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*Ceri Müller* *Release Me*

University of Cape Town



University of Cape Town

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# Stitched Implosions: Sexuality, femininity, conflict and desire

## SHOW ME YOUR PUNANI<sup>1</sup>: AN INTERACTION WHILE WAITRESSING ONE EVENING, SUMMER 2010

*Me*: Can I get you some drinks?

*Anonymous (Addressing his three male friends)*: I want to see her punani.

*Anonymous (Again, louder)*: I want to see her punani.

*Anonymous (Addressing me)*: Can I see your punani?

*Me*: What? Excuse me?

*Anonymous (Even louder)*: Can I see your punani?

*Me (High-pitched voice)*: No!

*Anonymous*: What if I'm good?

*I felt:*

Naked

Noticed

Overwhelmed

Desired

Disgusted by my body

Worthy of attention

Repulsed by the speaker

Dirty

Degraded

Humiliated

Powerless

Attractive

<sup>1</sup> A slang term for the female genitals (Uncertain origin c.1980s) (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008:116).

## Introduction

I am interested in the meeting point of the often contradictory aspects of female sexuality that reside in the body, the mind and other possible facets of one's being as manifested in the presence of conflicting physical and emotional needs and understanding. In this document and body of work, I investigate the realm of female sexuality and desire<sup>2</sup> in specific relation to both my experience and the notion of 'femininity'<sup>3</sup>.

It is fundamental to recognise differences among women, as only by rejecting the illusion of coherent, untainted identities can the diversity of women's experience be critically understood. I do not, therefore, assume to speak for all women. Rather, I hope that the subject matter explored in my work may spark dialogue and that others may relate to it in varying degrees. Women, especially in South Africa, reside within incredibly diverse political, economic, social, cultural and personal situations thus creating differences among the group with regard to concerns of power, agency, priorities, experience and points of view, to name a few. I am speaking from a particular cultural and economic position having being born into a segregated and privileged social category – factors which have impacted on and shaped my particular experience. Many women occupying a similar position to mine ('white,' Western, South African), and perhaps dissimilar positions, will have had experiences that resemble mine. The ideas and emotions expressed in my work are therefore not unique or specific to me but are, however, driven by personal experience and have been considered in the context of the cultural milieu in which I have been raised and educated.

<sup>2</sup> *Sexuality* as the capacity for sexual feelings, a person's sexual orientation or preference, and sexual activity (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008:1320); *desire* being a strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen, a strong sexual feeling or appetite, to want sexually (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008:388).

<sup>3</sup> In *The Subversive Stitch* Rozsika Parker provides a useful distinction between the construction of femininity, lived femininity, the feminine ideal and the feminine stereotype: "The construction of femininity refers to the psychoanalytic and social account of sexual differentiation. Femininity is a lived identity for women either embraced or resisted. The feminine ideal is a historically changing concept of what women should be, while the feminine stereotype is a collection of attributes which is imputed to women against which their every concern is measured" (Parker, 1984:4).

The viewer is invited to contemplate the work and may choose to relate, recognise, refuse, disregard, ridicule or celebrate my expression of a subject as it is interpreted through the particular work. My artistic project aims to explore aspects of the highly complex domain of sexuality and gendered behaviour without pointing any fingers or dismissing any point of view.

This body of work has been created predominantly through processes of handcrafting traditionally associated with women's work, such as knitting, tapestry and crochet. Using a combination of found objects and my own handiwork, I utilise the language of these processes and materials to disrupt the familiar expectation of these objects that serve as domestic comforts or decorations that adorn the home. My artistic production involves subverting and exploding what I suggest to be the repressed, contained, feminine objects so often used to make a house a home. Forms suggestive of the body, genitalia and internal sexual organs are simultaneously de-eroticised through their translation into knitted objects as the medium changes how the viewer encounters the explicitly sexual. The art objects themselves therefore embody a sense of conflict and disjuncture. Through the repetitive use of various shades of pink and pastel hues, colours stereotypically associated with femininity and a racially defined body<sup>4</sup>, I attempt to create an overwhelming mass of the sameness of colour and repetitive form. In doing so I intend to fabricate a space that is safe and inviting yet repulsive, as the subject matter and content of the work transgress the 'niceness' and comfort usually associated with knitted objects.

Through my practical work and this written document I wish to present and explore aspects of ambiguity and paradox in the terrain of female sexuality. The document consists of an overview of my research, my experiences and my fluctuating thoughts as they continue to feed my artistic process. The text that follows is highly gendered, speaking particularly from the female viewpoint that is my own, with selected references that serve to support my enquiry, in an attempt to understand my position as an active subject within the realm of sexuality and desire.

<sup>4</sup> The 'white' body was and continues to be used as a dominant measure or 'norm' – this can be seen in children's toys, dolls, band aid strips, etc. This was particularly prevalent during my formative years – when I was in primary school, for example, we referred definitively to the peachy pink pencil crayon used for drawing and colouring in as 'skin colour'. The pale pink coloured wool predominant in most of my work is part of the 'Toytime' range by Elle marketed towards those making children's toys and dolls – the colour goes by the name of 'Skintone'.

## Phalli and Vessels: Sexual 'difference'

My discussion of women's subjectivity will start with Sigmund Freud whose canonical theories about identity formation have remained hugely influential, particularly his phallogocentric view of sexual formation and difference. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) Freud essentially asserts women as envious of men, defining the notion of 'penis envy' from infancy. Describing the moment when young girls see that boys' genitals are formed differently from her own, Freud states: "They are ready to recognise them immediately and are overcome by envy for the penis – an envy culminating in the wish, which is so important in its consequences, to be boys themselves" (1977:114).

I can clearly recall as a young girl of about four or five wishing quite desperately to have a penis. I would lie awake in bed at night with my mom who had crawled in beside me after abusive arguments with my dad. I would interlace my fingers and clasping my hands together, I would point my two index fingers forward like a make-believe gun. I would hold this gesture against my young pudendum as if it were an erect penis, and imagine that I had a 'willy'. When I first came across Freud's theory of 'penis envy,' I admitted reluctantly to myself that my secret childhood wish must surely confirm his theory. But was my overwhelming desire to have a penis of my own and wish to be a boy a product of the inevitable 'penis envy' Freud claims all little girls experience on first recognition of the male penis? Or was it merely an acknowledgement of what Pierre Bourdieu describes as male domination<sup>5</sup> and females' seeming powerlessness that operated in my small world, as reflected in my parents' strained relationship? I saw my mother as trapped, powerless and weak. My father on the other hand seemed untouchable, in control and self-assured. Perhaps the penis that I wished for was synonymous with masculine agency, power and safety, rather than a reflection of pure desire on my part to possess the organ.

Freud acknowledges the clitoris as the "chief erogenous zone of the female child" (1977:142). In a chapter titled 'The Differentiation between Men and Women' in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* he states that the leading zone is then transferred to the vaginal orifice after a period of repression at puberty. This process, he claims, is essential in order for girls to "turn into women" yet contributes to greater mental instability in females:

<sup>5</sup> The terms 'male domination,' 'masculine domination' and 'symbolic violence' as I will use them throughout this document make direct reference to Pierre Bourdieu's writing on the subject. This topic is explored in greater detail in the chapter titled 'Masculine Domination and Violence' (p. 24).

*When erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation has been successfully transferred by a woman from the clitoris to the vaginal orifice, it implies that she has adopted a new leading zone for the purposes of her later sexuality. A man, on the other hand, retains his leading zone unchanged from childhood. The fact that women change their leading erotogenic zone in this way, together with the wave of repression at puberty, are the chief determinates of the greater proneness of women to neurosis and especially to hysteria. These determinants, therefore, are intimately related to the essence of femininity. (1977:144)*

Freud denounces females as inherently and inescapably hysterical and justifies this condition as being a part of our physical and genetic make-up. Furthermore, he claims that this 'hysteria' is the very 'essence' of our supposed femininity – a set of characteristics necessary and vital to be regarded as a 'true' and 'proper' lady. At the very best, it seems, we are doomed to a life of stifled neurosis, but at least we can conduct ourselves (and our simmering hysteria) in the appropriate feminine manner.

Although acknowledging the clitoris, Freud describes it merely as "homologous to the masculine genital zone of the penis" (1977:142) and as an organ that is largely useless to the sexual act in adults. He recognises "the female clitoris as a true substitute for the penis" (1977:114) – rather than a unique physical feature existing in its own right. It is a 'non-penis,' a void defined by its lacking. Freud continues to establish a male defined sexuality describing the libido as "invariably and necessarily of a masculine nature, whether it occurs in men or women and irrespectively of whether its object is a man or a woman" (1977:141).

In his establishment of the androcentric<sup>6</sup> view of the sex act itself and of the development of the self, Freud fails to recognise the vagina as anything other than the opposition to the penis, a lack that defines women in Freud's terms as castrated vessels waiting to be filled through impregnation or while engaged in sex with a man. Furthermore, in writing on his theory of the 'Castration Complex' Freud provides a psychological justification for sexist attitudes in men: "Both male and female children form a theory that women no less than men originally had a penis, but that they

<sup>6</sup> The androcentric theory is the view that the male sex is primary and the female secondary in the organic scheme; that all things centre, as it were, around the male.

have lost it by castration. The conviction which is finally reached by males that women have no penis often leads them to an enduringly low opinion of the other sex” (1977:113). The Freudian model of psychoanalysis establishes the phallus as the primary signifier – male domination is intrinsically linked to the penis, and to the sex act itself.

In the Freud that Jacques Lacan refers to, neither the unconscious nor sexuality can in any degree be pre-given facts, they are constructions; that is they are objects with histories and the human subject itself is only formed within these histories. In Lacan’s view, it is the history of the human subject in its generality (human history) and its particularity (the specific life of the individual) as it manifests itself in unconscious fantasy life that psychoanalysis traces (1982:4). This immediately establishes a framework within which Lacan broaches the whole question of understanding female sexuality.

In Noëlle McAfee’s account of Lacan’s system, she writes: “the penis is also what a woman demands and thus wants from a man and ultimately is what she seeks by having a child. Of course, the imaginary penis is phantasmic and leads to the function that the phallus has as the ultimate signifier<sup>7</sup>” (McAfee, 2004:32). Lacan replaces Freud’s theories of the penis with that of the phallus, which his followers are quick to insist is not the penis. In her writing McAfee argues that because the phallus is linked, however fictively, to the penis, it signifies what women lack and what men have: “In this sense, the phallus constitutes sexual difference: the symbol of women’s lack and men’s plenitude. But men only ‘have’ the phallus to the extent that they have a woman around who wants what he has. Men, thus, need women to be constituted as lacking in order for them to have the illusion that they have the phallus and the power that comes with it” (McAfee, 2004: 32).

Belgian psychoanalyst, linguist and feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray echoes a similar sentiment to that of McAfee. She points out in *Speculum of the Other Woman* that since Lacan continues the Freudian model he is as guilty of privileging the penis (be it real or imaginary) as his predecessor. Irigaray summarises the Freudian model as such:

<sup>7</sup> Since the phallus is a signifier and not an organ, no one can ever have it. No matter how much one might demand the penis as an imaginary object (for a man, in himself, for a woman, in a man), one can never have what one ‘really’ wants: the power of the phallus, which is to be loved and recognized as powerful, to be complete (McAfee, 2004:34).

*[A]n organised system whose meaning is regulated by paradigms and units of value that are in turn determined by male subjects. Therefore, the feminine must be deciphered as inter-dict: within the signs between them, between the realised meanings and between the lines ... and as a function of the (re)productive necessities of an intentionally phallic currency, which for lack of collaboration of a (potentially female) other, can immediately be assumed to need its other, a sort of inverted or negative alter ego – 'black' too, like a photographic negative. (1985:22)*

She goes on to say, that women are placed “off-stage, off-side, beyond representation, beyond selfhood” (Ibid.). In Linda Stupart’s thesis of her Masters research on themes of sex, violence and sentimentality, she states that this reiteration of woman as negative is one that is mirrored in a number of dualities that the notion implies: male/female, positive/negative, active/passive, private/public, culture/nature and so on; all based on the ‘darkness’ of women and their supposed hidden genitals (2008:13).

The Freudian model of psychoanalysis, and the Lacanian model which followed, are significant to my project as they firmly established the phallus as the primary signifier that served to reinforce the justified patriarchal character of society. Although formulated over a century ago, this phallogocentric view persists in contemporary society in various, often underlying and subtle forms, such as the distinct pressures and expectations placed on each sex regarding roles and activities in the public and private realms, as well as in the formation of sexual desires (discussed in more detail in the following chapters). It is this aspect of what Bourdieu terms male domination, which is intrinsically linked to the penis and the sex act itself, that I make reference to in my artistic project in seeking to understand the position of women within the realm of sexuality and desire.

## Self/Non-Self: Female subjectivity

The crux of my artistic project lies in the tension that resides in various ambiguous 'polarities' – the abject/erotic, attraction/repulsion, and the setting up of sexuality *against* femininity. I find these ambiguities interesting as they point directly to the inner conflict I am attempting to negotiate through my work. Much of the conflict I allude to manifests in paradoxical behaviours and emotional responses (as reflected in the 'punani' incident). This battle, I believe, also resides in the simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the materiality of the human body, blurred relations between the desiring subject and desired object, transgression and conformity to stereotypical notions of femininity, self-surveillance and constriction. All of which are manifested within the 'body,' and acted out by the 'self' through this 'body'.

As I have manoeuvred my way through the abovementioned 'conflict zone' I have attempted to understand where our sense of self – our *subjectivity* – as women comes from. In *Knowing Women* Helen Crowley defines the term subjectivity as the combination of conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions that make up our sense of selves, our relation to the world and our ability to act in that world (1992:7). In Crowley's view, unlike the individualist notion of people as rational, self-motivated individuals in pursuit of their own clear and stable self-interest, the concept of subjectivity can capture both the notion of people as intentional subjects – actors in the world – and at the same time as subject to forces beyond their conscious control (Ibid.).

As women we sometimes behave in ways, which we do not intend to and that do not always serve our own interests – such 'irrational' behaviour has been experienced by women as their own inability to make personal and emotional changes that politically and intellectually seem desirable. This ambiguity, often imbued within the female subject, may explain the conflicting and contradictory emotions experienced during encounters such as the 'punani' incident outlined at the beginning of the document. A need to understand why this happens, or how what is called 'contradictory subjectivity' is produced, led some feminists to examine, among other accounts, psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious processes. Crowley argues that it is important to explore the relationship between the social and the unconscious processes that are involved in the creation of our subjectivities for it is through the social and cultural practices acting upon the unconscious that we are able to insert change (1992:8). Without acknowledging the role

that social and cultural practices play in shaping subjectivities, it would seem that women would be locked into a subordinate position by the unconscious.

Julia Kristeva offers the term *subjectivity* as an alternative to the conventional understanding of 'self,' a term used to designate a being who is fully aware of her own intentions, fully able to act as an autonomous being in the world, and guided by her reason and intellect (McAfee, 2004:2). Kristeva's theory of the 'subject in process' (*le sujet en process*) offers a model of the self that is always in process and heterogeneous, rather than stable and unified. Kristeva shares Lacan's view that the subject is an effect of its linguistic practice. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, one of Kristeva's best-known texts, she writes: "linguistic changes constitute changes in the status of the subject – his relation to the body, to others, and to objects; it also reveals that normalized language is just one of the ways of articulating the signifying process that encompass the body, the material referent, and language itself" (2002:29). In Kristeva's view, the speaking being is not a stable subject. He or she is something else altogether: a subject in process.

Kristeva's work shows how what we call subjectivity is always a tenuous accomplishment, a dynamic process never completed. Persons are subject to all kinds of phenomena: their culture, history, context, relationships, and language. These phenomena profoundly shape how people come to be. Thus, persons are better understood as subjects, not selves. Kristeva argues that subjects are also not fully aware of all the phenomena that shape them; there is even a dimension of their own being that is inaccessible, a dimension that goes by the name 'the unconscious'. The unconscious is the domain of desires, tensions, energy, and representations that is not present in consciousness. Therefore, the experience of subjectivity is not that of coming to awareness as a 'self,' but of having an identity wrought in ways often unbeknownst to the subject herself (McAfee, 2004:2). In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva suggests that a dialectical notion of the signifying process would show how "significance puts the subject in process/on trial [*en process*]" (Kristeva, 2002:33).

As I have proceeded down the winding path of my artistic exploration, my awareness of the complexity of the terrain of female sexuality has morphed and multiplied. As I have looked evermore honestly at my personal experiences and motives while simultaneously delving into academic research, I have found myself less and less comfortable with the conventional understanding of the 'self' who is fully aware of her own intentions, guided by her reason

and intellect. It is for this reason that I have found this concept of subjectivity to be incredibly useful in beginning to understand the subtle ambiguities and contradictions within female sexuality which had previously baffled me. Kristeva and Crowley's concept of subjectivity take into account a combination of conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions that make up our sense of selves, our relation to the world and our ability to act in that world, while acknowledging that as subjects we are shaped by various factors such as our culture, history and context. I find this model to be hopeful as it alludes to the possibility of change – change that would better the emotional, spiritual, psychological and material situations of many women. It suggests that through honest self-awareness and acknowledgement of the various influential factors, which have contributed to the formation of oneself as a 'subject,' one is able to insert change. This is possible regardless of destructive 'unconscious' processes at play, many of which have been deeply ingrained as they have been passed down multiple generations in the form of societal and cultural belief systems and norms. This model does not place the 'blame' on one party or factor – and through this it is suggested that as a woman I do have choices, I do have agency if I am willing to take it.

### **Skin, Flesh and Bone: The female body**

The body, far from being a fundamentally stable cultural constant to which we must contrast all culturally relative and institutional forms, is constantly "in the grip," as Michel Foucault puts it, of cultural practices. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault asserts that this is not a matter of cultural repression of the instinctual or natural body, but rather that there is no 'natural' body. Cultural practices, far from exerting their power *against* spontaneous needs, 'basic' pleasures or instincts, or 'fundamental' structures of body experience, are already and always inscribed, as Foucault has emphasized, "on our bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations and pleasures" (Foucault, 1980:155). He argues, therefore, that our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture (Ibid.).

Attempts to analyse the relationship of women themselves to practices of disciplining of the female body raise complex questions concerning female agency, motivation and pleasure. When considering the disciplinary discourses and practices of such things as fashion, fitness and beauty that women adopt or are subjected to, some may view women simply as victims of a pernicious patriarchal system or ideology which deploys body practices and the fetishisation of

certain body types in ways that constrain all women. In a discussion on women's bodies, Jane Arthurs, however, argues that if women are victims, they seem very frequently to be willing victims – that if at times they experience the dictates of fashion, beauty and norms of bodily appearance as constraining, they also frequently gain pleasure from articulating their own self-presentation in relation to these things (1999:9). Pleasure is also gained from awareness of the male gaze and affirmation of desirability as in the 'punani' anecdote. The notion of complicity therefore needs to be acknowledged when considering the following questions: how is female pleasure and desire to be understood? How is one to respect and acknowledge pleasure and desire while also recognising that women's responses to body norms and practices may involve constraint and oppression? How can female agency and choice be understood in ways that neither see women merely as victims of a patriarchal order nor see choice or pleasure simply as the free play of unconstrained desire?

Reflecting back on the 'punani' incident I began to unravel the multiple strands of discomfort I felt during and after the encounter. The experience was unsettling not merely because of the obvious reason that the customer (non-descript 'white' male, mid-thirties) abused his position of power over me (waitress in a floral apron, mid-twenties) by so publically and blatantly disrespecting and objectifying me. The most disturbing facet of this interaction – through my honest acknowledgement – revealed that I had gained some level of satisfaction from this very wrong encounter: I felt desired. The flipside to this 'satisfaction' was the dull underlying inkling I had concerning a general sense of male disregard for women – my suspicions about 'men like him' had been confirmed yet again. This state of conflict led me to consider the complexity of one's own agency, as a woman, in the construction of (female) subjectivity, as well as in articulating one's own self-presentation and 'gendered' self. Already grappling with issues of power, vulnerability, gender constructions and desire in relation to sexuality, this interaction, like so many others, fuelled my preoccupation and interrogation of this complex domain within my artistic project.

Although an unfortunate number of women are kept in oppressive relationships by economic necessity, fear of physical violence or submission to psychological or what Bourdieu terms symbolic violence, I believe other such relationships persist for reasons which are less clear-cut and not reducible to material or overtly violent circumstances alone. There are forms of self-regulatory and self-imposed control operating in these, and thus presumably in other relationships too, which are not explicit, not necessarily fully understood but nevertheless

powerful. Aspects of complicity and co-dependence, for example, often exist within oppressive relationships. This control persists despite self-knowledge, awareness, and education on the matter – the control is therefore allowed and maintained by the one under the so-called control.

In her writing on this subject of sexuality and power, Lynne Segal criticises feminist strategies and studies of sex which focus only on the physical side of sexuality for reducing the sexual needs of women to finding the best way to have an orgasm and thus oversimplifying the question of sexual desire (Crowley & Himmelweit, 1998:112). She sees the patriarchal character of society being expressed not only in sexual practices but also in the formation of our sexual desires. Thus what women desire sexually is more than particular physical feelings, it is also particular emotional frameworks within which to experience them (Ibid.). In Segal's view, it is this that makes sexuality such a difficult area, for what we desire may be to *not* be in control; it may be to be submissive or to be masochistic. This may mean that our sexuality, or attempts to satisfy our sexual needs, and our lives as expressed in the more public realm do not always sit easily together (Ibid.).

What is 'appropriate' behaviour for a lady? How should a 'good girl' conduct herself? The Afrikaans saying "n Vrou moet fyn wees"<sup>8</sup> instantly comes to mind. Why do I constantly desire to be desired? Why do I willingly and actively conform to the fluctuating commercial definitions of 'desirability' reinforced through the media? Why do I resist Western ideals of femininity on an intellectual level, yet find myself perpetuating them on a daily basis. I am aware that I am constantly watching myself, watching myself being watched, watching myself watching myself being watched in my mind, watching myself not being watched when I want to be watched, watching the invisible watchers, imagining the desired watchers, desiring the imagined watchers, waiting patiently for the watchers. As if trapped in a hall of mirrors, the thoughts bounce back and forth ad infinitum.

Throughout *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) Luce Irigaray suggests that when looking in the mirror, women merely replicate the male gaze as it is imposed onto their own bodies because they are denied selfhood within the

<sup>8</sup>An Afrikaans expression which translates into 'A woman must be delicate'.

patriarchal definition of women. In John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* he too discusses the role of the mirror in reflecting the male gaze, which separates women from their subjectivity: "the real function of the mirror was [...] to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight" (1972:51). Berger discusses the concept of women surveying themselves (the constant surveillance), but it seems that in the contemporary climate this experience is far more incestuous, far more complex. Being watched can be equated with being desired = Success/Beauty, therefore not being watched can imply that you are not desired = Failure/Ugly. This equation leads one to want to be desired through objectification – affirmation and pleasure, however superficial, are gained through the process and awareness of one's own objectification.

Although I am aware of pressures and expectations placed on women in contemporary society, I do wonder: to what degree do women (such as myself) willingly conform to and perpetuate these stereotypical ideals of femininity which uphold systems of masculine domination – rather than experiencing an enforced or external source of regulation? To what degree are women such as myself complicit in reinforcing this patriarchal society we live in? Or have we merely given up the fight for true gender equality – looking for a way to journey around the mountain of entrenched masculine domination rather than attempting to smash it down? What role do I play in sustaining these stereotypical ideals of femininity and female sexuality? Why do I experience a sense of affirmation when a man I don't find desirable sexually abuses me verbally while I work? Why do I find myself intellectually rejecting processes of objectification, while simultaneously feeling a sense of achievement when experiencing them? Who and what is this 'I' that I speak of? Is 'the gaze' so deeply ingrained into the fibre of my being, into the very essence of my sexuality and my feelings of self-worth through generations of social conditioning, that no degree of self-knowledge, education or awareness can set me free? Harboured an ever-present feeling of discomfort – that is fuelled by constantly questioning myself and second-guessing my motives, which yield no definitive answers – may explain the perpetual conflict I have referred to.

I am wary of placing women as victims both within intercourse and society at large and as it seems that many women have an ambiguous relationship to the pain that arises from their sexuality, sexual behaviour and consensual relations. This pain is the consequence of damaging aspects of certain relationships such as oppression, psychological and emotional abuse, violated boundaries and masculine domination over women. These forms of damage or abuse

are often inflicted in subtle and overt ways with the conscious or unconscious engagement of the female counterpart. Living in a state of simultaneously consenting to and rejecting the predominant reality of male domination over women makes one partly responsible for the damage that ensues. This complicity ties into one's sense of worth, while awareness thereof also gives rise to feelings of guilt and shame.

Negotiating a way through my personal experience, practical work and theoretical research I have come to recognize the power of the socially constructed 'normative' processes and ideals women continuously confront and are subjected to. These include norms of sexual orientation and desire, of sexual behaviour and the bounds of decorum, of body shape and size. I do not however, see women's bodies as entirely disciplined or constrained by the relations of power operating in society as I believe a level of complicity is also at play despite the varying degrees of agency. On the other hand, I do find it hard to imagine women as able to transcend their bodies as they exist within the social construction of gender, or being able to displace or move beyond the body and its materiality. It is through the materiality of my work that I investigate the complex and dialectical relations between our embodied selves and the cultural processes in which we are engaged as active desiring/desirable subjects. I explore these relations by transforming the body's materiality via the particular medium, material and make-up of these exaggerated but recognisable bodily forms and processes. Body parts, organs, processes and products have been re-stitched to destabilize and disconcert the viewer's sense of the preconditioned embodied self.

In an article on the subject of the materiality of the body in consumer culture Tasmin Wilton explains her preference to see the 'self' not as a narrative project (which implies an *authoritative* author and a product which is then available to be 'read'), but as a conversation between the body and the social, in which the 'matter' of the conversation is continually created and recreated in the dynamic, temporally located interlocution (1999:57). She goes on to suggest that in this 'conversation,' it is much easier for an individual to control what the body 'says' than what is said by the society in which the self is obliged to function. Thus, she argues, the current social crisis in gender is marked by a veritable epidemic of body-transformative actions intended to assert control over how the bodied self 'speaks,' or how the body asserts and conveys notions of gender (Ibid.).

As women we often have a strained relationship with our bodies – we are conditioned to reject the raw materiality

of our female bodies. Like all living animals, our female bodies defecate, sweat, fart, burp, copulate, jerk, expand, contract and leak from every orifice. Hair sprouts from blemished skin and various substances are discharged from porous crevices. Vigilant maintenance is required as a result – our bodies are exfoliated, caressed, scrubbed, peeled, plucked, pulled, lazered, curled, washed, shaved, waxed, nurtured, bleached. Natural aspects are deemed ‘unfeminine’ – so we take the ‘necessary’ action and remove the hair, suppress the burp or fart, spritz the arm pits and mask our uneven skin with foundation. We speak of ‘Aunty Rosie’ and ‘that time of the month,’ rather than the healthy bloody discharge that passes through our vaginal opening. We attempt to purge and banish anything that is ‘other’ and ‘unclean,’ yet remains uncannily too familiar. A deep sense of shame develops around the body as we constantly reject, mask, hide and attempt to eradicate these aspects of our existence that are inescapable.

Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, a theme which figures prominently in her book *Powers of Horror* (1980), provides useful insight into this area. In describing the abject she writes: “It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (1982:4). She goes on to discuss how the abject continuously violates one’s own borders; it is sickening yet irresistible – “Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (Ibid.). In contemporary critical theory, ‘abjection’ is used to describe the state of often-marginalized groups, such as women, unwed mothers, people of minority religious faiths, prostitutes, convicts, poor people, and disabled people. ‘Abjection’ also describes the repulsion created by the sight of things such as death, excrement and rot, which constitute the subject as a living being. In this context, the notion of the abject exists between the concept of an object and the concept of the subject, something alive yet not (Kristeva, 1982:1).

In Kristeva’s view, the notion of the abject is what one rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself, but never banishes altogether. It continues to haunt the subject’s consciousness, a looming presence on the periphery of awareness, it remains a companion through one’s whole life. Kristeva writes: “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (1982:3). What makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear from consciousness. It remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one’s own clean and proper self (McAfee, 2004:46). The subject finds the abject both repellent and seductive and thus his or her borders of self are, paradoxically, continuously threatened

and maintained. They are threatened because the abject is alluring enough to crumble the borders of self; they are maintained because the fear of such collapse keeps the subject vigilant (McAfee, 2004:49-50).

The physical phenomenon of abjection, the state of rejecting what is other to oneself, holds a central role in Kristeva's theory of subjectivity (outlined in the previous chapter 'Self/Non-Self') and in her literary criticism. Kristeva considers abjection to be one of the most fundamental courses of the subject in process as it creates borders of an always tenuous 'I' (Kristeva, 1982:13). As a process, Kristeva argues that expelling what is deemed 'other' to 'oneself,' is a means to define the borders of subjectivity. But as a phenomenon that never entirely recedes, abjection also haunts subjectivity, threatening to unravel what has been constructed; one's own sense of self is never settled and unshaken. To keep hold of 'oneself,' a subject has to remain vigilant against what may undermine its borders (McAfee, 2004:57). As humans, females in particular, we constantly reject, mask and hide 'inappropriate' or 'unsavoury' aspects of ourselves that are most vulnerable to disapproval yet are inescapable, and I believe that a deep sense of shame develops around the body as a result of never being able to eradicate these aspects of our existence. Kristeva's theory of abjection is significant to my artistic project as she links the abject to the formation of the subject – these aspects of abjection, I believe, give rise to shame and an embodied system of self-surveillance within the subject.

The notion of abjection in relation to shame is confronted in my *Purge* series, a collection of drawings depicting female figures in a state of exaggerated abjection. In these drawings, bodily fluids spray violently from the figures' orifices and leak hopelessly from their every hole – vomit explodes from the mouth, faeces spill from the anus, blood, urine and discharge gush from oozing folds of the vagina. These drawings depict how these basic bodily processes are also inherently cathartic – through the literal release of matter from the body, the body is purged and 'cleansed'. Although all executed with the same urgent hand, some figures expel their fluids violently, weaker ones discharge theirs gently and others secrete nothing at all. All, however, are completely exposed in their abject state and it is this exposure that renders them vulnerable.

Themes of shame and abjection are prevalent in the work of South African artist Penny Siopis – they are particularly pronounced in her *Pinky Pinky* and *Shame* series. In these images which depict what the artist refers to as a "poetics of vulnerability," intensity, trauma and passion run together, as bodily fluids and fleshy part-objects pool, stain and

congeal into fluctuating manifestations of the subject, self, object and other (Siopis, 2005:5). Siopis remarks: “Both [series] touch on fear and strong, but somehow inhibited, emotion. And, perversely, the release of that emotion” (2005:141). The *Shame* paintings are more emotionally charged, working with the vulnerability of the (girl) body as the ground for both intimacy and violence, overlapping the beauty of the body’s forms with the ugliness of its multiple manners of distress. For Siopis, shame is more intimate than fear, since “in shame we seem to betray ourselves” (Ibid.).

I find my work to be homologous to that of Siopis in many regards. In her *Shame* series, for example, she places the threatened, sexed female body at the centre of the works, which signals scenes of the social particular to South Africa: to the gendered violence evident in high rates of rape and abuse, and also to the ways in which females, especially the girl child, are always the radical locus of the uncertainty in society (Siopis, 2005:141). Implicit in the work is the extent to which females’ abilities to protect their bodies have been deeply violated, and we are drawn to see the profound significance of sexed bodies in a history so often told almost exclusively in the registers of race (Ibid.).

My use of colour in this body of work also corresponds to that of Siopis. In her depictions of *Pinky Pinky* she used a host of pinks: some of the time it is a ‘flesh-coloured’ paint and the plastic body parts she incorporates are also “flesh colour, a kind of dirty pink” (Siopis, 2005:139). She notes: “there is an irony here, as flesh colour is not just a category of colour, but nothing less than a Western conceit in which whiteness (pink) becomes the universal colour for flesh”. At the same time, the pinkness of ‘flesh’ is our underneath, our inside, where we can be hurt and harmed, as well as the colour of our passions, our wounds (Ibid.). Sarah Nuttall writes the following about the depiction of ‘flesh’ in Siopis’ work which I feel resonates closely with my artistic concerns regarding the female body, shame and abjection: “‘flesh’ is at once the site of our lived wounds, felt traumas and ongoing fears and our greatest splendour, our utmost glee, our deepest humanity” (Nuttall, 2005:137).

## Masculine Domination and Violence

Biological sexual difference is possibly the most common justification for and defender of the male super gender, followed shortly by pseudo-psychology. As science is generally equated with truth, the standard for sexual difference has always resided largely in the seemingly objective model of physical difference (Stupart, 2008:15). Pierre Bourdieu asserts in his *Masculine Domination*, however, that it is the social world that constructs the body as a sexually defined reality and as “the depository of sexually defining principles of vision and division” (2001:11).

Bourdieu analyses the concept of masculine domination as a model form of symbolic violence – the kind of gentle, invisible, pervasive violence which is exercised through cognition and misrecognition, knowledge and sentiment, often with the unwitting consent of the dominated. In his essay on the topic, Bourdieu defines symbolic violence simply as “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004:272). He argues that masculine domination is so deeply ingrained in our unconscious that we hardly perceive all of its dimensions and that it is so much in line with our expectations that we struggle to call it fully into question. This overarching presence of ‘acceptable’ male domination must surely impact on female self-image and sexuality.

Bourdieu describes symbolic violence as a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition, misrecognition, recognition and feeling (Bourdieu, 2001:1-2). He suggests that in order to understand this form of domination we must analyse both its invariant features and the historical work of dehistoricisation through which social institutions, such as family, school, church, state, externalise the arbitrary<sup>9</sup> at the root of men’s power (Jenkins, 2002:104-5). He argues that the masculine social order functions as an “immense symbolic machine” giving consent to the masculine domination on which it is founded: it is the sexual division of labour, a very strict distribution of the activities assigned to each sex, and the structural allocation of space (Bourdieu, 1998:9). Bourdieu argues that the *biological* differences between the sexes, between the male and female bodies, and, in particular, the *anatomical* difference between the sex organs, can thus

<sup>9</sup> Culture is arbitrary in two senses: in its imposition and in its content. The notion of arbitrariness denotes that, other than as the result of an empirically traceable history, culture cannot be deduced or derived from any notions of appropriateness or relative value (Jenkins, 2002:104-5).

appear as the natural justification of the socially constructed difference between the *genders*, and in particular of the social definition of labour (Bourdieu, 2001:11). In Bourdieu's view, the logic that dictates broader cultural patriarchies and personal relationships is in fact based on an abstract, male-centered definition of sexuality, leading in particular to male domination within the sex act itself – an integral part of the heterosexual love relationship.

*If the sexual relation appears as a social relation of domination, this is because it is constructed through the fundamental principle of division between the active male and the passive female and because this principle creates, organises, expresses, and directs desire – male desire as the desire for possession, eroticised domination, and the female desire as the desire for masculine domination [...] (Bourdieu, 2001: 21).*

In her Masters thesis Stupart writes that although it may suffice to say that men have penises and women vaginas, the logic of reproduction as a man emptying his seed into the vessel of a woman so that she can carry 'his' child inside her is one that is inherently codified (2008:15). It presents the androcentric, assumed to be natural, model of sexuality to which the passivity of women is central. "The androcentric model of sex as an activity recognises three essential steps: preparation for penetration ('foreplay'), penetration and male orgasm. Sexual activity that does not involve at least the last two has not been popularly or medically (or for that matter legally) regarded as 'the real thing'" (Maines, 1999:5). This model of sexuality fuels the assumption that men are more active as they deposit their seed in their dormant mate. Furthermore, it enhances the prioritization of the male orgasm, requiring a merely mechanical fulfilment of the sex act on the part of the chosen female 'candidate' who must surely and necessarily present herself as desirable as this is also a measure of her worth.

Although I am cautious not to position women as victims and men as perpetrators, I do believe that women (and I refer particularly to South African women) live in constant fear of sexual violence, or forced penetration<sup>10</sup>. Women fear rape, and fear men's capacity for sexual violence. While rape is also a terrifying reality for men, it is still predominantly men who are the perpetrators of sexual violence, and fear is generally not a codified part of male conceptions of heterosexual sex. Research also indicates that the majority of victims of rape and sexual violence are women and children, so although rape and sexual violence against men is on the increase, the vulnerability of women and children presently outweighs that of men (Biggs, 2006). Helen Moffett of the African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, writes how her experience counselling women of all races, religions and classes has brought home to her the truisms of sexual violence: "rape, like most crimes, is intra-communal (that is, it is usually committed by 'insiders,' not 'outsiders'); women are far more likely than men to be raped; and women are invariably raped by men. In other words, sexual violence is an instrument of gender domination and is rarely driven by a racial agenda" (Moffett, 2006:7).

In her thesis Stupart writes that her fear of sexual violence came simultaneously with the realisation of sexual pleasure as a teenager (2008:33). I related strongly to this as I recalled that the very real fear I had of being raped developed around the time that I first became aware of my own (naïve) sexuality and I would struggle to fall asleep at night in anxious anticipation of attack. Feeling particularly vulnerable as I lived in a rural area on a small holding against a dense forest, my thoughts would run riot with imaginings of the horrors of this violence I had only recently come to consider. Stupart argues that this fearful position, even though it relates specifically to sexual abuse, is intrinsically linked to the fact that men can 'take advantage' of women, through their superior physical strength and through the social and biological realities of penetration (Ibid.). For women, sex and violence are always linked in a pervasive fear of sexual abuse. "Once you permit yourself to be perceived as a sexual creature, then you become open territory, open prey. Actual sexual violence oppresses us" (English, Hollibaugh, & Rubin, 1982:45).

<sup>10</sup> In the latest crime statistics the government reported 66196 incidents of sexual offences from April 2010 to March 2011. It is suggested that only 1 in 9 incidents of sexual offences are reported because of stigma, fear of retaliation and a lack of faith in the police which would mean that potentially there were actually almost 6 hundred thousand sexual offences incidents that month. This equates to 1692 per day, which is over 70 per hour or at least one every minute (South African Police Service, 2011).

In Moffett's view, sexual violence is especially effective as a tool of social control as it combines the unpleasantness of physical violence with deep shame and self-blame on the part of the victim, which leads to self-punitive and self-monitoring behavioural changes by the victim (Moffett, 2006:15).

This chapter and the next are intended to illustrate how the South African climate of sexual violence, symbolic violence and masculine domination have culminated in the existence of a society that is inherently phallogocentric. This male dominated social scenario, in which women are also complicit, impacts the 'construction' of the female body and the way women conduct and experience their sexuality.

### **The Legacy of Patriarchy in South Africa**

In attempting to identify the particular way in which female sexuality and desire have developed, and the way in which constructed gender roles impact on my experience, I have found it important to consider the role of apartheid's legacy and the current scenario of gender-based and sexual violence in South Africa in the realisation of my artistic project.

Facets of South Africa's past such as laws governing sexual conduct (such as the 'Immorality Act'), conscription and the strong presence of conservative Christian ideals enforced a patriarchal dominance specific to South Africa that shaped sexuality – the residual effect of which continues to impact on the way men and women behave today. The political ideology of apartheid was deeply rooted in and reinforced by Calvinistic Christianity as conservative Christian ideals and religious doctrines were interwoven with politics. The apartheid dispensation privileged Calvinistic Christianity to such a degree that under Christian-National Education all schools had to teach Bible Studies as a part of the curriculum. In accordance with the Calvinist complementarian<sup>11</sup> viewpoint, very particular gender stereotypes

<sup>11</sup> Complementarianism is the theological view held by some in Christianity and other world religions, such as Islam, that men and women have different but *complementary* roles and responsibilities as manifested in marriage, family life, religious leadership, and elsewhere. Complementarianism holds that "God has created men and women equal in their essential dignity and human personhood, but different and complementary in function, with male headship in the home and in the Church" ("Complementarianism, n.," 2012).

were upheld during apartheid: a woman's rightful place was at home attending to the needs of the family (a role epitomised by various forms of needlework, as I will discuss in the next chapter), while a butch masculinity and bravado was expected of rugby playing men who were called upon to protect their country from the ever present threat of the 'swart gevaar'<sup>12</sup>.

During apartheid, the government had a policy of compulsory conscription for young 'white'<sup>13</sup> men, which at its peak, consisted of two years of mandatory military service, followed by camps at intervals. Service often involved participating in the South African Angolan war or assisting the control of 'township' violence. The state institution of mandatory conscription, which applied to all 'white' men after completing their schooling or further studies, ensured the crystallization of 'white' male familial authority at the level of on-the-ground citizens. As a powerful and invasive institution of apartheid, it was central to the maintenance of 'white' domination in the country and played a pivotal role in the organization of gender, race and class relations.

Sexuality itself was governed and repressed by various laws implemented and policed rigorously during apartheid. The 'Immorality Act' (1927) forbade extramarital sex between 'white' people and 'black' people. In its original form it only prohibited sex between a 'white' person and a 'black' person, but in 1950 it was amended to become the 'Immorality Amendment Act,' which prohibited sex between a 'white' person and any person not classified as 'white'. The 'Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act' (1949) forbade marriages between 'white' people and people of other racial classification. The 'Immorality and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Amendment Act' (1985) repealed these laws.

<sup>12</sup> 'Swart gevaar' (which is the Afrikaans translation for '*black danger*') was a term used during apartheid to refer to the perceived security threat of the majority 'black,' African population to the 'white' South African government.

<sup>13</sup> The usage of 'white' and 'black' in reference to 'race' and 'racial' characteristics throughout this document is not an endorsement of such classification. It rather points to the continued relevance in everyday usage and legislation in South Africa. They are written in quotation marks to indicate that they are not conceived of as authentic group categories (Bagnol, n.d.).

Although it would be difficult to prove, I believe that the core of most forms of sexual violence and female subordination in contemporary South Africa lies in the continuous presence of masculine domination. This patriarchal social system, although present beforehand, was capitalized on and reinforced by the apartheid regime. Following that, I believe that there is a strong link between South Africa's recent history, and the inability of its citizens under democracy to respect women's rights to bodily autonomy and integrity.

Helen Moffett poses the theory that sexual violence in post-1994 South Africa is fuelled by justificatory narratives that are rooted in apartheid discourse (2006:7). In her paper titled 'The political economy of sexual violence in post-apartheid South Africa,' she argues that the destructive and overtly racially ranked hierarchies endorsed and enforced during South Africa's apartheid regime continue to have profound implications for women. This is evident in our experience of gender-based and sexual violence, even after these forms of social stratification have apparently been dismantled and transformed in line with rights-based principles. She suggests that it is vital to investigate the complex relationship between South Africa's recent history of apartheid, with its emphasis on rigid stratification and abnormal social rankings along racial lines, and the prevalence of gender and sexual violence (particularly rape) in the years since the institution of democracy (Moffett, 2006:4).

South Africa's new Constitution enshrines the rights of all groups in society, but it has arguably failed to deconstruct the multiple overlapping and entrenched forms of patriarchy that had flourished under apartheid. The Commission for Gender Equality (CGE, 2012) is an official group established in terms of Section 187 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa to promote respect for gender equality and the protection, development and attainment of gender equality. The CGE (2012) has acknowledged the under-representation of women in the formal sectors of South Africa such as infrastructure development, industrial projects and mining. CGE (2012) hearings reveal that the factors that attribute to this lack of representation range from outright discrimination in employment practices, persistent gender stereotypes about women's potential in the workplace, and insufficient interventions to encourage girls and women to study for and pursue careers in these sectors.

In the State of the Nation Address earlier this year, President Jacob Zuma outlined higher growth and job creation as key solutions to the challenges facing South Africa. However, the state's response in the form of the New Growth

Path framework made no reference to the situation and role of women in growth, planning and implementation, and in the economy generally. In what was titled 'A gender analysis of the State of the Nation Address 2012,' the Commission for Gender Equality (2012) state that: "This reflects the persistent failure of state institutions to engender key policy frameworks, by failing to conceptualise and integrate gender equality, and the particular vulnerabilities, situations and needs of women, in its overarching policy and planning processes."

The complex blend of peer and societal pressures men and women experience, as inherited from the past, has resulted in the need to 'police' subversion from the entrenched patriarchal order. South Africa's legacy of patriarchy and history of apartheid as outlined in this chapter has impacted South African men of different racial groups in various different ways. In an essay titled 'Mans is Ma Soe'<sup>14</sup> Dr. Elaine Salo of the African Gender Institute of the University of Cape Town analyses the ganging practices in Manenberg, South Africa, and the ideologies of masculinity, gender and generational relations in this area. In this ethnographic study of young, 'coloured' working class male gang members in Manenberg, Salo indicates that gang practices and 'coloured' men's gendered identities cannot be divorced from the historical factors of racial and economic dispossession that the residents of Manenberg experienced in the 1960s (Salo, 2005). The current nature of interconnected realms of masculine domination, race and community in South African societies can be linked to the history of racial segregation, economic division and deprivation incurred during the apartheid years.

Within broader racial groups, women are subjugated in different ways as a result of the embedded historical racial classification as well as various cultural factors. The extreme oppression of 'black' South African's, for example, has created a particularly oppressive scenario for 'black' women. Due to the current socioeconomic reality that there are a much higher number 'black' citizens living in poverty (itself a product of apartheid) means that 'black' women are generally far more vulnerable to rape, sexual abuse and economic exploitation. Democracy and racial and gender equality was and continues to be a threat to 'white' masculinity – their minority, loss of authority, inability to assert themselves in the way that they were previously accustomed to, has resulted in a new and particular range

<sup>14</sup> A slang Afrikaans phrase which translates into '*Men are like that*'.

of pressures which must impact on contemporary expressions of sexuality. Historical, cultural, social and political factors have contributed significantly to the particular gender relationships that exist today and impact on all South Africans.

### **Stitch by Stitch: Needlework and handcrafting**

As I was born in 1985, the sexual division that designated women to sewing was fostered by school curricula during my primary school education: boys were assigned to carpentry lessons and girls to handcrafting lessons where we were taught skills such as needlework and knitting. Over the years I have gathered an extensive collection of handcrafted objects<sup>15</sup>, which I have purchased from church fetes, charity stores, home-industry shops and markets. These handcrafted objects are usually made in the domestic sphere, by women, with 'love,' and evoke a sense of domesticity as they were created to adorn the home. Although social structures have shifted dramatically over the last few decades, these objects can be seen to represent the ideal of the 'white' South African woman, wife and mother that was fostered during the conservative years gone by, the residue of which lingers on today. They epitomize what I have come to term the 'church fete aesthetic': a conservative 'white' sector of South African society, which in my mind opposes an open, democratic expression and embrace of female sexuality. Desire and erotic impulses seem to be sublimated into innocent handcrafted objects, which hide sexuality, and are often sold for pathetically low prices considering the amount of time spent creating them. The majority of knitted forms that constitute my artworks were stitched by the elderly residents and staff of the Berghof Retirement Village who I approached for help in undertaking my artistic project (outlined in the proceeding section 'The Berghof Ladies Knitting Group'). Their engagement in my project is significant as knitting is generally associated with elderly women who often knit toys and other objects for church fetes and charity. Together, this group of elderly women, (with their 'retired' sexuality, one could say), and myself (in my sexual 'prime' at twenty six years of age) collaborated on knitting this project concerning sexuality.

<sup>15</sup> Including an assortment of toys, dolls, Barbie-doll clothes, toilet-seat covers, blankets, egg warmers, bed socks, doilies, cushion covers, tapestries, toilet-roll covers, new-born baby clothes, table cloths, etc.

Over the centuries needlework has come to signify femininity. Interestingly, the traditionally 'female' skills of sewing, knitting and crochet were the only area of accomplishment that Freud notoriously allowed as women's original contribution to Western civilization (Reckitt & Phelan, 2001:176). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, he was to decide that constant "needlework and similar occupations" were factors that rendered women particularly prone to hysteria because the daydreaming induced by these activities led to "dispositional hypoid states" (Freud, 1955:13). In *The Subversive Stitch*, Rozsika Parker examines the relationship between the history of embroidery and changing notions of what constituted feminine behaviour from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. In her introductory chapter she discusses how the feminine stereotype categorises everything women are and everything we do as entirely, essentially and eternally feminine, denying differences between women according to our economic and social position, or our geographic and historical place: "The conviction that femininity is natural to women (and unnatural in men) is tenacious. It is a crucial aspect of patriarchal ideology, sanctioning a rigid and oppressive division of labour" (Parker, 1984:3). She goes on to argue that embroidery and a stereotype of femininity have become collapsed into one another – both are characterised as mindless, decorative and delicate: "good to look at, adding taste and status, but devoid of significant content" (Parker, 1984:6). Like embroidery, various forms of needlecraft, such as knitting, crochet, sewing and tapestry, have been engendered with an ideology of femininity, which imply service, selflessness, docility and obedience. The objects themselves therefore serve as a material expression or proof of a 'nice' woman or 'good' girl.

The methodical, controlled practices of handwork such as knitting and crochet, as I have come to understand them, embody a sense of repression, self-containment and submission. I wonder what energies and desires are channelled into those endlessly stitched objects that decorate the home or offer some sort of comfort? I do believe, however, that to reject needlework due to its historical associations with femininity is problematic for a number of reasons: it would risk devaluing other women, it would negate each woman's autonomous freedom to engage in needlework and it would endorse the stereotypical view of the art as defined by a male-dominated society. Rather than scorning these processes as something that constrains women's lives I make use of them to produce artworks that explore female subjectivity. The materials are used to expose and negotiate the merged terrains of female sexuality, desire and violence – aspects of our existence as women that are often ignored in patriarchal South African society and suppressed by the very ideals of femininity that these mediums evoke.

My use of the mediums of handcrafting and needlework are by no means radical. As early as the 1960s various artists began to use the processes of handcrafting in their work to comment on the status of women's work in Western patriarchal culture. Writing about her *Crocheted Environment* (1972) Faith Wilding stated: "domestic craft came to be associated with femininity, and high art with masculinity. In my crocheted environment, I wanted to pay homage to women's useful economic and cultural work, while at the same time producing a piece that was useless (non-practical) to demonstrate the falseness of the traditional distinctions between art and craft" (Butler, 2007:316). Women active in the upsurge of feminism in Europe and America which began in the 1960s set out to challenge accepted definitions of the innate differences between the sexes, and needlework was a useful medium for artists at this time to provide a new understanding of the creation of femininity.

I identify significantly with the work of feminist sculptor Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) and the self-revealing YBA artist Tracey Emin, both of whom have worked extensively with fabric and needlework. In a discussion on her relationship with Bourgeois, Emin stated, "We both work with recurring themes [...]. Things that come again and again into our life, that don't go away" (Emin, 2010). I identify closely with the subject matter explored in their work – a major recurring theme shared by both artists is the female body as a site for both violence and creation as intersected by the sex act. Emin, famous for her work *Everyone I have Ever Slept with 1963-1995* (1995), has made her career by opening her personal life to the public as inseparable from her artwork. Emin's art confronts the viewer with autobiographical texts describing personal, very specific occurrences of her life to relate to the viewer's own life-experiences. While Bourgeois's works are similarly personal and psychological, they are more abstract in their visual language; thus both artists use their past in different manners.

During the last two years of her life, Bourgeois collaborated with Emin on a series of prints entitled 'DO NOT ABANDON ME' – Bourgeois made a series of watercolour prints to which Emin added text and drawings in black ink. The collaboration between Bourgeois, a first-generation feminist artist, and Emin, a second-generation feminist, shows a continuity between feminist themes, but also uncovers the differences in the means of expressing these very ideas. This can be seen in the way that Bourgeois' abstracted torsos interact with Emin's scrawled drawings and brutally personal texts. Emin and Bourgeois have a way of aestheticizing their vulnerability that I feel resonates with and relates to my artistic interests.

Using my own experience as a starting point, my sculptural project aims to pick apart the complexities of female intimacy and sexuality through the medium of needlework. With a limited use of colour and texture my handcrafted objects (bulbous breasts, erect woollen penises, enlarged vagina-like doilies, crocheted excretions and ambiguous fleshy forms) comment upon our highly charged relationships to human anatomy and sexuality in general. I hope to create a sculptural environment of proximity that is simultaneously reassuring and threatening because it dwells in a place that is intimate, even promiscuous, while remaining highly sanitized and 'proper' due to the nature of the material.

Through an interconnected openness and multiplicity of references I wish to set up tensions that allude to the complexity of female agency within the sexual domain. I have created a sculptural environment using domestic objects such as wooden plant stands, a lamp shade, a pink porcelain toilet and found tapestries, which I integrate with my own handiwork in an attempt to present an exhibit that operates not as a self-sufficient, complete form but rather an intersection of disparate possibilities and ideas. The handcrafting techniques of needlework and knitting that I employ as associated with femininity and docility are highly significant to my artistic practice as they relate to South Africa's history of conservatism and segregation, as tied in with politics and religious doctrine. The residual effect of our country's history, which includes a strong legacy of patriarchy, has shaped sexuality in contemporary South Africa as well as the vulnerability of women here. The present climate of rife sexual (and other) violence against women and children in particular, instils fear within South Africans, which dramatically impacts on sexuality and gender relations.

A multilevel register of expressions, references and materials appear throughout the exhibition, often merging, overlapping and manifesting differently in individual artworks. Much of the work points to aspects of 'abjection' that are hidden and denied through processes of grooming and covering up. *Floral Tapestry I & II*, *Rug* and *Naught Piece*, for example, draw on the abject nature of basic bodily processes that constitute life – woollen bodily fluids drip, ejaculate and excrete from orifices created on found two-dimensional surfaces. Other works are intended to simultaneously comfort and repulse the viewer – one may be drawn closer to the soft woollen surface of the *Ball and Chain*, for example, yet feel repelled by the ambiguity of the unknown yet sexualized nature of the form it may represent. I also play with the associations and familiarity of the handcrafted object. A work such as *Three Legs* is

a more direct manifestation of the anxiety I feel around my body and my sexuality – by externalizing my discomfort through the process of knitting I have created a sexualized mutation of the human body, the neat lacerations on its torso suggesting a contained violence. *Rug*, for example, appears to be an exploded, colourful version of a doily one would usually find on a mantle piece – as the woollen fabric sags off the wall the undulating crocheted layers invite you into the folds.

Both the formal aspects and the artistic intention of these sculptural works are echoed in my *Fold* series of paintings. In these works I have attached an array of pink limbs to symmetrical vaginal motifs, created with a naïve method of fold-over painting<sup>16</sup> I enjoyed using to create ‘butterfly’ images as a child. Although not originally my intention, this technique also makes reference to the controversial Rorschach test<sup>17</sup> – quite appropriately, since this series reflects my intention to reveal internal conflict that resides beneath the smooth façade of ‘femininity’. These painted ‘figures,’ although exposed, do not exhibit the acute vulnerability and shame of those in the *Purge* series – they float freely with subtle radiance and the ‘darkness’ of women’s ‘hidden’ genitalia is activated through colour and form.

## In Conclusion

My fluctuating state of anxiety coupled with ongoing theoretical research and analysis has culminated in a body of work visibly comprised of fragmented and contingent sculptural forms. Although I attempt to work towards greater personal clarity of my experiences and understanding of the realm of female sexuality and desire, my awareness of the complexity of this domain has also led me to create a body of work that openly presents an uncertainty of objects and ideas.

<sup>16</sup> By placing paint on one side of a page, folding it over and pressing it, a symmetrical imprint is left on the folded surface.

<sup>17</sup> The Rorschach test (or inkblot test) is a psychological test created by Herman Rorschach in the early 1920s, in which subjects’ spontaneous responses to and perceptions of inkblots, are psycho-analysed to assess personality traits, emotional functioning and internal thought processes in order to identify underlying disorders.

Whilst it is not the purpose of this document or my work to position myself squarely within feminist discourse, I am concerned with the bettering of women's situation in South Africa and beyond. As discussed in more detail throughout the text, I believe women are still largely marginalized from the currents of social and symbolic thought and being. I have looked to the canonical texts of Freud and Lacan in an attempt to gain a clearer understanding of how ideas of sexual difference have been formed and reinforced, as well as the impact this notion of 'difference' has had on sexuality and gender relations.

Reading Pierre Bourdieu's theories of masculine domination and symbolic violence have enhanced my awareness of the powerful forces at play which perpetuate the privileging of the penis as primary signifier and the subsequent definition of women as lacking. This circumstance, which is intrinsically linked to the sex act itself, is explored throughout my artistic project as I seek to understand the position of women within the realm of sexuality and desire. By pointing to the hold of subliminal and explicit masculine domination that persists within the domain of female sexuality, desire and intimacy, I hope to contribute to the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Although I do not present a clearly defined solution, I am driven by the possibility of an empowered female sexuality within social relations, and particularly heterosexual relations in the present-day South African context.

An enormous degree of power infuses sexuality, yet the extent of this power, or the concept of power itself, is not stable or consistent. These variations demonstrate that sex is not a universal or consistent category of experience, but that it is culturally and historically constituted (Harding, 1998:2). I identify with Lynne Segal's observation that the patriarchal character of society is expressed not only in sexual practices but also in the formation of our sexual desires – this being one reason why it is around sexuality that issues of power are raised in some of their most difficult forms. I would like to suggest, rather tentatively, drawing from my pool of knowledge, research and experience, that it is in their sexuality that women find that their feelings and actions often seem to belie their aspirations for independence. My artistic exploration of the terrain of female sexuality and desire and my questioning of the contradictions inherent within my own personal thoughts, beliefs and behaviour are all experienced beneath the complex and contradictory umbrella of what society deems appropriate, and advocates, both subtly and overtly, through the media and other forms of commercial promotion.

My artistic project looks at how we as women attempt to control how our bodies 'speak' by manipulating the materiality of the female body through bodily transformative process, and through rigorous maintenance of what Kristeva defines as the 'abject' aspects of our living bodies. In an effort to comprehend how the female sense of self comes into being I have found it useful to look at female theorists such as Helen Crowley and Julia Kristeva who propose the model of female subjectivity – the subject being a self that is always in process and heterogeneous and therefore able to insert change and gain agency. Through both my work and this document, I negotiate the relationship between our embodied selves and the cultural processes in which we are engaged as active desiring/desirable subjects. This has revealed the possibility of a certain degree of complicity.

My artistic project negotiates how we as women see ourselves, and how we exist, as Luce Irigaray and John Berger suggest, under the constant surveillance of the real and/or symbolic male gaze which in turn denies us a true sense of selfhood. Through a close consideration of my experience of heterosexual practice and the construction of women's sexuality, I have come to believe that notions of femininity and sexuality attach status and power to being attractive to men. In this regard, I acknowledge that fulfilling the sexual expectations of men could have some erotic value to women, even if only answering to their expectations. Yet I feel that this value remains located within the male domain, and attracting a man therefore becomes the defining feature of a woman's femininity (Crowley & Himmelweit, 1992:253). It is possible to suggest that within this framework, sexuality is subordinated to the need to be attractive to men and this need to be attractive produces the woman as passive in heterosexual sex. The adoption of a position as object in the discourse of male sex-drive, motivated by the interest to be 'found' attractive, may therefore become interwoven in the construction of female sexuality within the practice of heterosexual sex.

In an age when definitive theories, therapies and opinions spew from every living or non-living orifice, I feel the need to define a private space where complexity is not suppressed, where ideas are free to hover ambiguously without being forced to convey a singular opinion or stance. My viewpoint, as well as the territory, is fractured, muddled and most-certainly not homogenous and it would therefore be insincere for me to suggest otherwise. I do not want to cast any judgments or heterosexual norms on the viewer regarding the subject matter explored.

Together with the viewer, I am attempting to come to terms with, and make sense of, material that is by its nature slippery and imprecise. My artistic preoccupation is to work towards a greater personal understanding of my past, present and future self/subject within the realm of female sexuality. Although I strive for greater clarity and freedom from the bondage of the conflict I have described, I do not intend for this body of work to be directed towards a final conclusion in which everything is revealed. I do not attempt to present any 'truths' or 'falsities,' point fingers or lay any blame. The work may be a different experience for each viewer, collective meanings being made of the sum of many individual opinions, both of which may change dramatically over time. I hope to have created a body of work that stimulates intellectual activity, as well as emotional, spiritual and aesthetic qualities. Such a multilevel register of expression is intended to encourage an exploration of the work that ultimately allows the experience to translate into the viewer's own world, and perhaps transform his or her existing assumptions around issues of sexuality, femininity and desire.

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## **The Berghof Ladies Knitting Group**

In February of 2011 I met with members of the Berghof Retirement Village in Gardens, Cape Town. I approached the Berghof community, which included residents, nurses, and kitchen and administration staff, asking for help knitting the large quantity of woollen shapes I needed for my Masters project. After explaining the subject matter and theme of my project, my request for help was met with great willingness and enthusiasm by the women. I distributed the basic patterns that I had made and large quantities of wool amongst them, and encouraged them to use their creative flair and diverge from these patterns if so inclined.

Despite various aches, pains and ailments the aging residents produced an array of knits of great quality, quantity and diversity. The nursing staff were particularly prolific as they often passed their long nights shift by knitting while on duty. For the duration of 2011, we gathered weekly to show our knitting, discuss our progress and marvel at our growing mound of collective creative handiwork while drinking tea and catching up on the week's events.

While many women were knitting actively in their own time, attendance to the weekly knitting group meeting fluctuated over the year. A core of five residents attended regularly: Mrs Klichowicz, a 91-year-old employee of the Pineland's Dutch library with a particularly creative flair when it comes to stitching; Monty, the matriarch who ran the show from her wheel chair by rounding up the troupes and keeping us focused on the task at hand; Kathy, always on the go, ensuring that there was never a quite moment between stories of her late husband and the old days; Mischievous Silvia, a woman born and raised in Cape Town, who is sadly no longer with us, who delighted in knitting strings of 'pork sausages' despite her severe arthritis; Sybil, who had no interest knitting but celebrated our progress and kept up the group's while morale perched on the edge of her walker (lovingly referred to as her 'pumpkin carriage').

*A poem by an anonymous poet appeared in the Berghof lift in March 2011.  
A week later a sequel appeared.*

## KNIT, KNIT...

Everywhere you see them sitting  
Knitting, knitting, knitting

Pearl and Plain, another row,  
And the pile of shape, they grow

No time to be sick  
The needles click

Never mind the hot weather  
We are sitting together

And knit and knit, and knit  
That's it!

\*\*\*

They're knitting here  
They're knitting there

In Berghof, they knit everywhere  
In their flat and in the hall

You see them knitting, one and all  
In the bath? I wouldn't know

They didn't tell me so



Berghof residents knitting, 2011  
*Left to right:* Monty, Mrs Klichowicz, Kathy



*Left to right:*  
Monty, Mrs Klichowicz

## **Sculptural Works**

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**Three Legs**  
2011  
Wool  
105 x 95 x 185 cm



**Landscape**

2010

Wool, found tapestry

62 x 46 cm



**Floral Tapestry I & II**  
2010  
Wool, found tapestry  
Dimensions variable

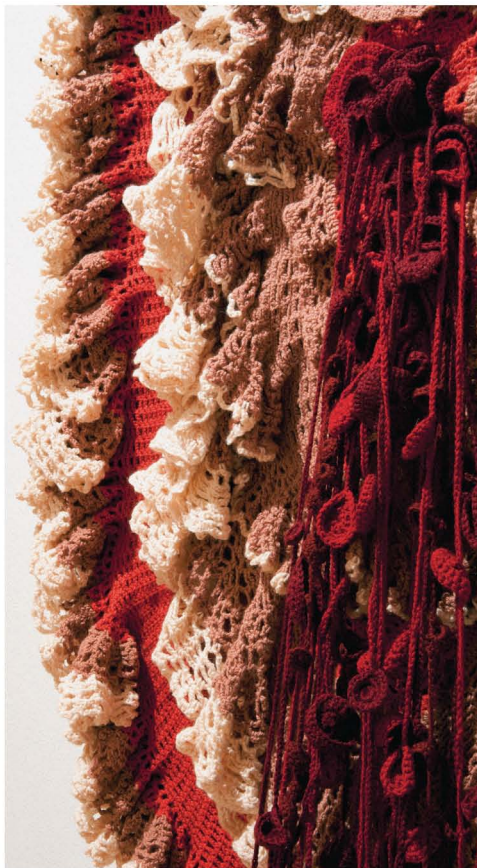


**Naught Piece**

2011

Wool, found tapestry

Dimensions variable



**Rug**  
2010  
Wool, soft board, fabric  
Dimensions variable



**Grace**  
2012  
Wool, porcelain toilet  
Dimensions variable

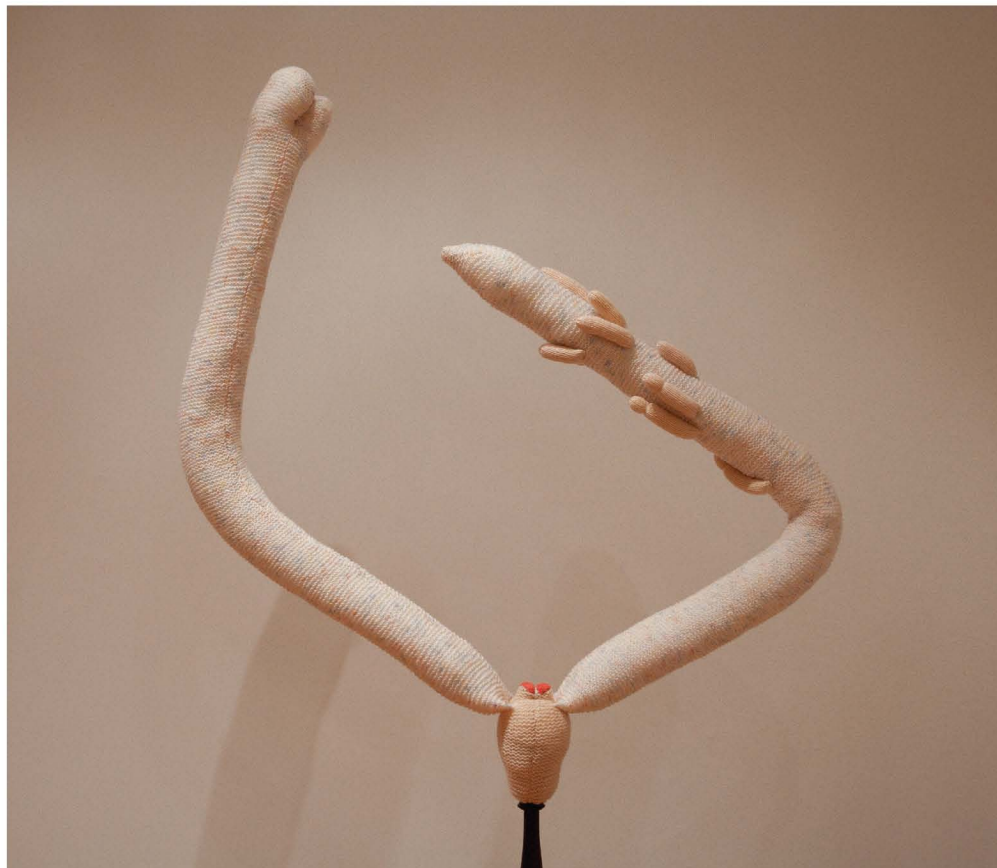


**Wanted**

2011

Wool, battery operated toy

35 x 14 x 36 cm

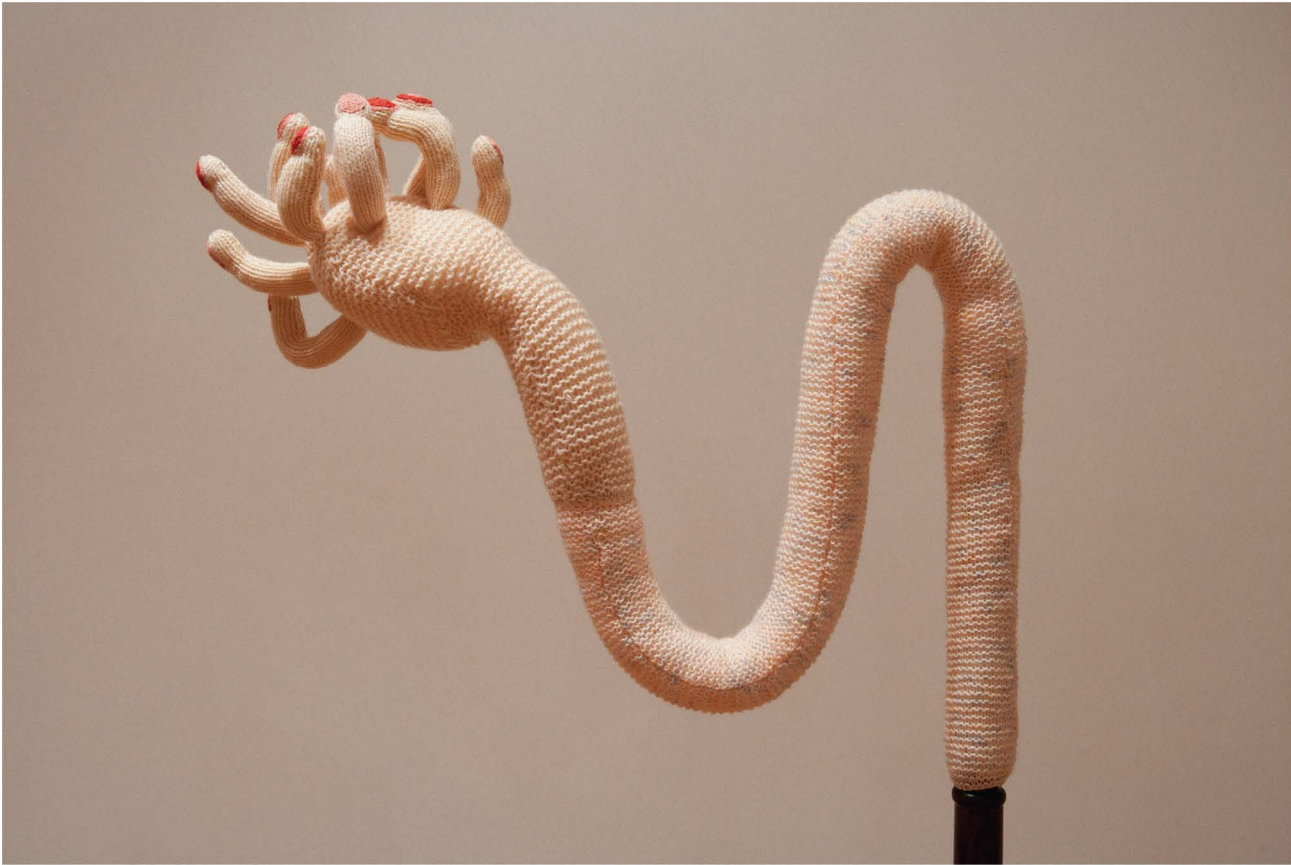


**Lucky Legs**

2011

Wool, found stand

118 x 218 x 39 cm



**Stimulation**

2011

Wool, found stand

37 x 162 x 83 cm



**Hood**  
2011  
Wool, found stand  
27 x 82 x 27 cm



**Lightness and Weight**

2012

Wool, found stand, lamp shade

52 x 15 x 52 cm



**Horse**  
2011  
Wool, found stand  
31 x 117 x 31 cm



*Left Portal (detail)*

2011

Wool, found stand

28 x 183 x 50 cm



*Right Princess (detail)*

2011

Wool, found stand

35 x 156 x 35 cm



**Arching Figure**

2012

Wool, wooden table

Dimensions variable



**Ball and Chain**

2011

Wool, beach balls, rubber tube

Dimensions variable



**Mole**

2011

Wool, found stand

58 x 75 x 58 cm

**64**



**Slot**  
2012

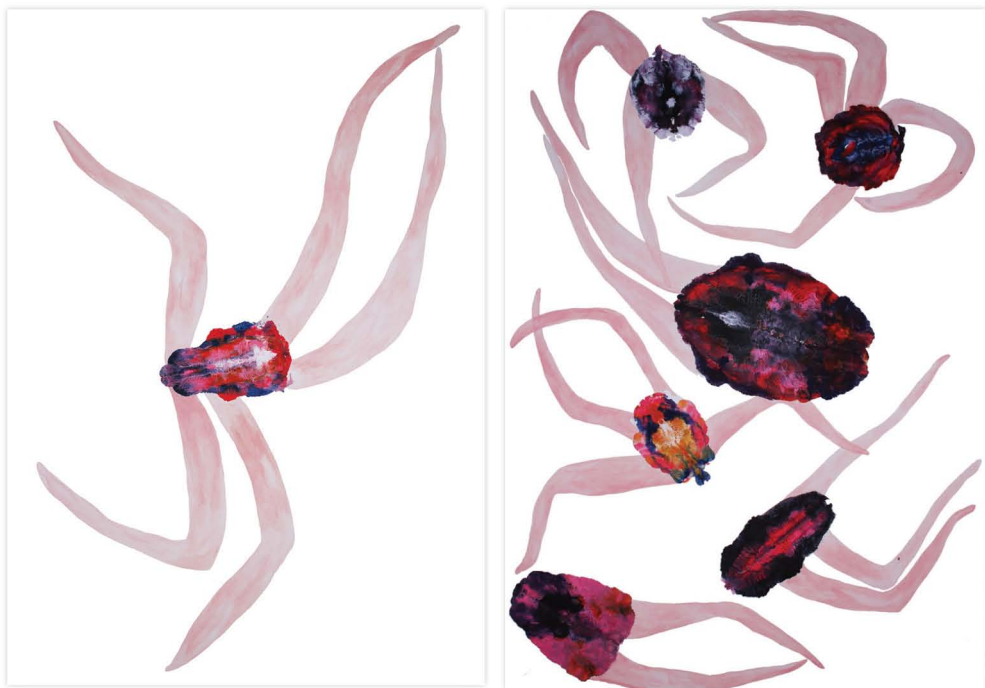
Wool, wooden bowl, found stand  
58 x 88 x 58 cm



Installation view

University of Cape Town

## **Paintings and Drawings**

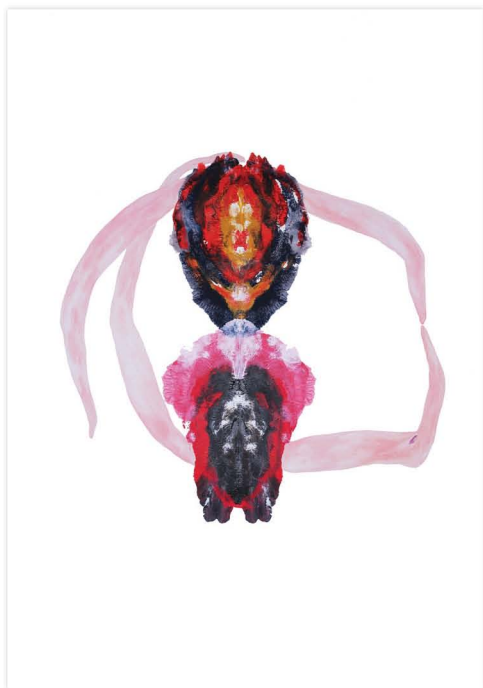


**Fold I & II**

2011

Acrylic and watercolour on paper

68 x 98 cm



**Fold III, IV & V**

2011

Acrylic and watercolour on paper

68 x 98 cm

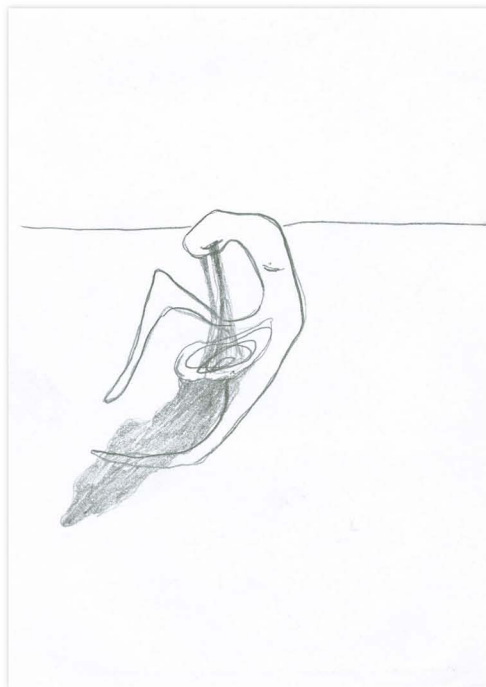


**Purge I, II & III (Series of 33)**

2011

Pencil on paper

9.5 x 14.5 cm



**Purge IV, V & VI (Series of 33)**

2011

Pencil on paper

9.5 x 14.5 cm

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