

THESIS

ROPE LANGUAGE

Submitted by

Johanna Guilfoyle

Department of Art and Art History

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2021

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Johnny Plastini

Aitor Lajarin-Encina

Domenica Romagni

Eleanor Moseman

Copyright by Johanna Siobhan Guilfoyle 2021

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### ROPE LANGUAGE

With blistered hands and rope-burned ankles gripping the rope, I look up towards the peeling tape marking the daunting height of 15 feet. I loop the rough fibers over my right foot before clamping it in place with my left. My feet hold steady and I stand up to reach my arms further upwards. I unwrap the rope from my feet and lift them higher before re-looping the rope over my right shoe, again and again, literally sculpting my body, my muscle, my flesh. Through the rope and this repetitive task, I build my flesh. The rope and other symbols of my past are imprinted over and over again. Similarly, the layering and fusing of prints transform inanimate material into bodily experience--I create flesh from repetition, and through this flesh convey the physical narratives contained within. The color and texture of each print builds to create the final collective mass. If any one of the prints were missing, any piece of the narrative, the final piece would exist as a different form. The layered narrative of my work is embedded in encaustic mortality. The amalgam of my life is embedded into flesh. The corporeal experience of my work entices the viewer to become increasingly aware of their own flesh and the narratives contained within.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
GLOSSARY OF TERMS.....	iv
Origins of <i>Rope Language</i> .....	1
Transformation from the Symbolic Order to the Abject Real.....	4
Defying Classification: The Print/Flesh Relationship.....	16
To Tie it Up.....	20
Figures Cited.....	21
Bibliography.....	38

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### Abjection

The abject as Kristeva defines it in *Powers of Horror* is the re-experiencing of the Real, a return to a pre-articulate stage.<sup>1</sup> The abject reminds one of one's own physicality, and by extension, one's own mortality. Therefore, the abject causes feelings of disturbance, disgust, anxiety. The viewer/subject identifies their carnal actuality in a separate object. The lack of distinction between the subject (internal) and object (external), the abject, is a return to the Real, and by extension to the feminine. This construction of my own flesh allows me to reclaim agency over my own body in contrast with a society which regulates and controls bodies without consideration for the women themselves.

Kristeva elaborates: "Abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory."<sup>2</sup> In *Bad News Days* Foster quotes

Kristeva:

The abject is what a subject must get rid of in order to be a subject at all. It is a phantasmatic substance that is both alien to the subject and intimate with it, too much so in fact, and this overproximity produces a panic in the subject. In this way, the abject touches on the fragility not only of our boundaries, of the distinction between the insides and outsides, but also of the passage from the maternal body to the paternal law.<sup>3</sup>

A woman is what must be excluded in order for a man to exist. Or, as Lacan says: "there is woman only as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words... She is the signifier of the lack of the signifier, proof *par excellence* that something is radically missing."<sup>4</sup> A

---

<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982): 5.

<sup>2</sup> Kristeva, *Powers*.

<sup>3</sup> Hal Foster, *Bad News Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London: Verso Books, 2015) 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Claire Freeman, "A Union Forever Deferred: Sexual Politics After Lacan," *Qui Parle* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 4.

subject must get rid of *something* in order to be a subject just as man must rid himself of woman in order to function as a man. I posit that this loss corresponds with the loss of distinction between subject and object by which Kristeva characterizes abjection.

I have taken a physical, corporeal experience and created from this experience a language, then use this language to create something abject, which returns the viewer to the real. I classify my work as abject insofar as to experience my work fully, a viewer must be able to some degree see pieces of themselves in the pieces of the series, thereby blurring the distinction between themselves, subject, and the work, object.

### Écriture Féminine

In response to Lacan's philosophies, Cixous writes "The Laugh of the Medusa," an essay which argues the importance of feminist writing, establishing what Cixous terms "écriture féminine." Writing is described by Cixous explicitly as a reclamation:

To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which may have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty... Tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of herself that she must urgently learn to speak.<sup>5</sup>

Écriture féminine resists definition: "It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that remains, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean it doesn't exist."<sup>6</sup> The patriarchy is formed by the invisible barriers that separate one word from another; it is in fact characterized by this separation. To lessen their separation is to cloud definition (as Cixous proposes), shaking the patriarchy from its very core.

---

<sup>5</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 878.

<sup>6</sup> Cixous, "Medusa," 883.

Cixous proposes that the number of women writers seems historically small, unless “we do not first deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women (as sensitive—intuitive—dreamy, etc.)”<sup>7</sup>

### Patriarchy

I define “patriarchy” here as a socially constructed continuous and ubiquitous ideology, structure, and organization that positions men as dominant and women as inherently socially, politically, and sexually subordinate.<sup>8</sup>

### Real

Based on the writings of Lacan and Kristeva, I define the Real as the maternal, what is experienced in the womb, before the introduction of language. There are no means by which the child might separate itself from the mother. This pre-articulate stage is the most primitive state of being, the carnal being of the mother herself.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva describes this borderless state: “There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.”<sup>9</sup> Real is associated with the primary connection to the maternal, the mother. Everything is experienced fully, there is no subject/object division, and so there is no discrepancy in what is experienced versus what can be communicated or labeled. Kristeva explains abjection as a glimpse of this Real, a connection again with the bodily maternal, and by extension the

---

<sup>7</sup> Cixous, “Medusa,” 878.

<sup>8</sup> Harsha Walia, “Challenge Patriarchy as Your Organize,” in *Beautiful Trouble* (O Books, 2012), 108-109; Colin Farelly, “Patriarchy and Historical Materialism,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 1-5; Steven Goldberg, “Why Patriarchy?” *Group* 32, no. 1 (March 2008): 13-21; Dominica Dipio, “Negotiating Spaces within Patriarchy,” in *Gender Terrains in African Cinema* (NISC (Pty) Ltd): 77-80; Robert Bahlieda, “Chapter 1: The Legacy of Patriarchy,” *Counterpoints* 488 (2015): 15-67.

<sup>9</sup> Kristeva, *Powers*, 3.

physicality of death, undefinable by language because of the loss of distinction between subject and object (see *Abject*). In *Rope Language*, the Real refers to the maternal body, to the very flesh of my/our corporeal beings. The Real is the antithesis to the Symbolic Order. It is the existence of the body without language, without definition or distinction, thereby allowing the viewer to view the Real in my encaustic flesh, and seeing in that glimpse of the Real their own flesh and skin, without division. Words cannot effectively communicate the feeling of skin, of corporeal existenceexperience based on the experience of the maternal body from the womb, before language is introduced, before distinctions can even be fathomed. Therefore, to return to the body, to experience flesh that defies classification, is a return to the mother, the feminine. In my work, the final product, which I view as an extension of my own body, is inherently feminineand therefore inherently Real.

Kristeva elaborates, “There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.”<sup>10</sup> I construe, based on Kristeva’s description, that the abject is that on which language (the Symbolic Order) is based. However, this abjection is the root- the maternal, the initial undifferentiated experience of existence, but is distinct from the metaphorical tree of language. It is this distinction that separates the Real from the Symbolic Order. It is this distinction, and ultimate reunification, of the Real and the Symbolic Order, between the masculine language and feminine body, on which *Rope Language* rests.

### Symbolic Order

The Symbolic Order is language, what arises to create the first distinction between child and mother. When a child is separated from their mother it follows that they will then be

---

<sup>10</sup> Kristeva, *Powers*, 5.

introduced to their father, experiencing through this addition the first sense of self and other, subject/object. Therefore, the Symbolic Order, language itself, is masculine. When the child is able to distinguish between themselves and the *other* they irreversibly enter the Symbolic Order and lose their inherent experience of the Real.

Lacan subscribes to and elaborates on the power and effect of words and language, using words as his “means of truth.” Murray begins: “By showing how the unconscious could be got at through an engagement with *language*, Lacan was promoting a particular sort of psychoanalysis, one that took representation in general as its field of study and words in particular as the material and means of his truth.”<sup>11</sup> In particular, Lacan used his language to classify women as less than because of their lack of a phallus, lacking what is necessary to be male. Although women may participate in sexuality, Lacan explains, their sexuality will always be separate from that of men; they cannot exist on the same level because one *lacks* what the other has.<sup>12</sup>

Without literacy/written word, there is not this divisive patriarchal framework. In *The Alphabet versus the Goddess*, Leonard Schlain describes non-literate societies as having a greater equality between men and women.<sup>13</sup> This equality by nature suggests that the patriarchy has not satisfactorily been able to permeate the boundaries of illiteracy; these “egalitarian societies” lack the gender division that characterizes a patriarchal society. He goes on to state that “The introduction of the written word, and then the alphabet, into the social intercourse of humans initiated a fundamental change in the way newly literate cultures understood their reality.”<sup>14</sup> If the advent of written word was able to influence the reality of the literate society, then it stands

---

<sup>11</sup> Martin Murray, “Ending and Beginning,” in *Jacques Lacan* (Pluto Press, 2016), 186.

<sup>12</sup> Freeman, *Union*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Leonard Schlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Schlain, *Alphabet*, 7.

to reason that the written word is endowed with the ultimate power, for to control perceived reality is to control society as a whole. Schlain states, “writing subliminally fosters a patriarchal outlook.”<sup>15</sup> If, as Schlain posits, writing becomes synonymous with patriarchy, the patriarchy then possesses all the powers of writing—that is, to control the society’s reality—and therefore is able to manifest the reality that allows the patriarchy to gain and retain power.

With the introduction of this written law into society, rigid, concrete rules overtake oral traditions and subjective justice systems. The division between man and woman is now fully embedded in society, both fueled and dictated by the divine designation of knowledge, which is always bestowed upon men, shifting the societal power balance in favor of the masculine while simultaneously lessening the power of the feminine. In *Legacy of Patriarchy*, Robert Bahlieda explains that “...the patriarchal construct is responsible for the historical dialectical tension between the sexes and entrenched in the gender socialization that pervades human experience.”<sup>16</sup> Text rules; those who can read and write (men) hold the power, while the illiterate masses (women) are at their mercy. The patriarchy set up in this origin story is “responsible for the same tension between all our social institutions: religion, politics, economics, education, and culture.”<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Schlain, *Alphabet*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Bahlieda, “Legacy,” 15.

<sup>17</sup> Bahlieda, “Legacy,” 16.

## ORIGINS OF ROPE LANGUAGE

*Rope Language* consists of 11 artist books, each containing upwards of ten pages. Each book has been transformed into flesh, from the Symbolic Order (language as it is experienced in a book) to the abject Real (the pre-language bodily experience).

The rope serves as the basis for this body of work. The rope is strength, both mental and physical. The day I got my rope climb and reached up for the first time, with blistered hands and rope-burned ankles, to touch the peeling tape marking the prescribed 15 feet height, was the first day in so many months that I felt strong. I gained a newfound sense of control over my body, linked inextricably with control over my mind. Not only was I able to lift my bodyweight, I was able to master the technique, wrapping the rope around my right foot and clamping it in place with my left, using my legs to stand up before moving my hands, and using the strength of my arms, my core, my hip flexors, my quads and hamstrings to lift and wrap my feet again to repeat the process, reaching my 15 feet one slow and jerky movement at a time. I held my body with my mind. I regained agency when I found control over my body. No longer was I trapped—I could use a rope and climb my way out.

The rope forms a symbol, building into a language that conveys this narrative. Just as strength is built through repetition, the rope is climbed one hand at a time, the narrative of my work is built through repetition. It is the layering and fusing of the pages of “text” (Symbolic Order) that allows the viewer the full experience. It is this layering that leads to a transformation from the Symbolic Order to the Real.

The rope itself forms the basic symbol around which my books are constructed. The rope serves as the basis for a language, a letter combined in iterations of etchings to form phrases,

sentences, text blocks. It becomes as if I am operating a printing press; the sequence of printing something written is mirrored in the sequence of my viscosity printing. As the letters are laid out, I roll out my ink. The formation of each sentence becomes a pass of the roller, laying down layers of different viscosities in a strict order. The ordering of these sequences/processes matters. Words must be put into the correct grammatical structure and sequence in order to form comprehensible sentences that in turn can form longer comprehensible narratives. The inks must be laid on in the correct order in order for the individual layers of the viscosity print to be discernible. In both cases, the correct order is what is crucial, and what represents here the Symbolic Order, the masculine.

This patriarchal order is also furthered by the printing press, present in my work. Leonard Schlain proposes that “nothing in history accelerated alphabet literacy as much as the printing press; the spread of both coincided with the one period when women and feminine values suffered most.”<sup>1</sup> The printing press was weaponized by the patriarchy. Books were now easily distributable, making the Patriarchy’s views omnipresent in society. Because the ability to name or classify is inherently masculine, as established by Lacan, the ability to write and use written language is also inherently masculine, and thus the format in which this language is presented (printed books) becomes a masculine format. And thus, the distribution of books gave the patriarchy to assume power and dominion over all others.

I am able to print my etchings as viscosity prints over and over again, to share however I please. I put my etched pages into books and display them in a gallery for others to read. I thereby assume the power to create and disseminate information, a privilege once reserved for the patriarchy. I engage in Cixous’ *écriture féminine*. However, the manner in which I create and

---

<sup>1</sup> Schlain, *Alphabet*, 377.

display these books shirks the Symbolic Order even though they are rooted in this very order; by transforming these patriarchal structures into a maternal body, I subvert the Symbolic Order. I force the viewer into an abject experience of the Real.

## TRANSFORMATION FROM THE SYMBOLIC ORDER TO THE ABJECT REAL

My practice has evolved as I have climbed the metaphorical rope through graduate school and ultimately to my MFA. I learned new foundational processes, allowing me to find the climbing technique. I have built upon these skills, hand over hand (and not without injury), culminating in *Rope Language* (Fig. 1). My initial delve into language in my first year of graduate school led eventually to a fascination with abjection, before I even knew what that was. Even in my first year I tried to create a visceral narrative of assault in order to get my viewers to uncomfortably share in that experience— making my Real, their Real. I used the symbolic order, my words, my order, my narrative, to bring my own experiences to the viewer, to not just view but *experience* what I did. I wanted to make them uncomfortable, using the Symbolic Order to actually move beyond the Symbolic Order (referencing Cixous' *Écriture Féminine*). Based on the work of Jenny Holzer using text to create visceral imagery, I could argue that Holzer uses the symbolic order in such a way as to transcend the Symbolic Order via her methods of display.

In her *Inflammatory Essays*, Holzer blatantly denies the existence of any god (Fig. 2), advises the viewer to “ruin your fucking self” (Fig. 3), and “starve the flesh, shave the hair, expose the bone...” (Fig. 4). Holzer assaults her viewers with her controversial words. When paired with undefinable aspects of the Real (ie. color), these words evoke an emotional response in the viewer. The viewer is rudely dislodged from the comfort of the Symbolic Order and plunged into Real.

These provocative words are set against loud and highly concentrated colors. Although some may look jarring, the other *Essays* are set against similarly bright colors, establishing a pattern of cheerfulness at odds with the content of the text, but similar in intensity. This

juxtaposition of bright and cheerful with the dark and sometimes sinister creates a sense of cognitive dissonance in viewers. This cognitive dissonance is essential in transcending the Symbolic Order. The words of the prints alone do not create this effect—it is only achieved through the combination with other visual elements the Symbolic Order cannot define (how does one *define* the color red?). Therefore, even as Holzer embraces the Symbolic Order, she must subvert it in order to maximize the viewer's discomfort, emphasizing the discomfiting and disturbing nature of her text.

I explore this combination of Symbolic narrative and *other* (for Holzer, color and its connection with the visceral imagery presented in the text) in *Ephemeral* (Fig. 5), *What If/I Deserve to be Here* (Fig. 6) and *Sed\_tion* (Fig. 7). In *Ephemeral* and *What If/I Deserve to be Here* there is text embroidered under the upper layers of encaustic-dipped print-flesh. These were the first *Rope Language* pieces into which I incorporated text. Originally the text was embroidered in black thread, showing through the skin like a bruise or faded tattoo, where the ink has bled and blown out with age. However, the similarities to tattoos were too great; tattoos come with such specific cultural connotations and meanings that I did not intend to bring to my work. In order to obscure the words further, I layered more and more print-flesh on top, until they were all but invisible, and then enhanced by scribing their outline into the topmost layer. I created what was no longer a tattoo but had instead become scar tissue. *Ephemeral* was a reflection on the nature of flesh itself, one of the first pieces of the series that I made. I had for the first time transformed a print from the Symbolic Order to the Real, which was a rather uncomfortable experience. I somewhat disgusted myself, I almost didn't want to touch what I had made, especially when the encaustic was still just slightly warm so as to make the surface of the piece feel clammy. The hair I had embedded stuck out from between the layers as if from the

cover of a shower drain. The fragility of the encaustic, with which I had only begun to work, seemed echoed in the fragility of flesh and life. Paper can be destroyed, yes, but encaustic has the potential for melting and destruction, and unlike the classic edition of prints, of which there are many identical pieces to choose from, they are irreplaceable. There will never be a way for me to repair these pieces without some trace of the damage sustained. Prints, words, the Symbolic Order, carry the opportunity for repetition and mass production. The pieces of flesh become individualized, made organic. The pieces came to embody the word I had embroidered into the paper, a self-fulfilling prophecy, and exploration of the ephemerality of the flesh, the body.

*What If/I Deserve to be Here* is a rumination on ephemerality taken to the extreme. In recognizing the fleeting nature of life and mortality abstractly, I arrived at an uncomfortable awareness of the possibility of my lack of existence, what that would mean, what the imminent rush of no longer being would feel like. I quickly became frightened of my ideations, made afraid of myself by my own thoughts. In this piece I confront my fears of not just ceasing to exist but a fear that my existence isn't earned and therefore I should not have it. Embroidering and then hiding these words was a catharsis, ridding myself of unhealthy feelings in a controlled environment, sewing and then hiding, a repository for my thoughts so that I do not need to carry them with me always. I know they are safe here in this piece and I can come back and visit them, but I am not obligated to bear their burden at all times. These two mark my true introduction into abjection.

In *Sed\_ tion*, the title is dynamic. It can change based on the viewer's interpretation. The clarity of the Symbolic Order is reduced through the deliberate omission of a letter, giving the word and the piece multiple potential meanings.

The piece was made on January 6, 2021, the day a violent mob stormed the Capitol. That day was anxiety producing and chaotic. Not only were we watching a glowing symbol of our Democracy being ransacked, it seemed unclear whether our government was partially on the side of the rioters. Were they standing down, or standing by? Was this sedition? Would those involved be prosecuted? Did the mob have help from Capitol police? The news was unclear, the situation nebulous as it unfurled.

The underscore in this piece was originally meant to oscillate between an “i” and an “a,” between sedition and sedation, the events versus the Trump administration’s response.<sup>2</sup> The text is sewn into the individual layers of tissue and remains somewhat visible embedded in the encaustic as the translucent upper layers are fused. The embroidered words become absorbed by the encaustic flesh. The Symbolic Order is not just built into, but consumed by the abject Real. Although patriarchal language is undeniably present, I assert that by trapping and embedding it in the feminine flesh I un-define it, creating a hybridization that defies classification.

Not only is the graphic imagery painted by Holzer’s words intrusive to the viewer’s calm use of repetition Holzer’s words, and my work, ha an even greater effect: Strength is ultimately created/built through repetition, which is necessary in building both new neural pathways as well as building muscle. The repetition required to build strength is mirrored in my artistic practice. The creation of the works themselves begins with the preparation of the plate, as depicted in figure 8. I feel the plate as an extension of my physical body. The rope itself is imprinted onto and etched into the plate multiple times, as it is burned into my hands when I climb. The layers of etchings destroy the metal plate, slowly revealing forms suggesting muscle filaments, ropes

---

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that I have found that many people initially view the work as saying “Seduction,” although there is no “c” in the piece. People seem to have included that “c” on their own, and are surprised when they look there and there is no “c” written in the work. Perhaps in some psychoanalytical way, there is attraction to one’s own flesh, the idea of the carnal, and the sexual undertones that carries. Can viewers be seduced by the flesh, the body?

almost in and of themselves that exist inside of all of us. Form emerges through destruction; something new is created through the breakdown of the old. The repetition has ultimately built muscle; one rope has led to the creation of others, and with this creation comes more strength.

Not only does repetition create the plates, repetition also reflects the printing process. The plate must be inked over and over again, with four colors, before the mulberry paper is placed on top, misted with water, and run through the press. Each piece in this series is composed of at least 10 prints. There have been countless runs of the press, infinite turnings of the handle, each time ingraining the familiar movement into my body: the turning of the handle, the pushing and turning of the ink knife. The whisper of the ink with each brayer pass becomes a breath. Every movement is contained in this work, the embossment in the delicate mulberry paper preserved in the wax and resin of the encaustic. Each layer of tissue, each small gain of strength, must be protected, guarded, maintained. Strength is never a stasis—if left unattended, atrophy will occur. These preserved actions are layered on top of each other. The individual layers may be indistinguishable in the end product, but all are necessary.

I construct flesh through the layering of these pieces. I create the flesh from the inside out, as muscles give way to skin. This work, then, is a direct engagement with my physical form. I am reclaiming my agency by creating and representing my own form as I see fit. This desire to manifest my own form, deepening the viewer's experience of the work, ultimately led to more visceral material explorations. For example, in my work I frequently include my own hair (Fig. 9).

Hair is an integral part of *Rope Language*. It appears embedded and enmeshed between the layers of encaustic and mulberry paper. It serves as a link between the universal materials of paper and encaustic (melding the Symbolic Order with the Real). Paper, encaustic, ink can be

experienced by anyone in their material form. But the inclusion of my hair makes the pieces a part of me.

Hair contains history, physically. Even when someone is long dead, their hair exposes impossibly specific details of the life once lived. Where they lived, what they ate, how they grew up. The isotopes in each strand tell a complete autobiography, contained in strands of genetic material invisible to the naked eye. Within these works lies the instructions to construct my whole body.

But my work, my own corporeal being, is not pristine. There are wounds and blisters, slashes and punctures, a physical reenactment of trauma, both personal and societal. Trauma is inescapable, but by inflicting it deliberately onto an inanimate stand-in for my own body, I am able to regain control, taking back my agency. But the flesh becomes not just mine. It is my hope that the viewer will also see their own flesh reflected in the work. In seeing flesh torn open, I want to evoke in the viewer an awareness of their own flesh, their own bodily fragility, to experience the blurring of the subject/object division that characterizes abjection. My trauma, then, becomes representative of universal trauma.

The connection between trauma and the Real and Symbolic Order is discussed by Foster: “The first was to approach the abject, even to identify with it-- to probe the wound of trauma, to touch the unseen real.”<sup>3</sup> Here again the abject is also equated with the Real. To expose and communicate trauma, the Real must be exposed, for they belong to each other. Suffering transcends the Symbolic Order. Pain is felt with the body, such a base sensory stimulus that it cannot be encompassed in language. Pain may be described, but never fully conveyed, since the symbolic order cannot reach that viscerality that the abject can. Therefore, in order to show pain,

---

<sup>3</sup> Foster, *Bad News*, 19.

suffering, to show trauma to viewers so that they might experience the trauma as well, it is necessary to transcend the Symbolic Order. The subject/object divide between the viewer and the work must be blurred, distorted, erased, so that the flesh and wax become one and my shin, the book precariously balanced on the sharp corner of the box, becomes the viewer's own shin, and they feel the pain of slipping up a staircase, knocking into a chair, etc. They must *feel* it, not read it. The book must become more than a book; the abject must transcend the symbolic order. There must be a return to the maternal, to the very source of life itself, in order to feel without the constraints of the language that defines the feeling.

A physical trauma is presented to the viewer in *Box Jump* (Fig. 10). The print-flesh book balances precariously on the edge of the plyo box, a wooden box 20x24x30". These boxes are used in CrossFit and other sports for a variety of movements. I am exploring here the box jump movement (Fig. 11). In CrossFit there are standards that must be met for each movement in order to count the movement as a rep in a competition setting. Failure to meet those movement standards results in a "no rep," meaning that movement does not count towards the rep scheme of the competition.<sup>4</sup> In order to meet CrossFit standards, women must jump on the box set at 20."<sup>5</sup> Both feet must start on the ground together, and land together on the top of the box. At the top of the box, you must stand straight with full opening of the hips before you jump or step back down. This is one complete rep. Box jumps are more mentally difficult than physically difficult.

---

<sup>4</sup> In a non-competition setting, the standards are relaxed and the athletes may perform at any level deemed appropriate, especially as new skills are being mastered.

<sup>5</sup> There are other gendered differences in the CrossFit programming, although they use an equation to calculate these differences to attempt to even out the activities so that both men and women are putting in the same amount of work, for the sake of equity. However, I acknowledge that this sport leaves somewhat little space (in some gym communities) for noncisgender people. I must also clarify that communities differ so greatly from gym to gym, and I have always found a sense of acceptance and selfconfidence to embrace my own sexuality although I know others have had a different experience. CrossFit, for me, is ultimately about the sense of community the sport allows, and I have been lucky enough to find supportive and accepting communities. To fully explore the gender discrepancies in the sport would require an entire separate thesis, but for my purposes here, I am focusing on the empowering aspects CrossFit brings to my life.

In CrossFit, if you are experienced at other movements, jumping 20” is not a difficult task. However, box jumps come with the very visceral fear of hitting your shins. Every CrossFitter has a story and the scars and bruises to match. If you get in your head, box jumps become impossible and injury becomes imminent. It’s almost as if you have to think less in order to complete the movement successfully. *Box Jump* is meant to get in the viewer’s head. It is meant to make them aware of their own physicality through the process of imagining the familiar pain. The pain of hitting one’s shin is universally imaginable. Even those who have never stepped foot into a CrossFit gym or seen a plyo box have surely hit their shin on the stairs, on a coffee table, and felt the uniquely sharp pain of hitting one’s tibia, hard bone on hard edge, with no muscle or adipose tissue to serve as a cushion. It’s the type of pain that makes one cringe to remember. It’s the pain I want the viewer to feel when they see this piece. Allowing the box to intrude into the gallery space (Fig. 12) allows me to create an even more disconcerting experience for the viewer, as they are forced to move around the box. It enforces a need for awareness, lest the viewer trip and hit their own shins against the box. The physical intrusion into the gallery space mirrors the psychological intrusion experienced by the viewer.

Artists have historically resorted to abjection in the face of major societal imbalances and discrimination, issues that were frequently brushed under the rug by older generations in society. In bringing attention to important but ignored aspects of society, art, in particular abject art, became inextricably linked with politics. Foster considers: “Was there a cultural politics in abject art? Often in the general culture of abjection in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this posture of indifference expressed a fatigue with the politics of difference.”<sup>6</sup> Amidst the growing tensions of the Culture Wars, there became an even greater push to expose the traumas that society avoided.

---

<sup>6</sup> Foster, *Bad News*, 24.

In the Postmodern era and forward, artists such as Kiki Smith use the abject to force viewers to engage with taboo subjects such as the AIDS epidemic. For example, in Smith's *Blood Pool* (Fig. 13), a figure curls as a fetus on the gallery floor, forcing the viewer to engage with the piece because it becomes unavoidable in the space. The figure is bloody, as if it has been burnt or lacerated, suffered some unimaginable traumatic event. I look at it and see the victim of a fire, when the tissue has been so dehydrated that the body actually crumples and deflates, folding in on itself.

*Box Jump* is presented in the middle of the room as in *Blood Pool*. This interjection into the gallery space forces the viewer to literally detour through the space to avoid hitting the piece. This inconvenience heightens the viewer's discomfort, characteristic of abjection. This discomfort also brings to the viewer my personal experience know that for my gym community, viewing this piece almost physically hurts. We have all at some point or other nailed our shins on the edge of a plyo box. Just as in the rope, bodily material is lost when a shin is scraped against the wooden corner. The flesh in this piece is from a shin, the thin tissue that covers the tibia, with so little underneath—no fat, no muscle. This lack of cushion makes this accident all the more excruciating. The ability of this piece to elicit this visceral response in the viewer situates this piece as abject, situated at a moment of collapse of the subject/object divide.

Kristeva is quoted in Foster: "In a world in which the Other has collapsed,' she states enigmatically, the task of the artist is no longer to sublimate the abject but to plumb it-- to fathom 'the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression. In a world in which the Other has collapsed:'" Kristeva implies that the paternal law that underwrites the social order has fallen

into crisis.<sup>7</sup> When the social order is flawed, as is seen in the Culture Wars, the abject can rise from the chaotic crisis into which the Symbolic Order has fallen.

Just as Postmodern artists such as Kiki Smith created abject works in response to societal ignorance regarding the public health crisis of the AIDS epidemic, I explore in my work the issues and stigma surrounding mental health in our current society. In *Three Days* (Fig. 14) I explore these issues as they pertain to and affect my own life. Instead of embedding my own hair in the encaustic encasing and fusing the prints, I have taken a sharp tool and punctured the three topmost pages over and over again. In total I performed 1,365 punctures, 455 in each of the three pages: one puncture for each milligram of medications I take daily to manage my Bipolar Disorder. I have a complicated relationship with medications. I need them to function in society; without those 455 mg I run the risk of sending myself into a manic or depressive episode, not to mention plunging myself into the myriad withdrawal symptoms that come when I do not take my meds. There is always a careful balance- what doses do I take when, how do they interact, what are the side effects, and how will I manage them? Sometimes they are managed with even more medications. I think of it as a game of Bipolar Roulette; I never know how I will be affected until I pull the trigger. This piece arose out of my relationship with medications as I take them daily to function, but also from a more sinister relationship with self-harm and the potential for suicide that resides in the eight pill bottles that sit on the table. They are a cage, a limitation, something to which I am tethered. But they are also a sort of key to freedom, by certain definitions (a return to the Real—the primal embrace of a mother, comfort and relief from pain). How many milligrams separate functionality from lethality? How many extra doses would I need to take before I never needed to take any more? I don't know the answer, and I shouldn't.

---

<sup>7</sup> Foster, *Bad News*, 16.

This unbidden desire is the reason I am no longer permitted to carry and take my own medications. In some ways, this is an incredible relief. I don't need to rely on my own to keep myself safe. I breathe easier. But there is a degrading feeling that comes with the loss of my agency. Yes, I am protected, I am safe. But this safety comes with a loss of control over my own body. I sacrifice my agency for my survival. In *3 Days*, I reclaim this agency. I cannot give myself the pills containing these life-giving 455 mg, but I found a surrogate outlet in poking holes in my print-flesh, an act of harmless self-harm. To perform all of these minute stabs, I used a twisted scribe, a tool traditionally used to carve lines in a plate for a dry point, or remove areas of ground to expose lines of clear metal that will be etched away to form the image. I bought this scribe when I moved to Fort Collins and started the program here at CSU. I have used the same one ever since. At some point this scribe sat in a pool of water and gum Arabic on the bed of a lithography press and rusted. I carefully removed the rust using Barkeeper's Friend, a metal polish and cleanser, until my scribe was shiny and clean. I have both dropped it on its sharp point, rendering it dull, and sharpened the point again on the whetstone. It has been with me, its presence felt in almost every one of my plates, even if not visibly apparent in the final product. By using this scribe, I treat my flesh facsimile in the same way I treat my plates, further establishing the relationship I have between the plates and my physical body. The twisted scribe is my tool as a Printmaker. It is my language, that with which I am most familiar. I take away the foreignness of a medication which I do not fully understand and replace it with that which I am most familiar. I therefore come to a greater understanding of my relationship with medication by taking control over the method of delivery.

The encaustic boils and fills in these punctures. It has been pushed and burnt and hardened by the heat gun, past the smoking point of the dammar resin. A toxic stream was drawn

up through the ventilation system and my glasses fogged as I breathed through my respirator, clouding my vision physically just as I have found my mind clouded, and sometimes unclouded, through the substances I take. I let the flesh become mottled, textured, sick with petechiae, the result of some injury, some blood bursting free under the skin- the visible side effects of an invisible malady, a literal depiction of abject trauma, the mental made physical.

## DEFYING CLASSIFICATION: THE PRINT/FLESH RELATIONSHIP

Just as abjection is the result of the blurred distinction between subject and object, between the Symbolic Order and the Real, and, it follows, between the masculine and feminine, my work encompasses, and blurs the distinction, between the lawful Symbolic Order and the undefinable Real. By using the Symbolic Order of my Rope Language, and transforming it into something *other*, reminding the viewer of their own physicality beyond any single written/symbolic element, I blur the distinction between the printed symbols and the finished piece, between the symbolic prints and my own flesh. Both are necessary. *Rope Language*, then, defies definition. It is not one thing or the other, it is both. And in being both, it becomes something new entirely, a hybridization that turns a written narrative into a physical experience.

In *Rope Language*, the narrative of the original symbolic nature of the rope plates, the repetition of a symbol to form a language, the rope-symbol of an individual muscle filament building to form the sentences of complete muscles, is visible from the backside of the pieces (Fig. 16). The deep bloody reds are seemingly invisible from the front, but their presence is felt nonetheless as their colors form the base layers underneath the skin, the blood that gives the luminosity and translucency that form the vivacity of life. The final pieces could not exist without the initial grounding in the Symbolic Order, which is necessary to convey the narrative of the rope climb. However, that narrative alone is not sufficient—only by the transformation of the narrative symbolic order into something *more*, something *other*, can the physical aspects of climbing experience be conveyed, and thus the broader metaphors of personal and societal trauma.

This necessary duality is addressed in Cixous' concept of bisexuality. Cixous describes bisexuality as "...of both sexes," without the exclusion of either.<sup>8</sup> However, this duality is not always evident in patriarchal society. When women write like men, their work is not counted as separate or distinct to women. Is this lack of distinction successful (in that a woman's writing is considered the same or equal to a man's)? Or is this breakdown of the barrier between the perception of male and female solely a product of the same problematic patriarchal ideas that characterize our society? These women writers, I posit, are writing not *against* the patriarchal society, as Cixous advocates, but rather *for* that society, and therefore do not generate the reclamation of power for oneself; this writing continues to power the existing patriarchal systems.

The integration Cixous describes falls outside of the patriarchal division. The patriarchy is formed by the invisible barriers that separate one word from another; it is in fact characterized by this separation. To lessen their separation is to cloud definition (as Cixous proposes), shaking the patriarchy from its very core.

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière describes his dissatisfaction with this definitive classification in contemporary society. He proposes that for too long, the specific subject matter of a work of art has determined the appropriate means of expression.<sup>9</sup> In other words, a medium is appropriate for some subject matter, but not all. Based on this historical context, I can extrapolate that words/written language, intrinsically patriarchal subject matter, have been suitable for the printing press, bearing books. Thus, I again establish books (and I view *Rope Language* as book forms, although they extend beyond books into something undefinable) as a historically masculine medium, suitable for historically masculine ideas. Rancière states that this

---

<sup>8</sup> Cixous, "Medusa," 883.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 32.

system is being dismantled now by the arts; subject matter is divorced now from its “appropriate” medium or mode of expression. *Rope Language* is a dismantling of this system. The book form is made feminine in the transformation from the Symbolic Order into the Real, the Abject. Kristeva explains: “It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>10</sup> *Rope Language* is a series of books, a living record, that becomes ambiguous through its transformation. The distinction between book, language, order, and flesh is blurred, defying classification; the pieces become abject. This solution, a refusal to name/classify/designate, mirrors the ideas present in *écriture féminine*.

Ranci re states this un-designation as happening contemporaneously. While it may be true that these dividers are beginning to fall, Ranci re fails to acknowledge the unique difficulties women continue to face when inserting themselves into traditionally masculine media/subject matter. Even when women succeed with this insertion, the success is an outlier that fails to fit into societal norms. In *Why Patriarchy*, Steve Goldberg states that even when women reach the most powerful positions in society, those that surround them are almost always men.<sup>11</sup> He elaborates, “But in no case do such differences approach a reduction of male percentages that would cast doubt on the presence of patriarchy.”<sup>12</sup> As much as Ranci re would like to believe, the dividers that separate the masculine from the feminine are still very much intact, and continue to serve as hurdles over which women must jump in order to reach renown, just as a woman must successfully jump atop the 20 inch box in order to complete a rep in a competition.

---

<sup>10</sup> Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Goldberg, “Why?”: 15.

<sup>12</sup> Goldberg, “Why?” 15.

These divisions are present in *Seven Years* (Fig. 17). The division and subsequent inequality in society that contributes to the societal trauma experienced by women is referenced in the physical gap the wound creates in the flesh. The gap can be closed with difficulty, and with very limited success, as reflected in the feeble sutures. In order to truly heal this wound, sutures are not sufficient—instead, there must be a wider overhaul, some surgical repair of flesh, an undoing and redoing of a society. The sutures must be removed, the scar tissue scraped away, to cleanly rejoin the fleshy edges with minimal lasting damage.

## TO TIE IT UP

In *Rope Language*, I have transformed the Symbolic Order into the Real. From order I have created abjection. I engage in Cixous' *écriture féminine*, writing that transcends traditionally masculine written language. Both *écriture féminine* and abjection defy definition, and thus both concepts exist outside of the Symbolic Order, fitting instead into the feminine Real. In deliberately subverting the Symbolic Order in order to create a manifestation of my female self, I reclaim my own agency over my mental and physical being.

FIGURES CITED



Figure 1. Johanna Guilfoyle, *Rope Language*, 2021, mixed media.

**BECAUSE THERE IS NO GOD SOMEONE  
MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MEN.  
A CHARISMATIC LEADER IS IMPERATIVE.  
HE CAN SUBORDINATE THE SMALL WILLS  
TO THE GREAT ONE. HIS STRENGTH  
AND HIS VISION REDEEM MEN. HIS  
PERFECTION MAKES THEM GRATEFUL.  
LIFE ITSELF IS NOT SACRED, THERE  
IS NO DIGNITY IN THE FLESH.  
UNDIRECTED MEN ARE CONTENT WITH  
RANDOM, SQUALID, POINTLESS LIVES.  
THE LEADER GIVES DIRECTION  
AND PURPOSE. THE LEADER FORCES  
GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, MANDATES  
PEACE AND REPELS OUTSIDE  
AGGRESSORS. HE IS THE ARCHITECT  
OF DESTINY. HE DEMANDS ABSOLUTE  
LOYALTY. HE MERITS UNQUESTIONING  
DEVOTION. HE ASKS THE SUPREME  
SACRIFICE. HE IS THE ONLY HOPE.**

Figure 2. Jenny Holzer, *Inflammatory Essays*, 1979-1982, offset lithograph on paper mounted on board, 10 x10," Tate London.

**RUIN YOUR FUCKING SELF BEFORE  
THEY DO. OTHERWISE THEY'LL  
SCREW YOU BECAUSE YOU'RE A  
NOBODY. THEY'LL KEEP YOU  
ALIVE, BUT YOU'LL HAVE TO  
CRAWL AND SAY "THANK-YOU" FOR  
EVERY BONE THEY THROW. YOU  
MIGHT AS WELL STAY DRUNK OR  
SHOOT JUNK AND BE A CRAZY  
FUCKER. IF THE RICH GUYS WANT  
TO PLAY WITH YOU, MAKE THEM  
GET THEIR HANDS DIRTY. SEND  
THEM AWAY GAGGING, OR  
SOBBING IF THEY'RE SOFT-  
HEARTED. YOU'LL BE LEFT ALONE  
IF YOU'RE FRIGHTENING, AND  
DEAD YOU'RE FREE! YOU CAN  
CHANGE THE RADIANT CHILD IN  
YOU TO A REFLECTION OF THE  
SHIT YOU WERE MEANT TO SERVE.**

Figure 3. Jenny Holzer, *Inflammatory Essays*, 1979-1982, offset lithograph on paper mounted on board, 10 x10," Tate London.

**DESTROY SUPERABUNDANCE. STARVE THE  
FLESH, SHAVE THE HAIR, EXPOSE THE  
BONE, CLARIFY THE MIND, DEFINE THE  
WILL, RESTRAIN THE SENSES, LEAVE  
THE FAMILY, FLEE THE CHURCH, KILL  
THE VERMIN, VOMIT THE HEART, FORGET  
THE DEAD. LIMIT TIME, FORGO  
AMUSEMENT, DENY NATURE, REJECT  
ACQUAINTANCES, DISCARD OBJECTS,  
FORGET TRUTHS, DISSECT MYTH, STOP  
MOTION, BLOCK IMPULSE, CHOKE SOBS,  
SWALLOW CHATTER. SCORN JOY, SCORN  
TOUCH, SCORN TRAGEDY, SCORN  
LIBERTY, SCORN CONSTANCY, SCORN HOPE,  
SCORN EXALTATION, SCORN REPRODUCTION,  
SCORN VARIETY, SCORN EMBELLISHMENT,  
SCORN RELEASE, SCORN REST, SCORN  
SWEETNESS, SCORN LIGHT. IT'S A  
QUESTION OF FORM AS MUCH AS FUNCTION.  
IT IS A MATTER OF REVULSION.**

Figure 4. Jenny Holzer, *Inflammatory Essays*, 1979-1982, offset lithograph on paper mounted on board, 10 x10," Tate London.



Figure 5. Johanna Guilfoyle, *Ephemeral*, 2020, mixed media.



Figure 6. Johanna Guilfoyle, *What If/I Deserve To Be Here*, 2020, mixed media.



Figure 7. Johanna Guilfoyle, *Sed\_tion*, 2021, mixed media, 9x4.”



Figure 8. Intaglio plate used in *Rope Language*.

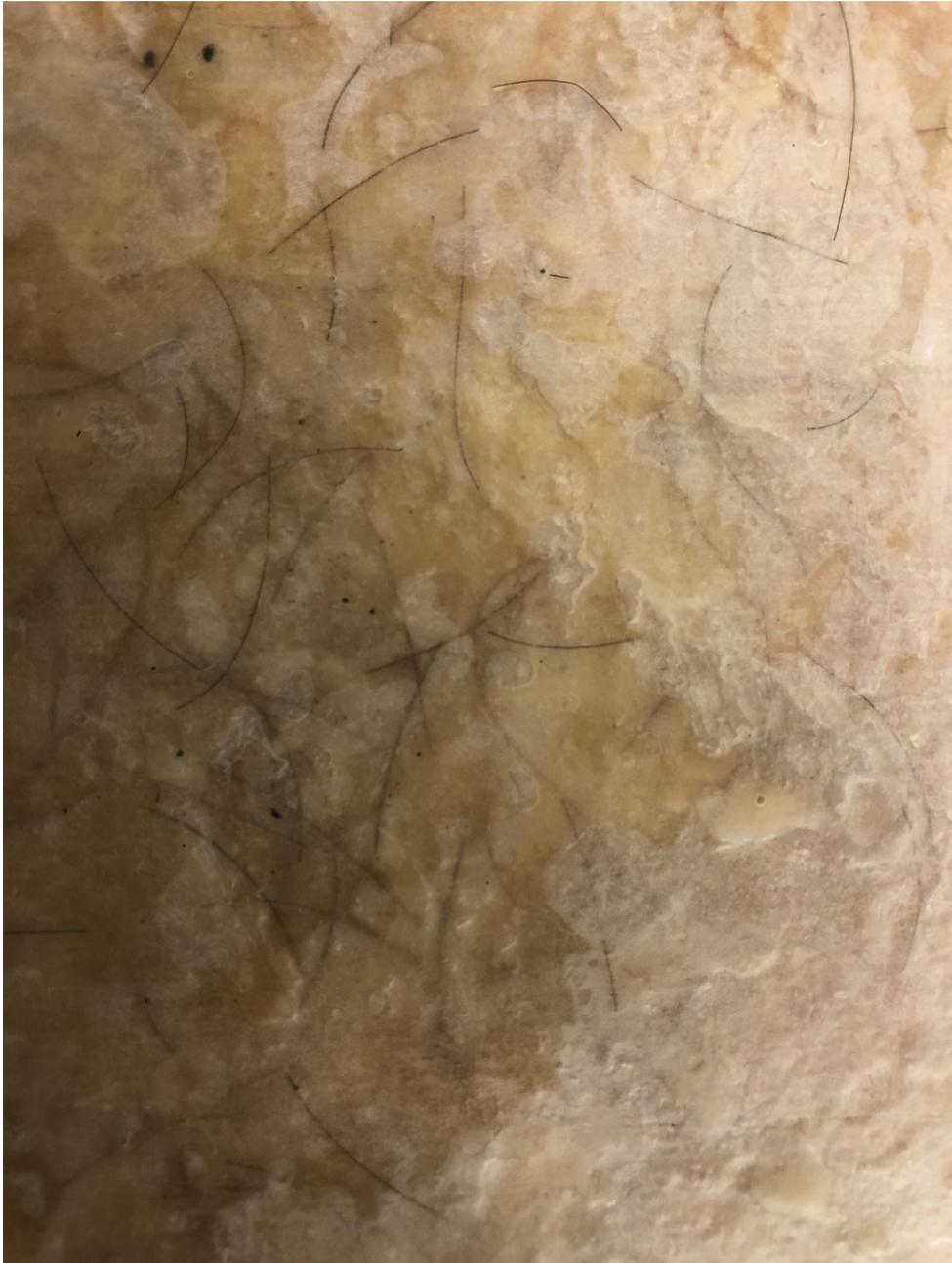


Figure 9. *7 Years (detail)*, 2020, mixed media.



Figure 10. Johanna Guilfoyle, *Box Jump*, 2021, mixed media, 36x36x33.”



Figure 11. Box jump movement standards, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NB9Y9-kTuHEk>, accessed 3/28/21.



Figure 12. Johanna Guilfoyle, *Box Jump* (gallery view), 2021, Johanna Guilfoyle, mixed media.



Figure 13. Kiki Smith, *Blood Pool*, 1992, wax, gauze, and pigment, 42×24×16,” The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 14. Johanna Guilfoyle, *3 Days (installation view)*, 2021, mixed media, 6"x4."



Figure 15. Johanna Guilfoyle, *3 Days (detail)*, 2021, mixed media.



Figure 16. Johanna Guilfoyle, *What If (back side)*, 2020, mixed media, 2.5x3.5.”



Figure 17. Johanna Guilfoyle, *7 Years* (installation view), 2020, mixed media, 7"x7."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bahlheda, Robert. "Chapter 1: The Legacy of Patriarchy." *Counterpoints* 488 (2015): 15-67
- Caponigro, Jessica. "Witches in Print." California Women's Museum, October 25, 2017. <https://womensmuseum.wordpress.com/2017/10/25/witches-in-print/>.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 875-893.
- Connelly, Frances S. *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Farrelly, Colin. "Patriarchy and Historical Materialism." *Hypatia* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 1-21.
- Foster, Hal. *Bad News Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*. London: Verso Books, 2015. "Abject Art 1994." in *Art Since 1900*, edited by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, 689-693. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004.
- Frascina, Francis. "Frames of Atrocity: Resistance and Left Melancholy." *Public* 25, no. 49 (June 2014): 8-30.
- Freeman, Barbara Claire. "A Union Forever Deferred: Sexual Politics After Lacan." *Qui Parle* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 119-131.
- Goldberg, Steven. "Why Patriarchy?" *Group* 32, no. 1 (March 2008): 13-21.
- Gilroy-Hirtz, Petra, ed. *Kiki Smith: Procession*. Munich: Haus der Kunst, 2018.
- Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture*, 3-33. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961.
- Harper, Paula. "The First Feminist Art Program: A View from the 1980s." *Signs* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1985): 762-781.
- Hirschorn, Thomas, ed. *Why is it Important—Today—to Show and Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies?* Brisbon: Institute of Modern Art, 2013. Exhibition catalog.
- Jeffreys, Shiela. *Man's Dominion*. Oxon: Routedledge, 2012.

- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Murray, Martin. "Ending and Beginning." In *Jacques Lacan*, 186-188. Pluto Press, 2016.
- Ozyegin, Gul. "Rethinking Patriarchy Through Unpatriarchal Male Desires." In *Gender Reckonings*, edited by James W. Messerschmidt, Patricia Yancey Martin, Michael A. Messner, and Raewyn Connell, 233-253. New York: NYU Press, 2018.
- Ranci re, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Ross, Christine. "Redefinitions of Abjection in Contemporary Performances of the Female Body." *Res 31* (Spring 1997): 149-156.
- Schlain, Leonard. *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*. New York: Penguin Group, 1998.
- Walia, Harsha. "Challenge Patriarchy as You Organize." In *Beautiful Trouble*, 108-111. O Books, 2012.
- Worth, Sarah. "Feminist Aesthetics." In *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, edited by Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, 437-446. London: Routledge, 2002.