I would make that sparked off the question of constructed gender in society and a concern for the movement towards androgynous sexuality. This work quite obviously questions the roles of men and women within a contemporary framework.

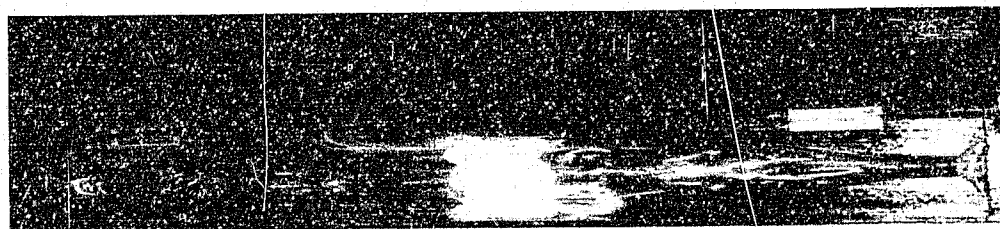


fig. no1.5, 'Male and Female in Box', Mixed media, S.O'Dea

The next significant body of work I made relates more directly to the issues of women's roles (see fig, no. 2.2 p46). At the time, I was fascinated in the work of Cindy Sherman who deals with the same issues. I, in a typically post-modern process, borrow the concepts and processes Sherman uses to investigate my own feminine roles and creative ideals. I found the process of directing; acting, editing and creating a series of images that questioned my role as woman, wife, mother (coming out of kitchen) to be extremely empowering at the time. These works are pivotal in my development as an artist, to date, and were directly associated with the questioning that underlies this studio investigation. By this, I mean that this work relates to the post structural questioning about constructed female roles in a patriarchal society. So here, we see an intrinsic link that keeps emerging in direct forms or objects that I create. It is a deep-centered feminist/feminine concept that is constantly being reworked in different mediums and materials, becoming increasingly refined with each body of work I produce.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to show how my art practice links to the post structural theories about the construction of the feminine within a patriarchal paradigm. In doing so, I feel confident that I have exposed how my studio practice links to these theories. So far, in my documentation, it is obvious that my work is a reflection of my own experience and personal view of the world.

I feel that there are two ways of looking at this problem of female construction: one from a 'pent-up,' feminist viewpoint and the other from a naturalistic perspective. I believe it was not men who created women the way they are, that is unless you believe in patriarchal ideology and I do not. We do not know who created us or whether we evolved. However, we do know that it is a fact of nature that women cannot fight the forces of nature by denying their own bodies. It goes against the natural laws of our existence to deny what our bodies

were built to do, so in this way I do not subscribe to a truly radical femininity viewpoint. As a reflection of this, I have linked how the roles I have played in my life have affected the way I think and the type of work I am drawn to create. These works are a cathartic expression of the inner dialogue that is searching for a balance in these gender specific issues of my own feminine construction.

I believe, the media, to be something more than what they are or can physically be capable of, is constantly manipulating women. In addition, if this strategy is formed within the constructs of patriarchy, how can a women stand apart from this and give an objective viewpoint when they see themselves always from the perspective of the male gaze? For me, it is the language of the Catholic religion that has shaped my world and viewpoint whereas the language of sculpture that I use in my art practice relates subliminally to a semiotic form of feminine signs. These emerge in the making of my work and become the intrinsic link to the perceptual growth in comparison to art theories. It is the scrutiny of these objects and signs that I produce within a deconstructive narrative that leads me to the main points of nature verses culture in this project.

²Haber. J., *The Empty Dress*, www.haberats.com/pieta.htm, New York, p.2

³Weldon, C., *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Blackwell, UK, 1987, p.17

⁴PhocaS. & Wright, R., *Introduction to Feminism*, Totem, UK, 1999, p.1

⁵Weldon, C., *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Blackwell, UK, 1987, p.17

⁶PhocaS. & Wright R., *Introduction to Feminism*, Totem, UK, 1999 p.164

⁷Weldon, C., *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Blackwell, UK, 1987, p.17

McParland, *Louise Bourgeois*, The Irish Times, 26/11/04, Ireland

⁸Gablik S., *Conversations before the end of time*, Thames Hudson, NY, pp273 /74

⁹Weldon C., *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Blackwell, UK, 1987, p19

¹⁰Weldon C., *Ibid*

¹¹Waller D.G., *Angels, Vampires and Women's Emancipation*, Metropolitan University UK, Leeds

Chapter Two

Artistic Genre

In the past, I have expressed myself through various genres such as painting, drawing, photography and video together with sculpture. One may suggest that I was a multimedia artist who believes in expressing oneself in the best possible medium for the task. In the last five year's I have worked primarily in the area of sculptural installations. In this chapter I discuss the various artistic genres and influences that have guided my work to date.

In the past, my work has been concerned with the relationship of the obscure and intangible ideas related to the process of making art. I was then and still am immersed in the processes and materials used to express my ideas, rather than the product. The research investigative works I have fabricated have been of a surrealistic nature, engaged in transformed states of reality. I believe this has enriched my research investigation by allowing the elements of play and serendipity to expand my focus. It has been more of a kinaesthetic process of learning and understanding and it has taken some time, hard work and research to link these exercises to the theoretical dialectic in contemporary art practices. The theory I have identified myself with - is as a post structural feminist/feminine artist. By this, I mean that I look at the signs and signifiers that relate to the female subject and deconstruct these in my art practice.

The problem that has occurred because of this research is whether what I do relates in a primordial way to my feminine side or alternatively is this part of the social construction of the feminine that I have been exposed to in my lifetime. This juxtaposition has presented itself from the way in which I have allowed the work to guide me in my studio investigation. The areas that this exploration study has led me into are concerned with ideas of fashion, female

display, female icons such as the goddess verse the whore image in art, film and advertising. See *Self Portrait* below.



fig. no. 2.1, '*Self Portrait*', black and white photograph, S. O'Dea

Installation Space

Installation space has become the focus of much artistic experiment. Along with other artists, use these spaces - as a manifestation of the deconstructionist ideal of the world I live in. In that, the world as a 'text' can never be fully known ever by its author, so that the reader is then free to interpret his or her own meaning and understanding into the work. Installation spaces bridge conventional art boundaries eg. public and private, individual and communal, high style and vernacular. This genre of art making began with the art movement Dada early twentieth century. It progressed through the experimentation, happenings, and performance art of the sixties and seventies and has evolved in the last thirty years from all these ideas into installation experimental art. As an installation

artist I use the space to explore as a three dimensional canvas. Like making any art, each space will provide a new artistic expression of the internal dialogue of the artist; this adds the element of performance to my work. Performance heightens those sensibilities usually attributed to sculpture. Therefore, I will compare examples from the past and present influences with my current body of work. For me this is my ideal artistic expression of body as canvas and feminist theatre.

Doll Story

This work is a result of a series of questions that relate to the conditioning little girls to play with dolls and become the carers of the family or is this a natural instinct of the feminine. Are genders roles constructed through the parents first, and then the children are allowed to explore their own interpretations of those roles? How does the notion of Barbie and Ken dolls as ideal bodies affect how we view our growing bodies? How do mannequins, adult dolls affect the way we perceive ourselves as women in society? Do men really expect women to be perfect silhouettes of femininity? What about the real live dolls; models on the catwalk how do they affect the way very young teenagers view themselves? What about our unquenchable thirst for eternal youth and why women feel the pressure to be perfect by going under the plastic surgeons knife. The work of French performance artist Orlan addresses these conditions to the very extreme and how society places such demands on women in general. In my current studio investigation of the objects of femininity, I explore the affect of these questions on my own intimate interpretation of the construction of femininity. I now look at the way in which I draw from my contemporaries influences in relation to these concerns and my art practice.



fig. no. 2.2 ,*Role Reversal*' , black and white photograph, S. O'Dea

Vanessa Beecroft

In my work I examine how, when and why these past genres have been utilised to initiate change in society. The work of contemporary artist Vanessa Beecroft explores the issue of constructed femininity by focusing on the effect of the fashion industry on young girls. Beecroft is an Italian-born artist - whose work consists of having good-looking female models take off their clothes and stand around in galleries and museums. Beecroft would have been fifteen years old when, back in 1984, a political art group called the Guerrilla Girls attacked the New York's MoMA curatorial policies by circulating a tract, which read in part, *'Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the Modern Art section are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.'*²²

The Guerrilla Girls might have been thinking "revival" last year, when Beecroft brought her *exhibition* into the main rotunda area of the hallowed Guggenheim Museum, New York; Beecroft says:

²² DiPietro M. *Vanessa Beecroft does Tokyo* , Notes: Until Aug 7, 1999 (3717-0020).

*The women are always aware of what is going on. It is a delicate separation between what is an image just to be representational and what is a real person standing there. I want women on heels because that's powerful, that's not natural nudity or pureness," she explains. "When men see this woman standing on heels as if she were dressed, and facing the audience, well, if that's what they like to see, then here it is, so what. I do not know if that will create more respect or go somewhere beyond that. Maybe after they see it twenty times they will start not to think of it the same way, I am not sure. It's an experiment."*²²

Beecroft's work is about confronting society with the problems that are shaping our consciousness on femininity. We are becoming more and more 'mould - like,' cast from an ideal expectation that is universally aesthetically pleasing to the male lens. I align myself with these concepts by making work also from an ideal model, a mannequin. I physically mould my pieces on the form of a mannequin and replicate the exact form. It is the impact of these forms placed together in clusters in the exhibition space - that forms the fundamental idea of objects of feminine form. Unlike Beecroft, I look more to an historical background to confront the issues on the constructed feminine. However, my work is also linked more to the classical Greek and Roman representation of woman - than to the contemporary plastic doll.

Let me now discuss the language of mirror, mirror on the wall and gender identity. My work *'Sisters'* (see fig. no. 4.5 p 80), explores these underlying issues of identity and feminine construction by examining the issue of sisterhood. I use this metaphor as a springboard to explore the psychological response woman has to one another from an early age. This also ties in with *Melanie*

Klein's, theories of the Oedipus Complex⁷. In my case because of my dysfunctional family background, there was unfortunately a lot of competition for my father's attention and approval. I was an aloof child and could not care less if I was taken notice of in my direct family environment; I had plenty of attention outside of it. However, my sister was extremely possessive of my father's attention. This work is about the conflict that existed then but more aptly; it is about the construction of feminine identity and the games we play in the family terrain today. In addition, more importantly, how these games ultimately affect the way, we perceive ourselves in the world we live. It is also about the way in which women will do anything for the attention of the male figure in their lives. I developed an unhealthy view in that I felt I did not need my father. This fundamental experience still deeply affects my attitude to the opposite sex today. This dialogue intertwined within the fabric of my belief system, which is one of the fundamental issues that have driven me to be feminist, independent and single.

Madonna Role Model

I have read and studied the work and theories of Camille Paglia who has taught women to be female and sexual while still exercising control. Her writing brings a celebratory and uplifting condition to my studio research.

Paglia promotes the influence of pop icon Madonna as a role model of true feminism. The issues that Madonna has covered in her career as a performing artist to date have been evolutionary and in response to the changing feminine view of women in society. She has for me almost taken on a Cindy Sherman line of artistic expression, in that she deals head on with contemporary feminist issues. Her whole career has been about challenging the phallogocentric thoughts of a patriarchal society. She uses the consumer system to deconstruct ideas

⁷ Phoca S. & Wright R. *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, UK, 1999 pp 26-9

associated with women's construction, language and thoughts. For example, her video clip in the late eighties Vogue, Madonna deals with the preconceived images that influence our lives.

Perceptions of the Female Body

This influence can be seen in the show '*Wear No Angels*,' (see fig no. 2.3 below) the theoretical concerns relate to my own perceptions of the female body in relation to the journey. This point has become the main area of substance in developing this exhibition. Here I have an interest in the idea of displayed perfect female form i.e. Madonna, linked together with a significant interest in the feminine sensitivity - with a view to the socialization images of the female body - as being either angelic or whore.



fig.no. 2.3, '*Wear No Angels*', tissue paper and plastic, S. O'Dea

The impact of western culture, capitalism, branding, marketing and healthy interest in fashion, has intercepted with my knowledge in the making sculptural forms and communicates these concerns through the work itself.

As Weldon states:

*The stress laid on biological sexual difference as the basis of women's oppression under patriarchy leads radical feminists to posit an essential femaleness which women must seek to recapture beyond the structures of the patriarchal family.*⁴

Therefore, from this I understand that because of women's biological difference they are still being oppressed within a patriarchal world. It takes a stronger and more radical female voice to ask women to think beyond their female body. This then brings me to issues of femininity within a feminist paradigm, which have become the dynamic strength behind this studio investigation of my work. In examining Rosalind Krauss's discourse of originality, I will now focus my research primarily with the perceptions of the body, the female body in relation to the history of life, process and my own approach to making art in the studio.

*By deconstructing the notion of origin and originality, postmodernism seeks to establish an historical divide between itself and the avant-garde to avoid the avant-garde's basic presuppositions and to expose its fictitious nature.*⁵

Women have gone from view as powerful queens and goddesses to driven from the Garden of Eden by the all-powerful patriarchal figure of god. Women have tolerated centuries of second-class citizenship until the onset of feminism. Still, women have moved slowly towards diminutive equal opportunity in a contemporary world. The effect of mass media on the western world has confused the perception of the feminine on themselves, this I believe to be a

⁵ Phoca S. & Wright R. *Introducing Post Feminism*, Icon books, UK 1999pp36, 58, 69

result of their construction through the lens of the male gaze. Female persona and the media in the 21st century have learnt to use the male gaze to their own advantage. If we look at recording artist, *Madonna*⁹ and the way, she has given voice to the didactic spaces. She has contributed to the terrain of the re-imagined feminine by challenging existing aesthetic stereotypes and the discursive representations of woman on the stage and in the everyday. Contemporary popular culture and in particular the work of Madonna has influenced my work as an artist. She has constantly reacted to the evolution of feminine issues in the late eighties and nineties with a brave interpretation of media portraits. As a female iconic image, she bravely portrays the effect of mass communication through the church on the self and women of our time. I explore these ideas through my work.

In this current body of work, I explore directly the issues of iconic androgenous figures of beautiful, flat chested boy-like girls that dictate our perception of self within the fashion industry. The dress has become my motif for this exploration of these ideas. I have constructed it out of the ideas and games I played as a child, which have influenced my perception of myself and the world around me since childhood. I have worked aesthetically with the dress as my motif and reproduced it many times in different materials. I believe that I do this to challenge the concepts that have constructed my life and that of many women who are still restricted and controlled by the institutions of a patriarchal society. I have moved from creating garments of ethereal materials begun in my *Knetwork* show at the start of this research project (see fig. no.2.7 p.59 & 2.8 p 60.) to exploring the constructed feminine through a more classical approach in my latest work - where I work with lace, white cement and marble dust.

⁹ Phoca S. & Wright R., *Introducing Post Feminism*, Icon books, UK 1999pp 12,23-5, 61-3, 79-80,96,107,111

My model is a stereotypical contemporary mannequin and the mould that I use to reproduce interpretations of the dress allows me to create something of great beauty and ironically, challenge the system that exploits these forms in the name of femininity. As a woman, I perceive myself through the male gaze. The husband of a close friend said to me recently that women construct themselves to attract male attention. In addition, if you are a naturalist this could be true. I felt myself seething with anger at this attitude, which I considered uneducated and short-sighted. It made me feel ashamed of my own sex to think that that was a norm. Yet, it is exactly what we do; we dress to feel attractive and wanted. Another incident that happened to me was with a more evolved man, whom I asked if he liked my new underwear. He coolly said; "do you like it, does it make you feel good?" In other words, do it for yourself, not for me. My emotional response was one of rejection, yet empowering for it was up to me to feel confident about myself, and he was wise enough to realise that I did not need his approval.

The work I present as the *'Virgins of Paradiso'*, (see fig. no.1 p 10), in this current exhibition relates religious origin and ideology to the source of these belief systems. My research has lead me back to my own roots and feminine construction and it is these concepts that are revealed in the work I present. The idea of iconic, female, angelic, virginal form as part of the language has shaped my world and that of many other women in my era. I challenge the notion that despite women's desirable being and power – we are still not part of the majestic realm of heavenliness - except within the unrealistic presentation of the Madonna mother of god or virgins waiting to greet a suicide bomber and reward him for his good deeds. My work is an exorcism of these ideas and beliefs physically manifested to connect with all core concepts of fundamentalist ideology. The *'Angel'*, (see fig no.2.4 p53), have evolved from my studio investigation into the *Objects of Femininity*. The forms are uniform and

erotically shaped juxtaposed to the angelic ideas of womanliness. This work speaks of reclaiming the erotic, life force of woman. It is based on the creative energy, empowered by knowledge of language and history.



fig. no. 2.4, 'Angel', tissue paper and pressed plastic, S.O'Dea

Women's being is based on giving and receiving pleasure as well as a reproduction. In a way, I have, through my work, reinvented my own femininity, through this questioning and investigation. I have used my inner guidance to connect me with my direction in this project. In addition, it is this inner guidance, my creative energy that has challenged the concept of language and the way we as females view the world and ourselves from a male lens. Through mass media, fashion and constructing imagery we as women are deeply affect and rendered powerless to the male gaze. It is up to us to turn the perspective and take the lead from female popular artists who have used the social construction phenomena to reverse the cycle.

Louise Bourgeois

I do this by probing my own studio practice and examining what I make to align myself with the work of other contemporary artists working within the same genre. I incorporate the voices and theories of other practicing artists, who are working in the area of reconstructing femininity. These include Louise Bourgeois³⁸ born 1912 in France and has lived in New York for sixty years. A, sculptor whose subjectivity has been driven by an internal raw emotional dialogue, she questions the relationship of identity, sexuality, gender and memory. Specifically, she looks at the father - daughter roles within the family structure and how this blue print has affected her outlook on life. Her work has been a life long struggle of power and identity due to this relationship and the fact she is a woman sculptor in a man's world. I can identify with this idea from my own childhood where our whole world revolved around my father as an alcoholic, his mood whose domination of the family home. I feel this is part of the reason I am so attracted to Bourgeois ideas and passion.

³⁸ Smith J. *Louise Bourgeois*, Sheaffer, NGV, Victoria 1995, pp 8 to 51

Bourgeois is able to express powerful ideas and emotions through her work that have a cathartic experience for both herself and the viewer. She has been a bridge between early 20th century modernism and postmodernism as a clearly a strong feminist artist. She, as a master and mentor influences me in my own work. I often refer to her work for inspiration and direction in my own endeavours as an artist. I have borrowed from ideas looking at Bourgeois entombed female form and the psychoanalytical side of her work. I have also used these ideas in my own art practice with the making of '*Prophet and Single White Female*,' in a show at the Band Hall Gallery 2000. see fig. no.2.5, below Here, I created two slender two and half metre high forms that resemble tombstones. They were created out of broken mirror, ornaments, Danish white cement and marble dust; they have a majestic presence that relates to the language of their mythology. This work was directly influenced by looking at Bourgeois performance in the seventies where she made a multi - breasted outfit '*Artemis*' that was worn in the exhibition space or as it was known at the time as a '*Happening*.'

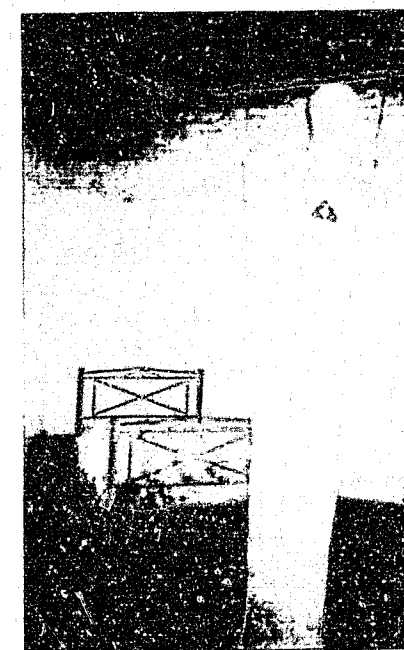


fig. no.2.5 '*Prophet and Single White Female*,' cement ,mixed media, S.O'Dea

The ideas she was engaged with were of a feminist nature and directly associated with the resurgence of the goddess in women's art practices at that time. I felt trapped in a time zone when I first started to make art and I had a compelling need to explore the same issues years later. Nonetheless, I see this as an important part of my own personal journey in identifying where one has come from - in relation to a feminist dialectic. In my research investigation, these ideas have become more refined and concise, and speak powerfully and frankly of male and female power sources and ideologies. Ultimately, these ideas are reflected into my artwork and writing as such. Like Bourgeois, my work may be read as a confessional memoir.

Cindy Sherman

I have also drawn inspiration from the work of performance artist photographer Cindy Sherman born 1954 who was inspired by stereotype representations of women in 1950's films. She uses the self-portrait to explore the effect of the movie industry has had on the female psyche. Later, she would explore historical art portraits that would sexualise the female role as an art subject. In her most recent work, she no longer uses her own body, which has become defunct from her genre; she replaces it with mutilated, grotesque and fragmented bits of body, which seem to suggest pornographic magazine centrefolds. Sherman has been significant in unpacking the dialogue that uses female subjectivity in traditional painting and film photography. These representations of women are sexualised and portray them as vulnerable, weak and mad. It is this dialectic that concerns me and I feel Sherman's work has significantly influenced my own art practice and ideas. As a young art student, I followed her lead and appropriated some of her ideas again as a lead into my own internal narrative - that deals with the construction of the feminine (see fig. no.2.6 p57). The process was an interesting one - in that it both enlightened and empowered me personally as an

artist. I found that I was able to be a director, actress and producer of these works - that intimately portray an sub-conscious memory of influences and constructs that have influenced my development as a woman artist.



fig. no. 2.6, 'Role Reversal 2', black and white photograph, S.O'Dea

Wendy Stavrianos

I am inclined towards the work of Wendy Stavrianos. She uses the symbolism of the emptiness, female form and dress as powerful, humanitarian primordial representations of the feminine. In her work, one experiences the ghost whose presences are replicated in the paint and past of powerful female forces. Stavrianos has said of her intention in making art, and I quote:

*'would like to bring back the savage quality, the fluttering quality, that in a way disturbs.'*²³

I am intrigued by this idea of creating a tension between the intention of the work and the viewer who responds to the energy of the work itself. I am attracted to the idea of a shamanistic spirit that exists in the materials used in the work. This appears to be separate from the conscious rational and artistic intention but always is present in great pieces of artwork. This concept seems to be resonating in the process of a kind. In the making and forming of the ideas in the work. This is what I am exploring in my own studio practice. The materials themselves create the language of self-expression and it is this feminine discourse of feminine artists that I relate to:

*Stavrianos's paintings are linked to the landscape and have a profound spiritual presence encompassing the sacred aspects of nature and the archetypal Goddess. It is this concept that connects my own studio investigation of the construction of the feminine to Stavrianos. The exploration of myths and ideologies before the church and in the forming of Biblical narratives, have lead me to investigate the pagan ideas of the feminine and her links to the land. This I determine in many of my works and continue to relate these ideas through the selection of materials I chose in the process of making my studio work.*²⁴

'Twig Work' from my Knetwork show please see fig. no.2.7 p 59, is one of the more literal expressions I have tried in questioning this link of female power to the land. The dress is constructed of twigs that are assembled together to form the idea of woman and her link to nature and its chaotic forces. Twig, tree ever

²³ Voigt A., *New Visions, New Perspectives*, Craftsman House, NSW, Australia, pp 259

²⁴ Ibid

since I can remember I have always associated the female form with that of a tree. Whether this is a subconscious link or a constructed idea from my Christian upbringing remains unresolved, it is never the less an important idea for me that I continue to work through.



fig. no. 2.7 'Twig work', twigs and latex, S.O'Dea

Similarly *Leaf Work* from the same exhibition is another work that expresses this in a more physical way. I have used the grapevine leaf that has a beautiful transformation in colour in the autumn to construct this piece. These I layered and placed in sheets of latex, which has the appearance of skin. The strange thing was that the dress has taken on the appearance of meat when exhibited in the window of the show. It had an interesting response from walkers by who had to stop and take a second look at just what this form was made from. 'Angel' is another that has developed from this early work and investigation. It is a more highly developed conceptual work that deals with the sublime more abstracted spiritual approach to the construction of feminine subjectivity.



fig. no. 2.8, 'Leafwork', latex and autumn leaves, S.O'Dea

*Each female figure is encased in its mantle of meaning, acting out self-imposed roles caught unaware in timeless rituals of fertility, procreation, seduction and desire these inescapable human forces.*²⁵

Stavrianos is talking about the roles in which society has imposed on the feminine. She speaks, of the nature of female bodily functions and rituals, as being a process of human nature and intrinsically linked to the all-powerful forces of nature. Like Lyn Plummer, who investigates the way in which high

²⁵ Voight A. & Dury N., *Fire & Shadows*, Craftman House, Australia, 1996, p140.

ceremony is constantly underpinned by reference to sacrifice and the body. Stavrianos creates a powerful argument in the execution of her work for the primordial feminine spirit. Whilst the fragile equally powerful works of Plummer creates a dialogue that speaks of the deconstruction of the patriarchal ideology of the Church; in so doing she analyses the myths surrounding the activities of the self in relation to the underlying power of male dominance through a feminine dialogue:

*I find that the representation of Spiritual entity as either male or female, reduces its limits and our perception of its force. By squeezing it into the confines of gender behaviour and narrative sequence, it is reduced forever to the temporal and becomes dogma, repeated endlessly without the assurance of any future recompense or current 'state of grace.'*²⁶

Lyn Plummer

I relate to the way in which Plummer investigates these concepts through the process of making the work. Her use of feminine materials and the way in which she treats the surface and the spaces she exhibits them in have had a huge impact on my own studio practice. She speaks of trying to debunk religion by placing the feminine and masculine side by side, her work for me has become even more powerful in representing the feminine through a deconstructive discourse. The materials she uses such as lace, veil, and shroud juxtaposed with geometric forms are placed to question the concepts of masculinity and femininity working jointly in the exhibition space. Through her work she investigates, the powerful effect religion has had on society and different cultures. And more particularly about the way in which we hold on to these beliefs and rituals through our experience of them.

²⁶ Voight A. & Dury N.Op. Cit p.152

Like Plummer, my own investigation of ritual and the construction of the feminine are linked intrinsically to the belief system we have been exposed to in our lives. My own experience of religious rituals and objects relate to the feminine are paramount in my body of works. The white, angelic forms, empty female torsos reflected in shattered mirrored glass and controlled in white cement are linked to this questioning of the myths and construction of the feminine.

fig. no. 2.9, 'White Torso', tissue paper and plastic, S.O'Dea

In my work, there is a strong link to fashion and the idea of female display. The history of fashion is intrinsically tied to that of women's history. Women in the past could not express themselves in any other way other than the way they dressed. So here, we link the notion of cloth aesthetics and ornament to that of a feminine domain. Women have always understood the power of expression through texture, materials, colour display and cloth. This is something we can trace back to prehistoric man and woman. It is woman who is primarily concerned in the development of cloth and clothing to protect the body. This is long before fashion magazines and the industrial revolution where we see the exploitation of woman as commodity. I believe this is a supportive argument for the primordial nature of the feminine towards aesthetics and fashion as a way of self-expression and display ultimately creating a dialectic that induces the power

of woman. It is interesting to look at the way in which *Lace* is a sequence of fillings of decorative stitches and designs worked so that all the parts of the lace grew together as the work progressed. The early needle lace was termed *Punto in Aria* - literally, stitches in air. This is not unlike the way in which one conceives the ideas and creates ones work. The phenomenal beauty of lace designs remained rather geometric well into the 1600's long before Picasso and his Cubist paintings.

I am engrossed in the spiritual realm of the artwork. That is the construction, spirituality and the female intuition in society today. Using it as a form as a sign of communication to empower the viewer with the language of objects I make. I engage in processes that relate in a tactile sublime fashion, something of the essence of my experience as a woman today. I am interested in getting the viewer to contemplate the discrimination and isolation of the feminine object on an emotional level. My past work has been concerned with the relationship of obscure intangible ideas, processes and materials used, rather than the product. I have been concerned with developing an intuitive process in my studio practice. In the next chapter I discuss my methodology and making processes.



fig. no.2.10, 'The Walking Tree', photograph by Maurice Tabard, 1947

Chapter Three

Methodology and making

What I make

In this part of my documentation, I will talk about my methodology of making art. I look at why and how I go about making art as well as discussing the different techniques and processes I have used. I will also investigate the way in which this work has evolved over a period using different methods and practices to explore the issues of feminine subjectivity. I will argue why this exploration has lead to the best possible outcome through this process of investigation.

Other Sculptural Influences

As a Sculptor, I have not only been influenced by the work of women but men as well who have affected my development as an artist. For example, the theories of chance associated with the work of Marcel Du Champ, Joseph Beuy's shamanistic performances of the seventies and eighties, Joseph Cornell's miniature worlds created in boxes, and Alexander Calder's suspended forms. Most importantly, Salvador Dali's surrealist dialogue associated with female power image and specially to my research investigation of the empty dress. All these artist have been linked to my development as an artist and looking back through my work I see the progression It is more the subjective imagery of the female form that the surrealist artists used which drives my own investigation of power in the art world. Whilst this was a brilliant movement in changing our perception of art and the way; it is understood. The violent assault on women underpins the work that concerns me and I guess in a sense, causes me to react as a feminist artist.

Intention

It is my intention to explore the notion of '*Objects of Femininity*' related through my perception of the body and the construction of femininity. My studio practice is an autobiographical translation of this journey. Lost in one's imaginative processes, for me the dress is intrinsically female and couched to the role of womanhood. My work explores the traces of my childhood play, my constructed feminine self and the materials I chose to explore these ideas as an adult. For example the body of work that I produced for the '*Knetwork, Show*' (June 2001 at Axiom Gallery in West Melbourne, see fig. no 2.7 p 59 & 2.8 p60) was a symbolic sculptural installation based on the simplicity of the paper cut out dolls from my childhood. I reworked these as an extension of the multiple layers of the semiotic language that relates to the self and the roles one plays as woman in society. I use the reminiscence and my instinct to push these boundaries of my perception to surpass my own expectations of feminine objectivity. Each aspect of this display emerges in the form of many archetypal shields that directly relate to my life experience in a creative semiotic form of signs. For example '*Leafwork*' (see fig. no. 2.8 p.g.60), is a reference to my own ideology based on religious motifs I have gone up with. Using the grapevine leaf, which I literally encase in a latex skin, that resembles female form of protection.

In my methodology of making art, I grapple at why and how I go about making art. Investigating and documenting how this relates to my studio research of this topic (*please see my diary documentation presented in final exhibition*).

My direction and interests come from a particular emphasis on the development of a two and three-dimensional narratives in the works I produce, that finds its voice within the constraints of contemporary art culture. By deconstructing the myths and rationale of the modernistic, post-modern, post feminine /feminist,

post-structural paradigms- provides the infrastructure for the research. I will now concentrate on the construction of femininity with the argument based on the patriarchal versus of matriarchal discourses.

Subjectivity

I discuss the subjectivity of objects within, ritual, tradition, historic reference and contemporary gender discourse of the feminine artwork is what primarily interests me. I look to the topics of feminine artefacts, birth and family, care and loving, pleasure, and pain to richly layer the work with meaning. I propose to use the research topic of 'objects of femininity', to enhance and explore my own understanding of self and others within the feminising paradigm of contemporary society. This will be done through stripping and peeling back of the surface of themes such as *memory / screen, inside / outside, hard / soft, internal/ external man and nature, aesthetic / display*. These abstract concepts together with the topical themes will feed the ultimate intention and purpose of this research investigation.

Themes

I now discuss the different themes I use to convey feelings of isolation, emptiness, social construction and the garment to support my studio research. These transitional concepts from childhood played important roles in the initial development of this work and research project. The direct reference to clothing, dressing-up and fashion, are not coincidental they are intentionally part of the unravelling of memory and experience that construct the female role. The empty dresses folds of drapery and flesh cover the absent female form as protective layers. This acts aesthetically with a sense of pleasurable disguise, a sensual mask. This form references the inner and outer image of the body

simultaneously. I see no need to include the female body within the forms I create: she is isolated, obsolete, the emphasis is clearly on the emptiness, the negative space within these forms and shapes they make.

Techniques & Processes

I now discuss the techniques and processes I have used to make this current body of work for this Masters presentation. The feminine objects are uncovered through the process of exploration in making. By using techniques such as pressing and moulding, contemporary materials like tissue paper and pressed white plastic shopping bags. I consciously use ideas and materials with a sensual physical quality to deconstruct the traditional language that may be inherently associated with them. These richly sublime feminine layers are formed to create a much deeper meaning than first appears on the surface. The technique allows me to crease, mould and form the materials into a new shape that has a painterly quality with rich textural appeal. This is an exploration of a more private construction of a personal subjectivity. These have been discovered through process, and the themes of the dress appear in the work. By this I mean the actual expression of forming and respectively mould an ideal female shape relates to the experience of having to perform and fit in to society and its expectations. The empty torsos I end up with are overexposed, obsolete while the image of the emptiness, and dress remains subverted.

Materials

I use simple materials that are light airy and easily available. Tissue paper and white plastic shopping bags are part of the contemporary woman's experience of consumerism. I am interested in creating a language that relates to the process by expressing and transforming these materials in my studio practice. A semiotic language has developed through the technique that relates specifically to the

materials I use and my experience of these. The use of paper also relates to the experience of writing; the word, 'text', that has such an impressionable effect on the ideologies that effect ones constructed reality. I have related specifically to the call of Islam in my creating of these 'Virgins'. A deeper message related to futile power, fundamentalist thought and power of the word. The process of pressing and forming might be associated with the process of shaping ones way of thinking through myth and religion. On a sublime level, I am creating something quite beautiful yet worthless and ethereal. The virgins are suspended empty torsos made of disposable paper and plastic bags. The combination of these thoughts and methods provide me with a tension in the work to provoke a contemporary discourse.

In the past, I have used hair in some of the experimental work leading up to this exhibition. This aligns with the idea of growth and renewal. Hair is the last part of the body to be nourished and interestingly it is the last to die. In fact, it continues to grow after we have departed. Much like the power of religious thought and concepts continue to pollute the minds of humanity. I have always played with hair. I learned the craft from a very young age. I grew up with an aunt who practiced in her backyard salon at my Grandmothers. I was able to watch in wonder the sculptural transformations she performed. Simply, I have transformed my own knowledge onto a contemporary canvas. I use the form female body to draw from to create my ideas (See fig. no 4.9 *Web Dress*, p86).

Forms

In researching the project my investigation of the empty dress create feminine, sensitive, fragility and ephemeral forms the materials I use are both found and formed objects. For example, 'Twig work', (see fig. no.2.7 p 59), is made of found twigs that have been coloured and stuck together to form a dress. This is in

contrast to *'Paper Doll'*, from the same show, is made from tissue paper and formed over a mannequin and *'Copperwork'*, (see fig. no.2.7 p59) which uses knitted copper wire in the form of a cut-out dress. I am interested in analogies that create an impression of impermanence, emptiness and vanishing femininity. I now investigate, the way in which this work has evolved over a period using different methods and practices to explore the issues of feminine subjectivity.

The themes I use are associated with the artist's body that is the female body, my body. It is the power of the female body, that interests me, and the way in which men have tried to control and possess it for themselves. Take my current proposal of the construction of *'Virgins in Paradiso'*, promised to the martyrs of Islam; these virgins are the fictional, ultimate gift for man's sacrificial life. When I have spoken of this to some men, today they have complained of this not being enough. It is not enough giving up one's life or quite simply not enough *Virgins* to be given. I sense the latter is the point where we want more of old fashion purity in our lives.

Exploration of Identity

This is an attempt to identify the influences of my art practice along with other women artists within this genre. In so doing I seek to define and explore the depth of a small feminine voice, that reveals itself in a powerful metaphoric language of my studio practice. This is a primal symbolic language of personal forms, space and experience. That is, I seek femininity within the feminist discourse by reconstructing feminine objects in the shape of torso and dress. I define my direction as empowering women rather than opposing any weakness associated with femininity e.g. the myth of *'Lilith'*, goddess or witch. By concentrating on the strengths, emotional intelligence of that interlocked

feminine perspective of self, an intellectual female narrative emerges in the work.

My personal interaction with these objects allows me to reconstruct my own identity; this idea is meant to challenge the notion that women only adorn themselves for men alone. Alternatively, is the feminine experience of the dress more inherent and natural than we might care to believe or admit. This I identify with a spiritual connection in nature and the environmental world. My life has been caught between the two discourses of femininity and feminist protagonist. This is a personal investigation of my experience as a woman and practising artist. My works continue to reveal the rich layers of thoughts and expose a kind of physical perception of these ideas in the objects I make. The choices I make and materials I use are intrinsically connected to these ideas of layering and fragmentation. The socially constructed external self is juxtaposed with the fragmented internal reality. My work is an exploration of how we see and build our own personal private subjectivity through different mental states. I do this through recalling memories, dreaming and allowing my imagination free reign in the process of playing with materials. I use objects that have become synonymous artefacts with women's femininity, my own femininity. These include hair, shoes, mirror and in particular, the empty dress that have become the focus of this research study.

Empty Dress as Feminine Object



fig. no. 3.1, 'Pink Dress,' Bridesmaid dress, S.O'Dea

My central theme is the empty dress as feminine object, like a shield, it becomes a link to an interpretive framework that empowers women's femininity. The work is about the inner and outer spaces of the feminine mystic. The way we see ourselves may not always be the way we really are. We are constantly faced with the mirror of images of our daily lives, that alters our true perception of self and who we are. These images, are constructed for the viewing of men; the political activist emerges in my work to empower women rather than focus on the negative. (See fig no. 3.1 above *Pink Dress* bridesmaids dress.)

Feminine Objects hung as if shields empty shells, artefacts that survive incomplete. Germaine Greer's female Eunuch motif has had a subliminal influence on these works I have made. It is only natural that her influence would reappear in my work to be reworked and reconstructed. The book cover shows a

motif, which is a suspended bronzed, form more like armour protection.

Mine is tissue paper and refugee of society engaged in more to do about what we have become through the breaking down of boundaries and postmodernism. The feminist movement of the seventies was more about breaking through these same boundaries. This same motif seen in many women artists work of the same era and I have already mentioned these in this documentation in the chapter on *Artistic Genre*. For example, Wendy Stavrianos uses the empty dress as a powerful metamorphic form of female energy and mystical power. The motif can be traced back to the surrealism movement where Renee Magritte and Dali have explored the image in their drawings and paintings. I have also traced back through looking at classical sculpture the link to fragmented forms of dress in history. This image has become part of the interpretative framework that links the feminist movement to a discourse that empowers women's femininity. Local Melbourne based painter Adrienne Strammp currently uses the motif in her paintings.

Traditionally, the feminine mystic links inner spaces with dark deep hidden mysteries of life. As artists we refer to the feminine in art speak as '*other*'. To me this means something that is not rationally explained, that is in scientific terms anyway. The experience of '*other*' and hidden space for me is about emotions and experience of another space. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard explains it more in his magical book the '*Poetics of Space*', in which he explores the concepts of shelter, shell, corners and hidden sublime spaces of the house. He does this by creating a literary connection to housework and the aesthetics of carpentry, lyrically exploring ordinary spaces of the everyday. Traditionally these spaces have been associated with the feminine experience capable of creating internal space. In my torso work, I have been influence by Bachelards concepts of space. This influenced has affected my installation aesthetic where I place as much emphasis on the space around the object as on the representational form.

In addition, it is within this 'other,' space that the viewer is able to bring his or her own interpretation to the narrative of the work. It is my belief, that within this inner space something 'other,' exists; a spiritual meditative space. (See fig. no. 3.2 below).

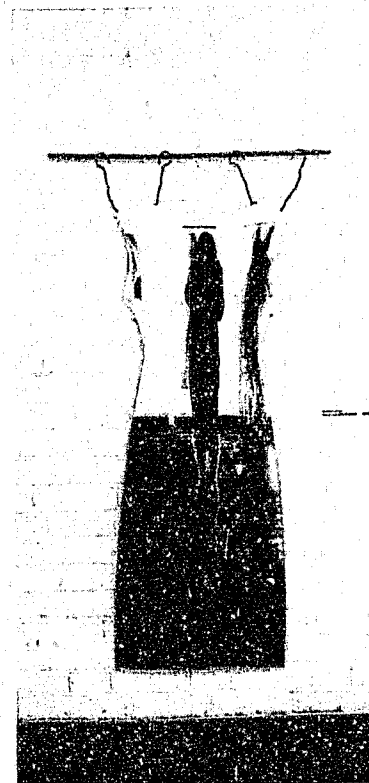


fig. no. 3.2, 'Reflections of You', laser cut mirror photograph, S.O'Dea

How we see the mask and ourselves and how this connects to the 'Objects of Femininity'. Advertising the mask and preserving the body is a current contemporary topic. I am interested in this as a link to the work I have made in that it deals with the construction of the feminine. Consumer culture has become obsessed with self-preserving products that offer solutions for physical decay. The experience of these phenomena both terrifies and fascinates me simultaneously. I feel that it woman's expression of this experience that reveals how we are being manipulated and constructed to behave.

My work uses a layering and pressing method of construction that effectively links the mirror of images that we are constantly bombarded with in our daily lives. These images alters our true perception of self:

The desire for youth, beauty, health and sexual fulfilment are genuine preoccupations and longings. Because of this flood of idealized hype real images, the difference between the authentic and the artificial body is being eroded. The contemporary subject is invited to construct a "post-human" subjectivity which flaunts fakery- for example, through cosmetic surgery⁷

My work deals with these issues again primarily from the feminine experience of having to perform a multitude of roles to fit into society. Whilst these roles are not only for the pleasure of men which is what I am interested in, they are also related to the quest for eternal youth and life experienced by men and women. In making my work I include the powerful motif of mirror as a psychological link to these ideas. In constructing the work, Sisters, these ideas are closely linked to the concept.

I am trying to empower women by creating works that are politically questioning. My work is about confronting these issues and reconstructing a dialect that incorporates these ideas. It could be argued that I have been caught in a time warp in dealing with these feminist issue, however I feel with the current contemporary concerns related to these ideas of construct validate my point of view. The wheels of change to empower women have been extremely slow to turn. These issues are just as valid today as they were thirty years ago in that the feminine is still being manipulated and constructed through the institutions of

⁷ Phoca S. & Wright R., *Introducing Post feminism*, Icon books, UK ,1999, p75

power. Women still primarily through their social construction take a secondary role to men even today.

Outcome

I will now argue why this exploration has lead to the best possible outcome through this process of investigation. Over the past three years, I have explored the concept of empty dress female objectivity. It has been a progressive process that has undergone many metaphoric forms with different materials. Throughout this process, I have always maintained the motif of empty hung torso. I feel these forms are signifying what I am trying to convey through my work through representational forms, methods and materials. This experience is best described as a link to the language of three dimensional forms and sculpture. The concepts I have used have needed to be deconstructed and reinvented to create a new dialogue. My work through its materiality and process has been able to do that.

I use repetition with ephemeral forms to strengthen my concepts. By this, I mean that this work is able to open a line of communication with the viewer's interpretation without authority from me the artist. Each person that views this exhibition '*Virgins in Paradiso*', (see fig. no:4.2 p 77), will bring their own experience to the work opening up a dialogue that will be different in some way to my own intention. This experience and interpretation will contribute to how successful the work is ultimately. However there does remain through the representational form and their historic association with the feminine and dialogue that deal with the objects of femininity face on. In the next chapter, I discuss the exhibition components of this studio investigation project.

Chapter Four

The Examination / Exhibition

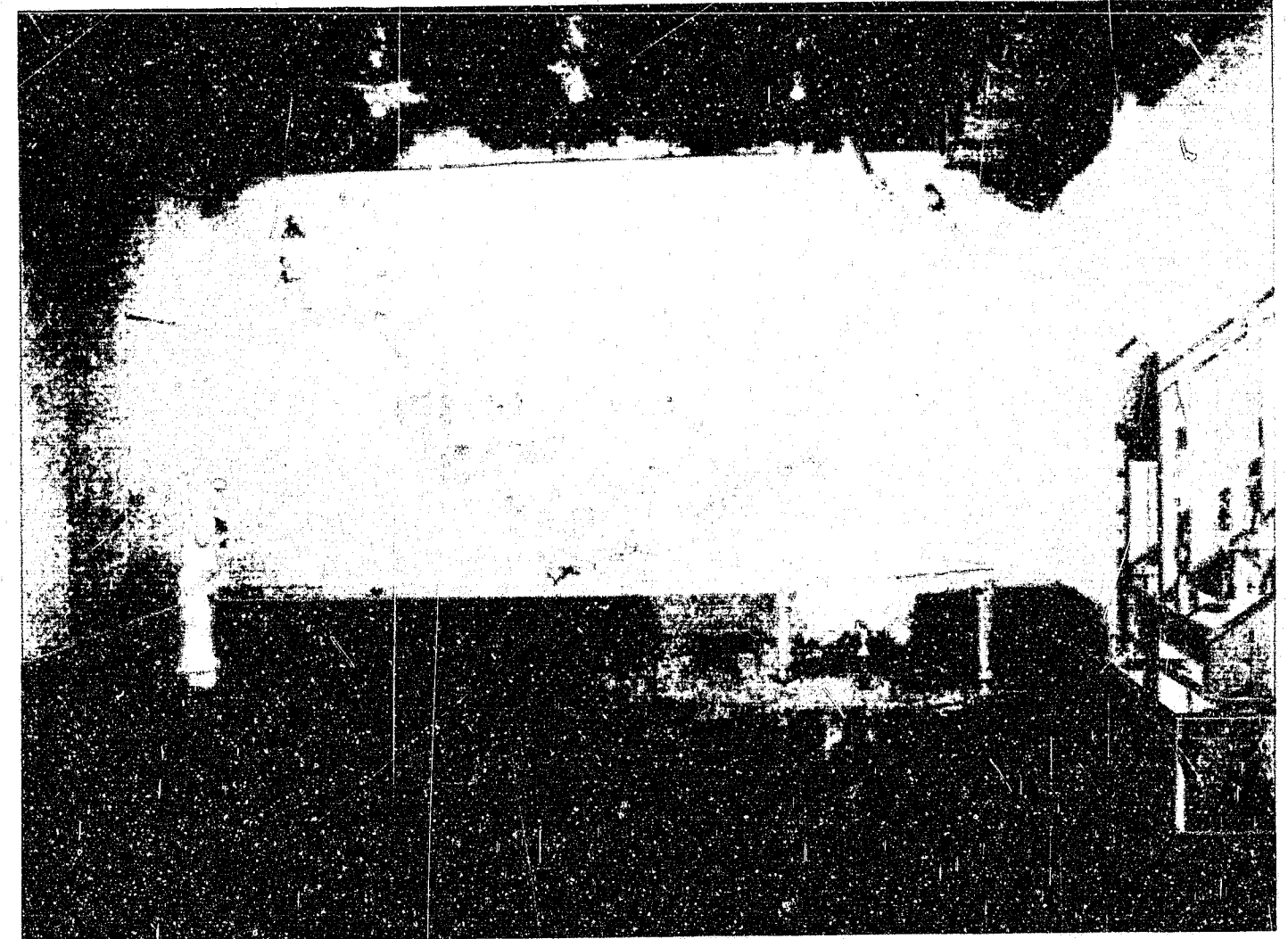


fig. no. 4.1 '*The Exhibition*', tissue paper and pressed plastic, S.O'Dea

In this section of my documentation, I will expand upon my vision of this exhibition and look at the physical qualities within each section of the installation. I examine how all of the research explores to produce the best possible outcome for the viewer to judge my efforts as a contemporary sculptor. I also discuss how my art stands apart from other contemporary artists. My own eclectic reaction to post-modern fracturing has been to explore the value and ideologies of social construction, spirituality and the female construction within the intuitions of contemporary society today.

I am interested in the idea of a spiritual realm in the artwork. Using it as a form of communication to empower the viewer with the language of forms I make. I engage in a tactile process in the studio that relate in a sublime manner to the forms I produce.

Virgins in Paradiso

Now I will expand upon my vision of this exhibition and look at the physical qualities within each section of the installation. The exhibition will take the form of life size angelic female forms, which cluster together to form a relief work. The exhibition will have eight pieces that will fit into the two exhibition installation rooms. The exhibition pieces could be displayed separate or as a whole in an installation space. The installation will require a large plain wall with a high ceiling for the first piece of *'Fifty Six Virgins'*, angelic forms that cluster together as a wall relief.



fig. no. 4.2, *Wall of Virgins*, tissue paper and pressed plastic, S.O'Dea

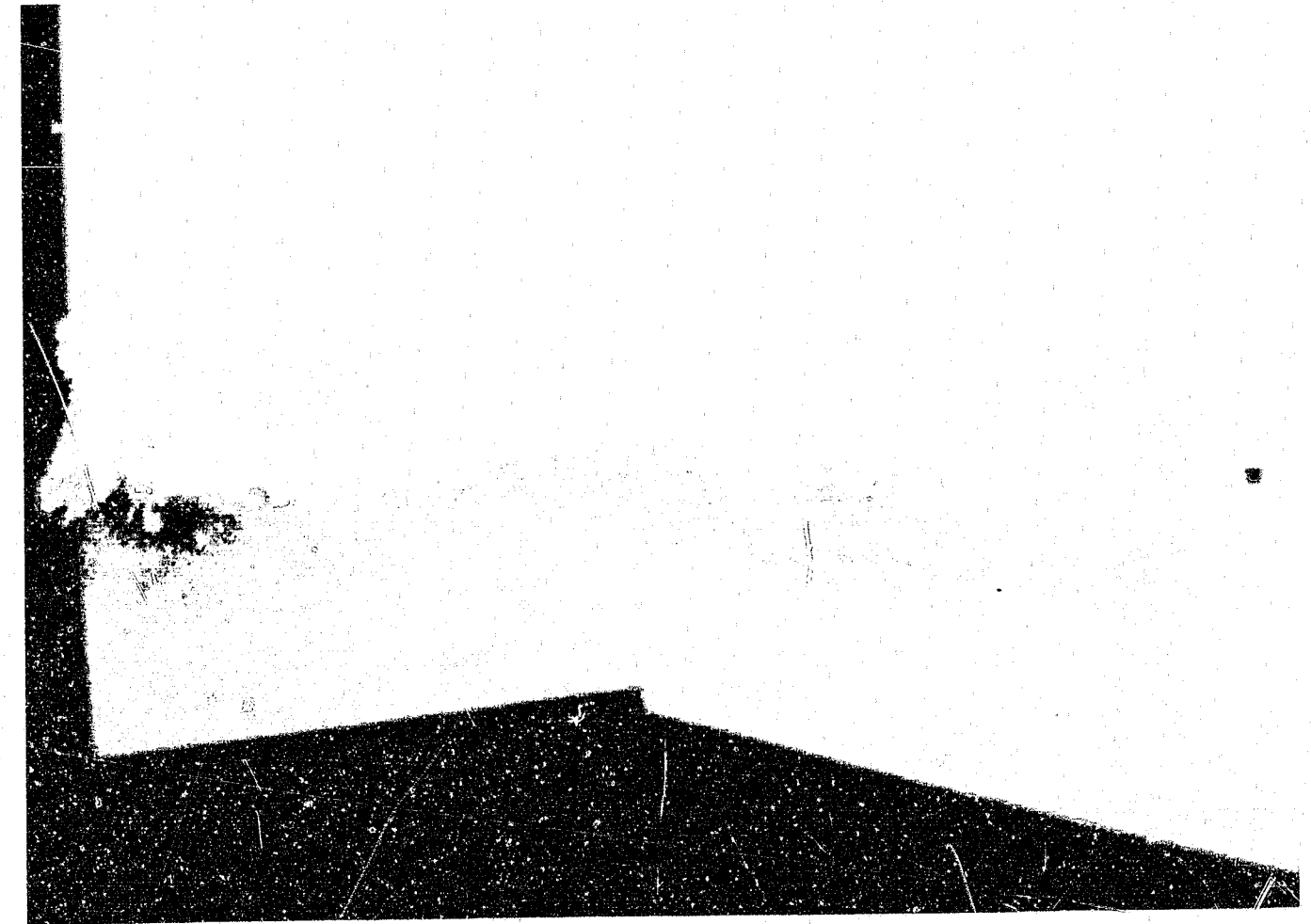


fig. no. 4.3, *'Cornered'*, tissue paper and pressed plastic, S. O'Dea

The second piece titled *Cornered*, is placed in a corner of the space, eleven female forms would cluster together to create this piece. In this piece, I am thinking about the idea of little girl princess in relation to the constructed feminine persona. In a way, this piece is about attaining to this ideal of femininity in that it places the female forms clustered into a corner. I feel I have touched on in this work, the expressive anxiety to be pretty, petite and feminine in order to be woman. The dance for me has become an intricate part of this idea of constructing femininity, in that you must learn the routine or you will end up out of sync; as this piece is, forced and clustered into a cornered. Again pressing tissue paper over the mannequin model has made the forms. I have pressed white shopping bags to shape the textured dresses and wings.

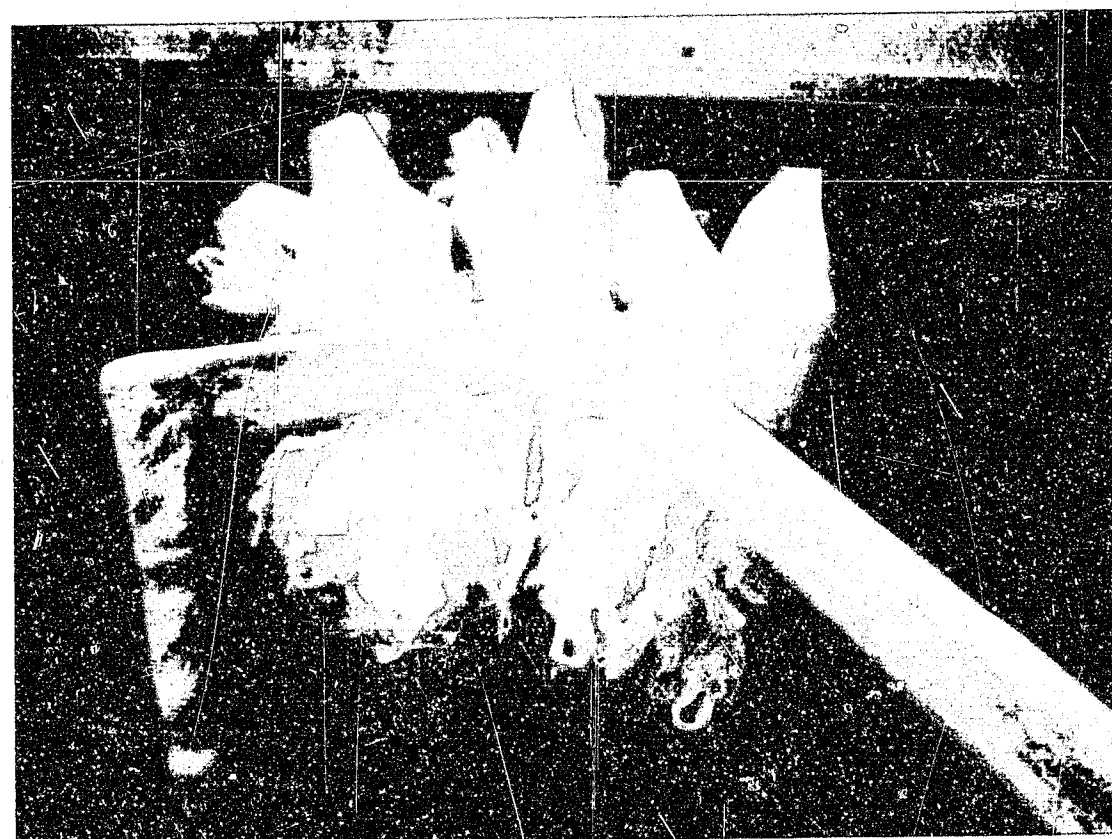


fig. no. 4.4, 'Table', tissue paper and pressed plastic, S.O'Dea

The third sculpture titled *Table*, is a free standing piece that utilises the floor and central space with three angelic forms attached to the corner to counter - balance the appearance of weight. This idea comes from the notion that a table is metaphoric for a female form. This table is deconstructed stripped back and left with three legs as opposed to four. I have taken the bare form and covered it with layers of white cement and marble dust, to entomb or protect what is left of the family. The three angelic forms will be placed opposite the vacated leg. They are representative of the pagan myth character *The Three Graces*. This work is delving into the issues of ideology, language and myths influencing the feminine in society. I feel the way I have approached making this work is related to working with clay rather than cement. The layered covering takes on a flesh - like presence due to the markings by ones hands. I am attracted to this attention to detail and mark - making when working with these materials.



fig. no. 4.5, 'Sisters', tissue paper, plastic, mirror, marble dust and cement
S.O'Dea

The fourth piece *Sisters*, is a wall-mounted sculpture with two female forms attached. In this work, I am addressing the competitive nature of women and the sisterhood. The work is about confronting the issues of femininity and working together to change our perspective. The competitive nature of seeking the father's attention is explored in this wall sculpture.

This examination/ exhibition proposal has been developing over the past two years. I have used my exhibition at BHG in 2003 as a springboard to draw my current concepts with recent research undertaken in Prato Italy for my Master documentation proposal. The four different components that will form the exhibition are conceived together to present a thorough body of work and investigation into the poststructuralist viewpoint on the construction of femininity within our society. Each component can exist individually however, when combined ,operate within the installation format.



fig. no. 4.6, 'Lace Tree,' tissue paper, plastic, marble dust and cement, S.O'Dea

Lace Tree

The sixth piece *Lace Tree*, or me as a tree, is a symbol that is intrinsically connected to the concept of women and the intertwining of nature. I am challenging the ideology associated with this dialogue by creating a tree from lace. My work is based on the concept of the family tree.

The mediums, lace, marble dust, white cement I chose are mostly connective with my life's experience and the developing feminine language of sculptural concepts.

In the past, I have created artwork by using tissue paper, plastic bags, latex and hair along with more traditional choices like copper, marble dust, wood, mirror and Danish white cement. I enjoy combining these elements and pushing the boundaries between the masculine / hard and feminine / soft genres. Ever since I can remember, I have had a fascination and love of dead trees; they always reminded me of female figures dancing in the landscape with their arms up in the air. They were the first things I remember drawing as a little girl. I link this desire with my current research on the construction of femininity, the tree of life myths, ideologies and history that have shaped our lives. The work has resulted in a three-metre high 120cm circumference form with two limbs, a white tree embalmed in lace. I am trying to reconstruct a new reality through my work by carefully probing and weaving history, textures, figures and objects. It is the exchanges between these ideas, that create my stories and bodies of work. Surface quality, texture and detail operate as metaphors, as well as evolving my personal history of the relationships between men and women and the societies they inhabit. I am driven by the desire to clarify the issues of language in relation to the female body and the environment with a more holistic approach.

As a Poststructuralist artist, I connect the question of women and nature through the process of making my work. I have used a combination of lace a delicate fabric made by weaving cotton, silk, or a synthetic yarn in a pattern that leaves small holes between the threads with a building material Danish white cement and marble dust as the aggregate. The use of lace acts as a metaphor for the role of the feminine within the family unit. All people who are descended from a common ancestor are traditionally recognised by the name of the father

in patriarchal society at the exclusion of the mother. This work looks at that role and acknowledges the mother as the important link that has been lost in this history.

I am exploring one of the meanings of cement in that as a compound that when mixed with water and allowed to dry – it may be seen as a metaphor – I symbolising unity and adherence between people and groups in society. Is the same structure that links women and nature? The concept of the goddess is one that I have grown up with and there has been a resurgence of her power with the feminist movements of my generation and hopefully those to come.

Stairway to Heaven

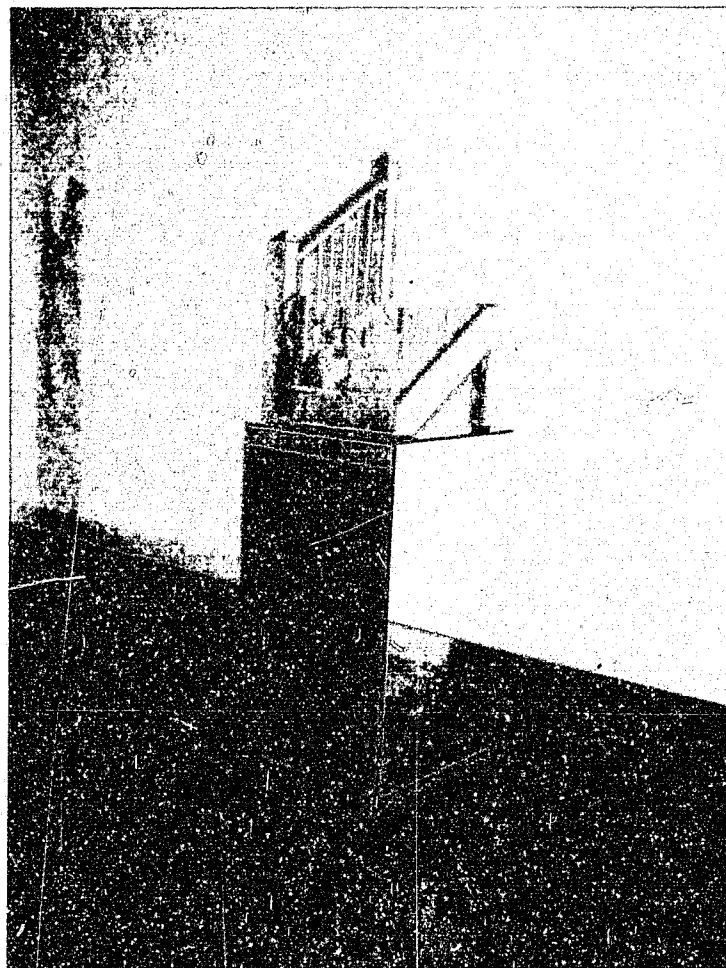


fig. no. 4.7, *Stairway to Heaven*, mirror and wood , S.O'Dea

The Seventh Piece is titled '*Stairway to Heaven*' see above. This work was constructed in conjunction with my son James who was doing his building apprenticeship at the time.

We had been going through a difficult time in the family with the break down of a marriage and his adolescent trials and tribulations. He proudly brought home his maquette of a staircase to show me. I loved it and wanted to use it in my exhibition at that time which was dealing with mirror and reflection. I had the piece covered in mirror and displayed on a mirrored stand. The piece is very personal and has a powerful presence and message about life, relationship and reflection.

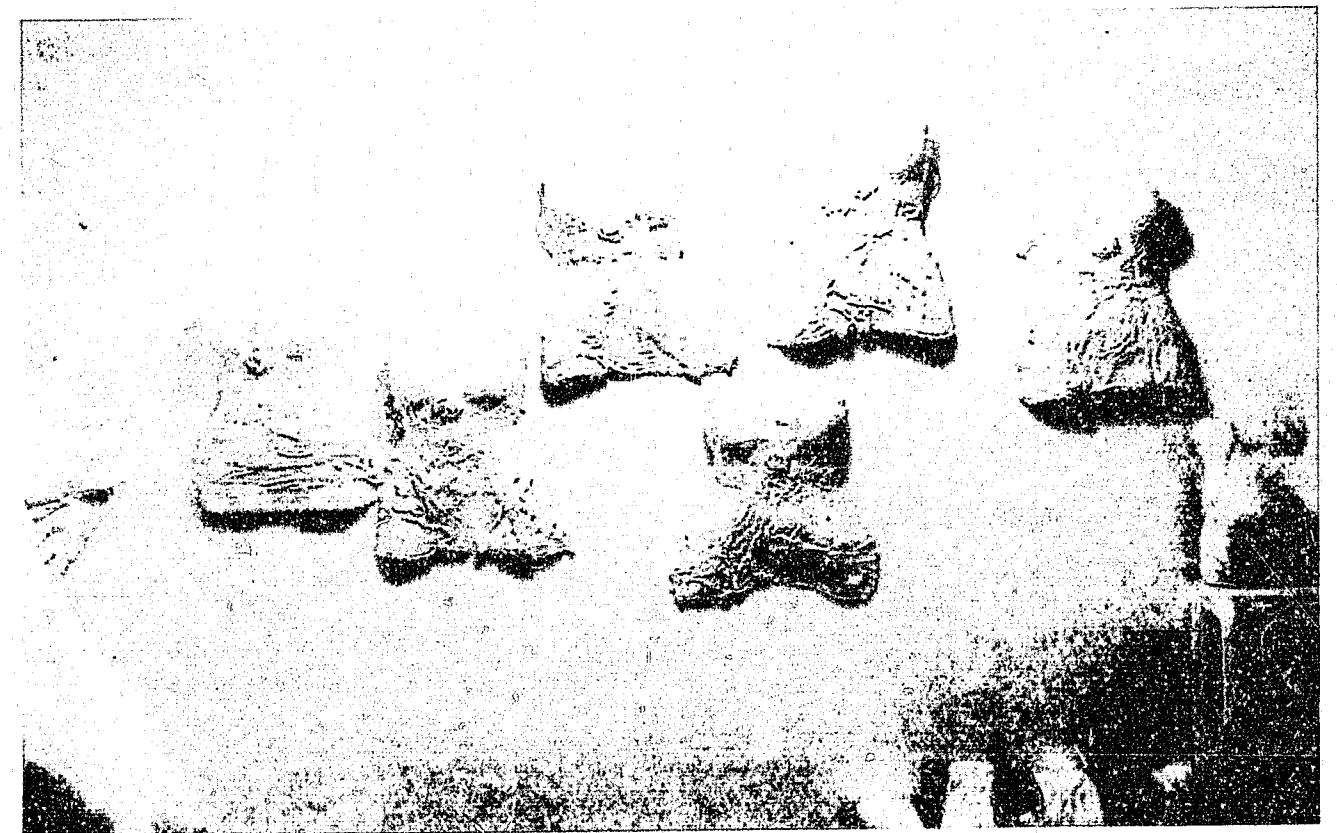


fig. no.4.8, '*Lace Torsos*,' white cement, marble dust and lace, S. O'Dea

Lace Torsos

The eight piece *Lace torsos*, is made of a combination of lace, Danish white cement and marble dust. I have made a shell construction of the female torso and created a piece that can be exhibited internally as well as externally. The idea is a progression from using ethereal materials to that of creating something with more permanence. This work links strongly to an historic view of the feminine to incorporate the female voice in a new history and language of forms. To make these pieces I have used my mannequin mould, which I have layered with cement, marble dust and lace. The pieces have taken on an Etruscan quality that harks back to ancient gods and goddesses but here, they have vacated the form, leaving only a superficial shell.

Angelic Ideals

The work that I do uses the refugee of the environment to deliver an obscure message in relation to the feminine facade. The angelic ideals I had as a young child have originated through the doctrine of religion, are a now a frightening a reality of daily continued existence. How many women feel they have to link to the source of youth under the plastic surgeons scalpel because of these standards and unrealistic beliefs. In this work, there are many levels of meaning. One of which deals with the current controversial crisis in the Middle East. On another level I deal with the irony that historically all angels have been male and not female. Yet, the ideal feminine form is that of the angel.

Outcome

All of this research produces an outcome for the viewer to judge my efforts as a contemporary sculptor. I have used my methods materials and installation placement to present this final examination exhibition . I have discussed how my art stands apart from current art in this genre to establish an individual style.

This method of making these objects is unique to my own art practice.

However there are significant influences of my inspirations from fellow contemporary artists to place me within the current post structural framework. My philosophy falls within a poststructuralist feminist framework. I deal with the construction of femininity and the effect that this has on us within society. The relevance of my work within a social context serves to confront issues of feminine construction and the psychological consequences this has on the individual within society today. Women, now more than ever, feel compelled to be perfect, ageless and timeless beauties that oscillate between virgin and whores.

In the final chapter, I summarise all the research to date and draw a conclusion. Here, I decide whether or not there is a clear direction and future for these topics discussion.

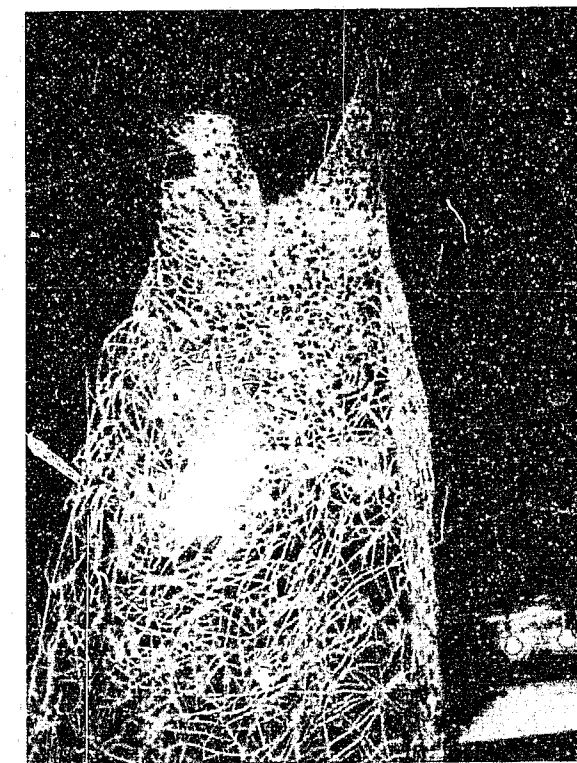


fig. no. 4.9, *Web Dress*, weaved acrylic material, S. O'Dea

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The works within this research project have links to other artists working within the poststructuralist genre, artists who have directly and indirectly affected the development of this body of work. I have reflected on the roles I have played in my lifetime as a woman along with the expectations placed upon other women in today's society. I argue that these concepts and our perception of self is always an arbitrator within the framework of a male gaze in a patriarchal society while the language I use as a maker, is relative to a semiotic form of feminine signs that emerge in my work. These signs have developed through a deconstructive paradigm. A further consideration is the way in which the viewer audience interprets this work within a postmodern paradigm. However, fundamental to the work, is the issue of whether it is possible for a woman to truly examine her own perception of self within a patriarchal paradigm.

Understanding Where I've Come From

Firstly, I must say this is the most difficult task I have set myself so far. The journey that this research project has taken me on has been a painstaking one. In that I have had to search for answers that have related to my own construction as a woman, validate this and address the true psychological purpose of my motivation as an artist. Nevertheless, I feel I have grown intellectually as well as artistically and I am now able to communicate within the artistic realm as a serious professional contemporary artist. The learning has been driven by the internal trauma and the relearning stimulated by the evaluation of the socially constructed self, juxtaposed to the natural desire to be feminine. I firmly believe that it is through the making of my art and my passion for the creative process, that I have been able to grow intellectually and spiritually.

As an artist, to be able to confront one's demons by physically manifesting your ideas in the work, has given the greatest satisfaction in my life thus far.

Main Points

The work has evolved over a period of four years. Its current metamorphosis has related to the theories of post-structural feminist. My work is about using these theories to compliment my art practice and create a position of identity and clarity in the work for the viewer. By identifying these theories, which have influenced me, I am able to relate to the work on another intellectual level. In establishing the artistic genre that my work falls within, I am able to compare my work with that of other practicing artists past and present. In doing so, I have been able to establish a line of historical reference that identifies my work with a dialogue of contemporary thought and discourse.

My Case

In this work, the methodology of making links a semiotic language of forms to my concepts of femininity and feminism. The processes, materials and techniques I use create an insight into my thought processes during my studio practice. In this documentation, I examine these processes and relate them to the viewer, who should after reading this paper be able to comprehend the work. This research paper supports the final exhibition and artistic vision in that it has established the gap in my art practice. My art is now linked to theories, theorists and practising artist- working in the area of post structuralism and feminism.

My work poses questions to the roles of women in a postmodern paradigm. Femininity is being threatened more than ever for the sake of androgynous sexuality. I have learnt that my work has a strong viewpoint that needs to be

expressed and promoted in the genre of contemporary art and installation work. I argue strongly from a socialist, feminist perspective in that I believe in difference and promote equality amongst the sexes.

Femininity I believe is primal and constructed according to cultural and economic background. I believe in empowering the feminine voice to speak and stand equal to men in a complimentary position in contemporary society. My investigative process has explored the powerful institutions that have shaped our feminine voices in society. It is up to women to challenge these predominately masculine dogmas.

Where to from Here

My art now has become clear and focused on defining these themes of femininity within society. I started with an idea about my childhood play and have learned that through my work I am able to challenge the dogma I have grown up with. I have learned how to stand up and be counted for what I believe to be for the greater good of society. My life has been a reflection of the social constructs I have lived through; and being an artist has enabled me to expand my vision into the world. My argument outline leans towards a conclusion that it is a combination of primal femininity and social constructs that has led women into the 21st century. I believe the patriarchal constructs have been set up to control the feminine, ideas of women and nature. And woman as 'Other' are outdated deep seated religious beliefs and myths that no longer fit into these contemporary times to control women and society. Due to the fracturing in postmodernism, the crisis concerns not only femininity but masculinity as well. I see the contemporary concerns for humanity seeking a balance now more than ever between sexes, environment and the computerized age.

From here, I do not believe this problem is resolved and therefore continue to investigate the issues progressively through my art. The work is evolving through object making to combine a more classical style of sculpture with information technology and installation work. I continue to use many different tools and genres to guide my art practice to present and the best possible outcome for my ideas.

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